This is Alan Hutchings on behalf of the oral history project being organised by the Dunstan Foundation, and I’m interviewing Mr Max Lieberman, one of the major private developers planning and constructing and designing the suburbs of Adelaide in the 1970s, in the Dunstan Era.

Max, how did you come to start off in Adelaide?

I’d been flying in from Sydney to do some business in Adelaide and every time I was – the plane was …..., was flying over West Lakes (baby vocalises) – just a minute. Can we retract that?

That’s all right, it’s a nice background. (background apologies) That’s all right.

Is it still running?

Yes – I thought that was a nice interlude to have on the tape, rather than turn it off.

I was flying over what was called the Upper Port Reach in those days – actually, in the land that’s owned by the Government.

Keep going.

When I got back the next time said, ‘I’ll go and see Don and see what he’s going to do with that’, and Don said to me, he said, ‘We have no idea what we’re going to do with it. We’re going to get the Housing Trust to ….. ….. ….. find the money to do it’, and I said to him, ‘What about if I get our consortium in Sydney to come and have a look at it and see if they’re prepared to actually put the money in and get it done.’ And he said, ‘Yes, be an excellent idea.’ When I went back I talked to the chairman and I said to him, ‘It’s a very good development that would actually happen in Adelaide. Would you be interested?’ He said to me, ‘No, Max, I’ll go with you anywhere in Australia except Adelaide’. And I said ….. ….. He said, ‘Well, as you know, things a bit dead in Adelaide and we can’t afford to actually put some capital in there and wait for it to come good’. So I went to see Don and I said, ‘Don, it’s not working’. He said to me, ‘Do you think if I go and see him I’d persuade him?’ I said, ‘With your charisma you probably will’. (laughs) And that didn’t do any good. So, cut the story short, he went there and talked to Sir John ….. and he
persuaded him just to come to Adelaide and have a look, which he did, had a look, and he came and had a look one morning and we took him out at West Lakes there and his wife said to us, ‘You boys must be out of your cotton mind to do something with that rubbish’. (laughter) And we didn’t answer because she was a very nice lady.

Well, this is how it all started. I said to Don, ‘Look, this is a big job and the only way that we could do that is we couldn’t really rely for the planning approvals for a council because once we start moving on this one we can’t have a council that would actually take their time to sort of approve every little thing that you want to do. This is something, it’s a major project’. And he said, ‘Yes, I think I know what to do with that’, he said, ‘I’ll have to do an indenture and Parliament will have to agree to it’. I said, ‘Well, I’ll leave that to you because I don’t think that the Parliament will approve it’. He said, ‘Ah, well, I’ll try it’. And he was very persuasive and he put it to Parliament. But before he put it to Parliament he asked me whether I would actually have a meeting with all the heads of the departments to actually find out what they think about the project and so forth, and we had a meeting and all the heads of department – nearly all the heads of department, including Salisbury, the fellow in charge of boards and so forth, I think he was –

Oh, right, yes.

– they all said, ‘I’m afraid it can’t be done, it just won’t be done’, and it just so happened two hours later Don Dunstan came into the meeting and he said, ‘Well, boys, what have you decided on this?’ They all said, ‘Premier, this is not going to work, not going to work at all because it’s going to be a big problem’. And he said, ‘Well, let me tell you something, boys’. He said, ‘What I want to hear from you is “Yes, it will work”, so I’ll leave now and you can actually stay here until early in the morning and come and see me then and tell me what the results were’. And as soon as he left the heads of department decided, ‘Well, we’d better do something about it’. At the end of the night – we stayed there until two o’clock in the morning, I think – and we decided that, yes, the way we’re going to do it, and it just happened.
That’s interesting because there was the Greater Port Adelaide scheme that was on paper at least, so I would have thought that the old Harbours Board would have said yes.

Well, if you knew Salisbury you would have found out that (laughs) everything is as difficult as it can be done. So we had a lot of problems but we overcame all of these problems, and really it was at a time when Adelaide was on their knees, you see, and Don really needed something to brighten the situation up, and it took us nearly thirty years to finish the job. We started it in 1970 and finished in 2001.

I hadn’t realised that it was still going for that length of time.

