Full transcript of interviews with

NEWELL JAMES PLATTEN

on 14, 21 and 22 February;
18 and 24 April;
and 8 and 15 May

by Madeleine Regan

Recording available on CD

Access for research: Unrestricted
Right to photocopy: Copies may be made for research and study

Right to quote or publish: Publication only with written permission from the Adelaide City Council Archives.
NOTES TO THE TRANSCRIPT

This transcript was donated to the State Library. It was not created by the J.D. Somerville Oral History Collection and does not necessarily conform to the Somerville Collection's policies for transcription.

Readers of this oral history transcript should bear in mind that it is a record of the spoken word and reflects the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. The State Library is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the interview, nor for the views expressed therein. As with any historical source, these are for the reader to judge.

This transcript had not been proofread prior to donation to the State Library and has not yet been proofread since. Researchers are cautioned not to accept the spelling of proper names and unusual words and can expect to find typographical errors as well.
First interview with Newell Platten, AM
recorded by Madeleine Regan

14 February 2013
at Adelaide

for the City of Adelaide Oral History (Extension) Project 2012/2013

[00:00] Oral Historian (OH): Thank you, Newell, for agreeing to this interview, and I’d like to start by asking you some of the questions about your background. Your full name?

Newell James Platten, AM (NP): My full name is Newell James Platten.

OH: And your date of birth?

NP: My date of birth is 16 April 1928. My place of birth was Mango Avenue, Rabaul, in the Mandated Territory of New Guinea, now Papua New Guinea of course.

My father, Gilbert James Platten, was a missionary in Rabaul, and my mother (nee) Isabel Rose Harcus, had just been married to him just barely over a year, and I was born in the parsonage. By family legend, the doctor who attended me, my mother rather, at the birth, had the surname of Newell, and my father, so delighted to see the birth of a son and so proud of the fact, and grateful I think to the doctor because my mother had been actually quite ill in the period of the pregnancy, not just before my birth but she’d had dysentery, and the doctor had been very helpful with that. Anyhow, in lieu of all that, or because of all that, I was named Newell after the doctor, thus that strange name.

OH: Thank you, Newell. Did you have any siblings?

NP: My sister, three years my junior, born in 1931. Her name is Paquita.

OH: When you were growing up in Papua New Guinea, or in New Guinea as it was then, how many years did you spend there?

NP: Until I went to school, it was a little over five I think. Yes, it was well over five actually. I first went to school in 1934 in Two Wells. Until that time, except for probably one trip down when my parents had a furlough which of course I don’t recall, I was in New Guinea, mainly on New
Ireland, which is the island across the Strait from New Britain, where Rabaul is. It was on a Mission Station called Halis at Namatanai.

OH: And your father was a missionary?

NP: Exactly, for the Methodist Mission. He served on the islands until 1942 when he was on New Ireland and he was luckily able to escape after the Japanese occupied, got down to Australia, and spent the rest of the War either in Woodside or in Sydney\(^1\), and went back after the War, immediately the War ended, and he was back for Christmas 1945. Everything was shattered, everything was ruined, the place was a wreck. Rabaul did not exist, the lovely mango trees had been knocked over, and he tried to rebuild, and it was pretty tough going. And after five or six years, for various reasons, he resigned from the Mission and joined the Education Department, but he finished up his life in the Islands pretty well, until nearly retirement age when he came down here.

OH: And Newell, last time we spoke you talked about the influence of the tropics from the time that you were a young boy.

NP: This is pretty much rather imagination than I think direct recollection, but I now look back and I think my attitude towards architecture, and my attitude towards space indeed, was influenced by the tropics. The tropics are very lush, space closes in on you, you know, roads are narrow and they’re bound by tall trees and jungle, and stuff like that. In contrast to that of course you’re always close to the sea, which expands endlessly, but there are islands out there, and I think also people live in small villages which are built of native materials, bamboo, palm, and such like. There’s a certain kind of materiality there, I think people would say these days, which is sort of both unique but also consistent from one place to another.

I think that my attitude to architecture which was very much influenced by the use of natural materials, probably had some connection to those days of growing up. And I remember very clearly, perhaps my strongest memory of this is that my father built a little beach house on a lagoon named Huris, and he built this out of native materials that had plaited Parndana palm walls, and it had a thatched roof, and that was it, and it had just a big room and a sleeping gallery, just native-style stuff, and I can remember waking in that in this sort of tawny interior, and the light filtering through the plaited palms and things like that. And I think that gave me a sense of belonging with natural materials, which I think sort of remained as part of my background thinking and interest, and attitude to architecture later on.

\(^1\) Newell’s father was also based in Stirling East, in the Adelaide Hills
I do think also – this is perhaps a kind of, a later kind of later connection I made, my feelings about space, I’ve always liked tight spaces. I like the feeling, I like streets to be narrow, to crowd onto me a little bit. I like distances across spaces to be small. I was never happy in big, outdoor spaces, they worried me a little bit, not at sea though but on the land they do, and I think that’s connected too with that, and I wouldn’t be surprised if that didn’t influence my idea about space in architecture and indeed town planning later on.

OH: That’s interesting, isn’t it, because you also lived in a variety of houses after Papua New Guinea?

NP: Oh indeed, but they were always extremely boring manses, and very dull places [laughs]. Perhaps a desire to sort of transmute one to the other led me into architecture, but basically, if you really want to know why I became an architect, it was because I liked drawing. You wouldn’t know that story, no.

OH: Well that will be a story that I’ll ask you ...

NP: Later on, in due course, if the time arises.

OH: Yes, because I was going to just follow your chronology a little bit about your education. Can you tell me about your schooling?

NP: Well public school at Two Wells; public schools at Perth, two years, brought me to the age of nine. Well just before nine, I suppose, just about eight, nine, 1937 anyhow. And then my father had an opportunity to go back to the islands, which he very much wanted to do, so I went into boarding school here, and my sister went into the care of an aunt. My parents sailed merrily off to the north, not to be really seen again for 12 months, or my father not for two years, it turned out.

So I went to boarding school at Prince Alfred College, just across the Park Lands from the City of Adelaide, and my first memories of Adelaide are connected with the boarding school, and trips we would make either as a little school group, or individually as I got older, into that part of the city which was closest, walking through the Park Lands, walking up Rundle Street as it was then, and still is, and a sort of memory of a low, brown street with lots of verandas and balconies, and there was a stamp shop where you could buy stamps. There was a hairdresser where you got your hair cut, Sym Choons where you could buy firecrackers all the year around. And further on of course there were the cinemas. I can carry on a little bit about this recollection of a certain kind of Adelaide if you wish at this stage?
Adelaide was then … this is pre-War Adelaide I’m talking about, and also wartime Adelaide … there was no difference really except the wartime Adelaide had a bit less traffic and a few less people in it. But it was a city, I mean it was the only city I knew, so it’s hard to make comparisons with anything else, but I thought it was a pretty nice place. It had everything you needed for that stage of my life anyhow. It had cinemas and milk bars, and it was a city that everybody came to, to work, everybody came to for recreation, and it impressed me I think, and it had a certain ambiance.

You would be aware I’m sure of a recent publication, *Then and Now* — I must get hold of it sometime – but you look at Rundle Street back in those days, Rundle Street going right up into what is now Rundle Mall. And it’s fascinating to see that everything has changed, but it hasn’t got any bigger [laughs], until very recently, there’s some big buildings going up now, but almost everything is the same height, except perhaps one or two department stores, and it’s also empty in a way because most of those older buildings I think are probably uninhabited on the top floors, but in those days of course it was a totally integrated functioning city, and it was a beaut place.

OH: When you say ‘totally integrated functioning’, could you explain that?

NP: Well I mean people lived in it, people worked in it, people had recreation in it, people shopped in it, not only the people in the city but also the people coming in from outside. It was the city, it was the city, and outside the city were the suburbs where people went to bed, and that was it. There was nowhere else, I mean apart from the corner shops of course, but there was nowhere else, there were no competing supermarkets or any of that sort of stuff, so the city was the place in Adelaide where you were at if you went to the city, and that gave it a certain coherence and strength of character I think, which sadly it doesn’t have any more.

OH: And Newell, you mentioned the War years and the fact that the city was less busy. Can you say a little more?

NP: Well of course a lot of young men went away. On the other hand, of course, they came in great, masses of them. American soldiers came in for a while and really jazzed the place up, but I meant really in terms of traffic. There was very little traffic on the roads because people could not get petrol, but it was still busy in an elective sense, so people still moved through it a lot of course, but I can’t really compare that very

---

2 Campbell, L & Bradley, M, 2012, *City Streets: Progressive Adelaide 75 years on*
easily with the years (         ) to the city, so perhaps I shouldn’t have said that.

OH: Do you have any memories of your life during the War?

NP: I was a student in high school or in college. Life during the War? Perhaps in the latter years when I was, let me think now, I was a student of course, so what was I, 1945 the year the War ended I was 17, so you’re looking at a 15-16-year-old boy, and there were girlfriends and boyfriends and things like this. It was a city you could travel around easily on pushbikes, or if you didn’t have a pushbike or it was too late, there were tram services but they all stopped at 11 o’clock.

So the city was a playground at that stage for me as a student during the War. It was a playground for kids, you know, and by that I mean there were places to go for films, there were places to go for milkshakes, there were places to go. There were dance halls, things like that, because I’d probably started dancing by then. So it was sort of a city which was both recreation, and also functional in the sense that all the department stores were there. There was something like eight of them in the city at that time. So it just was the, again, you know, it was just the place to be if you were ... and it seemed to have everything that one needed.

OH: Returning to your education, you didn’t stay at Prince Alfred College?

NP: No, I started doing very badly at Prince Alfred College for a whole host of reasons, and it concluded when my parents were moved to Woodside in 1942. My father, having come down from New Ireland, my mother having been evacuated with my sister previously, we all stayed for a little while in a house we shared at St Peter’s with another family. Then he was posted to Woodside, and my father decided to take me out of boarding school, obviously for the expense, [we] stayed with another family in Adelaide for a while, but then the father in that family died, I couldn’t stay on there. So I went to live with my family in Woodside, and this meant I was travelling from about half past seven in the morning to go to school, and getting home late in the afternoon, late in the evening, early evening I suppose by the time I got home. That meant I had to give up anything I liked about school, which at that stage was rowing, I loved rowing; had to give up the Cadets which I rather enjoyed, stamping around in a uniform. All I could do was go to school and try and do some homework. My grades started suffering badly.

That was the year I did Intermediate, and I did so badly in that. No, hang on, the year I did Intermediate? No, it was the year I did Intermediate, that’s correct, Intermediate [laughs]. I actually failed Intermediate, I didn’t get enough. You had to get five subjects, I think I only passed in four, and my father said, This is terrible spending all this money on
school fees. That’s what he said to my mother, I can imagine the conversations [laughs] that were going on, and they enrolled me at Birdwood, Birdwood High [School]. Birdwood High at that time had a terrific reputation, they got about half the country Bursaries. Its chief asset was Albert Jones, Alby Jones as he was commonly known. He became Director of Education eventually, but at that stage he was the, I’ve forgotten the phrase, but he was the Head Teacher. He took the Leaving class at Birdwood High – there was only one Leaving class and it was a mixed class of boys and girls – and he was a terrific teacher, he was brilliant.

He probably wouldn’t be allowed to do it these days because he taught with a mixture of aggression and an understanding, which was quite unique. It worked for me, and I started off being a pretty ordinary sort of student, you know, down the bottom of the class sort of student, on the bottom third at least. And then one day we did an intelligence test and I must have gone fairly well in it [laughs], because from this time on Albert Jones probably thought I was a better asset than he’d previously expected from my history and my other results, and he started taking some attention, paying me some attention. Anyhow, he had this interesting way of punishment, I suppose, if you made a mistake. I can remember him twisting my ear, you know, a common thing in those days I suppose, and he’d say, Platten, there’s a mistake, there’s a mistake in that, can you see it? – some mathematical equation. I’d look down and I’d say, No sir. Have a close look. He’d push my head down [laughs]. Can you see it now? No sir. [laughs] Well keep looking at it. That was pretty vicious, I can’t imagine this going on these days. This guy becomes Director General of Education. He would have been sacked, and he used to put his arms around the girls. Oh dear! It was effective because if you actually showed some sign of improvement, he immediately gave you a sense of encouragement, Yes, I must have had something going.

I suddenly discovered I could be a student, somehow or other it just happened. Something transformed within me and I started to enjoy the work that I’d loathed, and from that time on I never failed anymore examinations, and I just went straight through virtually with him.

But I had transferred and then my father was transferred to Sydney, so I just stayed on at Woodside that year. Eventually he came back, we had a little cottage up in Stirling, and I went to Unley High (School) that year, and then the next year I did Leaving Honours. Unley High didn’t do Leaving Honours so I went to Adelaide High (School), so I went to three high schools, three high schools in three years.

OH: I remember you telling me about a visitor at Unley High when you were there, and this connects ...
NP: That’s right, that’s right. This was a very important moment in my life because as I told you I liked drawing, and perhaps I should go back a little bit… I liked drawing because when I was a boarder I tended to be a bit lonely. A lot of my friends for some reason were day boys and they’d go home at the weekends. I didn’t have that many friends in the boarding house, I’m not quite sure why that was but that’s how it worked out. Anyhow, there was a lot of time to fill in as a boarder, and you read and you played sport and all that sort of thing, and I also liked drawing. I used to doodle, that sort of stuff kids do. I think it started off with Spanish galleons, I was very fond of them for a while, and then I got onto the faster vessels, the cutters and the clippers, the clipper ships. Then the War started and I got onto battleships, and finally when the Battle of Britain started I got onto Spitfires, and I loved drawing Spitfires. In fact, connecting with old school mates, which I’ve done recently, they tell me I was quite famous for drawing Spitfires [laughs] and doing it all the time, you know, this way, that way, always shooting down the Messerschmitt.

OH: And what would you have used as models?

NP: Oh, just my head. Oh, you know, I would have been looking at them in the photographs and illustrations, because the Battle of Britain was going on and every day there would be a Spitfire or two. So it was just from memory, but I’d just around doodling. I learnt to doodle freehand with pencil and stuff like that. Also I’d found I had a certain facility for drawing because in Geography classes we used to do projects where we’d do a map of some place, North America, whatever, UK (United Kingdom), and we’d have to make little illustrations of the various activities that went on. So for the UK, here was wool, there was a sheep; here would be iron, there was a furnace, and so on. We had to draw these little things on these maps we did. Then we’d put water colour on them, we’d do them all up and we’d put the ocean in, you know, with varies grades of blue, and all that sort of stuff. I enjoyed that and I thought I wasn’t too bad at it.

The other thing we used to do in a very young class, I think it was some time in primary school, they used to give us a square about six inches, and with a compass and a pencil you’d make connections and draw circles, and then you’d fragment the whole thing. You’d keep on making little bits, using just this tool, getting half circles and arcs, and fragments of this and fragments of that, and then you’d colour the whole thing in pencil. I could do this pretty well. I mean, I found my work used to get held up for the class, it was about the only thing that ever did. So there we go, that’s the background. I’d already begun to enjoy drawing.
So here I am at St Unley High School and B-Leaving, not A-Leaving where they all studied Latin under ‘Pinhead’ Giles, a terrifying man, B-Leaving. I was doing Leaving for the second time. I’d already passed Leaving but I was too young to go on, so I was just doing another year of it, so it was a pretty easy year for me.

Anyhow, sitting there in the class, the Headmaster walks in, a little man in a grey suit with him. We were all sitting down, we had to stand up. The Headmaster said, *Sit down boys, I’m introducing Mr So and So. He’s going to tell you about Architecture.* This was interesting. He sat down and began to talk about Architecture. Architects drew things, they drew things from their imagination, they did technical drawings and all this stuff, and then they went out and they supervised the buildings which were going up. He went through the whole process of architectural practice. I was sitting there and … *You can earn a living drawing?* [laughs] This was lovely stuff I was hearing, and I’m sure that was the day I made my mind up, I was going to be an architect.

I discovered I was doing the right subjects, Physics, English, Intermediate Latin, that was all you had to get. So I was doing the right subjects, and I just loved drawing and, you know, the idea of making things probably stimulated some creative urge I must have had, and there we went, it was like that, it was straightforward from that time on. It was a very lucky moment in my life. I just think about that, if I hadn’t gone there that day. I had some vague idea I’d be an engineer but I’m a bit dyslexic, I make mistakes when I add things up. I would have been hopeless, I probably would have been in jail by now [laughs]. It was just one of those lucky days, and I just think about what if I’d been ill that day, or something, or just missed that class, or I’d been in the A-grade class, he didn’t go there, they were all going to become lawyers and doctors and stuff [laughs].

