This is Alan Hutchings on behalf of the Dunstan Foundation interviewing Newell Platten, a retired architect who was very involved in matters of architecture, urban design and town planning during the Dunstan Decade.

Newell, we were talking briefly earlier about how you saw the Dunstan Decade as something of a culmination of a particular era and approach to creativity in urban affairs. Perhaps you can elaborate?

Well, Alan, it’s probably a cliché, but if I think of Don I visualise the surfer on the wave: someone spectacular, beautiful to behold, expressing a movement, but the movement requires energy and energy is there, regardless. I think what Don did was to tap into a mood in South Australia which was quite unique and had been building up for some time and give expression to it. That’s not to say – that’s not to diminish his contribution in any way, because other people, another man might very well let it go. But Don had that capacity, and what I think I’d like to do to start, to get me going on this, is to talk a bit about the kind of energy that was around the place.

Can I go back to the immediate post-war period? A number of things happened. First of all, the Commonwealth Government introduced scholarships for people who might not normally be able to afford to go to university, was one thing. The other thing is a lot of ex-servicemen came back and began their education. These ex-servicemen were people who’d been liberated, if you like, from Adelaide’s traditional conservatism by being abroad, they understood the world was a different place to what Adelaide was, and they brought back a lot of fresh attitudes, I think, to life – on such simple things as drinking at six o’clock and city life and all that sort of thing. They all went through university about the same time and in two or three years you saw this great mass of people going through university; and you had, together with them, people who came from a part of Adelaide that wasn’t normally the kind of people who would get to university, and I was one of those. I got a Commonwealth Scholarship, otherwise I’d never have gone through.

The result of this was that in the late ’50s, in the ’50s and ’60s, there was a tremendous amount of intellectual activity, you might call it, also activism that was transferring itself from ideas into active kind of grass roots politics, if you like. The architects themselves were actively promoting change in planning and in urban
design, and trying to encourage the Playford Government to get active in these areas. You did this by writing letters and forming little groups and having meetings and stuff like that. For example, the Civic Trust came out of this movement in 1968. This came out of the ..... Exhibition which was organised by the Institute of Architects followed by a public meeting, which then created the Civic Trust. This was all, as I’m saying, grass roots activity. But let’s just pause for a minute.

That’s fine.

Then Don was – I’m trying to remember now what Don’s position was about the time. He became the Minister of Housing in 1964, was it?

He was the Attorney-General in at first the Walsh – – –.

Attorney-General in the Walsh Government, and then he lost to –

Steele Hall.

– lost to Steele Hall, won the election again in about ’69 –

About that.

– ’69–70, so the Dunstan Decade was called the decade of the ’70s. Okay, let’s go back a bit.

The Playford Government and the Adelaide of the Playford Government’s times, as I mentioned earlier, was extremely conservative and repressive, and when Playford lost the first election to Walsh it was like lifting the lid on a big pot of boiling matter – intellectual matter, if you like – and certainly there seemed to be a lot of optimism in the place. I mean, I look back on Adelaide as a rather exciting place in those days. There was activity all over the place, we were always holding meetings and agitating for this and agitating for that and not getting very far until Don arrived.

When Don came he liberated all this energy and gave it expression, and various people will talk to you about their various activities. It was in the arts and culture and food and wine and lifestyle and in urban design, and in architecture. I was never very close to Don in the personal sense; I did know him, we’d called each other by their first names, that sort of thing, but I wasn’t one of those people who wined and dined at his house. But I always admired him and always respected him.
I must tell you a story, if I may. When Don first went into Parliament, that would have been in the ’50s, wouldn’t it? Do you know, do you remember when he went?

No.

He was a backbencher. When he was a backbencher in the – – –.

He was Member for Norwood.