Yes. And in fact we actually won the award of excellence, 1992, with the Delfin Property Group worldwide, we had quite a few competitors there, about seven or eight of them, and we turned out to be the number one.

That’s the worldwide – – –.

.....

That’s, what, the Federation of – I’ll pick that up later – – –.

Yes. I think I’ve got a copy of this; I’ll give it to you.

Oh, thank you.

So it was something to really sort of be very proud of, that little Adelaide was the winner worldwide of the best development in the world. But after that we also did Golden Grove, and Golden Grove was a big success also, and Mawson Lakes started. I resigned after that, I just retired after starting.

So really West Lakes was the Dunstan Era start of the major developments.

Yes. The others, Don wasn’t there any more; it was the Premier – – –.

Back in the days of West Lakes, with Don Dunstan, that was very interesting about him not laying down the law but sort of motivating the team, so to speak.

If it wasn’t Don Dunstan it would still be a rubbish dump.

You mentioned his charisma: this was something that I found, too, that he could motivate without being too big-handed about it, if you know what I mean.
Yes.

Heavy-handed, rather. Are there any other stories that you can remember of him being like that with the public servants and other developers?

I think that he was like that with all other developers, too. It wasn’t just the one-off with us. And his door was always open, any developer could actually ring him up and get an appointment in a couple of days maximum, and I think it’s a little bit more difficult these days than it was in the old days.

You could get through to him, you didn’t have to go through a line of minders.

No. And he was always open to suggestions, always. And really I personally miss him quite a bit.

Did you have any dealings with him outside of professional life?

Yes. In fact, he asked me on three occasions to be the Chairman of the Housing Trust and every time I refused it because I was actually living in Sydney and it was weekly meetings of the Trust and I just couldn’t fly in and fly out every week. The fourth time I accepted it and it was quite interesting because, being outside the Housing Trust, I always felt that these guys were sort of dead from the waist up, and when I got in there and was working with the boys there I found them really very dedicated people. It was a big experience for me to actually – – –.

Yes, the reverse. Often it’s public servants who get a pleasant surprise when they go to the private sector but it doesn’t always happen in reverse.

No. But really it was an eye-opener because they were all very dedicated people doing a magnificent job. In fact, we were the best Housing Trust. Not ‘we’ when I was there; it was long before me that the South Australian Housing Trust was the best housing commission in the land.

Well, looking back on those days –

You remember that, don’t you?

– yes. Well, looking at the products, I mean Elizabeth gets bad press but it’s often not the fault of the plans or the developments of Elizabeth, is it? It’s just the fact that industry disappeared there for a while.
In fact, Adelaide used to be the State where the big boys used to come in here to actually see what we were doing, and I remember A.V. Jennings used to come in after six o’clock and take some photographs of the houses that we were building and I came out and I said, ‘Well, can I help you?’ and he said, ‘I’ve been admiring these houses of yours and I heard all about it in Melbourne so I’m taking some photographs’. I said, ‘Well, come in and tell me which plans do you need and I’ll give them to you’. (laughter)

But, really, Adelaide, what actually started Western Australia to actually start building good homes was when we went there it was really hillbilly country, you know? They were building houses like pre-war. And we took all our plans from Adelaide there and we sent our people there and we trained them, and you should see now what’s happening. They, in fact, left us for dead because they’re doing magnificent things up there.

You mentioned before we started recording, we were talking about Monarto. What were your views about that? That was a Dunstan initiative; in fact, it pre-dated the New Cities programs of Whitlam.

Yes.

So what are your views about Monarto?

Well, I spoke to Don about this one and he really wanted to actually do something himself, and he said, ‘We will be doing this development’, and then he found it was fairly difficult and so forth. But, personally speaking, I felt that the area that he had ..... ..... was a beautiful piece of real estate and it could have been an absolutely magnificent development, but things changed ..... ..... situation ..... financially was a bit difficult and so forth and unfortunately nothing happened. He was very, very disappointed.

As I also mentioned before, I think the last time I saw you was thirty years ago, when you came up to Monarto to advise us on a rural living development we were going to do. Can you remember that at all?

Vaguely.