So that set me, that was one of the big moments. School can be so important, it’s incredible. If I hadn’t had Alby Jones the year before, if I’d stayed at Prince’s…. At Prince’s with all respect to them, they have three sorts of students in Prince’s. They have the bright academic ones, and the bright athletic ones, and then they have the rest of us [laughs]. If you’re a scholar, great, you get a lot of attention; if you’re athletic you get a lot of attention, but the rest, you know, you don’t advance the reputation of the school anymore, you just follow, you just keep the place rolling on, and it was like that with me there. So I had that lucky break with Alby Jones, and another lucky break the next year with the little man in a grey suit, as I fondly think of him.

**OH:** And from Unley High you went to Adelaide High?
To Adelaide High. It was the only place you could do Leaving Honours, there was just one Leaving Honours class in the state. In those days, I mean it was a different system. Nowadays I don’t quite understand, you do years 1-12 or something and that’s it, but those days you’d qualify. There was a Progress exam at the 7th grade in primary school, and then after a couple of years of high school you did the Intermediate exam. A lot of people dropped out at the Intermediate level. If you wanted to go on to university level you had to go on and do the Leaving subjects, which gave you admission level, access to university, or you could do Leaving Honours, which just improved your grades a bit. I had a year to wait, I was too young to try university, and I had this year to fill in, so I just went on to Adelaide High to do Leaving Honours.

I think that was a great help too because of the third lucky thing that happened to my family. We were a poor family, missionaries got nothing really, lived on a pittance, so we were always struggling, and the fact that we were always separated as a family didn’t help at all either, but that year, I think it was that year, the Chifley Government – certainly Labor Government – I think it was Chifley by then, introduced the Commonwealth Scholarships for tertiary education, which were means-tested, and because I was able to boost my marks with the year in Leaving Honours, I got a scholarship. So that paid all my university fees, and also gave me living away from home assistance at various times when I was boarding. So that was a third lucky stroke I had. All these three lucky things got me to the position where I am now.

Newell, your parents, like how did they respond to your aspiration to become an architect?

That’s a very interesting question and I find it very hard to answer it as a matter of fact. My mother, strangely, I don’t think she ever quite understood what I was doing [laughs]. She was a lovely woman but I don’t think she quite understood. And my father … from the time my father went back to the islands after the War, I began to see very little of him because his life was up there, and I was emerging in a different direction down here, but I think, I think my father ... I think they were happy with it, they never complained that I was doing the wrong thing. They never said, Oh, you should be a lawyer or a doctor. Or something like that, and clearly it was beyond me, but I can’t really answer that. I did find once, after my mother died, I got some cuttings that they’d cut out of a paper, and I noticed they’d cut out a few things where I’d been mentioned here or there and I thought, Oh well, they must have thought something or other [laughs].

Can I extrapolate there? Perhaps I shouldn’t, it’s totally off the track.

No, please do.
NP: It goes on much later. I’ve written a memoir, a biography, and I’m afraid a lot of the stuff I’m going to be telling you will appear in the publication I hope [laughs] before you get it out there.

Many, many, many years later after my father had died, and indeed after my mother had died, and I was researching my father’s life in the Mitchell Library in Sydney. So I opened a filing cabinet looking for the name Platten, those little filing drawers, you know, those little drawers you pull out with cardboard things on them, and I found, Gil Platten Gil. And I thought that was interesting, and it related to a document he’d prepared for UNESCO [United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation], after the War, on the use of vernacular in South Pacific Islands. It was something he’d done when he was working for the Education Department up in New Guinea. I just pulled that thing forward, or it fell forward, or whatever, and I saw my own name just next to it, and that gave me a real little thrill because I thought, Oh well, that’s nice. [laughs] I wonder what he would have thought of that. It might have been just some paper I’d given to a MATS [Metropolitan Adelaide Transport Study Plan] Conference back here in Adelaide. Sorry, that’s totally out of...

OH: No, no, that’s a really interesting connection. If we go back to you starting university, it was 1946, can you tell me what that was like, what the circumstances were about living and studying?

NP: For living it was difficult - 1946 wasn’t too bad. My mother was still at Stirling, my father had gone back to New Ireland, but we were still living in the house that we’d all shared at Stirling. So I had a boarding house on Marion Road, just off Henley Beach Road, which was a very nice place – it was just for the week nights, Monday to Friday. [laughs] And the landlady was a lovely woman, and a snob, and you couldn’t let any of her friends know she had boarders. We weren’t boarders anyhow, we were paying guests. Who was that lady, Boucaut, you know the English snob on TV, Madam Boucaut? Anyhow Mrs Bucket.

So that was fine that year but the subsequent year my mother then rejoined my father when she was able to, and in 1947 I had to start boarding out. And I won’t go into all the details but some of those boarding places were terrible. So the living wasn’t great, some of it was all right. The university was growing very rapidly because of all the ex-service people who were coming in. The previous year I think, the year before we started there would have been about four doing Architecture [laughs].

OH: Four people?
NP: Four people in the architectural course, I think something like that. I can only remember two of them, but there must have been a couple more [laughs]. I might be wrong but it was just a handful. I think the year after I remember there were 30 of us, and most of those, a proportion of at least 2:1 were students, ex-service students, and they of course changed the usual kind of discourse, the kind of quality of the class, because they were older, some were married, they were serious, they wanted to get on with life, so there were none of the youthful kind of shenanigans going on that might have happened in previous years or subsequent years. It was a very interesting time to be a student actually. I started in 1946 and because I was boarding, I used to use the city quite a lot as a resource for study, we used to study in the Barr Smith Library.

One of my impressions of Adelaide, if we can get back to the sort of core subject, is that I loved the way the university was located next to an Art Gallery, and the Art Gallery was next to the Museum, the Museum was next to a Library. And those three things that we could use in our daily activities were all close at hand, and the city was just there. And of course, at that time, I was interested in girls and things like that, and I had a particular girlfriend who lived in the city. She and I would meet for lunch sometimes, and I have this very strong memory of taking my little bag of sandwiches and whatever, and meeting her, and we used to meet in what was then, and what is still I suppose, the space outside the Museum, between the Museum and what’s now the Mortlock Library. The Museum used to be in the old building on the right of you, and the Library was on the left, and the space between, you could only enter on the corners of North Terrace, where the big entrance is now, that was a bank of grass, and beyond the grass were flowers and shrubs and stuff, but that bank had an incline of about 45 degrees, faced north, and was protected from the wind by its own existence, and of course the planting behind that, so it was just a wonderful spot for a lunch. I deeply resented the fact that one day it all disappeared, and you might remember the Bonython Fountain took its place, and destroyed it, absolutely destroyed what had been a lovely, lovely urban space, and those urban spaces, you know, you were in the city but out of it with a sense of quiet and solitude with a noisy, bustling city going on there. A wonder.

So I had that memory of the city then, but the city was still pretty much the kind of city it was before the War, people still came to town on trams. The car hadn’t quite taken over yet, that was beginning to, traffic hadn’t really become a problem. You could still, I mean really if you went shopping you’d drive your car into Rundle Street and park it [laughs]. That was normal. You always parked outside the shop you wanted to go to, if you had a car that is, not that you very often had one, so you didn’t have one as a student.
OH: Last time, Newell, you talked about a memory of riding a bike from where you were living at St Peter’s, and looking at the visual image of the city.

NP: I think that was probably the first moment I’d begun to feel the city was a place, a substantial entity separate from everything else. I was training for lacrosse at that time – I never played lacrosse very well but I still had to train – and training took place early mornings, so in the early morning I’d be riding down the slope from St Peter’s College, down, is it Payneham Road or Magill Road there, I forget. Anyhow that road that runs from the fork of Magill and Payneham, down towards North Terrace, and becomes North Terrace. There’s a downhill slope there and I’d be riding down there and I could see the city rising beyond this band of trees in the Park Lands, and the buildings would be a tawny colour, stony, brownie, tawny buildings. And the sun would shine on them, and they’d have this lovely warm luminescence beyond the dark leaves of the trees. I just thought it was a terrific sight, I just loved the way that conjunction of the geometry and the fluidity with the trees and things in front. It was beautiful.

I used to think Adelaide was really like a walled city in that sense, you know, it’s surrounded by this belt of Park Lands, and exists with its own self-entity. It was true, everybody sees it like that because if you photograph the city it’s always taken across the Park Lands, you know, Colonel Light’s Lookout or from the Weir, or something like that. That might have been well when my interest in the city began, that particular morning, when I noticed it for the first time. I don’t know why I noticed it that time, perhaps just some trick of light these things can happen.

OH: In your course of Architecture, what were the important, or what were the overriding ideas that were being taught?

NP: No ideas were being taught except the history and style. The course was an extremely conservative course. Firstly it was an Engineering course, it wasn’t an architectural course per se. It was an architectural attachment to an Engineering course. The course I did was a Bachelor of Engineering (Architecture), as you would be Engineer (Electrical, Civil) and so on. So I became a structural engineer, Bachelor of Engineering Degree (Architecture).

I learnt later, I mean if I can just digress slightly, the architectural course was basically the stuff that architecture is about, you know, building designs and designs of buildings, structure of buildings, and history, and all that sort of stuff. The Engineering course was what the engineers who built dams and silos and things all studied. We joined them for two years, and that’s when architecture was extremely demanding, it required a mathematical expertise that very few of us possessed, and we
had to struggle to maintain a Pass standard. It was always terrifying for me, every time the course results came out, you know, Would I pass? As I said I’m a bit dyslexic and I can make mistakes in things quite easily. It was always a terrifying moment because it was very important for me, because if I’d started failing I would lose my scholarship, and so you can imagine how that was. I don’t know how it was, but I kept on passing, but I learnt later that they dragged quite a few architects through because they were doing Architecture, whereas we would have failed if we were doing Engineering [laughs], which was nice. Sorry, I’ve digressed, what was the question?

OH: The course, and I asked what the ideas were that were being taught.

NP: Oh, the ideas coming from our instructors, as I said, they were basically about history and style, but if you’re talking about the ideas flowing through the student body, it was all about Modernism. Modernism had barely made any influence in Adelaide. I think before the War started Jack McConnell had built a couple of, two or three modern buildings, and as a kid, as a student, and as an aspiring young architect, I used to go on my bicycle and search them out, and there were two or three houses at Springfield I can remember, which I found very attractive.

OH: Newell, just a question. How did you know about Jack McConnell?

NP: I didn’t then, this was subsequently.

OH: So you just knew that there were houses?

NP: I just knew there were just these houses, there were two or three houses up there whose shapes appealed to me, and they were modern houses, but I didn’t know who designed them, no, not at all at that stage, but subsequently I learnt that one of them was Jack McConnell, and another one had been designed I think by Russell Ellis.

So where were we? Oh yeah, student body. The student body was interested in this Modernism, so we were being taught history and style, but we were interested in Modernism. So we taught ourselves, and one of the most influential students, I think so, was Brian Claridge, sadly departed many years ago now. Brian had a bit of an advantage over a lot of us in that he was the son of an architect. He was also working in Jack McConnell’s office. He was just a little bit older than I am, but he knew about Gropius, he knew about Le Corbusier, he knew about the Bauhaus, he knew these things which were foreign to me. I didn’t know the background of all this stuff.

When that man in the grey suit came and talked to us, I didn’t know anything about architecture. I’d never met an architect, I barely knew
the profession existed. Anyway, here I am studying it, and we’re finding
that there was this sort of stuff we were being taught, or thrown at us
through the School, but there was a whole other stuff happening which
was interesting us, a whole burgeoning of interest in Modernism. So we
just taught ourselves by looking at magazines and talking to each other,
and reading books, and that was it.

OH: It’s interesting, isn’t it? So a totally parallel kind of activity?

NP: Yeah, two universes going on there. A little bit later, I’ve got to say, that
as the course developed in my later years of Design, in fairness to the
School, the lecturers who took Design courses, blokes like Reg Steele,
were not unsympathetic. In fact I think they were sympathetic. It was
better then, but in the early years it was just really history and stuff like
that, incredible.

OH: And how long was the course?

NP: Theoretically it was three years part-time, two years full-time, Sorry,
I’ve got that around the wrong way – three years full-time, two years
part-time.

OH: Right! And you did it full-time?

NP: I did the full-time and then I did the two years part-time, and I worked
with an office called Lawson, Cheesman and Doley.

OH: And how did you get that work with that firm?

NP: Oh well, Jack Cheesman came and talked to the students one day.
Again, you know, the little man in the grey suit. He wasn’t the first one
that talked to us, Jack McConnell talked to us but I hadn’t warmed to
Jack because I think he was totally uninterested in what he was doing
that day, and I think he’d had such a good lunch that [laughs] he wasn’t
his most coherent. Not that Jack was ever that coherent come to think of
it. He was coherent of course but never quite a communicator.

Jack Cheesman, Jack Cheesman was different. Jack came up, sober and
enthusiastic, and he talked about travel. He’d been travelling a lot
himself, he was the first person I’d ever met I suppose who’d travelled
as a young architect. He travelled to Europe and he travelled to
America. He showed us little sketches he had done, he had done them in
ink. He used to colour them with three coloured pens, green, brown,
blue I suppose, and he would do these little fountain pen drawings,
lovely, lovely things. I wonder what’s happened to them. Maybe the
Museum has got them. I thought Jack was terrific.

OH: How old would he have been at that time?
NP: Gosh, that’s a hard question. I would have thought he was 40.

OH: So he’d had quite a bit of experience?

NP: It wasn’t a great deal because the War interrupted them. No, he’d had some of course, but during the War he worked for some part of the War anyhow, with built things, you know the built stuff. I’m very vague about that. I’m sure you could find out, it would be in his own library system, archives, whatever. Jack had a very, very positive, enthusiastic personality, so I went and knocked on his office.

Now my own approach to architectural design and rendering was to use water colour, and I used a rather bold technique, and sometimes it didn’t work and sometimes it did, so I showed him the ones that worked of course. He seemed to like it and he called Maurice Doley in, had a bit of a chat, and they took me on.

OH: And was that common for students in that second part of the course to go and work in a firm?

NP: They had to, it was mandatory, it was part of the course, you had to start working. Once you had done the full-time three years you had to get a place somewhere. Some went into the government. The government was attractive because it gave you a good wage, private firms didn’t give you so much, but it was a very critical time for a student, because depending on the firm you went to join, depending on the dynamics within that firm, the way they thought and the way they did things, your career was going to be influenced one way or the other, and I was very lucky I think to join that office because (a) it was a lovely friendly office to work in, and I became very good friends with Maurice Doley over the years – even after I’d left the office our friendship continued, right through to his old age – and they were very good and lots of people came and worked. If you look at the history of people in Adelaide you’ll find a lot of them had a connection with that office because it became quite large when it became Cheesman, Doley, Neighbour & Raffen. I think it was that probably got to have a staff of 50 or something, I forget, but it became quite big.

OH: And where was it located when you were working?

NP: It was located in the Edments Building in Rundle Street. Is it still called the Edments Building? Just down there, not from Gawler Place. There used to be a cinema next door called the York, or was it around the corner, the York Cinema, and when the film, The Third Man, the film The Third Man, the famous Hitchcock was it?

OH: I think so.
NP: The film, *The Third Man*, you know that lovely zither tune that goes on and on and on? They used to play it in the loudspeakers, you’d hear it going in the office all day, it was lovely. So that was life in Rundle Street as it was then.

OH: And what was the experience like of moving from the student world into the practice of Architecture?

NP: I enjoyed it very much, the practice of Architecture, yes, yes, it was very enjoyable. We were very lucky in those days. Maurice Doley and Jack Cheesman were so busy doing administrative work, and Jack was also the President, I think, of the Royal Institute of Architects, or Institute of Architects, that he was away a lot, and so we got a lot of design we were doing, more than we should have really if the truth be known [laughs].

OH: You mean as a student?

NP: As students, yeah, we were designing stuff for the office.

OH: And what kind of work were you doing?

NP: Mainly houses and extensions and alterations, and things like that. They were pretty difficult times for architects because after the War there were restrictions on the building materials which were available, long delays to get stuff, bricks were extremely hard to get, so that’s when the substitute materials came in, concrete blocks came in for the first time as a substitute for bricks. So there were long delays and nobody had any money really.

OH: So who were the clients who were asking you to design?

