I am honoured to be here today. As I am neither a graduate nor an Architect, I feel somewhat inadequate to be speaking to you. However, I am getting very accustomed to operating outside my comfort zone so I would like to share some observations about life in our industry and how to survive it.

Specifically, I have three observations I would like to share. The first is that you are entering the most important industry in the developed world, within the most important profession, within that industry at arguably the most pivotal time for the industry within human history. This is a great burden on your shoulders.

The property and construction sector is the biggest single contributor to Australia’s wealth. Property contributes 12% of our GDP compared to the combined might of Agriculture and Fisheries that contribute no more than 3.5%. This is a very different picture of relevance to the health of Australia than that portrayed by the popular media.

In terms of defining a sustainable future, our industry is the most important again. An OECD study of 2003 told us that building sector activity is the single biggest contributor to the environmental degradation of the planet. Our industry consumes no less that 40% of the worlds resources and contributes more than 30% of total greenhouse gas emissions. When you combine this with the understanding that our built environment has a direct impact on our health and wellbeing – we spend 90% of our lives in a manmade indoor environment – then you realise that is our industry where the battle for a sustainable future will be won or lost. If we do not meet the challenge our quality of life and more importantly that of future generations will be degraded significantly as we transition to a resource restrained economy.

Whilst resource constraints are starting to reveal themselves today, this is not the reason I perceive us to be at a pivotal point in human history. We are in the midst of an unprecedented process of global urbanisation and hyper-urbanisation. What does this mean? In 2005, for the first time in human history, the population in urban environments exceeded the population in regional environments. In China alone they are experiencing a migration of some 15 million people each year from the country to the urban centres. Imagine 75% of Australia’s population moving to the cities each year, it’s a very scary and
sobering number. This requires massive construction activity to provide housing and workspaces in a resource constrained world, again placing our industry at the pointy end of the nature of our sustained existence.

So my observation is not that our industry that must make a difference. Rather, you are entering an industry that can make a difference and you must contribute.

My second observation is about controlling you own destiny or, how not to plan a career.

I never set out to be an engineer, or to achieve the industry profile I currently enjoy. My career revealed itself and the decisions that got me here were based on a couple of very simple things;

Firstly, Can I make a difference for the better?

Secondly, will I be proud to tell my mother what I do all day?

I should contextualise the second point. My parents were the archetypal hippies of the late sixties and simply working for a company of more than 10 employees constituted a slavish existence working for the man!

So, I have never established a career plan or set lofty goals. Instead, I have let opportunity and personal effectiveness guide all my decisions and career opportunities since leaving school – 2 months before my sixteenth birthday – through to my day to day management of my company, which employ 350 people.

Some key decisions over the years;

At school, I thought a job in advertising would be good for me. My mother set me straight.

When I moved to London I had to choose between earning a living as a DJ or becoming a mechanical engineer. DJ’s have very little opportunity to make a real difference so my conscience won the day.

Once an engineer, I guided my career by choosing to do only projects that satisfied my personal ethics. I must thank my enlightened employer of the time for respecting such issues
Creating the Green Building Council of Australia non-profit organisation, I knew it would make a real difference to the industry so I was committed.

My current role with Lincolne Scott - our business is being very bold; we now decline work we consider unethical; we refuse to green-wash projects, no matter how important the client is; we allow our employees to apply their own ethical determination as to which projects they are happy to engage in; we are going deep green and some of the market will not employ us because of it. The result? We are more successful than ever before; we attract and retain the best engineers; we are growing at a rate of 20% per year and next month we open our first office in the mainland of the United States.

My observation is this – if I looked backwards, all these decisions make perfect sense in their contribution to where I am now. However, if I were to have tried to plan this I would have failed miserably. If I had tried to apply management theory to my decisions, I would have got a different answer and if I didn’t trust my instincts – my two fundamental ethics – I would not have been so bold to make the decisions I did.

Trust your guts and make sure your decisions let you sleep at night.

My final point is about effecting change, becoming a change agent. We know change in our chosen field is needed urgently and we know that each of us has a role to play. We also know the construction industry is a huge one, with lots of momentum that is very difficult to shift. The question each of you will need to ask yourself is how best to engage. Do you do a Pete Stutchbury, Glen Murcutt or Ric Leplastrier and maintain a disrespectful distance from the big end of town or do you assume the path of a Richard Johnson, Barry Marshall or John Wardle and engage with the big boys and become a commercial player.

My personal determination of this issue is probably the single most important contributor to what I have achieved. My industrial psychological profile tells me (and my then employers) that I have a distrust of authority, which can be attributed to a resentment of my parents. The first part is very accurate. The later is so wrong it is offensive. Remember, it was my parents who brought me up to be distrustful of the authority, or the man, in the first place. It is out of closeness and respect that I continue to operate with caution when dealing with all things corporate. The psychological profile was subsequently found to be engineered for baby boomers and is clearly inappropriate to dealing with later generations, much like how the industry has worked.
So the pivotal choice I made was to join a large consultancy in London against what I was told was the right path. The practice was a public company that employed Architects, Engineers and Interior Designers and had 500 people in the head office alone. My previous employer had only 6 employees – this was a big move and one that I though long and hard about.

What was immediately obvious was that this company was more aligned to my personal values than my previous small employer. I was employed to work on the British Embassy, Moscow and my charge, at the request of the British Foreign Office, was to account for all the greenhouse gas emissions from the development over its life. This was back in 1990 and a career I would feel passionate about had suddenly revealed itself. I declined work on Military work for this employer (the company did the interior design for Saddam Hussein’s bunkers in Iraq) and was gifted projects with Foster and Partners, Richard Rogers and Future Systems, all very innovative practices with environmental sensibilities.

My move to Australia in 1993 was personally driven and not about career and I had an offer of sponsorship from a company with tenuous connection back to my employer in London. I was interviewed in Sydney by a well respected Mechanical Director of the practice who asked me a very simple question – “What do you want to do”. My answer was quick, as this time I actually knew, “Design Green Buildings” to which he responded “You may as well get straight back on the plane to London then, there’s no market for green buildings in Australia”. I adjusted my expectations, took the job and embraced the challenge of creating a market from within. Australia now has an exportable skills base in smart green commercial buildings and I like to think that my choice on that day has played a small role.

My last observation is simple. Having values that are important to you doesn’t predicate a career path within the margins as was asserted by my parents. The larger companies within the industry today have the far biggest impact upon our environment and the future leaders of those companies are in this room. If you go there you do not have to leave your passion, values and ideals at the doors. You can have more impact if you celebrate them, let them guide you and change the fabric of what’s around you.

Understand that you have a huge contribution to make and our present environmental circumstance provides each of you with unprecedented opportunities to make a real difference and develop careers that you love and can be proud of. I look forward to witnessing the impact you will make.
Thank You.