Vaguely, right.
But anything that we would have done there would have been first class, because it was an easy job. There was no reclamation to do and the land was undulating and had trees and it was good roads to get there, and it was a ..... ..... ..... ..... so I was really sorry to see that it didn’t happen.

Yes. Well, that makes two of us. But you mention the terrain, the undulating terrain: from your point of view as a developer, you saw it as a very good site with different –

Excellent site, excellent site.

– aspects and things like that.

Yes. In fact, if the private sector had to do it, they couldn’t actually accumulate all that land because it had to be a government job.

Yes, that’s for sure. Now, you were also involved with South Lakes, weren’t you?

Yes, we did South Lakes. That was another one where it was a bit difficult. It’s full of mosquitoes and midges and the water level was fairly high, it was about twelve inches from the surface, and it was a piece of land that you couldn’t do much about it. But we drained the land and washed it.

What do you mean, ‘washed’?

The rain actually did wash it.

Oh, I see.

What we did is we actually built a lot of little lakes all around it, interconnected them and built it all out, all the soil that was there was brought up into one big pond, and that’s why we could actually plant beautiful greens and fairways.

Oh, I see.

Nothing would have grown there unless you – – –.

So when you say ‘washed’, that sort of washed the salt out of the soil?

Yes, salt out, yes.

Now, that was not Delfin, that was RDC, wasn’t it?
Yes.

So that was a different development company to Delfin.

Yes, but Delfin was actually indirectly connected with it, yes.

I see – because there’s all of those sorts of connections that someone like – – –.

Yes. RDC was non-existent then.

It didn’t exist.

Not any more.

Oh, no, it doesn’t exist now.

No, no, it didn’t exist then.

Oh, I see.

It was actually taken over by Delfin.

Oh, I see, right. So in that case South Lakes is really under the Delfin umbrella as well.

Yes.

So West Lakes, South Lakes, Golden Grove, Mawson Lakes – – –.

Was all Delfin.

Right. So, other than the Housing Trust, you could say that Delfin probably planned and developed more of Adelaide than any other large organisation.

Not completely. Not completely. The Housing Trust – we actually built, Delfin actually built ..... ..... of probably sixty or seventy thousand homes; Housing Trust built a hell of a lot more.

Yes. So Delfin would have been the next after the Housing Trust, if you put it together like that.

Yes.

Because AMP developed North Haven, but that was nowhere near the size of West Lakes.
It didn’t really develop North Haven. It started to do it and then decided that it wasn’t paying and they sold it to the Housing Trust. When I was Chairman of the Housing Trust we bought a lot of that land from them because it wasn’t successful.

Well, going back to the actual Dunstan Era again, is there any other aspects that you’d like to record? I mean, we’ve talked about West Lakes and you’ve talked about how he, I suppose, enthused the public servants. There was Monarto. Were there other developments that he was keen on? Like I think where we are in the East End Precinct and the Market, that was really after his days, wasn’t it?

Yes. It was developed under Bannon.

Yes. I just wondered, was he – – –? Well, there was things like Dr Kent’s Paddock: were you involved with that at all?

No.

No, that was mainly the Housing Trust.

Yes. I think West Lakes was quite a big job in itself.

Yes. Well, it certainly was, and still is. And the Football Park, I’m trying to remember, was that developed in the Dunstan days, or – – –?

No, that was after.

That was after.

Yes.

But you could say that Don introduced and had the indenture act passed.

Yes. It was the first indenture that was actually sort of provided in Australia on a major project.

Oh, right – is it the first?

Yes. In fact, we then gave some copies of indentures to my ex-partner, which was the commissioner on the NCDC, he wanted to know how we did it in Adelaide. And Sydney wanted to know, so I gave it to Sydney. So we propagated his views right through Australia.

Right. You mentioned your ex-partner, who was the NCDC Chairman; who was that?
Fellow called – what’s his name? – Tony.

**Tony Powell.**

Tony Powell, yes.

**Oh, right. Because I knew Tony – I’ve lost touch with him. So he was Chairman but he was in as one of the executives in Delfin, was he?**

No, no, no. He was a person with Lieberman and Associates.

**Oh, I see.**

We were partners. It was Lieberman, Powell and Associates.