NP: I suppose the usual mixture of professionals. There were limits on what you could borrow, limits on what you could build. It was pretty rapid inflation too I remember after the War. I can remember labouring and loving a building. I was designing a house I was designing for someone. We must have gone through, like through a tender process and the price came in, it was £2,000. *Oh*, he said, *I think that’s far too expensive, prices will come down, I won’t go ahead with it.* I wonder if he regretted that decision ten years later.

OH: When you were doing this design work were you also completing studies?

NP: Yes, yes, we were. At that stage it was the higher levels of student design work. All the Engineering subjects were over, they were completed in third year, so by the time we got onto this it was basic architectural stuff, it was architectural design. What else were we doing at that stage? There must have been some technical subjects and I can’t
recall. To finish we had to do a thesis which was some major architectural project, and once you’d done that and completed that, you were awarded the degree.

OH: And what did you do your thesis on?

NP: I did a live theatre, I did a theatre, on the side of the river down in, what’s the place called, Pinky Flat. I thought it was a nice site for a building [laughs] – awful! I remember somebody asking, What about public transport? And I dismissed that out of hand, you know, You ride a bike [laughs]. I did it under rather difficult circumstances because again I was living with my Aunt by this stage, once again I didn’t have a house. My student days were handicapped by the places I lived in because I never had a proper place to set up a drawing board or study, or things like that.

I remember one of the projects we had to do earlier on was a thing called Analytique, which was a composition of classic elements, columns and capitals, and architraves, corbels and things like that, and you could arrange them any old way you liked. It was abstract composition, some of them were beautiful, some of the people did beautiful things. But I had to do mine over the laundry troughs in my girlfriend’s laundry [laughs], and you had to apply wash after wash, it was pale in to do it on the deep colours. I mean, things like that weren’t really helpful to me, and so by the time I did my thesis I had similar difficulties, but I managed to get through. I did a supplementary, I handed the thesis in and they pushed me through – even gave me a prize at the end of the year, which was nice.

OH: I noticed that. You got the Kenneth and Hazel Milne Travelling Prize.

NP: Well don’t be too impressed by that, there were only four of us [laughs] that year.

OH: What were the requirements for winning that award?

NP: I don’t know, we were just judged on a year’s work. I think I had a pretty good year in that I think I might have got a Credit in Design or something like that, something good must have happened. All the Engineering subjects were behind me so they weren’t dragging me down [laughs].

OH: When you were at Lawson, Cheesman and Doley, what were the expectations of you for those two years?

NP: For the firm, from the firm’s point of view?

OH: From the firm, yes.
NP: I suppose I had to do enough to earn my keep. Basically I had to do technical drawings and design drawings, just to keep the show going.

OH: What was the firm known for in Adelaide?

NP: One of the reasons I was attracted to it, it was one of the few firms which was known to take any interest in modern architecture. Jack McConnell’s firm was the prime firm, you know, Jack had the big reputation, and indeed did the best work, there was no question about that. Jack and Morris didn’t come up to the quality of his work. He had something that they didn’t quite have, but they had enthusiasm. They were very, very supportive people of what younger people on the staff were trying to do. There were other students there, and there were a couple of experienced draftsmen, the usual range of people you get in architectural offices.

So what we were expected to do? Well, I worked with Morris a lot. He was doing renovations to cinemas for the Greater Union – is that what they were called – Greater Union Company, so I worked on cinemas. The Star, they ran the Star Theatres or Star Cinemas. There was one at Norwood I worked on, the ticket office there, and we remodelled the foyer, things like that. A lot of it was just sort of uplifts to remodel fronts and lobbies, sometimes it was more work on interiors. So there was that sort of work going on, the odd private house, some shops. I remember designing some shops which actually are still built; old folks’ home, I did an old folk’s home somewhere, that sort of stuff, small, small scale private work.

The big jobs, the big city jobs, the buildings, the city buildings, usually went to Woods, Bagot, Laybourne-Smith and Irwin (Adelaide architectural firm). They were the biggest office by far, they were the establishment office. They were also, because the School was begun by Louis, they supplied the bulk of the lecturers in the School. So the rest of the profession sort of picked up what was left around the edges, which was small commercial stuff, a bit of industrial stuff, housing and stuff like that.

OH: And the discourse that you had been part of with the students about the Modernist Architecture movement, did you continue with that in the firm?

NP: Oh yes, yes.

OH: Was there talk about …?

NP: Oh yes, we used to chat about it, not perhaps with any great depth of understanding, but we knew what Modernism was. *It was a flat roof, wasn’t it?* [laughs] A flat roof was mandatory. You couldn’t build the
bloody things, you know, they always leaked [laughs]. It’s fascinating, isn’t it? The profession struggled and kept on building flat roofs until good technical solutions were available, and then we all went back to pitched roofs [laughs]. No, Modernism was the flat roof, that was essential actually. It was an extraordinary thing, but you had to have a flat roof to be a Modern, and [other] roofs and gable roofs are passé. Oh no, it was more sensible than that really. We understood the importance of orientation, and we understood the importance of fenestration. We understood the importance of insulation, we understood those things.

One important thing did happen to me in those years that I should mention, and that is that we discovered Solomit. Now this happened because Maurice had a friend called Les Wright, and Les Wright had built a split-level house with a sloping Solomit ceiling, out in Burnside somewhere, and this architect was – and it escapes me this minute.

OH: An Adelaide architect?

NP: An Adelaide architect. I might think of it later, so leave a blank there and I’ll put it in [laughs]. Can you leave blanks?

OH: We can arrange that.

NP: Put it in when the name comes back to me. This is the first time I’d see this house that had been painted, and they’d burnt off the little floppy ends with a blowtorches and painted the straw, and there it was, it looked terrific, and it was acoustically lovely, it was insulating. So from that time, on the whole office got very enthusiastic about Solomit, that straw stuff. And I don’t know how much you know about the work I did with Bob Dickson, but we used a hell of a lot of it in those days.

OH: And I think we will talk about that period of your life in the next interview, Newell. So I think this is probably a really good place to complete our first interview, and I’d like to thank you very much for your contribution to that.

NP: OK, thanks very much, if it’s of any use [laughs], who knows, don’t tell me.
Oral Historian (OH): Newell, I’d like to follow up three things that we talked about in your previous interview, and the first one is about Modernist Architecture, because you mentioned three elements that you worked on when you were first at Lawson, Cheesman and Doley (Adelaide architectural firm), and those three elements were orientation, fenestration, and insulation, and I thought you might just want to perhaps provide a bit more context for that.

Newell James Platten, AM (NP): Sure! Those three elements that you point out are an extension of the idea of functionalism, and the notion of functionalism is inherent in the whole idea of Modernism.

If we can just go back a little bit. As I understood Modernism as a student, it was a revolt against imposed style; it was a revolt against the dictates of history and the authority of style, and also against symmetry and an imposition of formal arrangements upon the planning and the organisation of architectural works, and also perhaps in those instances the use of other traditional building materials.

Now the Modernist architects, early 20th Century Europe, advocated a total departure from that into a form of architecture which embraced new technologies, new ways of planning buildings, absence of symmetry and formalism, absence of decoration, and absence of historical references. In other words a complete departure of architecture from the previous influences of history and style, into something which was free, embracing new things, new ways of looking at buildings, new ways of looking at space, new ways of looking at the way people would use buildings and lived in them, and it manifested itself in buildings were using large sweeps of glass to unite inside and outside spaces, to take advantage of the orientation. The advantage you get with sunlight penetration in winter, and those sorts of elements which made buildings practical and pleasant to live in. Now that was what Modernism was about. Of course, Modernism is a much more complicated thing than
that, but that was our simple-minded architectural attitude to Modernism.

So when I talk about those sorts of elements, that was just really, you know, fenestration, orientation, sun protection, things like that, that was just really an extension of functionalism. It was Le Corbusier, who said, *Form is function.* So yes, I mean does that explain it [laughs]?

**OH:** Yes, it does, and I was thinking that those were the sorts of ideas that were being applied at Lawson, Cheesman and Doley?

**NP:** Yes, it was, they were, indeed. It’s very strange, you know, because when you look at the progress of architecture from the ’60s onwards into the ’70s and ’80s, how little influence those notions have had. You can look at housing estates built 10, 20 years ago, and they just ignore all these aspects of orientation, don’t they? You see walls of glass facing westward without the slightest bit of protection. God knows what they’re paying in air-conditioning costs in these joints now, I hate to think. We pay enough here and we’ve got plenty of protection.

But in those days of course we were living in houses which were not heated and cooled with air-conditioning as they are now, and people were more dependent upon the vagaries where they were more open to cool changes. I mean they had to live with the weather more than we do now because of air-conditioning, which has become so universal, you can just shut the doors and put the world outside, outside, but in those days very few people had air-conditioning, and so you had to sort of organise the house as best you could around what you had, which was nature.

**OH:** And leading on from that, at the end of the last interview, you talked about the material Solomit, which was first being used in the 1950s?

**NP:** It had a longer history. It was a Swedish material originally, and the machine was imported into South Australia by this guy whose name I’ve forgotten, but he established a little company up in Hallett where there’s a lot of wheat supplies, and made this straw stuff.

Solomit is produced by compressing, or binding straw with wires into sheets which are 2 inches thick, 4 ft 10 inches wide, and any length you like. The combination of the wires and the straw added a certain strength to the material. It was more or less self-supporting across 4 ft 10 inches, but we discovered it was better if it was stiffer, if you could support it halfway in between.

Its original purpose was for cool rooms, plastered on both sides, and perhaps a couple of layers of Solomit, it was used for cool rooms, but then I believe a few houses were built with it entirely, plastered, up in a
northern town somewhere, in the early-30s I think, something like that. I’ve never seen them but I’ve read about them. We knew nothing of that material except that in the office there was a filing cabinet, and in the filing cabinet there was a little brochure on the use of Solomit to make cool rooms.

But then Andrew Benko, that was the name I was searching for the other day, he was a Modernist architect individual, practising by himself as individuals want to do.

**OH:** Where was he practising?

**NP:** In Adelaide, he was in Adelaide. He’d built a house for this lawyer called Les Wright, and Maurice Doley was a friend of Les, and because of that connection we were all invited to go up and look at the house, and the house had this big straw ceilings – we just usually called it stuff straw all the time – and it had been painted and exposed, so you could see the straw there, but in a different colour than their natural colour, and we thought it was terrific because it had this lovely acoustic quality. It was just like an acoustic ceiling, like a carpet up there in many ways, so it helped the acoustic qualities of the house, and also it looked good, and it was 2 inches thick straw, it was good insulation, so it seemed everything you wanted in a ceiling. So it very quickly became the preferred ceiling in the office, but not many people had the gumption for it, you know, it wasn’t something you could sell to every client, as you might well imagine. It was used every time we could, and so as time advanced we became happy with it just sitting unpainted. Perhaps when I joined Bob Dickson later on, we used it almost every time we could.

**OH:** What was the relative cost?

**NP:** It wasn’t very expensive, the expense came with the detailing you might put underneath it to support it, because it usually went with beams and rafters of polished timber as well, and rather nice carpentry went in to give the whole effect, but it didn’t produce a very expensive ceiling, no. I don’t know, we never compared them, because once you’d started on the idea of using a straw ceiling, you had a certain kind of structural technique, and you couldn’t really just say, *Well pull a straw out and try something else there*, because too many other things were involved. But no, we built houses, we could build houses in the early days, certainly competitive with market prices from the developers. It was very economical.

**OH:** Were other architectural firms in Adelaide using it?

**NP:** I don’t think so. I’m sure some were but I don’t know. See there weren’t very many people who built like that. If you look at Adelaide at the time, the so-called Modernist Architecture, the first, the prominent one,
the most prominent one was McConnell’s office. Now I don’t think McConnell’s office used it. I think their aesthetic required a more kind of... they were more international, into what became known as International Modernism, International Style, which was pretty clean, ceilings were smooth, plaster, clean sweeps of glass, and fairly clean, synthetic looking buildings, let’s put it that way.

The Cheesman style was different. Maurice and Jack were both very fond of stone, they still liked the handcrafted look in buildings. George Lawson, a funny old fellow, he was very fond of clinker bricks, and he introduced clinker bricks into interiors around fireplaces and things like that. He was particularly fond of them. Do you know what a clinker brick is, by the way? It’s the over-burnt one.

OH: And the shape is a little ...?

NP: And the shape, and sometimes they twist because they get so near the fire, and sometimes they fuse together, so you’ll get a brick with great lumps sticking out where one brick has broken off but it’s fused back to the other one. It’s a very rugged, dark almost purple-red look, and they liked to use the dark mortar with it, so it sort of emphasised the colour. So there was this emphasis on that kind of material, rough texture. McConnell I don’t think was into texture to the same extent as Jack and Maurice were, so this distinguished them, but McConnell’s work was slicker. There were a lot of rough edges in the work that Jack and Maurice did. It just wasn’t quite, the proportions probably weren’t quite as sharp or something.

But going outside them, who was there, I don’t know. There was Andrew Benko of course, but he was sort of small. I don’t know any other buildings Andrew did except the one I’ve seen of Les Wright’s. His stuff didn’t have quite the polish of these two people anyhow. I get beyond them and they must have had more the international style. I don’t think any other firm was doing it, using those materials in quite the same way at that time.

OH: That’s interesting.

NP: One of George Lawson’s buildings, by the way, is Edments Building that we were actually working in at that time, and if you look at the facade of that building you’ll find a lot of red bricks built into the facade in various patterns and things, and I think that indicates the interest in red brick, and red brick textures in that particular firm.

OH: And that’s on Rundle Mall?

NP: Rundle Mall as it is now.
OH: Thank you, Newell. The third item I wanted to follow up from the previous interview is about the Kenneth and Hazel Milne Travelling Prize, which you won in 1950 as a result of your study. Could you tell me a little about that?

NP: I can I suppose, but I don’t particularly want to talk greatly about it [laughs]. I don’t regard it as a major achievement. It sounds fine but the truth is that there were only four people who could have won it that year [laughs] and I was the lucky one.

OH: But what did it enable you to do?

NP: It was for £40, and you couldn’t travel very far for £40 as I recall, but I was supposed to travel and do some research work and then write a report, and I suppose this has got to come out sometime or other. Well I did the research work, and I decided to combine it with my travels to the UK (United Kingdom), because I was going to the UK anyhow, and when the ship docked at Fremantle I went off to visit an old folks’ building, and tried to do some research into accommodation for elderly people, because I’d done a little bit of that in Adelaide in the firm, but I have to tell you, I suppose I have to confess, I never wrote the report and nobody ever asked for it. So the report which was supposed to be lodged in the Archives, it never has been, and I hope they don’t follow it up now. Don’t let this get out, not until I’m dead [laughs].

OH: I don’t think people will worry too much.

NP: I can’t remember what I saw [laughs]. I’ve no doubt I wrote some notes but I wouldn’t know where they are [laughs].

OH: So you continued on with your travels?

NP: Yes, I did. Now I’ve got to say something here with I think is important. When young architects travel from Australia they go in one of two directions. They go to Europe or they go to America. They travel at a very impressionable age as you might well imagine. They’ve just come through a university course here where they’ve been disciplined, and we have to sort of follow certain patterns and routes and things, which are set out for us by our superiors, and then we travel and we’re more or less free.

The people who went to America tended to be what you might call academically the brighter students, people like Keith Neighbour, people like John Morphett. They got scholarships and they went to prestigious universities in America and studied, and what they studied tended to be International Modernism under the tuition of famous Modernist architects. International Modernism, you might want an explanation of that, but we might come to that later on if you like, just put that aside for
the moment. That will come into the picture when I talk about my work with Dickson and Platten. As the word suggests, it’s the style of Modernism that spread right across the world, or to put it simply, I suppose it’s the sort of thing you’d see when you see these big glassy office buildings, stripped down, no aesthetics apart from the grid and the glass and the very simple materials. More of that later.

Also in America the idea about architecture and the relationship of architecture in towns is not the same as it is in Europe. In Europe there’s a greater emphasis on the building and the context of the building in the city, and the city as an organism, if you like, and the connection between the three, particularly in England after the War. So the people who went to America got a certain attitude towards a building, more as a thing in itself, more as a thing of separated art, and more as a thing like … not so much a piece of sculpture but certainly something you can model as it were in isolation from the world around it. It was a thing.

In Europe the emphasis I think, generally speaking like architects, it was more of a thing in connection with what’s already there, and this has, of course, this long history of traditions stretching back for yonks. That’s an aside to that. So what I’m actually trying to say is that people who went to Europe, like Bob Dickson and myself, and others, we became more interested in buildings, I think, which fitted with context, as opposed to the people who went to America and became more or less to do with the sculptural essence of the building as a thing apart. I don’t know whether I’m expressing myself clearly enough but it’s a distinction I made and it’s a distinction which came to influence the way architects thought about their work when they got to Australia.