Member for Norwood, right. Well, I had a friend whose uncle was the (telephone rings) Honourable H.H. Shannon – I’m sorry. Let’s stop. (break in recording)

I was going to tell you a story, but I’m not sure whether I should or not, but I’ve started so I suppose I’m committed, aren’t I? (laughter) As I said earlier, I had tremendous admiration for Don, but he was a polarising fellow and he built up also a great number of enemies around the place, and one of them was the Honourable H.H. Shannon, a political opponent. H.H. Shannon was the Member for Onkaparinga, I think, in the Adelaide Hills, an uncle of a friend of mine, and when Don had just got into Parliament I remember going around to my friend’s house and Shannon was there. I was all eager and curious about this new spunky young fellow that had gone into politics and I said to Shannon, ‘What do you think of Don Dunstan?’ And he looked at me and he said, ‘Have you looked into his eyes?’ he said, ‘Touch of the tar brush there.’

That, to me – I give you that story, not because it’s unkind of Shannon, which it certainly is, but because I think it reflects the attitude of Adelaide at the time, its innate, self-destructive conservatism which Don managed somehow or other to overthrow; but, as I said earlier, with the support, I think, of this great wave of energy that was coming out of a lot of younger people emerging from universities, a young kind of – well, you couldn’t call it a quasi-intellectual scene, but they were people who had the education and because they were older, these mature ex-servicemen had also the kind of young vigour but at the same time the maturity to start working in and around the edges of politics and start influencing people. Now, I think someone one day ought to just work out what that all means. I certainly haven’t done that. But I know how it got expressed.
For example, did you now about the architectural exhibition of 1956? It gets a bit mentioned every now and then. It was a major architectural exhibition in the Botanic Park.

Is that the one that Benko was involved in?

Benko? Not very much, no.

Just that I have at home a little book put out by Benko and somebody else on town planning –

Right.

– that was seen to be supported by the Institute of Architects at the time, around about that era.

No, this was an exhibition that actually built buildings that was put up in the Botanic Park in 1956 to coincide with the Architectural Convention of that year. It was an extraordinary exercise, put together entirely by a team of young architectural graduates and Keith Neighbour was the Chairman of the group that organised it. I was involved in design and Brian Claridge was involved. Most of the architects at that time who went on and became more or less senior architects in the profession later on were involved, and they just built some eight, ten, dozen structures in the parklands, with the support of the building industry. It was all this brave, modern architecture. When Playford opened it he mistook it for an agricultural opening, I think he said (laughs) how much pleasure he had in opening this ‘agricultural exhibition’ the ..... had made. But that was an example of the amount of energy that was around the place at the time and, getting back to Don, he was able to tap this.

I became more closely associated with him, I suppose, when I joined the Housing Trust and I really joined the Housing Trust as much as anything else because of his presence. When I joined in 1974, Don was the Minister of Housing as well as being Premier, and he’d had the opportunity to clear out the old board for some reason – I suppose it was to do with the fact of people being reappointed and reappointed and suddenly he had the ability to appoint a practically brand-new board of the Housing Trust. He put Dick Roberts, architect, one of the prime movers of this exhibition, in as Chairman; he put Jack McConnell, senior architect, in as a member of the board; put Hugh Stretton, historian, in; well, that’s not a bad start. Then they advertised for
two new positions: one was Chief Design Architect and one was Principal Architect. This was all from the pressure Don was putting on the Housing Trust to change itself from a provider of low-density housing on the periphery to, while not stopping doing that, add to its portfolio as it were inner-city housing suitable for low-income people to bring people back closer to the city to regenerate life in the city. It seemed to be a great time to join an organisation like that, so I took up the position of Chief Design Architect.

It was, I think, a very vigorous and interesting time to join the Housing Trust because there were lots of movements to develop housing in the inner city. There was land at Norwood, which Don – the Government I suppose, but I’m sure Don was behind it because it was in his district: there was a site out there called, we call it ‘Dr Kent’s Paddock’ now, but then it was land on which the E&WS\(^1\) at the time had lots of low-quality buildings – sheds and stuff like that. Dunstan moved the E&WS out of the site and handed it over to the Housing Trust and we put public housing on it. We got about eighty-odd flats and townhouses on the site. That sort of activity was going on all around the place and Don was very supportive of that, and it was a very interesting time for me as an architect to be involved.

Then, of course, Monarto came along, as you will remember. (laughter)

I certainly do. You were, in effect, one of my bosses because you were –

That’s right.

– on the board.

