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Address to the Industrial Design Council of Australia

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Address by the Premier, Don Dunstan, to The Industrial Design
Council of Australia.

18/11/74.

Mr. Harris, Ladies and Gentlemen.

Thank you for inviting me here today.

I am, at this time, very pleased to be able to speak in general terms about good design in South Australia - and how it relates to both the State's industrial base and its life. It is, I believe, entirely appropriate that your working meeting be held now. Proper standards of industrial design are extremely important to this State's industries because they have an increasingly fundamental effect on the market's acceptance of industrial products. And as we all know, domestic markets generally are becoming extremely competitive - in many cases, for this State, good and efficient design will give our products the essential edge.

However, I don't intend to go any further than that in touching on current economic conditions. We have a troubled national and international economic situation at the moment, but we are a well-endowed, wiry, resourceful people. In the medium term, for which we must now be planning, proper standards of industrial and environmental design will be an essential indication of our success, both as manufacturers and as a society. And relating to that, I intend here to use the word 'design' in a very broad sense.

Firstly, I would like to touch on 'Good Design'. This is a peculiar and distortable epithet. To pun, the matter, in 'Good Design's' mansion there are many 'Houses and Gardens' - which is to say that 'Good Design' is very often seen merely as Skandinavian modular furniture, German stainless steel cutlery, Italian dome lights, and the like. By applying such a narrow definition, people entirely forget the essential design achievement of, say, an efficient and innovative printed circuit.

There are, of course, two main streams of design. They both have their source in a broad concept of functionalism and productive efficiency, but they diverge shortly after rising and remain separate for most of the time. Only occasionally do they converge, but then in important ways.

The first stream follows the swiftest course possible - its products are exemplified by the mass produced printed circuit or transistor. The other, while moving in the same direction, is a more relaxed stream. It meanders, somewhat artistically, and its products are exemplified by, say, Arabia-ware cooking pots, Finel bowls, or the Marrimeko fabrics. Today I wish in particular to dwell on the second stream because the products that are influenced most centrally by its ebbs and flows are those which people most constantly see, use and touch as objects, separate and distinct.

It is the shape, the exterior, of a transistor radio or door lock or washing machine, that people see and are, or are not, pleased with. Likewise the pattern and texture, or the shape, of a fabric or a ceramic tile. Efficiency in performance they also require, but it is not the only central consideration, for otherwise every stobie pole would have a good design label.

The visual world all people live in is influenced in a massive way by the products of mass production. Design standards influence the society's taste and sensibility. For this reason, the State Government's support and encouragement of the Industrial Design Council should not be seen as an isolated thing, a fillip on the edge of our industrial development programme. It is far more important than that.

Four years ago we embarked upon a programme designed to achieve in South Australia a more stable and diverse economic and manufacturing base, a better environment, and opportunities for a better life-style for South Australians. The programme was ambitious; it was intended to be. We have achieved a great deal; we have still a great deal to achieve.

For instance, we have established a Craft Authority to give employment to craftspeople in their own right and to train apprentices. We believe some of our design deficiencies can be made up by encouraging manufacturers to use, as is done in many other countries, the vision and the design expertise of craftspeople. Already this policy has resulted in some outstanding craftspeople establishing themselves here, in particular silversmiths, potters and weavers.

We have initiated, in a number of ways, programmes for town and city planning and innovative house design. These policies are now bearing fruit.

On the cultural front, both in our schools and colleges and in the public arena, the Government has sponsored, encouraged, subsidised and promoted extensive programmes of craft and design studies, and by providing a stable base for the performing arts in has provided, simultaneously, employment for the design skills that are used in mounting stage and film productions.

One could continue the catalogue in this; but I think the point is made.

And in all of these programmes, our desire was and is to have the State aim for and reach new social and environmental standards, both in our urban areas and in the country at large. In many cases it could be likened to a design assignment, but one in which everyone could have, and has, a say.

Planning for these standards - as well as the implementation of policies aimed at achieving them - continues now and will do so for the foreseeable future because, while the direction and magnitude of the task can be defined, the problems it throws up are not stable. They are subject to changes of emphasis and direction, resulting from new information; or the buoyancy or otherwise of the economy; and all other matters that affect State Government decisions in this country, not the least of which are Federal Government decisions.

Now in all of this, 'design' - that is to say the processes of defining and reaching standards of function, style, productive method, shape and quality - is of fundamental importance: whether it be the design of a region or a park, a city or a town, a street or a subdivision, a house or an office building, a fence or a window frame, a door or a lock, a carpet or a carpet cleaner, an electric stove or a cooking pot, a transistor radio or a transistor. Thus, what might be called for the purposes of this argument 'macro design', is a process which really affects everyone constantly, and often paradoxically, as in the instance of rural and landscape conservation, where

the macro design would often be how not to design anything at all.

So what are the environmental design problems that can be seen when taking a proper overview?

