

Philip Long – Honorary Degree Acceptance Speech

Dr Tymkiw, Pro-Vice Chancellor,

Thank you very much for these kind words. I am absolutely delighted to receive this honorary degree.

I came to Essex now more than thirty years ago, part of a small group welcomed on to the first year of the brand-new post-graduate degree in Museum and Galleries studies created by the University. At that time there was an exciting boom in new museum developments here following a worldwide one, with the opening of The Burrell in Glasgow and the Clore Gallery at the Tate in London, the planning of the Sainsbury Wing at the National Gallery and Tate Liverpool. Here at Essex Dr Peter Vergo and colleagues recognised the importance of the museum profession and the vital role these institutions have in shaping our understanding of history and contemporary culture.

So, it was a wonderful opportunity to come here. I arrived with a degree in the visual arts which I had studied I think with a varying diligence. Essex then was a great chance to come back to university to get stuck into what had begun to seriously interest me, and especially to make friends with students from across the Art History department, from whom I learnt just as much, both in the seminar rooms and I have to say in the pubs of Wivenhoe.

What did my time give me here? As well as my degree of course, I began to learn that hard work is good fun and rewarding, and that the expertise and experience I most respect is among those who will readily say there is still much they don't know but they want to find out. Being at a place like Essex University is of course all about learning, and what I have also realised looking back on my experience here is that a thirst to find out, so important for all of life ahead, is instilled in places like this. I am very grateful to Essex University for that, and for all the opportunities I was given here that have helped me since.

As has Dr Tymkiw has kindly told you, I've been fortunate to work in the arts and heritage throughout my career. Of course, one of the great sustaining things about the arts is that it is not really a definite thing in and of itself, but a means of infinite expression and of infinite interpretation, that is shaped by and gives shape to our history, our culture, our society, our place in the world.

It's a pleasure to enjoy and learn from the arts, go to a concert, visit a historical site, learn from another culture, see an exhibition, to read, to listen to music. Finding time to do that can be difficult in our frenetic lives. Societal attitudes can also prejudice the arts and culture as non-essential; for example, for local authorities throughout the UK there is no statutory requirement to fund culture, although investing in culture is proven to bring many benefits to individuals, to community, to place, to people's lives.

All of our lives have of course been seriously affected by the pandemic, and for many the consequences have been very difficult indeed. The situation has been unprecedented, with all experiencing a loss of liberty that has been confusing and disorientating. For me, building and opening a new museum, V&A Dundee, was hard, but I had never anticipated the further unimaginable challenge caused by the pandemic of having to close its doors as one of my final tasks before moving on to the National Trust for Scotland.

Throughout the country our museums, galleries, concert halls, historic sites, cinemas all closed, and with that our towns and cities felt bereft, one-dimensional. And with that, it was possible to see that what we had always taken for granted, these places where we meet, have fun, learn, be inspired must not be taken for granted, and need to be supported to take care of our cultural heritage so we can always learn from it.

Thankfully these places are open again and doing wonderful things, but they have a long, hard road back to recovery. So, if I can ask all of you to do one thing after this celebration then it would be to go back to one of our museums, galleries, concert halls, and historic places in the coming days and weeks, helping them with that recovery so their vital role can continue, helping us all to better understand and enjoy the world we live in.

May I finish with a few brief thanks. To the University for this honorary degree, which I am very proud to receive, and I look forward very much to being involved in the life of the University in the future.

To my wife Annie, for everything really. And to my parents. There are many parents here today, and I expect many like mine have done a great deal to help get to this wonderful moment. My parents certainly did, and while my mother is no longer with us, she and my father were here to see me graduate more than thirty years ago. I am sure today would have been a proud moment for her, as I hope it is for all of you.

Thank you.