Monarto was a sad experience, wasn’t it, for a lot of people, though interesting in many ways. Strangely enough, I met my wife through Monarto, but that’s a digression. I’ve very mixed about Monarto. I’m not sure that it wasn’t a cynical exercise from the very beginning. I wonder if you’ve heard any of these rumours that I heard about it?

Oh, yes. But they’re almost – talking about some of those rumours, which related to cynical views in Canberra, but opposed to that seemed to be Don’s, once again,
idealism. So I’m not sure how to go on from here, but how you fitted in, saw that yourself – – –. It was seen to be definitely part of his package of idealism –

Yes.

– and new ideas and what have you.

I think that, when I look back on those years, he stood like a kind of – what’s the word? – he illuminated the place. He gave, I think, a great feeling of life and activity and hope and things like that. It was a place in which you felt anything was possible for a while. Adelaide for a while in those days was virtually the centre of Australia. People came to Adelaide and marvelled at what was going on. It was a place where so much was happening – in the social world, in the urban design world and in the creative world – and it was all emanating from Don. But when I say ‘emanating from’ Don, it was perhaps coalescing in Don and then being reflected back. Okay, let’s have a pause.

Well, thinking back about the projects, there was Monarto that you were involved in, as I was; there was Dr Kent’s Paddock; and there was Noarlunga Centre –

Noarlunga Centre, right.

– and that was seen as, in effect, a new town because of the suburbs built around it, there was Noarlunga Centre in the middle; and at the top of it all there would have been the Premier, let’s see, as you said, inspiring and illuminating; and from my point of view there was your approach for Noarlunga Centre which was a bit different to the then-emerging ‘big box’ approach. Well, I suppose that could have only happened, to some extent, in that era and with Dunstan being sort of –

Yes.

– giving us all room to move, so to speak.

Yes. What was happening for the first time was that the public authorities like the Housing Trust and the Department of Public Buildings were moving – with Dunstan’s pressure, I think – moving stuff into the private sector. I was a private-sector architect when Noarlunga was – when I worked on Noarlunga. In the old days that would have been done virtually within the Trust itself, but I was appointed by the Trust to be the consultant working on the design. So the first Noarlunga design was done by private consultants for the Housing Trust. At the same time, we were getting direct commissions as an architectural firm to draw up a restaurant at
Windy Point and an aborted but wonderful idea to build an Aboriginal cultural centre down on the Coorong. I took a trip down there once with Peter Ward and Don Dunstan down to ..... ..... second site. Do you know about this?

No, this is news to me.

There was a move emanating from Don to establish somewhere – a cultural centre, museum, whatever you like to call it – for Aboriginal culture, and the first site chosen was down the Coorong. I can remember going down there with John Bailey[?], who at that time I think was the Director of the Art Gallery, to see the location which had been suggested and it was a wonderful sort of spread of low mallee near the water. I can remember walking around and if you stood up in the stuff you just saw treetops and things like that, but if you sat down in it you looked through under the trees at all these wonderful sort of sculptural shapes going on. We’d been asked to prepare sketch plans for a cultural centre for the Aborigines. The brief was very vague: it was some sort of space in which we’re going to have exhibitions, and galleries, and stuff would be shown and maybe meetings would be held and things like that. I can remember planning something half-buried in the ground so that at standing level you looked out just above ground level at the tree trunks and things like that, and designing some amorphous shape which, perhaps naïvely, I thought was going to be kind of appropriate to an Aboriginal presentation rather than the usual orthogonal stuff.

But that unfortunately didn’t come to anything. First of all, the Aboriginal community itself, if you think of the community as a general body, couldn’t agree on the site because if it went there it was going to advantage some sections of the community; if it went somewhere else it was going to advantage someone else. So the Murray River people wanted it somewhere else and South-Eastern Aborigines wanted it there and perhaps the people up the North wanted it somewhere else, anyhow.

Then we looked at a site on the edge of Lake Alexandrina – is that right? – down there, at Milang, I think. Is Milang on the – – –?

Yes.
Yes, went down to Milang to look at a site there, went down with Peter Ward and Don Dunstan, drove down there, lovely little site there. Then the whole thing fell apart. But I just mention that as an example of his ability, I think, to try and look into the cultural life of the place and bring together different aspects of our culture and give an expression to it.