Let me go back to my travels again, having said all that, I travelled to Europe and my first contact in Europe was Marseille. I’ve written about this in my memoirs but I’ll mention it now. In Marseille there’s a very famous Modernist building and I can’t say it properly—Unité d’Habitation, a big block of flats by Corbusier. The Corbusier theory was that you could house people in these enormous giant blocks of flats, which would work like little towns. They’d have everything, not only the dwellings but there’d be nurseries for the small babies and the pre-schools and the playgrounds, there might even be a shop; there’d be community rooms and so on and so on and so on. And he built this enormous great block of flats at Marseille on these principles. It’s a very famous building.

It was under construction when we arrived in Marseille, so I was duty-bound to go and see it. I teamed up with a girl called Audrey, who spoke good French, this girl from Sydney. She had private school French and I thought we’d make a good team, she could speak French and I could tell her what to do [laughs]. She floated along with me and we went to look
at the ‘Corb’ Building, and there it was, a great massive grey thing in a sea of mud. We couldn’t get on, the building was under construction and it was very wet, and cranes things all around the place. I took a photograph and duly admired it and went on.

Well, it just happened that we decided to hitchhike, a mad thing to do, just think about. We got one day in Marseille and we decided to hitchhike somewhere down the coast.

OH: This is 1951.

NP: This is December 1951 – not many cars anyhow. Audrey was looking very elegant, she had a beret on and a tan coat if I remember correctly, a skirt and boots and things – she was very, very smart, probably even French – shawl [laughs]. So we stand at the side of the road and hitchhike, and somebody going East, a little black Citroën stops and a chap gets out and Audrey and he had a chat, and he said, Hop into the back seat. He assured us he was just going down. His wife was there and he was just going down the coast. Yeah, sure we can go along and have a little ride with them. He’d get us back before the ship left at night, that’s fine [laughs], so we hopped in. I think we were mad! [laughs]

Fortune favours the brave, as they say, and off we went, and we drove the coast and finished up at Cassis. Now I don’t know if you’ve ever seen or heard of Cassis. It’s one of these terrific little French towns, and I can remember driving into Cassis, and you drive down a road which curves slightly, and the houses crowd in on this road, and they were three storeys, two to three storeys high. And they had little balconies and French doors on the balconies, and the balconies had pots with geraniums and stuff on them, and they’re painted pastel colours, ochre pinkie colours, blues, white trim around the windows, and it was just enchanting. I was absolutely smitten by this, the whole feeling of the space and the humanity and the colour and the rhythms of these houses, and that was that.

Suddenly I was exposed to this way of living and building that I’d never seen before. You know, you come from Adelaide and everything is broad and flat, and suddenly you’ve got this totally different sense of scale and form and humanity, and a feeling of people living in this lovely sort of space. Anyway, we went and these nice people took us and gave us a nice lunch in the café, and drove us back to the boat. All went well. I look back on that now and I’ve written myself in my memoirs and I think, What an amazing thing to happen. On my first day in Europe I come across this Modernist Architecture, ‘Corb’, and certainly by chance I come across this traditional form of building and living. I didn’t know then, of course, how important that was, it was just
a passing event. I was young and naïve and the next day would bring more fun. But I look back on that now and I think that was probably very formative, because I realise now that in all my subsequent architect’s work I’ve been trying to bring those two incidences together. It sounds crazy but it’s true.

I think later on when I talk about Bob Dickson coming in, You’ll want to talk about him no doubt because he becomes important in the story. I’ll refer back to that, but the problem was for me from that point on, I became more interested in exploring that aspect of Europe and lifestyle [laughs] instead of being a proper architect. So in a sense I wasted two years of my life at a very vital point because instead of sort of searching out the best architects to work for, I sought out the most expedient ones to work for a little while and get away quickly so I could go off and do some more travelling. It was a very rich experience as you can well imagine, but it wasn’t very helpful for my architectural training in the sense that I’d come back and do practical things.

OH: So as you were travelling you were getting assignments, or you were getting work with different ...?

NP: I had to work, oh yes. That was the normal course of events in those days. Travel was a big deal, you know, it took you five weeks to get to London, you just couldn’t go there sort of for a weekend, so most people stayed away a year, two years, something like that. I found work in London, I worked there. I worked there until May. And in May I took off again with a friend I’d made from the workplace, and we travelled extensively through Southern Europe, and then came back and spent a bit of time in the UK, and then travelled in Scandinavia, and so we were travelling pretty well from May until November.

OH: Were you particularly interested in Scandinavia for architectural reasons?

NP: It was. I thought I would be. It didn’t turn out like that. I won’t go into all those details now because they’re all part of my memoir stuff, but Scandinavian architecture was well known. It was also influential because (a) they had very good architects, and (b) Sweden has this long tradition of socially-minded architecture. And they built very good houses for working-class people and they’d learnt to build good flats, people lived in flats and so on in better conditions and better designed, connections, circumstances, than many other places. Sweden has a very good reputation [laughs] let’s put it that way in architectural circles, and I wanted to see it, but I didn’t in the end. But that’s another story, I won’t go down there now.

OH: You continued to work and travel for, what, a period of two years?
NP: Oh yes. I came back in just over two years. I finished up, having sort of explored Europe and worked in London for a couple of terms, I went to America and travelled through the States.

OH: And did you work there also?

NP: I worked in Canada, I couldn’t work in America it was too difficult in those days, but I worked in Canada. I worked in Montreal and worked in British Columbia until I saved enough money to come home, but in the meantime I travelled right through the United States of America for two months.

OH: And were you synthesising the kinds of ideas that you were open to in different places?

NP: I wouldn’t be synthesising, I think I was still kind of like a sponge, you know, just absorbing stuff. I don’t think it was really until several years later that I began to kind of allow these impressions to influence me. I suppose it gave me the opportunity to be influenced by something. I mean you’ve got to express yourself somehow, and I wasn’t actually building anything much in those days [laughs].

OH: So when you came back, I understand it was 1954?

NP: Early 1954.

OH: And you returned to Lawson Cheesman?

NP: I returned to Lawson Cheesman and I duly became a partner.

OH: How did you become a partner, what was the process?

NP: The partners simply decided to invite new partners in, and it was just a structural deal they did. There were several partners, Keith Neighbour, a guy called Roy Brabham who died rather young, Laurie Brownell who also died fairly young, and me. That’s four of us were invited to join the partner, old George Wilson had died, so they developed a new firm called Cheesman, Doley and Partners; Lawson was out, and I became a partner. I’d always rather expected that. I’d sort of got on well with both partners, and I believed that that would eventually happen. I think I was very proud, it was terrific to be this, so that went a while. Do you want me to continue down this line at the moment?

OH: Yes, because I was going to ask you what kind of projects you were involved in at that time.

NP: Of course they got a bit bigger as I became a partner, and also the fact that I became a partner meant that I became responsible for projects,
whereas previously as not a partner, someone else would have been responsible. So I became the responsible entity.

Projects like hotels, office buildings, houses of course, we still did houses, but the firm was rapidly expanding in those years and more stuff was coming in, and the firm had to find new accommodation. It was at that time located on the intersection of Wakefield Street and Hutt Street, on the north-east corner of that intersection. And to expand the office to take in extra work, and extra staff that they needed to do the extra work, they rented a property on the other side of Hutt Street, on the southern side of Wakefield Street, and I shifted over there.

Now, from that point on I have to say my feelings about working with Cheesman Doley had changed. When I first went there in my earlier years they’d been a very intimate, cohesive group of people, and it had been a great, great place to work, lovely people, but suddenly we moved over there and the whole place, you know, it felt a little bit like being exile [laughs]. I took very seriously the responsibility of being a responsible architect, and part of that responsibility means keeping your costs down so your work returns, not necessarily a profit but at least runs on costing, not losing money every time you do a job while the firm goes broke, and suddenly I was becoming a businessman too. I was very young, and truly very inexperienced, I was still very naïve. This bothered me and I found that – when I say bother I wasn’t going mad all the time – but I was aware of this kind of load, and I thought I’d been distracted, I wasn’t getting as much fun out of architecture as I’d really hoped for. I can go down this line a little while if you like because it brings Bob Dickson into the picture.

Now one night, it was actually the night Sputnik flew over, Sputnik flew over this night and Bob Dickson gave a talk to the office.

OH: And that would have been 195...?

NP: 1957 I think, because we started work in 1958 together. Yeah! Bob came to the office and gave a talk to the office.

OH: On what? Do you remember?

NP: Well yes, he’d been in Italy working for a fellow called Mangiarotti, an architect, Mangiarotti and some other name, I can’t remember offhand. I can pick it up later on if you like and tell you. Anyhow, a very well-known, very good, Italian architect, strong and Modernist architect, quite famous at the time. Bob had got himself a job there for a year, he’d been over working for him, so naturally he wanted to talk about Mangiarotti’s work. But also he talked about the Italian vernacular
buildings he’d seen, the farm buildings and the structures, you know, even things like beehives, you know the sort of whole vernacular stuff that he’d seen in Italy that I’d seen in Cassis in France, and in Spain again, and those towns there. I had suddenly found someone I had something in common with, both of us were interested in that kind of architecture as well as the Modernism.

OH: And Newell, had you known him before, like was he a contemporary?

NP: Oh yes, he was a fellow student. I didn’t know him very well as a student, but he was working in McConnell’s office, and we were in Design classes together. His work was pretty interesting. I always thought a little bit stiff in those days, it was very much International Modernism stuff, clear lines, organic, you know, straight up and down. His work was interesting, always one that you looked at when it was pinned up on the wall, but he wasn’t an outstanding student in the sense that he was always getting top marks and things, but he was a good student. Anyhow, I didn’t know him very well. When I saw him, when he came and talked to us, I thought he’d just moved on a lot, and he’d obviously worked with these good architects. He’d had this terrific experience, totally opposite of mine of course [laughs]. I had worked with pretty crappy architects, to be honest, just to get a buck in and move on. And I thought, Oh gee, it would be terrific to work with someone like Bob. We had the same attitudes towards architecture and design, and things like that.

I talked to Margaret, my wife, and she thought it would be a good idea if we became partners and linked up together and tried working together. I arranged a meal one night with him and his wife and suggested that, and he went away and thought about, and agreed, and that happened.

OH: Had he been working in a firm at that point?

NP: He was working for McConnell at that point, Jack McConnell’s office. So we started together in 1958 I think it was, in July.

OH: I’m going to ask you about the work that you did together in partnership a little later, but I wanted to ask you some questions about the context of the 1950s and 1960s in Adelaide, because in our earlier meeting you talked about the fact that the Playford years had meant almost like an absence of planning and design.

NP: Absolutely.

OH: And on the other hand a tremendous amount of intellectual activities in the social kind of fabric. So I’m wondering if you’d like to talk about that.
Well, in the ’50s, what are we talking about, the mid-50s I suppose. Let’s go back, we need to go back. Have I talked about the Sixth Australian Architectural Convention Exhibition?

No, we haven’t talked about that.

Well I think we perhaps should go back to that because that comes before, that comes when I was still with Cheesman, Doley, that comes before that.

That was 1956?

That was 1956.

And even before then, Newell, I understand that you were a member of a Contemporary Architects’ Group?

Well that’s right, that’s right. Now they’re all linked up all those things, they’re linked up. How can I get to this quickly? I’ve explained, I told you how during our student days there was a sort of a schism between the attitudes of the lecturers and the attitudes of the students, so there was like two universes going on there. One was up there giving us instructions, and the other one was down there ignoring them [laughs]. This survived of course student days and remained after the students became architects.

Now I suppose it depended a bit on where you were working to a degree, but I think the collegiate feeling that students had when they were working at university was dissipated when they went to work for other architects.

Now perhaps it started with a desire to regenerate that collegiate feeling, but a group of architects who were resentful of the indifference of the profession at large, to the issues that Modernist architects were interested in, and the fact that this indifference was particularly manifested at the organisation of the, was it the Institute of Architects? South Australian Architects I don’t think had become … I don’t think it was a national organisation then.

A group of architects formed an organisation called the Contemporary Architects’ Group, is that right, CAG, yes. I remember John Chappel, a guy called John Tulloch, I’m sure Keith Neighbour, various other people, mainly ex-service people collected the group, formed it really, and others of us joined. So eventually it included all the younger architects that I knew at the time, people like Brian Claridge and Bob Dickson and myself, probably Ian Campbell, and others, and people like John Chappel. It was basically a group of people who wished to sort of continue to think and discuss, and examine the issues of Modernism
which were not being examined by the organisation of architects as a whole. So you had this sort of duality in the profession, and I don’t know what the old architects thought of this lot, but anyway there it was. There were the older architects who wanted history and style to pervade, and the younger architects, *Poohey to all that stuff, let’s get on with Modernism.*

**OH:** And did you have formal meetings of the group?

**NP:** Oh, we must have, yeah, we probably had formal. I can’t remember all that to be honest, it was a long time ago, and I was never a very active member anyhow. I was building a house and I was raising a family, and all these other things were coming into my life at that time.

These people, I mean it’s important to realise that these people were older, these were ex-service people. Now the fact that the university course at that time had been invaded by ex-service men, very few women, made it a different student group to I think anything previously and anything subsequently. It was extraordinary, I mean I think the ex-servicemen were 3:1 to naïve school leavers at the university course, and they came out. Now these people are not kind of as naïve as we were, these were mature men, and they weren’t going to stuff around. [laughs] They were going to do something, and they did it, and they formed this group, and it was this group largely that organised and developed and built, and otherwise created and ran the Sixth Australian Architectural Convention Exhibition, which we can get on to now because that was an attempt by the profession, the younger members of the profession, to demonstrate the potential of modern architecture. Brian Claridge was, I think, the driving force behind this.

Now Brian was a passionate Modernist and very enthusiastic, and a good communicator and a good motivator, and he formed in a way a bridge between the older architects like the Chappel era, the ex-servicemen, and the really young ones like myself who had just come through after the War. He was a little bit older than I was and he was doing the course part-time. His father had been in an architectural practice, and he was working in McConnell’s office. So he had more history, access, affinity, with the sources of modern architecture in books and magazines than many of us did. And he became the kind of a vehicle to move Modernism, to spread it among the university students, and then kept the enthusiasm and the spirit going after they’d all left university, and he was the driving force in the Contemporary Architects’ Group, and he was the driving force between this idea, that when the architects from all over Australia came to meet in Adelaide, in the Architects’ Convention in 1956, we would display an exhibition of architecture for them. Now he didn’t have in mind something simple like a whole bunch of photographs in the gallery, he had in mind a
whole bloody village [laughs] in the Park Lands, and he set about this, and was supported by other architects of like mind. They’d done a lot of work.

Now I was looking forward to this, at the time. I’d been away anyhow, I’d only got back in 1954, and it all started while I was away and I was just getting back. He, and Bob Dickson and had been one, and others, had got this idea that they were going to build this exhibition of buildings, and the buildings would be in the Botanic Gardens just across the other side, you know where the drive goes through the back of the Botanic Gardens. Back of the Botanic Gardens – I’m getting confused – Botanic Gardens Drive near the Botanic Park, they were going to be in Botanic Park between the Botanic Gardens and the Zoo. They got permission from Council and from the Botanic Gardens themselves to use the land, and then they finally got support from the Institute of Architects to go ahead, and it became a venture.

Now it all had to be sponsored, there was no money coming from anywhere, so a committee was set up. There were some designers and there were some people who went out and got people to sponsor the thing, firms and the building industry, and got people involved, and it was just amazing how people came to the party. Finally it just happened that they got enough money and got enough system going to build this little collection of buildings.

I came into the picture in 1955 I think it was, yeah, 1955, early-1955, autumn 1955. Brian Claridge came to my house one day, I was living in a house in Rose Park. Brian knocks on the door and I go to the door and say, Hello. He says, Good day. He said, I’ve got news for you [laughs]. We had a little backyard that we were sharing, a little garden out the back and some steps there, and we sat down on the steps. Brian told me about this Exhibition Committee. I hadn’t heard of it until then. He’d been working at Bob Dickson’s trying to design, or putting ideas through, and Bob had done off to Italy to work with Mangiarotti, so they had a position for a designer and was I interested. I said, Sure, count me in. Then I remember just sitting on those little back steps and the autumn sun was coming down, a little dirt there, and I thought it was a matter to celebrate when you’ve got a cask of wine. We filled up our glasses and we’re there sipping wine on this little back step.

