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Why Australia Needs a National Design Policy

words

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Why indeed? Italy, the United States and the Netherlands – all great design nations – don’t have one and they do just fine. So why is the Design Institute of Australia (DIA) supporting the Australian Design Alliance in its pursuit of one? And if it is so important, why isn’t the DIA – the voice of professional design – doing it?

In 1993, South Korea was the first country to launch a national design policy, followed by Denmark in 1997, a country with already excellent design credentials. The lack of national design policies in some countries is attributed to design already being well represented across their cultural and commercial landscapes. A growing number of countries are currently working on creating such a national policy because they realize design is too important to be left to chance.

There have been some efforts in Australia at getting organized at a national level – the most recent was the Australian Academy of Design. It contributed an excellent paper titled “Competing by Design,” which still resonates strongly seventeen years later, and is available for download from the DIA website.

At state level, Design Victoria, the envy of the nation, was swiftly and brutally shut down last year by a new state government. South

Australia’s Integrated Design Commission, one of the great things to come out of the SA Thinkers in Residence program, recently suffered the same fate. Design in Queensland has managed sustained success with a number of programs, but suffers from being bounced between arts and industry, and the fallout from Queensland’s dramatic state election is, at the time of writing, yet to be felt. There is movement in New South Wales on a state design initiative, but some industry consultation would have been welcome.

One recent issue that seems to have galvanized design communities, and something that certainly felt like a kick in the pants for the DIA, was the incredible lack of understanding, visibility and support for design in the federal government’s Innovation Review. It was completely deplorable. The Innovation Agenda, which stems from the review, pays no heed to design – a view grossly out of step with the rest of the world, where design is increasingly identified as the key driver and enabler of innovation.

Design is the vital link that has been missing between Australia’s excellent “white coat” innovation and commercial success. Remember: innovation turns money into knowledge, design turns knowledge into money. There’s nothing too cultural about that – probably why

it is called design, not art. Taking all the above into account, the need for a national design framework becomes glaringly obvious. We are facing a growing number of initiatives by other countries that will undermine our international competitiveness. This is compounded by the lack of broad federal awareness and initiatives. Just look at the Singapore President’s Design Award – an industry, not arts, initiative. Though at times brilliant, support at state level has been highly inconsistent, and fragmentation of the industry has not helped, either.

These issues are being addressed – the creative sector is taking charge. Two years ago, twelve industry bodies representing more than eighty thousand designers created the Australian Design Alliance (ADA). There has been no equivalent body in our history. The ADA is not a lobby seeking favour, concessions or protection. The ADA is seeking to educate the federal government about the positive power of good design; about the benefits to the economy, the increases in efficiency, and the gains that can be realized if it is understood, embraced and used properly.

The ADA is seeking to create a framework that will – and I quote:

- Invest in the design industry to raise the profile and the market for

Australian design both nationally and internationally.

- Help Australian businesses realize their full potential for sustainable growth and international competitiveness by placing design at the core of their business.
- Immerse design into the culture of the public sector to ensure that design thinking is part of the development of public services.
- Ensure that design thinking is integrated into all our systems of learning, from schools to tertiary courses and professional education.

The design sector is not asking for handouts. We want a seat at the big table. Not because we are greedy, but because we know what an incredible difference good design makes to everything it touches. By integrating design into business, government and education, Australia’s competitiveness, standard of living and economy will reap infinitely sustainable rewards. **A**