



UN-HABITAT

Address by

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Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations
and

Executive Director of UN-HABITAT

On being conferred an Honorary Degree in Urban Design
by the School of Architecture and Building Sciences (SABS),

Jomo Kenyatta University,
Nairobi, Kenya, on Friday 27 July, 2007

Honourable Prof. Ali Mazrui, Chancellor of JKUAT,
The Vice Chancellor,
Professor Bernard Otoki Moirongo, Director, School of Architecture and Building
Sciences,
Distinguished Members of the School of Architecture and Building Sciences,
Parents, Graduands, Students,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a very great honour and privilege to be conferred this Honorary Degree in Urban Design by such a distinguished School. I therefore wish to express to you my deep and humble appreciation for bestowing me such a great honour. I do hope that I will continue to live up to your expectations and to advocate for the important role that this distinguished discipline has to play in our pursuit of sustainable development.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Urban design basically involves the process of shaping the physical environment and the way we live in our cities and towns. Some call it the art of making places. It encompasses the design of the buildings where we work and live, landscapes and urban spaces, and establishes the unique identity of our neighbourhoods, public spaces and our cities as a whole.

Urban design, however, is not just about the final result. It is also a tool and a process that can make successful, inclusive urban development possible and more meaningful for all our citizens. In short it is the art of making our towns and cities liveable.

Urban Design is a profession for those who are interested in more than just designing a single building or a home for a single family. It is a great profession for people interested in creating a *place* that can be used and enjoyed by all, now and for years to come. It is also a young profession, borne out of a pact a generation ago between architects and urban planners who decided to stop bickering and agree to work together. Today, urban design typically requires a combination of many skills including architecture, landscape architecture, engineering and a range of other expertise to change our built environment for the better.

And although the list of professions is too long to list here today, I wish to address my remarks particularly to you, my fellow young graduands. I have no doubt that whatever professional avenue you will choose, somehow you will find that it is linked to urban design and development.

Young ladies and gentlemen,

You will be starting out in your professional lives at a critical turning point in human history. UN-HABITAT, the agency which I head, deals with the *built* environment. Our research shows that in 2007, for the first time, half of humanity will be living in towns and cities. It marks the beginning of the new urban era. An historical period when “*homo sapiens*” becomes ‘*homo urbanus*’.

It is projected that by 2030 that figure will rise to two-thirds. Make no mistake, we live at a time of unprecedented, rapid, and irreversible urbanisation. The cities growing fastest are those of the developing world, and the fastest growing neighbourhoods are the slums. We therefore have to use every means at our disposal to ensure a new urban era, characterised not only by glittering towers, commercial centres and highways, but also by liveable spaces for the vast majority of our growing urban population. It is a shocking fact that roughly 70 percent of people in African cities live in slums. Urban poverty is now becoming a severe, pervasive – and largely unacknowledged – feature of modern life. Huge numbers of people in towns and cities are suffering levels of deprivation that are often worse than those experienced by the rural poor.

Another feature of the new urban age is that the year 2007 will also be the year in which the global number of slum dwellers will reach the 1 billion mark. The locus of global poverty is moving to the cities, a process now recognised as the *urbanisation of poverty* and the impending spectre of climate change has complicated matters. Many cities and human settlements are threatened by rising sea levels while others are on a blink of desparation from advancing desert frontiers. A good number of them have already joined the league of the urban poor as environmental refugees in slums.

This is absolutely unacceptable. It is the greatest challenge facing not only the new generation of urban designers, but all of us: the legal profession in upholding the human and civil rights of all, especially those of women; the medical and public health professions in ensuring that our people have access to proper health care and live in a healthy environment; the city engineers to ensure that everyone has access to clean water and decent sanitation; our teachers to ensure that the new generation not only get decent schooling but that they understand properly the world in which they live. Last but not least we have the agronomist, who has to make sure food is on the table, particularly in the slums where food insecurity is rampant.

My agency is committed to helping governments and local authorities upgrade their slums. The only way we can successfully improve our slums is by bringing together all key actors and stakeholders, including the slum dwellers themselves. We need to solve the problems of land and security of tenure. We need to work with developers, planners, service providers, banks and savings and credit associations and housing cooperatives.

But in the end, it is the Urban Designer who can bring all these disparate inputs and actions together into a coherent whole, where people can say with a degree of pride – “this is where I live, this is where I work, and this is where I meet my friends”.

As new graduates you will have far greater responsibilities on your shoulders as the new generation of young leaders moving up to take the helm from us. It is my sincere hope that in doing so, you will remember that part of what makes great cities and great nations is not just grandiose projects or schemes, it is also about the quality of the space we share in our daily lives.

But here I do not want to dwell too long on these matters. For Graduation Day is one of the most joyous days of our lives. It is a milestone, when we open a new chapter with zeal and enthusiasm having worked so hard during study time. And in this I wish you success in your new endeavors.

Again, I wish to express my heartfelt thanks for the honour you have granted me, Mr. Chancellor and the Vice Chacellor and Professor Moirongo, and distinguished members of the School of Architecture and Building Sciences. I will take advantage of my enhanced status to work had in fighting urban squalor that afflicts the masses. And I wish to conclude these remarks with a call on all present here to rise and give our young graduands a hearty hand of congratulations.

Thank you for your kind attention.