Brian and I sort of sketched out the plan and discussed the whole theme for the exhibition. The idea was, Brian’s idea, … that we would demonstrate the use of materials, that we would demonstrate glass and steel and timber and concrete in various advanced technological ways, so that people would realise that materials could reflect the shape of a building, and each had their own kind of integrity which could be expressed. He wanted to approach the exhibition this way, so that
became the theme. I designed a glass building and a steel pavilion, and an entrance canopy, and something called the International Pavilion which was meant to sort of bring the whole thing together. I can talk about those if you wish, but maybe ...

OH: I think that’s really interesting, and if you could I think it would be great. I was going to ask you what was the scale of these buildings.

NP: They were small.

OH: Full scale?

NP: Oh yes, yes, you could walk into them. It had to be something in itself. The house for example, let’s just talk about Brian’s house. That was the most polished and finished of all the buildings. It had doors you could lock, and it had artworks in it, and things like that, but it was conceived as a little open interior space. The whole structure was built if timber, it had timber portal frames made of laminated woods. It had a timber ceiling which was also the roof, timber floors, and timber walls – timber walls lined with plywood inside – many sorts of timbers were there. It was very beautiful. It had artworks because Brian was very close to a group of artists. Brian was a sort of Renaissance man, you know, he was interested in the theatre and painting, and art, and everything as well as architecture, and he had very good friends in the art movement, a guy called Wladyslaw Dutkiewitz and Stanislaw Ostoja-Kotkowdki, and others. He got them involved, they were to work with the architects at the same time, really Bauhas-ian in ideas that the architects and the artists would dream up things together.

So it came about that these buildings were designed, and various firms did the working drawings from the designs, and then various other firms donated the money, and builders put in workmen and sponsored things, and organisations sponsored things, and it got built, it was amazing, and the architects did a lot of work themselves on the ground, made paths and painting [laughs]. It was an extraordinary exercise. It could never happen again, the stars would never realign, I mean because of the various issues.

First of all you had the impetus, because there was still this kind of feeling we Modernist architects had that our message wasn’t getting through, it wasn’t getting through to the public, and it wasn’t getting through to the older members of the profession, and we felt still that we were not there, we were being ignored, so this was a chance to demonstrate what we were about. There was that …[laughs].

… There was that, and then there was also the circumstances of the time. I think this is important. It would never happen now because in
those days the builders controlled their own trades, the builders generally speaking were called Master Builders. And by that, that means they had their own, certainly had their own carpenters, probably had their own bricklayers, had their own major trades, which they just employed all the time, so they could direct them as they wished. Whereas nowadays, a builder is no more than a sort of middle manager and he just hires subcontractors in, and you can’t control subcontractors the same way. So there was that aspect to it.

It was a prosperous time in the building industry. There was so little competition, so much work to do, that they were all doing pretty well.

OH: Were the restrictions that had been in place after the War lifted?

NP: They had begun to ease but they were still there in 1956. This is ten years after the end of the War and things were getting a bit easier. I can’t remember, I think probably restrictions had been eased entirely by then. Building materials could be hard to get, red brick you had to wait for a long time, but we weren’t using those sorts of materials anyhow. So just those circumstances.

But the other important thing was the maturity of the ex-service people. You had people like Keith Neighbour and Dick Roberts who had the experience and the confidence to go into Board Meetings with businessmen, and lobby to get money out of them. I could never have done that, I don’t think anybody of my age could have in those days, but these people, they’d been Majors and things in War, so they were used to being in control of things. So you had that sort of experience, and all those things together, and you had someone like Brian Claridge. Brian Claridge was enthusiasm, the experience of the ex-serviceman. The fact that the building industry was prosperous and they could control their own future. You put all those things together and suddenly you can have an action, but none of those things would apply now, and I don’t know if they ever will again. So that made it unique, it was a one-off, and that’s why I think it’s quite an important little statement to make about architecture here in South Australia, and I’ve written about them in my own memoirs, with photographs. So what else could I say about it?

Probably the other thing I could say about it is that Brian’s house was the most polished, and probably the most expensive Exhibition building. Some weren’t even buildings I might add. For example, the steel pavilion was simply a kind of a little shelter thing, but this was a proper building, and it looked like a building except that it was so abstracted that people were confused by it. Brian refused to have anything as ordinary as to have an enamelled bath in it [laughs], it would totally wreck his ’50s aesthetics. So for a bath he put a wooden tub, half an old barrel I think. There was a big wooden tub there as a symbolic bath,
people took him seriously [laughs]. *What’s that architect about, taking the bath and all those things?* But it was a pretty expensive little number when I look at the photographs now. I can show you the photographs if you like, I’ve got some there. Would you like to see them?

OH: I would.

NP: Do you want to do that now?

OH: Perhaps we can look at them after.

NP: Later, OK.

OH: Because I was going to ask you what did Brian Claridge see in you when he went to see you in autumn of 1955?

NP: Brian is dead, how would I know?

OH: What do you think he did?

NP: I don’t know [laughs] I really don’t know, I can’t answer that. Well Brian and I were friends. We’d been students together. He probably thought that I was a reasonable sort of designer. That’s all.

OH: But that’s a lot when you think of the venture that came to fruition from the mud drawing.

NP: Brian was a lovely man, he was very generous. I mean some of the architects would have held that to themselves. I mean I might have done that. Gosh, what an opportunity to design the whole bloody lot, you know, *My village*, but Brian, Brian wasn’t like that. I wasn’t the only designer. There was Ian Campbell, there were three of us altogether, Ian did some work too. But I suppose we were regarded … I mean I had a reasonable reputation at the university, and I did win that bloody prize after all [laughs].

OH: What kind of publicity was there for the Convention?

NP: There was quite a lot. It was covered by *The Advertiser*, and there were a lot of comments afterwards, and various other overseas magazines published photographs of it, it got quite a bit of publicity. I think the two things you have to consider is the impact on the local population and the impact on the local architects. Now, as for the local population, I don’t think it had any influence at all, to be quite honest. I think people came and mused, you know, it was like going into a gallery and looking at modern paintings on the walls, and then they’re going off somewhere else and buying a Hans Heysen or a reproduction of a Hans Heysen more likely [laughs]. I think it amused people, it stimulated people, but I
don’t think it influenced what people actually did, because when people build houses they’re more interested in market returns when they sell, and that sort of thing, and they’re very conservative towards the housing industry. If something has been selling for so long, it’s probably going to keep selling. You try something new and it’s dicey.

But I think it’s more important to consider the influence it had on the profession, and I think the influence was quite profound in the sense that I think it gave everybody who was involved with it, a great deal of confidence. I think it was like the turning point in the way the profession operated here. I think it was ‘the beginning of the new and the end of the old’ if I can be sort of so pretentious as to say that. I think from that point on Modernism was no longer a debate, it was the ordinary, and it was never an issue, and all the architects involved finally got themselves on the Council [laughs] and slowly as it happens, they became part of the establishment, as these things do.

OH: Are you talking about the influence being wider than just Adelaide because it was an international ...?

NP: I don’t think. It was published elsewhere but I don’t think it had much influence, but it was nice that it got published. It meant that it was recognised as something of some significance. It was very significant in Adelaide, of course, because of the whole wackiness, and I think that was a totally wacky idea [laughs].

OH: And it was set up for about three weeks I understand?

NP: At least three weeks, I would have probably said four if you’d asked me. The month of May, it was dreadful weather, it was the wettest May on record. It was dreadful [laughs], but everybody bucked in, you know, we all went down there and did turns at the beginning, handing out information, and somebody had to mind every building all the time, so there was always someone standing around there.

I remember one night I was down there, it was a bitter night, and I was scheduled to look after the steel pavilion. Now the steel pavilion had no shelter at all except on the upper side of the bloody thing, and it had these flip-flop roofs. The flip-flop roofs amused me because I’d seen Sert’s work in Boston and I knew he was interested in flip-flop roofs. But there was no money to enclose it, so it was just really a roof structure with some dynamic looking trusses and suspension and stuff. It looked rather pretty, I rather liked it. It was kind of a bit mad [laughs]. It wasn’t very warm, and eventually it all came down.

Now Reg (Steele) was a nice guy. He was a partner in Woods, Bagot, Laybourne-Smith & Irwin’s firm, and a Design teacher in my later days
at university, and he was one of the ones that didn’t condemn Modernism. He seemed vaguely interesting, was quite supportive. Anyhow, Reg comes down there and we’re both standing around miserably in the cold, and Reg puts his hand in his hip pocket and pulls out a little whisky flask and says, I think we need some of this to keep going [laughs]. Anyhow, I think 10,000 people went through, a big figure, a big figure of people went through.

Another thing I wanted to point out was, getting back to the house, you ask yourself afterwards, Why so much money on one particular exhibition? It was sponsored by the Timber Development Association, the Woods & Forest Industry I think they’re called. Several sponsors came in from the industry, from the timber industry, and I think at the back of their minds would have been the knowledge that timber was a no-go building material in nine or so suburban Councils. It was regarded as inferior. You could not build in timber in the whole Mitcham Council, I think the same applied to Burnside, and there were others which I had known once but I can’t put a name to now. It was a material which was deemed unsuitable for South Australians to use in their houses, inferior, largely I think because of the rush of little timber dwellings that had been built in, particularly Mitcham during the Depression.

Even during the War and after the War there were little timber shacks scattered all through the Belair district, which people knocked up during the Depression, just to get somewhere to live. And I think as a reaction of that, they declared timber an unsuitable material. I think the sponsors hoped that an exhibition like this would sway them to allow timber to be more widely used, and I don’t think it did, but what it did, what it did, was quite important. I think it forged strong links between the architectural profession and the timber industry. And I know that when Bob and I were working later on, we often called in people from the timber industry to give us assistance in designing buildings, and selecting materials, and things like that, so it was a good connection that way.

OH: And Newell, that’s a good place to end our interview today on the influence of the Sixth Australian Architectural Convention in Adelaide, so thank you very much.

NP: I hope that was all right.
Oral Historian (OH): Thanks, Newell, for agreeing to this.


OH: We’re going to resume the interview by the focus on your career in architecture, and in the previous interview you spoke about beginning the practice with Bob Dickson, and the fact that you had similar approaches to architecture.

NP: Yes. This I had not expected from my previous knowledge of Bob. As I mentioned earlier, I think as a student I thought his work was rather strictly down the middle of the road, International Modernism, a little bit stiff.

Anyhow he’d been to Italy, and as I said before, he’d obviously developed a lot, and he came back and gave this talk, and there he was talking about the vernacular buildings of Italy in a way which harmonised entirely with my feelings about the buildings I’d seen in Spain and in France. In Adelaide at the time there weren’t too many people who thought like that – in fact I didn’t know anybody else – so that was something I immediately felt a connection with Bob about, but also his work was, the work he showed of Mangiarotti and the way he spoke about his reaction to that sort of work. I thought, Here’s a guy who’s really interested in design.

At the time, as I mentioned, I was a partner in a practice that was moving upwards, and I seemed to be spending most of my time worrying about specifications and contract documents, and whether the place was running efficiently as a business, and all these sorts of things. I didn’t feel ready for that, I didn’t feel my design had evolved enough. I always felt I had a bit of talent but I didn’t know quite how to get it all together. I was naïve, I was young, and suddenly I felt bogged down by all this little business stuff, I just felt unprepared, and I thought, Gee, it would be terrific to work with someone like Bob.
We had that meal together, and we put the proposition, Bob later agreed, and it just so happened in 1958 we commenced a partnership in a little old cottage that his mother owned in MacKinnon Parade, North Adelaide, opposite the Park Lands, just across the road from the Children’s Hospital [Women’s & Children’s Hospital], just a small cottage, just a single-fronted bluestone cottage, a passage down one side, a room at the front, a room behind, another room at the back, and that was about it, with a little extension on it with a bathroom and a place for files and stuff, and documents, and behind that in the vacant backyard Bob had, well was building a little self-contained cottage for his mother to live in, who was retiring then. So that’s where we started in 1958, in a cold winter in July, with an oil heater in the passage.

Now we had invited Vlad Dutkiewitz and Francis Thompson, the artist, to paint the place, and they did, and Vlad had done some little murals around the free-standing fireplace that we’d organised – it was a pleasant little place. Bob and I sat in the front room, we shared an office, and we had a long bench under the only window facing the Park Lands, and he sat one end and I sat the other end of this, and we began our work together. And I think it was partly the fact that we were so close to each other in our working lives that helped us develop an idea about our own architecture.

We were still very formative I think, both of us. Bob had come from the McConnell office which was influenced by International Modernism. And I’d come from Cheesman’s office which was more earthy, if I can use the phrase, more sort of material in stone and straw and timber, and stuff like that. McConnell’s office was in form, in sort of classical modern forms of portions and strength and character, and I think as we worked together, we began to blend a little bit, as these ideas infused each other’s work.

We also made a decision which would have been a bit odd in those times. We said that we won’t have any magazines that will influence us, we felt we wanted to muddle through from what we only felt about architecture, and our experience up to date. That’s not quite true, we did have one magazine, but the magazine we had was a magazine called Architectural Journal\(^3\). It was an English magazine and because it was English it was very European, naturally, and it emphasises the architectural connection with the buildings around it. It was interested in context and it was interested in ideas about space in towns, and the way buildings made spaces in towns and the sort of events you can have as you move through spaces, and how architecture contributed to that – architecture and connection with its general environment.

\(^3\) On review of the transcript, Newell confirmed the actual title was Architectural Review
That meant that we did not become terribly well acquainted with the influences, or the ideas, that were coming out of International Modernism, particularly as it was emerging at that time … were the sort of Miesian, Mies van der Rohe, aesthetics that were coming out of America. So our idea of Modernism went, as it were, unfettered in whichever way you wanted to take it. Now that’s not to say that we dismissed Modernism, we still thought [about] the values of Modernism, which were freedom for planning, expression of structure, which meant that a building should appear … when you look at a building you should be able to read how it was built. It should expose its structure, not to say the structure by putting a skeleton on the outside, and we sometimes saw buildings do that. You had to know how a thing was built.

We believed in planning in certain ways that gave freedom for the user. We’d exploited the opportunities that lay in a site in connection with the orientation of the building, to pick up sunlight; any views it might have; the creation of internal spaces – that is internal spaces within the site as opposed to within the building – and the connection between the spaces and site, and spaces in the building, and so on, all those sorts of things. We believed decoration was passé, and that in all, you had to be truthful, both for the purpose of the building and the way you were building it. That’s sort of International Modernism, that’s the guiding principle.

But instead of going into the way that embraced modern technologies, in the way you could use steel and concrete, and always look for the latest way of doing something in a building, we sort of went the opposite way. We sort of went back and putting up buildings with brick and timber and stuff, for hundreds of bloody years, and they still look terrific, why not [laughs] why not exploit that? So we tended to work backwards, as it were, in technological terms. For one reason it sort of suited our feelings about architecture, I suppose, but also they’re pretty cheap [laughs] relatively speaking. There’s a lot value from using old ways of doing things. It just so happened, when I look back on it of course, we didn’t know this at the time, but when I look back at it I realise now that we were coming in at the end of a sort of an era, in the sense that the building industry was still attuned to building the way we wanted to build.

It would soon change, we did not know that, we did not realise that bricks would change, that timber would become unavailable, quality timbers would become unavailable, that good carpenters would cease to exist. We didn’t realise it was the end, it was like the end of a craft movement. We were using this craft movement, and we wanted to use it in a way which expressed the craft in the building, therefore we wanted,
you know, if you had a support for a ceiling, for a roof or something, we
wanted that support to be visible, so we wanted to see the beams and the
trusses and the purlins and the rafters, and all the bits that held the roof
up. We wanted that to be part of the architecture instead of burying it up
there and putting a ceiling underneath it, so you had a flat space.

I think we pretty well abandoned the idea of a flat roof. I can’t
remember ever doing a flat roof. Well, that’s not quite true, there were a
few flat roofs. Sometimes a plan could only be roofed with a flat roof,
but we liked roof texture, and I think this relates to both of us through
our feelings of Europe. European towns, you know, you look down and
an Italian or a Greek or a Spanish village and town, and you see the tiles
on the roofs, and you get this wonderful sense of play in the roof scape.
And we sort of thought that the roof was symbolically important, the
idea of shelter up there, you should be able to see your roof, you’ve got
to enjoy it, and we both enjoyed I think playing with roof shapes. So
that became a kind of a determinant, and often we started our buildings
almost by thinking of the roof itself, and then sort of planning down
from it and how it all worked. We both had these similarities.

OH: Now Bob, I have to say, came with a much stronger sense of detail than
I had at the time, and he taught me a lot about detailing and how to put
buildings together in a way which articulated various pieces within the
building, so you could see each independently of another, and he had a
very good eye for the precise proportions for detail. If I can say anything
about my work I think it was a bit freer than his, so I think I helped him
free up a lot. He helped me tighten at the other end in the detail sense, so
I think we were a good combination in that sense.

NP: So we worked happily together, we were very sympathetic in our views
about architecture, and as for the work itself Bob had a client by the
name Zsolt, who is another story and I think we won’t go into it too far
here, but he was a very good client was Zsolt, and he’d met Bob
incidentally while Bob was working at McConnell. I think Bob was
working for McConnell, and this guy comes in the office, he’s got a
little problem with his laundry or something like that, the plumbing is
not working properly, and McConnell says, I can’t fix this, it’s too small
for our office. Dickson, you take it home and deal with him directly.
[laughs] Something like that.

Anyhow, he formed a friendship with Zsolt, and then Zsolt had built up
an empire in the trucking industry and was moving into the restaurant
business and gave the firm a lot of work, but at the beginning the job we
had was Zsolt’s house. I had nothing very much, so we had very little to
start with, it was just really [laughs] hope for the best. In fact, before I
left Jack Cheesman told me I was making a huge mistake that I’d come
to regret, and other people told us we were doomed to failure. People in
my office told me we were just doomed, we were both too alike, too quiet, too serious. Neither of us were salesmen, neither of us liked socialising out there. So anyhow, it was all very unpromising [laughs] you might say at this stage. We were happy enough and we got a few little jobs, and we kept going for a while.

So it was by sitting there and talking about architecture, discussing materials and discussing theories, and discussing our own experiences, and discussing each other’s work, we just slowly built up this style of architecture that we could use. We would have rejected the idea of style, because one of the ideas about Modernism is rejection of style, and this of course explicitly is a rejection of the styles of the past, the Renaissance and Gothicism and all those styles. But I have to look back at it and say that we actually had a style, because a style somehow emerges no matter how you try and avoid it, simply by doing the things time and time again, rather in a repeated way. As time went by, the small buildings became bigger buildings, but we kept the same vernacular going.

**OH:** Newell, how common was it in the late-1950s to set up small partnerships like yours with Dickson?

**NP:** I don’t think it was uncommon. I’m sure they were cropping up all over the place. It was a relatively easy time to start a practice because of this one reason, if you wanted to build a house, and there were a lot of people wanting to build houses in those days, if you wanted a house you couldn’t get the money, you couldn’t borrow money to buy an old one. I think I’m right here, this might need checking.

As I recall it you could only borrow money from banks, like the Commonwealth Bank, and the Savings Bank [Savings Bank of South Australia] and so on, if you wanted to purchase land and buy a new house, put a new house on it. This was to encourage the building industry and it made it very difficult for people to sell old houses, and it also held the price of old houses down.

A lot of people were building houses, you know, young professionals and people like that who might nowadays buy an inner-city suburban house and simply renovate it, and I suppose renovations worked for architects too, but the new houses were more interesting. The land, the land was readily available, fairly close to the city, you know, you could still get vacant blocks at Brighton, Belair, and up in the Waterfall Gully area, and places like that. So there was that sort of work around. It wasn’t a bad time to take a punt.

**OH:** How important was the location of an architectural office?
NP: Pretty important, I think, to be close to the centre of the city. Some architects remained in Central City offices, in offices like, you know in King William Street. Woods, Bagot, Laybourne-Smith & Irwin were certainly there. Others though, small offices, many offices were moving out from the city for the usual parking reasons. There were no restrictions in those days, fortunately for us at the time, but sadly perhaps for the long-term view of it. There were no restrictions, you could go and set up an office wherever you liked. Cheesman Doley set up in Hutt Street; Bob and I set up in North Adelaide; John Chappel’s office was actually next door, so he had also set up in North Adelaide, MacKinnon Parade. That wasn’t the same thing, he knocked down an old cottage, or did he? No, I think he might have built it up. He knocked the top off and added another storey to it, we just adapted the one we had. We used to watch John’s clients come in from our front window. They always seemed to arrive in Mercedes Benz’s and ours came in Volkswagens [laughs].

OH: How did you attract your clients, like you said that Bob had one to begin with?

NP: Well I got one I think that had been passed on from Keith Neighbour, who passed me on from Lawson Cheesman and Doley, one of my early clients. I don’t know, we just sort of learnt. We didn’t go out and look for them, but every now and then someone would pop up [laughs]. It was word of mouth I suppose. We didn’t have that much work you know, there were only two of us, two of us and a part-time secretary, and I don’t think in our early years we even had any draughtsmen. We just did all the work ourselves. I had a few clients, a few houses came my way, people I might have gone to school with, people I might have gone to university with. I’m not too sure, actually, they just arrived.

OH: And you made a living?

NP: We made a living, yes. It was a very basic living, we didn’t make much money, but we made a living, and that went pretty well until 1960. There was a recession, a recession that was brought about by a credit squeeze, and it just so happened that was a time when I decided to go to Greece. I don’t know when you want to get on to that aspect of the story, but I can go back and talk more about Dickson and Platten if you like. Do you want some examples [laughs]?

OH: Would you like to give some examples?

NP: Well I think it’s a bit hard just to talk about examples. Architecture is such a visual thing, but basically we did a lot of private houses.

OH: Right!
We exploited the same techniques I’ve been talking about.

I think it’s a great time to talk about going to Greece.

What happened was, I suppose there’s a few strands to this particular story. I got interested in planning through a client called Albert Simpson. It’s strange how I forget names, you must pardon me. Albert was a Director of the National Fitness Council.

Certainly! We’re pausing while Newell looks at his memoirs here.

[Recorder is turned off and then back on]

We’re resuming the interview and Newell is going to talk about a client.

A client, a client by the name of Albert Simpson. I met Albert Simpson in 1954, soon after I returned from my travels in Europe. He was the Director of the National Fitness Council, an ex-school master, a lovely gentle man, and he gave me ... first of all he invited me to join the National Fitness Council’s Recreation Areas Committee. This had been set up in response to Albert’s concern about the management of recreation areas, and in particular his concern that the state was not adding, or the city was not adding, recreation areas to its new developments. There was no planning control that regulated the amount of recreation space, a new subdivision, a new suburb indeed should have. You can just spread houses across the land, and so be it. This was a particular concern to Albert.

But as a client, he asked me to help him rebuild a National Fitness Council Recreation Centre up in Mylor. There were a number of buildings there, dormitories for people who would come and stay there, and toilet blocks, places for recreation, a gymnasium, and things like that, and he asked me to start a program of rebuilding these – this would have been back in the early-50s⁴ – and we did, one building after another, and this work flowed on for at least 10, a dozen years or so. So that was one strand of my relationship with Albert, which certainly started in the 1950s, late-1950s.

But another was that, as a member of the Recreation Areas Committee, I became involved, or interested, in the supply of land and in subdivisions, and he got me interested in, I mean he encouraged me perhaps I should say, to write my first letter to the Editor, and it was questioning the ability of the town planner to do anything about providing recreation areas in the new subdivisions, and of course he couldn’t. This was a matter of questions for the Attorney General, which

⁴ Newell corrected this date, and identified it as the late 1950s
Albert actually put to me and then I put my own words, and put in the letter [laughs]. Of course, I didn’t get any response, but there I was, suddenly my words were in the newspaper. I thought, This is rather fun.

So Albert has got me interested in Town Planning issues from the political end if you like, but I was also interested in Town Planning issues from the social, aesthetic environmental end. Now it just happened that my father, we’ve been talking off record about my father, but he had a very strong feeling for the land. He was a very good keen gardener, and he sort of treasured earth, you know, he thought earth was extremely valuable stuff, and I can remember once when I was very young, he picked up some earth and showed me how moist and friable it was, and he said, This has been here for tens of thousands of years. It’s all leaf rotting and falling, and worm tumbling through it. That’s what that is, he said, it’s all that time that’s made this stuff. And not all earth is good. It just so happens that settlements like Adelaide established themselves on the best earth that’s around, and then proceeded to build all over it. And this was happening particularly in the 1960s because the place had been expanding very rapidly.

Hitherto before the War, you could trace up the Torrens and find market gardens. From the whole length of the Torrens, from the sandhills to the foothills, there was a stream of market gardens going up and down, with beautiful fertile soil built up over centuries and centuries and centuries, and here we were building on it. The same thing over the vineyards, over the orchards, over the extremities in Adelaide, good fertile soil. A good fertile space which was already built up and covered with bloody little houses and streets and stuff. This just worried me, I just said, We shouldn’t be doing this, this is just wrong that we’re using all this productive land, and covering it up, and losing it forever.

Then I found myself ... a house we were building for a client out at Athelstone, Tea Tree Gully Council anyhow, and it was a long trip up the North East Road, and the end of this trip to come to the site of the house I would actually go out into rural land. The house was on a piece of vacant land in a sea of vacant land. It was old farmland and there were paddocks stretching around, and the only thing that gave you a sense of being connected to the city were the stobie poles which marched up the road. I would take this trip out there looking at the stobie poles going on [laughs], thinking, Oh my God, this is all going to go one day. And I just thought, This is dreadful. It was happening all over Adelaide. I found it a very depressing experience, I just thought it was just the wrong way to go about things.

At about the same time, I read an article that was published in the British Institute of Architects magazine. I was a member of the Institute and I still get their magazine. A guy called Constantin Doxiadis had
been awarded the gold medal, and on receiving the gold medal he had addressed the institute, and he talked about his planning organisation. Now there was this guy in Greece and he was planning stuff in Africa and Iraq, and in Pakistan, and all over the world, and there were illustrations of his work. He sounded so passionate and strong about cities. He talked about cities in a way I’d never heard anyone talk about cities before, about how they could be grown, how they could be controlled, how people could use cities and manage cities, to suit both, man, and you know, the new life that we’re making with machines and things like that; the importance of keeping man at the centre of your thinking, this sort of stuff. Inspiring stuff, you know.

As I said earlier, this coincided with the time when we were having this rather bleak economic period in Adelaide for an architect. I think my workload had been reduced to a carport at the time, so those sorts of things combined. I was not enjoying my work very much because I didn’t have very much to do that interested me, and there was my depression looking at all the expanse of Adelaide, and there was this guy in Greece talking about cities in a way which I thought was very stimulating, exciting, and I said to Margaret one day, I’d love to go and work with a guy like that for a while [laughs]. So I wrote him a letter, I wrote a letter to the office.

Oh yes, I should add here, I should add before I go that far, I read that they were very happy to employ English-speaking workmen, workers, in the office, because most of their documentation was for countries which were previously part of the British Empire, but had recently achieved independence, namely Pakistan, Ghana, Africa, and other places like that, so all the documentation was in English, and imperial measurements. So this was fine, you know, I just read this and I thought, Okay, I could work here. So I just wrote and said, What do you reckon? [laughs] Can you give me a job? [laughs]. Here I am. And I got back a letter saying, Yes, and thank you for so and so. And they offered me two alternatives. One was to go and study there. Doxiadis had established something called the School of Ekistics, where you studied Ekistics, and then they outlined their fees for this course, which were horrendous, and I said, There’s no way I’m going to try and do that.

But they offered an alternative which was what they called an internship, which was in fact you worked for a very modest wage, just enough to survive on, and you did a bit of study, you know, you attended some lectures at the School of Ekistics, and they offered me one for a year, so I wrote back and said, Thank you, and I went.

It was fortunate, the other thing that worked for us at the time, I had two children who were too young to go to school, so school wasn’t a
problem. People thought they were also too young to go travelling but, you know, we thought we'd try it [laughs], and Bob was happy enough because I don't think I was adding much load to his, and it would probably help him a bit to keep going with just one person extracting money from the firm. So I took a year’s leave of absence and off we went, took a slow boat to Greece, and arrived in October, late October, in the year of 1961, and I worked in Greece from 1961 to 1963, [it was] early 1963, when I came back. Sixteen months I worked there.

OH: So your first year extended?

NP: I had my first year extended, I had to get a monthly extension after that.

OH: And what was that experience like of working there?

NP: Very, very, very mixed, but rather wonderful. First of all it was a wonderful time to be in Greece, and travelling with kids turned out to be an enormous advantage because the Greeks love kids, and they open doors, and that was just terrific. I love Greece, I just love Greece. Greece was a wonderful place to be at the time. The tourists had not yet invaded Greece, this is before jet planes and jumbos. This was the time when travellers came to Greece for the month of August, mainly from Germany and France, then went away again, and Greece was just Greece for 11 months of the year. We loved the living.

Now the work was another matter, and I probably won’t go into too much detail here because it’s covered really extensively in my own memoirs. But it was both stimulating and depressing, because what I found of course was I was going into a big organisation with a strong hierarchical form, and the pinnacle of the hierarchy was Doxiadis himself, but the further you went down the hierarchy, sort of the dimmer things became. It’s like a lot of organisations I think, the closer you get to it [laughs] the deeper the shadows sort of thing, and the people who worked under Doxiadis were, I think, first of all very protective of their own positions, because it was probably a pretty good position to get if you were an architect or a planner in Greece at the time. And secondly they weren’t always of a very high quality, and I wasn’t used to being subordinate to people I didn’t respect [laughs] very much. So I found that very difficult, and the work was frankly very tedious and very mundane.

But on the other hand, Doxiadis himself was an inspirational character. He had a wonderful way of communicating and the lectures he gave were just stunning in many ways, and all sorts of other stunning lecturers, people, came – Siegfried Gideon came and talked to us – and I also enjoyed the company of fellows. It was like a little United Nations. We had people from India, we had people from Nigeria, we had people
from Scotland, Norway, Canada, America. They’d all been attracted to Doxiadis for one reason or another. Well, the same reason that I went, of course. They’d all been inspired by his feeling for cities, and the ability to communicate that cities could be great, wonderful, stimulating places still, not the way they seemed to be heading right through the Western world. So it was good, and the life was interesting and fascinating in many ways.

My wife loved Greece and the kids were happy there, and it was just a wonderful time. We got to see temples with no one else in them, and all that sort of thing you couldn’t do now. There were two sides to it; it was a very, very mixed thing. I was very happy to get back to Australia, I have to say, at the end of it, but I feel now that life would have been different if I hadn’t gone. I’m not quite sure what it would have been, but I’m sure it would have been more constrained I think. Going to Greece at that time opened up my eyes to so many other aspects of life, and also cities.

Talking of cities, of course, we mentioned my feeling for density. I think the feeling for density has existed from earlier experiences. I’ve lived in London and I’ve travelled in Europe back in the 1950s, and in Greece we lived in a flat. It wasn’t a very comfortable flat. It was beautifully located on a small road very close to the office building at the foot of a hill called Lycabettus, very close to the city. We could actually walk to the Parthenon, the Acropolis, and other parts of the city from where we were, but we lived in a flat, three, four-storey flats, a very small flat, but we liked the freedom the flat bestowed upon us, and we could see how people could live in flats and enjoy life like that.

Our flat less than others which had very large balconies. I noticed how important the balcony was in Mediterranean flat dwellings. You’ll find the same think in Italy, I’m sure, but in Greece the balconies would always be half the size of the living room, even bigger than that. That’s a fairly large one by Australian standards, and it made me aware very much that the quality of flat life depends very much on the ability to get onto some large balcony, particularly in climates which are Mediterranean. It probably wouldn’t apply in Scandinavian countries as much as that. That’s something I just think we do very badly.

Anyhow I got the feeling … I just loved being in places where life was frittered all the time, where you could walk out of your dwelling and walk to your office, buy stuff in the store below you in the same building. And where life sort of penetrated in so many aspects of life in the precinct, instead of having to move by car to go from your shop to
your house, to your library, to your place where you buy a newspaper, and so on and so on.

OH: And a contrast to the way that people were living in Adelaide at the time?

NP: Absolutely, absolutely, and of course the other contrasts I loved about European older towns and the cities, is the absence of the grid. I must say that the bit of Athens we were living in did have a grid, but the wonderful thing about this grid was, it was stupid [laughs]. You talk about corrupting the grid, this grid corrupted itself [laughs]. The planner had put a grid down this little section of Athens, I’m not quite sure when it happened but somewhere back in the past, and they’d headed it towards the Lycabettus Hill, and of course that’s a pretty steep hill. So finally the grid sort of got defeated by its own intentions to cross the hill – I think it appears on the other side again – but just where we were it had sort of given up and became a flight of steps, and then it gave up entirely because it became even too steep for steps, and the whole thing disappeared.

