

Remarks by Grattan Gill, Architect
109th Graduate Commencement
University of Massachusetts Dartmouth
May 23, 2009

Thank you Chancellor MacCormack. This honor I am about to receive is due to so many nice people I have met over the years here, and especially two long-time staff and faculty: Bruce Barnes, Acquisitions Librarian, and Professor Emeritus Fred Gifun of the History Department. They were both strong supporters of the ‘back story’ we had to tell about the architectural history of the campus, and hard workers in the telling of it. Again, my many thanks.

I am greatly honored to be here with all of you today, and to receive your honorary degree for the efforts of so many of us who worked with Paul Rudolph in the development of this campus in the early sixties. We were all employed by the Boston architectural firm of Desmond & Lord, Inc. who had retained Paul as campus master planner and designer of the buildings under their contract, which amounted to approximately ten structures. I was thrilled to be able to be a part of this State undertaking of such a large project; to be designed by one of America’s best, new, contemporary architects; and without precedent in those early days. Even better, I was assigned, as project manager, to oversee and coordinate his designs into the contract documents of the various buildings, and to insure their careful construction as he had clearly intended.

This ideal arrangement continued from 1963 until 1966 when contractors’ bids were opened for the construction of the second large structure, the science and engineering building with attached lecture halls. Sadly, they were over the appropriated budget by the exact amount to provide the necessary laboratory equipment and overall air-conditioning. An epic argument ensued and a deficit appropriation had to be secured, leading to the dismissal of the “design” architect. This had been a contentious issue ever since Paul Rudolph was retained by Desmond & Lord. Rudolph was then Chairman of the Department of Architecture, Yale University, was internationally respected and a bright light on the horizon of America’s contemporary architecture. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts building review agency had no architects employed in their offices and therefore, as engineers, was badly delinquent in evaluating any architect’s designs. As the State did not have a contract with Mr. Rudolph, it became Desmond & Lord’s issue to resolve. It turned out that Desmond & Lord did not have a contract with him either, only a handshake, so only had to inform him verbally of his unfair demise, despite not being in charge of estimates! This was crushing to all of us, who, after all, had joined the firm because of his presence, and now had to complete his designs without him! And his designs were in various stages of disapproval by the State, to be rescued by us, if possible.

Depression stalked our drafting room. Woe is us, and at that same moment, help arrived. To keep us in check in completing our contractual obligations, the State review bureau assigned an engineer solely to us – to ensure good behavior and no-nonsense architecture. And guess what? The first civil servant, who was truly civil, fell in love with the campus and its buildings, both built (two), and soon to be (eight). Further, he saw in us a determined, idealistic, and committed group of young architects unwilling to compromise our principles which would result in an aborted, inferior campus. He pledged to help us to achieve our goals but insisted that we meet our obligations too: bringing bids for the next building in on budget. It was the textile technology

building, and we simplified its silhouette while smoothing down its exterior. It worked. We beat the budget and were back in business. We continued our cause with successful modifications of the auditorium and administration buildings, and then we attacked the State-rejected complex – the contract for the library, amphitheatre, campanile, and extensive site work. We learned from our friendly State engineer that the State did not build campaniles; they were foreign structures to them. Our friend suggested we rename it a “communications tower,” electrical engineer that he was. We did, and peppered it with antennas and discs, two-hundred and thirty feet tall. The amphitheatre and site work came easily after that.

Meanwhile, Paul Rudolph had been invited back by the student union building authority to design that complex, and later still Desmond & Lord completed the fine arts building, while Paul Rudolph, again, contributed to the Dion building.

During all of this activity, Paul Rudolph was never far away. We both had very much at stake in the university’s architectural outcome: our honor and his reputation. I privately consulted with him on major design decisions, and kept him abreast with drawings and updates. We felt this only fair, as he had been unfairly dismissed, and it was after all his master plan, his campus, and his buildings we were bringing to reality. This brilliant master plan, moving south from Old Westport Road across the former fields and forests of prior farms, turns westerly at the site’s midpoint, where he has located the campanile, library, and amphitheatre. Here he takes the organizing lawn down the gentle slope where it longingly terminates in the cool reflection of Cedar Dell Pond. Romantic, isn’t it. But no less so than Thomas Jefferson’s University of Virginia where the colonnaded lawns look west to the then uncharted forests of this young country; or Frank Lloyd Wright’s Florida Southern University’s pier-shaped esplanades, which lead you through the various structures, terminating on a picturesque lake.

In each setting, these are gifted men with bold ideas making us aware of the beautiful solutions that can be achieved in wonderfully varying landscape conditions. Here at UMass Dartmouth, the plan has been implemented but remains incomplete. Hopefully and happily, future leaders and planners will complete these brave visions, ensuring lasting success of these sound ideals. We as helpers have participated in this pursuit of ideal architecture, and you, as graduates, can now evaluate the results. Like you, we hated the sight of a wet floor caused by a leaking roof; a cold stair, an unlit corridor, or an unkempt student lobby. And like you, we hope, we love the sunrise and sunset on the buildings and the magic shadows cast on the deep and shallow recesses of the facades. More pedestrian, truly, are the diagonal paths across the campus, and where inadequate, you have shown us where to add them. We hope the lobbies have been helpful retreats from the classrooms and good places to gather in down time. I hope that we have both enjoyed the campus in the evening, as the sun sets and the buildings become illuminated as svelte silhouettes against the sky. I often imagined, when we were constructing all these buildings, that one day, when all was complete, I would lay down to rest on the great stepped lawn, and I would hear the buildings humming to me.

One hopes these experiences have made us all more visually aware, and regardless of our field, given us a new standard to strive for. As Sir Winston Churchill said long ago: “We shape our buildings, and then our buildings shape us.” So we must be good observers of our environment and be discriminating in our future choices of housing, the workplace, shopping and recreation.

That will come again when this recession is behind us, and you can think again of your valuable time spent here at UMass Dartmouth. And then you will all be smiling, for you will remember that you have lots to smile about. Thank you.