**Right.**

And he came to me one day and he said, ‘I’ve got a good job. Do you mind if I break the partnership?’ And I said, ‘Be my guest’. I in fact liked the man. He was a real – he still is – haven’t seen him in years now, but he wanted to know if he could have a copy of the indenture to see if he can do something like that with, I think it was with Lend Lease in Canberra.

**Did you have much to do with Stuart Hart?**

Very much so, very much so. I had something to do with him earlier than Don Dunstan.

**Because Stuart was actually – he was an inspirational character himself, actually.**

He was, he was. In fact, I had a few ding-dongs, let’s put it that way, with him; but he was actually always very friendly. The only ding-dongs were with Sir Thomas Playford, I used to go and see him on Para Hills and he said to me, ‘Yes, you go ahead and do it’, because I wanted them to actually put some sewers in in Clovercrest for the development that I did up there in Modbury, and they asked me how much was it going to actually cost to put the sewers in and I told him about nine hundred and forty thousand pounds, and he looked at me and he said, ‘That’s not chickenfeed, lad’. (laughter) And he said, ‘Come and see me on Friday’, and I went to see him on Friday and he said, ‘That’s fine, go ahead’. In those days there was no red tape; Sir Thomas, his word was his [bond]. I went back and started to do
some work and I was told, ‘What are you doing to me?’ Stuart Hart was telling me, ‘What did you do to me? I’ve actually worked for nine months straight to actually plan Adelaide north or south and you’re coming along with your proposition to do one in the east; that’s against my advice’. I said to him, ‘Well, if you want to actually have a fight, have a fight with the Premier, don’t have a fight with me. He’s the one that said yes, go ahead’. But I always had plenty of time for Stuart, really. He was a very dedicated man.

Yes. Well, he found, like you, he’s recorded in this series the way that you could go to see Dunstan as Premier and he was across his brief and would give you a decision quite quickly and clearly.

Within a week.

Yes, and that seemed to be a strength of his that comes through.

Yes.

But they weren’t decisions that were off the cuff or inconsistent, he had a – – –.

No, no, no. He had good support with Des Corcoran, you see. Des Corcoran was the man really responsible for actually helping us to get West Lakes going. He was always open. You rang him up, he said, ‘Come and see me now. What’s the problem?’ He took the form[?] home and said, ‘Get that thing done’, put the form back in and said, ‘What else do you want?’ I said, ‘Nothing more’. He said, ‘All right, see you later. Bye’. (laughter)

He was Minister –

For Works.

– for Works, with the E&WS¹ and the other major organisations.

Yes.

And he worked pretty closely with Dunstan, didn’t he?

Yes. Very, very closely, yes. Dunstan used to put every difficult job on his desk.

¹ E&WS – Engineering and Water Supply.
But I’m trying to think back from my own experience with Monarto: it was Don Hopgood who was our minister for Monarto. Did you have anything to do with — — —?

No.

No. So your relationship with Monarto, it was really talking to the Premier.

Only, yes. He asked me my views.

Yes.

I gave him my views and I said, ‘Look, this is fantastic’.

Right. Now, Max, is there anything else you’d like to add?

As I said before, I really miss him.

Yes.

It was a pity, you know, that he died so young.

Yes. Did you meet with him socially at all? You don’t have to — — —.

No. I was going to his home quite often, talked to him about things; but socially, I was living in Sydney.

No, right. And his house, did you have anything to do with that? I think it was Bob Dickson[?] with the architect, he gave Don some advice about the plans for his house; I don’t know whether — — —.

I think Morrie Downer[?] was the one —

Morrie Downer was, was he?

— who helped him on this one. The architect sort of wanted to put all the timbers that were coming from overseas and it turned out to be so expensive that Don couldn’t actually get the house built. Morrie said, ‘Look, let me have a look at the plans’, and he altered a lot of things and it was done at a reasonable price.

Well, I won’t keep you —

That’s okay.

— just reminiscing; we can both go on like that for some time.
Yes, well, eighty-six plus.

Well, you have a few years on me.

Yes, yes, you’re a junior.

I’m a junior.

I’m your senior. (laughter)

I had lunch today with some people and they thought that I was very much a senior as regards to them, too. Anyway, thank you very much, Max.

Pleasure.

Good.

END OF INTERVIEW.