No, the absence of the grid, the sense of, I don’t know, how shall I put this? The sense of there was always something unknown around the corner, a sense of the fact that you cannot anticipate with certainty what’s going to happen if you move from one end of your street to another end of it. Well it’s a notion of surprise and so on I suppose that you always don’t get in life in a city. I digress, where were we?

OH: Well, we’re coming to the end of your time in Athens, and I was going to ask you about returning to Adelaide, and how you were able to integrate what you had learned while you were an intern with Doxiadis.

NP: Oh well, nothing really, not then, not ever probably, nothing in a practical sense. The projects I worked on with Doxiadis were huge scale. I mean, I worked on the Islamabad City, the plan for Islamabad when I first went there. It was the new capital city for Pakistan. I worked on that vast, vast major city. Then for projects in Ghana, which were highly improbable and equally grandiose in scale.

That was one of the problems I had working with Doxiadis. I was working on a place, the city called Tema, in Ghana, which was an extension of Accra, or a sort of a city close to Accra. One of Doxiadis’s principles, if I can just revert, was separation of scales. That is that vehicle scale of wide spaces, fast speeds, should be separated from the human scale, that is you, me, walking, and this was achieved usually by vertical separation, so you’d design cities where the cars moved and trucks moved on one level, and pedestrians would move on another level above all this.
Now we were working on schemes for Ghana which were inconceivable in a Western developed country like ours in terms of cost. I could never see how poor countries could afford all this stuff, and the truth is they couldn’t, so the schemes never went ahead, but that gave me a very strong feeling that I was a student again and I was just doing stuff, you know [laughs], because I’d been set a problem of no real worth in the world. So I got no practical experience there that I could use when I came back to Adelaide. But a lot of his principles, nevertheless, sort of hung around in my mind, and I certainly retained my interest in planning. In fact, if anything, it strengthened it to the point, almost to the point, I would say, where half the time I didn’t know really what I wanted to do in life, whether I wanted to go on being an architect, or I wanted to be a planner. And I felt from that point on tugged in two directions.

Planning is tempting and terrific in many ways because it gives you these ideas to sort of make big decisions and make things better over big areas, but it’s also terribly boring because nothing is going to happen for 20 years and it might very well change. [laughs] And I could actually at least have the immediacy of working on something that’s got a fair chance of going ahead while you’re still alive, but the two things need to be combined, but I also discovered that my ideas of planning were very different to the planners’ idea of the planning.

I once told Doug Speechley … he was the Assistant Town Planner for Adelaide [City Council], or Deputy Town Planner – I’m not quite sure what his term was – but he worked as an associate of Stuart Hart in the Town Planning Office, that I thought planning was really architecture writ large, and he thought that was a very crazy idea, because I think the planners tend to see planning as a regulatory system. And I think we architects – and I wouldn’t be alone here, I’m sure people like Brian Claridge and Bob [Dickson] also thought the same – saw it as a productive system that you could actually create the future, not just let it happen and then control it. You could create it out of your imagination – that’s a different process entirely.

That’s what Doxiadis was doing, I suppose that’s one of the reasons I was very excited by it. He was actually using his imagination to build new cities, rather than just saying, Oh no, we’ll set up a whole lot of regulations and we’ll just see what happens. He was giving form to his ideas, not trying to control them by rules and numbers and letters.

But anyhow, so the planning regime in Australia when I came back, and we got back in 1964 ... Where were we? We still had, 1963, we still had the Playford Government, did we not? I’ve got to remember all the times here. The Playford Government in 1963?
But planning was becoming a major issue. Other people than Albert Simpson were getting involved. While I was away a little group of architects had decided – this must have been during the Depression – had decided they would reorganise Stepney. Bob Dickson was one of those who took the suburb of Stepney, because it was a funny little shape, all these triangles, and they just knocked everything down [laughs], nothing symmetrical of course, knocked everything down and put flats and things, and a row of houses there instead, very Modernist sort of idea that you can actually go and sweep people away and put a little bit of Utopia back, but that kept them engaged. And it was sort of part and parcel of that whole kind of feeling that was general through your profession, that something was amiss and something had to be done.

The Department of Adult Education was running seminars about the future of the city and the future of planning. People began to see that something needed to be done. It just got further than architects then because people could look to the hills and they could see houses covering the hills, and quarrying destroying where the houses weren’t. How long you wondered would they be there? If they were would they be covered by houses? On the corners old shops were being knocked down and replaced with service stations, and roads were being widened, and the trees were being cut down. There was this general sense of the place was going to wrack and ruin and nobody was doing anything about it. Probably a lot of people didn’t care of course, but there was an emerging degree of unrest, and it was in this scene that a lot of us began to take interest in planning, and we began to get more encouraged. The Advertiser, to its credit, at the time, was very supportive of planning issues. And I’ve covered them somewhat in my own memoirs, but it published articles I wrote myself about the nature of planning. It published an article about Doxiadis.

It published another article I wrote about Victoria Square. It was at this time that Victoria Square was being examined. Victoria Square was originally, in my youth, divided into four quarters of the major roads by Wakefield, Grote, King William, and there was a feeling growing that it should be redesigned. And I got into the act and had my students design a Square with all traffic around the edge, and put little things in to make it amusing for people to go there, and The Advertiser actually published this plan, and then I wrote an article about squares in Italy I’d seen, and places like that, and how they could really function.

Then the Council of course deliberated this, and then they came up with a Diamond plan which nobody likes anymore. So we had the support from The Advertiser, and there was a general pressure and a general
movement, a general up and thrust, that would result in action, did result
in action, when finally the Dunstan Government, the Labor Government
overthrew the Playford Government.

OH: Would you like to have a rest? We’ll just pause.

[Recorder is turned off and then back on]

OH: We’re resuming the interview. And Newell, you were talking about the
parallel nature of the movement about design and planning in Adelaide
at the same time that you’d come back, and you resumed your role at
Dickson and Platten.

NP: Perhaps we should just keep these two parallel movements separate, that
might be easier from an organisational point of view. When I came back
and joined Bob [Dickson] it was early in 1963, and of course I had
nothing to do, I’d lost whatever, I had no contact with a client base at
that time, but Bob had been – I mentioned Zsolt before – Bob had been
working with Zsolt on several projects, and when I came back Zsolt was
expanding his empire into flats and restaurants, and it just happened that
Bob was working pretty hard on these, and I fitted in most of the time
when I came back, helping him on various odd projects. As time went
on my clients began to come to me individually and I began to pick up
houses and things like that. But one of the early projects that came our
way was the Arkaba Project.

Now this became a significant project for us, and a sort of mad one.
Zsolt’s empire at this stage had been extended to include flats on Glen
Osmond Road, a restaurant on Glen Osmond Road, a restaurant in the
City called ‘The Red Wine Grill’, and of course his original trucking
empire, so it was a pretty big network already.

One day Bob came to the office and he said, Oh, there’s a bit of land on
the corner of Fullarton Road and Glen Osmond Road, and it’s
available, and Zsolt wants to do something. He thinks he wants a
restaurant there and perhaps a motel, perhaps some shops, and he said,
Can you do a quick sketch rendering getting the [details]. So the bit of
land was this triangular bit of land, and I did a quick sketch with a
circular restaurant there and stuff around there is the way I remember it,
very rough, very rough freehand, probably using a texta pencil or
something. Bob took that off to show it to Zsolt. We put it into sort of a
nice document and gave it a nice look, made a presentation out of this
drawing, and Zsolt liked it. He thought he’d liked the circular restaurant,
and he wanted one. So that was the genesis of the Arkaba.

When it became a project, Zsolt was intemperate in the way that he
wanted his architects to drop everything else and work for him full-time.
He didn’t like wasting time on tendering, the usual process where you do your documents and you call tenders, that took a long time, and I think he didn’t like borrowing money and then having to sit tight while nothing was happening. He liked a ‘cost plus’ contract for that where you just got some people in and you started building, and away you went. This had probably worked successfully on some small jobs, but here we are, this is a major undertaking.

Anyhow, that was his decision so away we went, and we developed the sketch plan further, we developed the sketch plan for pretty much what you see now, or what you don’t see now, what you might have seen in 1965, which was a dodecahedron, a 12-sided figure, for a restaurant, two storeys with wings around it, but this had to proceed very quickly, so we did the sketch plans and then got builders called Wilkins and Burnside in to start building, and it was just a mad helter-skelter of just trying to get your documents done before the builders wanted to start building stuff. It was very, very difficult, it was very demanding, it was actually unnerving too because you had to just keep ahead of everything, and hoping that when you wanted to put the bricks up the foundations were in the right place for them [laughs], all that sort of thing. But we struggled through it. Halfway through he wanted to make it bigger, so we originally just this central shape and then Bob added these little pods around the outside, very, very elegantly, they actually made the building graceful that it perhaps wasn’t before, so it got built.

And this exploited – now this is the important thing about the building I suppose – it exploited the red brick and the timber, and the straw vernacular feeling, if you like, that we’d been using in our small houses, but this was the first time we’d applied it to something as substantial as that, you know, this was a major project and there it was all up there. So that was pretty nice, and it was a pretty nicely finished building. And Bob’s detailing was excellent as it always was, but not cheap, I wouldn’t say it was cheap. But it was very, very good.

Well so far so good, and this thing goes off and we get an award for it, 1964 I think it was, or 1965.

OH: With the Royal Australian Institute of Architects, 1965?

NP: Yeah, mm, and the interesting thing about it was, from our point of view, was that it brought to public attention the kind of vocabulary we’d been using privately. In a way, it sort of put the firm on the map a little bit.

Then Zsolt wanted a hotel licence, which meant he had to build bedrooms, accommodation. He embarked on a high rise, six to eight storeys, I forget, accommodation block that we put on the edge of the
building, and a drive-in wine place – drive-in bottle shop, that’s the phrase – and again the big building, the big building went up with this load-bearing brick all the way, and we did our best to design it as nicely as we could. But I think again it was a pretty expensive building. He did this again on a ‘cost plus’ contract, and when the thing was finished he didn’t have any money to pay for it. Some financial arrangement he had made wasn’t going to come. The builders went bankrupt, he went bankrupt, and that was the last we saw of him, we never saw him again. He went to Sydney, I believe.

**OH:** And did you get paid?

**NP:** All but at the very end, because we got paid progressively, but we didn’t get our final payment, but it wasn’t a bad price to pay because it just gave the firm publicity, I know now, I can see that. It brought us to public attention, and that was no bad thing.

**OH:** And just to finish off this interview, another form of attention that you attracted in 1965 was *The News* House of the Year competition. Could you just really briefly talk about that?

**NP:** *The News* ran this competition, and the information was that Robin Boyd would be the assessor. I won’t discuss Robin Boyd, he should be well known. I had just recently read an article about Robin Boyd, by Robin Boyd, in which he talked about flies, and he wondered what’d happened to the old flyscreen porch in Australia. Flies are not so bad now but they were part of life [laughs], and I thought, *That’s interesting.* Then they announced this competition and Robin Boyd was the assessor and I thought, *Oh, Robin Boyd, eh, flies eh. He’s going to give an award to a house that’s got a central flyscreen courtyard.* So I said, *Well that’s it, I know what to do. I’ll design a central flyscreen courtyard with a house around the edge.*

Also, I knew he liked geometric forms. His partner, Roy Grant, lived in a square house with a circular courtyard, and he built round houses and things like that. I knew that geometry, this pure geometry was also interesting and so I thought, *I’ll make it a square, it’s got to be a square, and the courtyard in the middle has got to be a square.* So I put these rooms around the edge. I figured that out after a little while and drew it up, and entered it, and we won first prize, and that taught me, that taught me something. It taught me how important it is to know the mind of your assessor when you’re entering a competition, because had it been Harry Seidler judging it, we wouldn’t have got anywhere with it. It would have been a very different solution. So it was sort of [laughs] cynical in a way because I don’t think it was a terribly practical house, but I was earnest about it. I’m not pretending I was cynical, it was a house I thought I’d like to live in.
OH: And it achieved a purpose.

NP: Well, it won the award, yes, and it was quite a heavy prize. It was £750, that was a lot of money in those days, and they built it, they built it, erected it at the [Royal] Adelaide Show. When was it? I forget what time of the year it was, anyhow in the next Adelaide Show, perhaps the same year, it was erected inside one of the big pavilions. Then it was re-erected out at Clovercrest. I think it was hard to sell [laughs].

OH: That’s really interesting, and a great place to complete this interview, so thank you very much, Newell.
Oral Historian (OH): Thanks, Newell, for agreeing to a fourth interview.

Newell Platten (NP): My pleasure.

OH: We’re going to focus today on the ’60s and maybe the early-’70s, and I’m just going back to one thing that we talked about in the last interview, and that was the story of the Arkaba Hotel, and I just wanted to ask you what happened when you won the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (RAIA) Award of Merit for the design? That was in 1965.

NP: If you’re asking me about the presentation itself, I can’t say I recall that specifically, but I do recall the general nature of the presentations because we were discussing the short time I think, my role as a member of the, the Chair actually, of the Public Relations Committee, and just to contrast the day’s presentations of the awards, not only the presentations but a number of awards. The architectural awards are held every year now, and they range across a broad spectrum of categories, everything from small additions to sustainable development and public works, and so on and so on.

There’s certainly more than a dozen award presentations now, but in those days there was – and they have presentation ceremonies in some grand venue like the Wine Centre, or previously at sometimes at the, what do you call it, the Convention Centre, and [laughs] they’re grand affairs with speakers and wine, lavish dinners, and ballroom dancing subsequently, and so on – but back in the days of Arkaba and the ’60s generally, the awards were, I think when Arkaba was presented, alternately one year for a commercial building and the next year for a domestic building. So there was one award each year for a building of one category, alternating between different categories over the two years. Arkaba was nominated and was successful this particular year, ’64 was it?

OH: ’65?
NP: ‘65, ‘65, I think we built it in ‘64, something like that. Well, all that would have happened would have been that the President of the Institute would have appeared at Arkaba. There would have been a little ceremony of some, a place arranged. A few people would have been gathered, the builder would have been there, the owners would certainly have been there, the architects would have been, the President of the Institute would have been there, and he would have handed over a document to the owner – they copy that document to the builder and another copy of that document to the architects – and there would have been a cup of tea [laughs], and we would all have gone home. This would have occurred sometime in the morning, probably, or perhaps the afternoon depending on the circumstances. That was what it would have been.

Then there would have been… hopefully, if the Public Relations Committee was doing its job, there would have been an article in The Advertiser noting the event, and I think that did occur. Well I don’t know whether that occurred or not, but I think John Chappel, I’ve got a copy, got a clipping of an article he wrote about it, so there was just some little publicity. That’s all I can say about that, if that’s what you’re after [laughs].

OH: That was the first major award that Dickson and Platten had won?

NP: I think it was very well the first award at all. I don’t think there was anything earlier. It was very lucky for us in way, I mean it was an extraordinary project. Did I talk about this last time?

OH: Yes.

NP: I mean, it was a mad project as I mentioned before, and had it not been mad we would not have produced a building which was so [laughs] interesting, and we would not have received an award for it. So its madness in a way paid off for us, but it did, I think, I mean I don’t suppose I was terribly aware at this time, we were just working away. But I think it must have brought our firm to a bit of public notice which hitherto we had not had, so it was good for us, yes, indeed, mm.

OH: The next major public project that you were involved with, I understand, was the Kathleen Lumley College, which was in 1966. And I’m wondering if you could talk about that process.

NP: Yes. The Kathleen Lumley College has been a unique experience in my life for a whole lot of ways, and we might get on to some of those ways later on. But fundamentally it started, I think it was in October, October ’66. A certain Professor Nicholas called our office and asked if we were interested in designing a residential student college, student residential
college. Yes, we said, and had a little chat, and told him what we did and what we thought, and we went away and a little later we heard we got the job. That was very nice.

In those days I think we’d sort of apportion jobs in our office to one or other of the partners, depending on who was the most busy at the time. Anyhow, for some reason or other it came my way, so we worked with the College Council, who were organising the project, and the brief. Now the brief had been prepared, prepared by the university architect I think, and the brief was a standard sort of thing architects mostly get. It was, set out all the rooms in the college site, blah, blah, blah, budgets, needs, blah, blah, very straightforward sort of practical, practical needs for the college.