You mentioned looking at the mallee forms of the landscape, to put it that way. Did he ever say anything about landscape much?

Don? Not to my knowledge, no.

Say on one of these trips with him, or something like that?

No.

The reason I’ve brought that up is because you may recall at Monarto we had imposed upon us a superstructure, a megastructure, (laughter) that was going to have three acres of floor space in it and was going to wipe out the landscape including the mallee landscape, and I think with the backing of the Commission with the board we quickly discarded that and sort of discovered, as it were, the mallee landscape and tried to boost that. Now, perhaps – I’m interviewing you, but these thoughts come back – the idea of taking the South Australian landscape as it is rather than trying to impose something, I don’t know whether we would have got away with that in earlier years. To me that was part of that spirit of Dunstan trying to lift the local scene.

Well, it was part of that; it was also part of a strong cultural movement, wasn’t there. I mean, I look back on those years, in the ’50s you began to get a strong movement towards expression of Australian culture. In literature, for example, you had Patrick White writing for the first time about Australian life; you had Summer of the seventeenth doll; you had painters like Drysdale, Nolan and Tucker painting Australian landscapes in a purely Australian way which never happened before, previously you had Australian landscapes painted sort of semi-European ways, but you suddenly discovered these paintings in the deserts with Aborigines in them. So there was a whole general ethos, I think, of trying to express Australia within the culture, which I think was definitely much a post-war trend. So in gardens the idea of the bush garden was emerging and that was part of the time. But you’re right, it wouldn’t have happened earlier, it wouldn’t have happened earlier at all. So I think we were becoming much more sensible to the inherent qualities of the Australian landscape at the time.
But getting back to Don, I don’t know that he had a strong feeling for the land in that sense, but I’m sure he would have gone along with any ideas that one had at the time.

I always see Don as more of an urban person than (laughs) as a land person.

What else can we say? You can see my relationship with him was very peripheral, rather related to urban issues and design issues. I can remember, though, once going to a meeting with Brian Claridge. This was – heavens above – I think it was before he was Premier, perhaps when he was Attorney-General with the Walsh Government. Whatever. Brian and I – do you remember Brian Claridge?

Very vaguely.

Great activist. Brian and I went to see Don because we thought he’d be interested in design and we wanted to talk about designer products, you know, getting design products or products produced in Adelaide, designed in Adelaide. The terrible, terrible activity going on – hasn’t changed much probably – but where nothing got designed here. Stuff got made here. Simpsons, for example, the people who made washing machines, actually employed an industrial designer, he was a friend of mine, but he never did any work. He never did a thing. Well, he designed a few things but they never used them. It was cheaper for them to go to America, get a licence for last year’s design and produce it over here a year later, so we were always getting second-hand American models here and Simpson washing machines were made like that. So we never designed anything, and we thought this was outrageous. We went to Don and said, ‘You’ve got the chance, you really ought to do something about this, start some design going, start making stuff here and designing here and making it here and selling it here and do what you can to assist. You’re in government, you should do this.’ Brian probably led the conversation, forget what he said but words to that effect, that was the general thrust. And Don received us very graciously and we had a nice conversation and we left, and later on, of course, the Jam Factory started. Now, that was interesting to me because there was a place where he brought in the crafts and the designers and the product and the sale in one operation out there at St Peter’s, and it was a great move. But it wasn’t quite what we intended. (laughs) We were thinking rather more in the industrial
sense and Don was obviously thinking more in the sort of craft and theatrical sense, if you like.

So I think perhaps if anything was neglected during that period it was there was very little emphasis on industrial design, on adding value I think to local products through designing them, building up the skill level and the industry base – which was very strong at the time. Though he did start a little organisation – what was it called? I’ve forgotten its name. In North Adelaide, a little industry organisation popped up to assist industry promote design or whatever. But I don’t think it got very far; it was very small.

Well, there’s a fair few thoughts that you’ve come out with and a fair bit of ground that you have covered. I think that’s all going to be pretty useful for people putting it all together at some stage down the track and in the future.

Well, thank you.

Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW.