13 March 2017

To all Architects’ Organisations in the Commonwealth

Commonwealth Day 2017: A peace-building Commonwealth

As I join other Commonwealth Organisations from fifty-one other countries at Westminster Abbey for the Commonwealth Day Service on the occasion of Commonwealth Day 2017 I wish to send my greetings to all Architects’ Organisations in the Commonwealth.

Commonwealth Day, held on the second Monday in March each year, is an opportunity for individuals, communities and organisations to promote the Commonwealth’s shared values of peace, democracy and equality, and to celebrate the association’s rich diversity.

The theme chosen for this year’s Commonwealth Day is that of ‘A peace-building Commonwealth’. This is appropriate and important when considering the ever increasing instability and uncertainty in the world. As announced by the Rt Hon Patricia Scotland, Commonwealth Secretary-General, “the Commonwealth family of nations in its rich diversity becomes an ever more-needed source of strength and hope for all its members”. ‘A peace-building Commonwealth’ is a natural follow-on from the 2016’s theme of ‘An Inclusive Commonwealth’, and reaffirms the Commonwealth Charter’s principle that international peace and security, sustainable economic growth and development and the rule of law are essential to the progress and prosperity of all mankind.

The Commonwealth Charter expresses the commitment of Member States to the development of free and democratic societies and the promotion of peace and prosperity to improve the lives of all peoples of the Commonwealth. The Charter also acknowledges the role of civil society in supporting the goals and values of the Commonwealth.

The 2016 Global Peace Index highlighted the continuing deterioration in the overall global levels of peace. Among the 163 countries mapped, it found a widening gap between the most and the least peaceful. Of the index’s chosen indicators “the impact of terrorism” and “political instability” showed the sharpest decline. The report attributes the global deterioration to conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa and the associated international repercussions. The number of refugees and displaced persons doubled between 2007 and 2015 to nearly 60 million, accounting for more than 10% of the population in nine countries.

The Commonwealth Association of Architects is one of more than 80 intergovernmental, professional and civil society organisations within the Commonwealth family that can proactively engage with, and contribute towards, the pursuit and strengthening of peace through their work. As architects, we have a special place in all this as through our designs and buildings we contribute to the well being of society and to the quality of life of our citizens. Quality designs and buildings contribute to a better society and thus to a better world and more importantly to a better and peaceful world.

Our designs come in different forms and at different times during the development of the urban fabric; either in the design of new buildings or renovation of buildings in existing towns.
and cities or in the design of new settlements following war or conflict. Spontaneous construction and a lack of strong civil governance are symptomatic of post-conflict cities. The role for architects and architecture in addressing these challenges is crucial.

Rapid and often unplanned urbanization continues unabated and this is aggravating the impacts of a range of natural and man-made disasters. Armed conflict and the use of explosive weapons in densely populated areas cause death and injury amongst civilians; earthquakes inflict unique levels of devastation in cities, as do severe storms and floods. But urban areas can also offer sanctuary for the majority of internally displaced people and refugees.

Urbanisation intersects with climate change, natural disasters, conflict and displacement. It is a critical lens through which to review national and international efforts to prevent, prepare for and respond to crisis, conflict and disasters. Moreover, displacement, conflict and natural disasters are increasingly becoming an urban phenomena.

These issues generate new challenges and in order to address such issues a number of initiatives at an international level have emerged.

It is of interest to note that CAA has recently joined the Global Alliance for Urban Cities which is a global, multi-disciplinary and collaborative community of practice. It is a ‘network of networks’ working to prevent, prepare for and effectively respond to humanitarian crises in urban settings. Its first milestone for progress was the Habitat III held in October 2016.

The Alliance promotes a vision of inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable cities and towns (as laid out in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development) in which urban communities, their leaders and members have the power, capacities and resources to address the risks and reality of humanitarian crises, to mitigate crisis impacts on the most vulnerable, including the displaced, and to enable affected people to determine, with dignity, the course of their lives and their futures.

Let us hope that the theme of this day will be kept in our minds, not only throughout 2017, but also in years to come and that through our actions we will contribute to a peaceful Commonwealth and more importantly to a peaceful world.

Vincent Cassar
President