Take the urban environment. In this area, there are, at last, many new important initiatives and policies that will have a major affect on our ways of life. Since Robin Boyd wrote "The Australian Ugliness" fourteen years ago there has been a major shift in The Australian's attitude to his environment and to the architecture around him. But there is still a long way to go. In the matter of urban design standards (in the small things like tree planting; the big things like advertising display controls, such as those currently exercised in splendid isolation by the City of Adelaide Development Committee, and building conservation and park and garden design) it is often as if Robin Boyd had not existed, so hide-bound and lacking in vision are many of our authorities.

Take the Metropolitan Planning Area's foreshore. It is most often a treeless disaster area, totally unresponsive to the important recreational uses it is put to each summer by Adelaide's sweltering hundreds of thousands. Where are the licenced shoreside cafes; shade areas; changing shower and locker facilities; squares; piazzas; playgrounds; creches and beachside drink and ice cream services? They should be available easily and simply as such facilities are in all other countries which enjoy a climate similar to ours.

Then there is the matter of our parks and gardens - in a climate as dry and as hot as ours, our public authorities constantly try to make many of them look as if they had been lately translated from one of England's damper counties when in fact our State itself (not to say the country as a whole) has a splendid treasury of low rainfall native flora, and a developing design expertise in native flora gardening. (I will not at this point fulminate on the design standards of our park and street furniture - the deficiencies must surely be too obvious.)

But while on this level, one could touch on our subdivisional planning methods. The Planning and Development Act in this State

is an immensely flexible document - and yet the variety of housing design, of street and parking planning, and of overall suburban and urban design layout, approved under it, is basically what we had in the 'fifties when the problems of urban sprawl and concomitant public transport strain were first envisaged. The housing philosophy which most Australians now understand and advance is that they be given a maximum choice in their housing styles, together with a series of far more interesting and urbane and convenient central and regional shopping and business areas. But to achieve such qualities, both our State and local Governmental planning authorities must be far more imaginative and open-minded. Let us welcome change, variety and innovation in housing types, block sizes, cluster arrangements, street layouts and mixtures of residential and business uses. A large number of Australians want to live in a house that provides adequate garden space for their children and their leisure. They do not necessarily all want to live with some ideal subdivisional block size that leaves them little time for much else than cutting the lawn. There is a large expertise in this State for innovative housing design; to achieve such designs, and higher housing densities where possible and desirable, both the Government and local authorities must be involved in a creative process of encouragement.

Likewise, the design of our countrysides, rural areas, great parks and highways. We can congratulate ourselves in many respects for our handling here of the advertising hoarding; it has been controlled and does not render the driver's landscape as wretched as it is in some parts of the Eastern States. But in the provision of public facilities, highway tree-planting programmes, scrub conservation and regeneration and building conservation, we are again often faced with a kind of neat, box-like view that takes no proper and adventurous view of the situation and existant powers to control or encourage.

It is my opinion that in the implementation of many of the general ideas I am here outlining we suffer in Australia from what might be called as 'all-or-nothing' syndrome. It is often as if so fixed are we on the desire for achieving the large and highly ramified development, planned even down to the design of,

say, its outstandingly attractive gutters, that we miss the urban and rural design options that are available in the short and inexpensive term.

It is for this reason that I took the opportunity of, as it were, endorsing the planting of trees in shopping centre car parks, and car parks generally, last week. (I do the same today for trees anywhere possible in the City of Adelaide - or the metropolitan area, and mention in particular that trees have the room and could grow very nicely and inexpensively down the centre of Grenfell Street.) However, enough of the design of the City of Adelaide - I think it has been saved. The Government is now equally concerned with seeing achieved throughout the metropolitan area and in all major State urban centres, proper standards of urban design.

And such issues, ladies and gentlemen, are not unconnected with the reason which you are here today. You are all, in a vitally important way, contributing in a 'micro-design' sense to achieving many of the 'macro design' aims I have touched on.

But there is, if you will allow me, one sour note which I would like to strike on your behalf, because I think it is proper that I do so. The Government is disappointed at the relatively small number of Good Design Labels companies in South Australia received. It indicates how far our industries have yet to go in appreciating the necessity for proper design standards. What we must aim for is a situation in which most of the products of this State are worthy of including in the I.D.C. Index. Such a situation would mean that, firstly, to the extent that the State's urban and rural design problems result from badly designed articles of mass production, part of our problem would be solved; and secondly, and even more vital, it would mean that the stability of our employment base was close to being achieved.

South Australia is not a big State and is never likely to be. But size has nothing to do with bigness of vision, and that is what we need in Australia now. Today I have not touched on many of the essential ramifications of my central theme - I have endeavoured to steer a narrow course, for in talking of design

in this way we can raise the nature of our total society, its financial and political and social institutions, and how they all interact. I will simply close saying it is all of a piece, and a proper achievement here requires flexibility of vision and social purpose for this State.

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