

Speech by H.E. Mr Michael Bryce, AM, AE
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A National Design Policy for Australia

Forum

Tuesday 8th May 2012

Brisbane

Commissioner Timothy Horton

South Australia

Professor Julianne Schultz AM

Queensland

Professor Sam Bucolo

QUT, Design and Innovation

Mr Andrew MacKenzie

Writer and Critic

And other Guest Speakers

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I also acknowledge

Lisa Cahill and

Geoff Fitzpatrick,

from the Australian Design Alliance

Acknowledgements:

I thank the AdA and the Queensland Design Council for inviting me to this forum, and I particularly welcome the presence and input of so many eminent colleagues.

I am a designer and architect; or so I was when I last left Queensland 3½ years ago.

In the meantime we have seen the formation of the South Australian Integrated Design Commission, the Australian International Design Awards, the Australian Design Alliance, the Queensland Design Council, and the beginnings of the National Cultural Policy.

I have attended at least two “BEMP” (Built Environment Meets Parliament) forums in Canberra: one “Design meets NSW Parliament” in Sydney and the launch of the AdA as well as countless meetings and conversations on the broad topic of “What’s happening to Design?” or “Why don’t they do something?”

I think I have been having these conversations and meetings for around 40 years, and it might be instructive if I were to mention some of these bodies that have existed over time.

While the Institute of Architects (RAIA and RIBA) has been my underpinning all this while, I began my design interest with the establishment of the Industrial Design Institute (IDIA) (Queensland Chapter) in my office in Brisbane around 1972.

And rose to the position of National President by around 1978.

At the same time, the Industrial Design Council was being developed with the Blue and White “Good Design” label, and showrooms in the main States. In Queensland we had a showroom at Central Railway Plaza for some years.

I became Chairman of that, and a National Councillor for 10 years or so.

Both organisations changed their names to Design Institute / Design Council, and I have continued my links over 30 years with the various iterations of the Design Council to now be Patron of the Australian International Design Awards, or “Good Design” program.

In the meantime, there was an attempt to set up a peak advisory body called the Australian Design Academy, launched by the Prime Minister (Bob Hawke). This failed, for reasons I won’t elaborate.

Then Julianne, as Chair, will remember the “20/20 Summit” in 2008, where we included a list of recommendations on design matters under a creative group of 100.

I was a member of the Design Board of the Australia Council in the ‘80s, which had the ear of government, but only to be eventually told we were too established and didn’t need help from the government.

Now the Australian Design Alliance is again putting forward the idea of a peak body to pursue better co-operation between the Design Professions and now – lo and behold, the Queensland Design Council is back on the scene with all the good motives that the other 6 or 7 bodies have had, and – I regret - failed to achieve: their aim to have design championed by Government.

But – there are many successes – and we live in a country that is now receptive to good design.

The mere fact that we are here again shows the resolute power of the design community.

We are surrounded by the word “design”; we are drenched in magazines, press articles and interviews with designers and architects; and, bless it – the Design Institute has maintained a steady course of professional standards over 50 years.

Undoubtedly we produce the best architecture in the world – albeit the best architects, and we have wonderful schools of design within our universities. We even have celebrity designers such as Mark Newson, and media programs like “By Design” and “Grand Designs”

But – are we happy?

No. We are not!!

Why?

Because there is no big picture thinking – no grand design for Australian cities, no standards for new communities, no access to well designed products for the poor, ad hoc government selection of materials, furnishings from abroad; cheap foreign substitutes fill our homes.

We are also not happy that successive governments always seem to rank design programs, grants, support, initiatives, at the bottom of the agenda – the first to be cut.

Design is, I am afraid, somewhat lightweight in economic circles of thinking.

Designers and architects are nice to know, clever, but not worthy of a seat on the board, with few exceptions – and finally:

Australia has not achieved a reputation as a design-conscious nation, no tourism image of streets and towns and buildings other than the Opera House and the Great Barrier Reef.

Designers are among the most important people in our society (cf brain surgeons, policemen and teachers).

Certainly the acquisition of a reputation that equals Britain, Scandinavia, Japan and even Singapore, is something to strive for, and how do we do this – with great respect –

Not by having forums

Not by forming alliances

Not by establishing councils

But by regulation – at least something akin to making things happen because they must happen.

And here I must pitch for the Commission model along the lines of CABE in the UK, and the South Australian Integrated Design model.

In these examples there is the hint of REFORM, of government singing from the same hymn sheet as the design professions.

The United States Government, as far back as 1975 issued a Presidential Decree that Design was to be a vital part of governments. [National Medal of Arts]

I also believe in State Architects, Council Architects and even Government Designers, as I believe Victoria is doing. Here there is some form of being an insider to government.

Of course, I wish the Queensland Design Council every success, as it has the ear of government, but, as I have experienced it is better to be on the inside of the tent than waiting to be called in.

I have enjoyed my life as an architect and a designer.

I think that what we do is important, but I have said my piece many times, and have little more to add than this:

- “Nations that value design rate above Australia in design performance and innovation, and actively promote design in their economies” [Bucolo]
- “Those of you engaged in design as a form of income, know well the frustration of public indifference – and while designers, engineers, architects and planners love what they do, and are admired for their skills, they may at times feel undervalued as the wealth generators of the nation.”

Professor Mark Burry, Director of RMIT's Design Research Institute, who has unlocked the secrets of the mathematical formula that underpins Antonio Gaudi's Cathedral in Barcelona says:

- “Australia doesn’t give voice to the cultural achievements of designers, as opposed to the widespread support and promotion it gives to sports people.”

While industry closes down factories that produce ships, cars, canned fruit and furniture, there is a better way forward to stimulate the Australian economy; that is by striking, innovative, original and professional design being applied to everything.

A National Design Policy would put this design horse before the industry cart, and ensure that every government, every school, every business thinks first – **can this be better designed?**

And that is why Australia needs a
National Policy on Design.