**OH:** And Newell, the purpose of the college?

**NP:** Was to house postgraduate residential students, yes. It was the first postgraduate residential building in Adelaide, and there were some other graduate, undergraduate buildings, so this was the first one, and probably one of the first in Australia. I’m not quite sure how many there were in other places.

But then, then accompanying the brief, this was important to me, I think important to the understanding of the College in its present state, was a little statement made by Bob Lewis. Bob Lewis was the Head, I think, is the phrase, of St Mark’s College at the time. *Master* of St Mark’s College, that’s the phrase. He had written a small account of colleges and how they should be run, and it included a little sort of couple of paragraphs on the idea of size. He stressed the need for the College to be a certain size so there’d be enough people to provide a diversity of interests, and not so many that you wouldn’t get to know everybody if you were part of the college. He determined that that number was 120 people, and he used historical references like the size of a Roman, the Centurion, the Roman, what was it, Roman forces. And he said, *Roman times it was the same, and certain organisations and troops always have this number of 120. That’s the manageable size for a small group of people. It means that the Head can know everybody in his team, and they can all know each other. At the same time there’ll be a diversity of skills in some places, or interests in the college, a diversity of disciplines and things like that.*

When I read this, it just, it just struck me somehow, and I saw the College not so much as a statement of people being, the numbers are here and blah, blah, rooms and sizes, and facilities and so on, but I saw it more as a sort of a social organism. And I imagined all these people sort of coming together and meeting for a while and going away, and more people coming, communing for a while, then go away. So there
was a constant flow of people, and it seemed to me the whole college had to be organised in a way which that, those connections could be most easily made. That is, it was easily, most organic if you like, most fluid, arrangement of people coming, meeting, getting to know each other, moving on.

So it seemed to me that first of all, it had to be a place designed so that these things could happen, not only in the set places like the dining room and the living room, and the kitchens, but also in the organisational aspect of it, the way the buildings were connected, the way the buildings were handled. So I thought it’s got to be, people have got to meet spontaneously as they move around this place, not just the places they’re going to.

We had not very long previously, I had not very long previously been in Greece working with the planner, Doxiadis, I think we might have discussed that already, and whilst there with my family, I often visited a small monastery named Kaisariani. Kaisariani is a Byzantine Monastery, it’s on the outskirts of Athens. You catch a bus eerily destined for ‘Metamorphosis’, and you take the bus to [laughs] the terminus. You’d alight, you’d get off the bus, and you walk along some rural roads for a while and then you enter a little, copse of Cyprus trees on the winding road, you wind through this copse, and finally you come to the monastery, and you come to an outside wall. There’s a space with a well in it, then there’s this wall, there’s a doorway in the wall and you walk through, and you go through a passage between some rooms, and you come into a garden.

You’re in the garden of Kaisariani, it’s a beautiful place, and on the right as you look into this garden is the Monks’ cells. There’s a two-storey wing on slightly elevated ground, and you just walk through this ring where the refectory and the dining room and the kitchens are, and then there’s a ... The whole place is walled in, and in the middle of this space is a chapel, but the whole thing is a wonderful fusion of architecture and garden. It’s such a fusion you cannot really say whether it’s a garden or whether it’s architecture. They each support the other in a wonderful way, and in wonderful ways indeed. It struck me as a kind of … it was so beautiful you’ll have to go there.

I think I recalled it, I mean I don’t know whether I’m reinventing history, but I’m sure I would have recalled it, because I decided that I wanted to make a garden the centrepiece for the College. Because it occurred to me that this would be a place where people would go to, would walk through, would see into, all the time, and if people walked on balconies from one space to another around the garden, they’d be in constant connection with the garden. Just as the monks in Kaisariani would have been in constant connection with the garden, as they moved
from their cell to the refectory, to the chapel. The garden would have been a constant companion in their lives all the time, and I thought Kaisariani could do that. So instead of putting the building in the middle, we arranged it around the edge of the space, put a garden in the middle, and that became the model. So we allocated rooms and the places where they should be, sent it off to the Universities Commission to make their final judgements about that.

To make this work, of course, you had to have bathrooms, you had to have bathrooms to each bedroom, inside your bedroom, and you didn’t want people wandering around in their pjs or whatever [laughs] in the middle of the night trying to get to their bathrooms from their bedrooms. So we had to have private, private like little motel rooms, private suites in effect for the studies, and that’s what we planned. We could do this within the budget and get the number in.

**OH:** Just talking about the budget, Newell, there were some interesting financial arrangements for Kathleen Lumley College?

**NP:** There were. Mrs Kathleen Lumley had made a donation, I think from memory it was £60,000, $60,000. I’m sorry, I can’t remember all these figures, but then ... Look either, either then the university, the Universities Commission, the Federal Government, chipped in and doubled it, or a third party got in the act. Look, I’m sorry I just can’t remember these, these issues, but there’s certainly a combination of influences here, and I’ve got an idea there were three parties involved. Perhaps the university was involved, perhaps they put some into it and then the Universities Commission doubled up on that, but certainly it was an amalgam.

As far as we were concerned, the money was there. The only thing we had to do was to get our plans off to the Universities Commission for approval. So we sent the plans off and there was a snag there because they’d never approved before a residential college where the students had their own bathrooms and their own private bathrooms, and they thought they should have public bathrooms, which was the convention. Well this would have, this would have killed the scheme if we’d, we’d had to do that. Thankfully the University’s Committee, Kathleen Lumley College Council, supported the plan that we had and were prepared to argue the case for not, for not diminishing the bathrooms. I think, in the end we justified it by proving it was actually no more expensive, that we’d have to, we’d have to enclose all the corridors and things like that, but the cost of doing that would wipe out the cost of, well, the saving you might make from not having bathrooms because you have to provide bathrooms somewhere.

So we finally got the thing through. Had we not been successful in that,
the College would never have eventuated the way it did, and I don’t 
think it would be as workable today because a lot of those places which 
were built with now what would be regarded as sub-standard facilities, 
would just, just have to be remodelled.

OH: Newell, where was the site for Kathleen Lumley College?

NP: Oh, it’s in, it’s in North Adelaide, it’s facing the Park Lands. It’s in 
MacKinnon Parade, so it was a lovely site, it was a beautiful site. It was 
some old cottages were there previously, but I think the university 
already owned them and they were able to organise it, the college, to get 
this bit of land. Now it was very tight, and that was the other reason, of 
course, we had to keep it very dense, because it was actually quite a 
small site, so instead of spreading all round the place, we had to build up 
entirely, and the garden became quite, the garden is not very big and it’s 
pretty, it’s not bad, but it’s not big.

Have you seen it by the way, just digressing?

OH: Yes, I have.

NP: OK.

OH: Yeah.

NP: So it was built in several stages. It was opened officially in 1968 and the 
first students came in that year. Another wing was added in a couple of 
years time, and it still works. But I have a very happy association with 
the college because in, I forget what year it was, it was after I left the 
Housing Trust, I was invited to come back and help them refurbish some 
cottages they had recently acquired from the university, and the Master 
of the College at that time, David, … oh dear, my memory is failing me 
from time to time. Well I’ll come back to that in a minute, I’ll remember 
his name shortly, I know it quite … David Clements, he, he invited me to 
help, and I re-established association with the College, which has 
continued to this day. I’m delighted to tell you I’m a Life Member of the 
College, and I get invited to various little dinners every now and then, 
and I meet the students. It’s just a wonderful experience, and I’ve been 
able to see the garden mature. It’s now really quite a lovely space, I 
have to say, I was just there the other day, and it looks terrific. It’s 
wonderful to see that happen over the years. I’ve been very fortunate.

OH: Who was responsible for the garden?

NP: Well, it was a bit of a mixture. I designed the major part, which was the 
courtyard part, which was largely paved and planted with major trees, a 
couple of Plane trees. I designed that and the steps, and the levels, and 
all that sort of thing, but Ray Holliday came in and he helped with
finishing the garden. He did the soft planting and chose a lot of the trees around the edges, and things like that, mainly in Australian natives. So it was a combination between the two of us. But, but the people who criticised the College architecturally, saying it’s not really that much, it’s just a garden after all [laughs]. I get slightly cross about that.

OH: I can understand that. Newell, there were a couple of awards for the Kathleen Lumley College, weren’t there?

NP: It did get an architectural award.

OH: And also for the landscaping?

NP: That would have been a Civic Trust award I think at one stage for landscaping. It is actually on the, on the Provisional Heritage List now, the State Heritage List. It’s been on there for a couple of years I think, quite wide, it’s not on the final list yet but ...

OH: And what does it mean for a building like that to be on that list?

NP: Oh, a bit of satisfaction for the people connected with it, a lot of [laughs] irritation of people who own it [laughs].

OH: It’s interesting when you won the award, the Royal Australian Institute of Architects said that, *It was one of the best examples of the time, an architectural approach which adopts a domestic ethos into medium sized buildings.*

NP: Well that was, that was nice of them to say that. It was the way we did things. Bob and I … I don’t know if we’ve discussed this, but we departed from mainstream Modernism. I probably have discussed this previously – we went back to a system whereby we used rather traditional building methods, because we just liked that sort of work and we liked ... It sort of humanised what we were trying to do.

So domestic, yes, some of the buildings, some of the materials were domestic. We had some straw ceilings, timber ceilings, a lot of exposed timber and trusses, just ordinary old common bricks. I suppose they were domestic materials, but we used those same materials in seven or eight-storey buildings in those days, so it was just not so much that it was domestic, but it was just sort of traditional those building techniques I think.

OH: And following on from there you did a couple of designs for golf clubs?

NP: Yes, there was a couple of golf clubs. We built the Mt Lofty Golf Club, that was also in the late-60s, using the same materials. We used, we built that with basically clinker brick and straw ceilings and timber
beams. We liked to express the materials. We were very, this is in interiors which expressed the way a building was built, we did not like, did not like interiors which were interiorly decorated, if I can use the phrase. In other words the decoration we felt came from the architecture, and all that needed to happen after that was you’d throw some curtains in and some floor coverings, and some furniture, but as far as the walls themselves, we liked them as in built.

So all these buildings, Kathleen Lumley College, the golf club we’re talking about, another golf club at Blackwood (Blackwood Golf Club), employed a vocabulary of red brick or clinker brick in Mt Lofty, in the case of Mt Lofty, inside and outside, the same building material on both sides of the wall. Then timber for ceiling structures, then straw for the ceiling surface, and also for insulation, and then finally put tiled roofs on them, so yes, that vernacular is a domestic vernacular.

OH: Also at this time in the late-60s, I understand that you worked as a consultant with Hickinbotham Homes.

NP: Hickinbotham was an interesting developer in that he ran a, he was a building, house builder, and his bread and butter was conventional little houses that people would buy easily and not too much fuss on his part, you could build easily and obviously make some profit from them. Every now and then he, he aspired to greater things, and he showed desire to build something which was different and forward of the market. He was working with Philip Fargher.

Philip Fargher was an extremely interesting engineer who did a lot of work with us. He did the structural design for all our buildings at the time, for Arkaba, for, for the golf clubs I’ve just been talking about, for the college. He was an unusual engineer because he was first of all very skilled as an engineer, but secondly he had a very strong feeling for architectural form and architectural detail, and he was a very creative engineer to work with. Anyhow, he was working for Hickinbotham mainly designing footings for the, for the houses he built, but he encouraged Hickinbotham to talk to us or to me, and do some house designs for him.

We worked on two sections. We worked on, we worked mainly at a place called Foxfield, up around Athelstone in the foothills. I did some designs of split-level sites using the sort of vernacular that Bob and I had developed for all our private houses. Hickinbotham built a few of those, and then he also wished to build a medium density development at Foxfield. He had a lot of land lying alongside a creek, and he wanted to do some courtyard housing, or something like that, which would have small gardens in the European style. A lot of houses in Denmark would be like this, for example. You contented yourself with a small courtyard
garden, but then you would move on from the courtyard garden to this public space, which would be common to all properties, and we designed such a scheme for him. I’m never quite sure whether that one, I think that one got, first of all they had problems with Council because I think to do that he had to work with land areas for each individual unit, which were less than that allowed by the Council. He had to argue of course that the public land should be included as part of the private land. I don’t think they accepted that. It never got anywhere anyhow.

The Foxfield ones, I think the trouble was that in the general market, some of the stuff proved a little bit hard to sell, and he, he would tend to start with his rather grand ideas, but somehow or other they wouldn’t [laughs] They wouldn’t develop very far in the end. He did try, he did try, and it was worthy of him to do that.

OH: And an interesting direction, I guess, for you to take?

NP: Architects have always wanted to embrace the wider world, and there were a number of architects working with developers in those days. Two or three developers were building, what the hell did they call them? Architect-designed houses anyhow, standard plans designed by an architect. John Chappel worked with some builders and there was another, there were two or three I think. I think Snowden was one to do that. Anyhow, these people were building especially designed architect houses for, for mass production, for mass consumption. I think, I don’t know if it happens anymore, but it was done there for a while. I’m not being very specific about this because I can’t quite remember the name that they called them [laughs].

OH: That’s, that’s fine. Before we just leave the Dickson and Platten work, I understand that you were a little involved with the Adelaide University Union Complex?

NP: That followed Kathleen Lumley College, and it came to the office at the time, and I personally was very busy, and Bob was free to take the job on, so it went his way. I did a little work on it at the beginning, but it was a major operation, it was a very, it was the biggest job we ever had, and it kept Bob pretty busy for years. I must say he handled it very well. It was a very complex problem, he did a terrific job on it, and it’s been well-recognised.

OH: Yes, with awards and that kind of thing.

NP: With awards and things.

OH: When you were doing these large jobs, were you also continuing with the small housing work?
NP: We did, we did, we always did a little bit of housing. It dropped off a bit, we did no, no more than we could manage at the time, but we kept building houses. People would come to us, sometimes they seemed to be prepared to wait for a while, and we’d put them on a waiting list, usually commissions that somehow or other seemed worth taking, but not, not, not very many, no.

OH: I wanted to move, Newell, to a more public kind of discussion about citizen public action at this time that you were involved with. I understand that you were on the Royal Australian Institute of Architects Public Relations Committee, and you were indeed Chair for some time?

NP: Mm.

OH: While you were on that committee the ‘Outrage’ Symposium of 1967 was planned. Could you talk about that?

NP: I think it was 1966 I was appointed to the Public Relations. Sorry I was elected to Council, go back one step. This was at a time the Council incidentally had been a club for old men for the early part of my career.

OH: Is this the Council of the Royal Australian Institute …?

NP: It’s the South Australian Chapter of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects. At some stage it was the South Australian Institute of Architects, but it joined up the national body sometime during the early part of my career, I don’t remember that. By the time I got connected with it, it was part of the, part of the Australian Institute of Architects. Every state had its own Chapter, so it’s the Chapter I’m talking about. I’m not talking about the Council here, I’m talking about the South Australian Chapter of the Council. Previously in my early part of the career it had been old men running the place, but they’d slowly had their places taken by young Turks who were themselves now becoming the establishment [laughs] in the way of, way of things.

Then in 1966, I suppose I nominated and I got elected to the Council, and I became part of the establishment myself. I was a … Every, every Council member had to Chair a committee, a sub-committee, and I was given the Public Relations Committee. I was a bit aghast at this because I knew nothing about public relations [laughs]. In fact, I [had] to stay in public relations, I thought it was a lot of bullshitters, sort of [laughs], nonsense stuff. Anyhow, that was my job now so I had to do it.

Fortunately I had a very good, energetic team of young architects working on the Public Relations Committee, and our basic job was to try and spread the message of architects were very good people, could do terrific things, and everybody should use them. It was a promotional
activity of some sort. How to do this? Well, see that architects were properly represented in features about architectural works. There’s a tendency to put a picture in a bit of paper, which is actually a copy of the architect’s own drawing, and say, *An artist’s impression of a future building*, just to get a simple thing like that done so the architect’s name was featured instead of just the *artist’s impression*. That was one thing, so we kept on nagging the papers on this particular issue.

We gave talks, we gave talks, we organised talks here and there. We had a program of sending around display panels to schools. Somebody would go along with a display panel and take questions and things from students, to encourage the kids to become architects. We had to handle the awards, the little ceremonies I mentioned earlier, the presentation of the awards, the manufacture and so on, little jobs like that. Anyhow, we used to meet once a month and chat about these things, who was going to go and present the next school, school day, and so on and so on and so on.

One day somebody said, *You know that ‘Outrage’ Exhibition which has been showing in Sydney, we should bring it over here*. The idea caught on and we decided we should try and do that. Now the ‘Outrage’ Exhibition was a series of photographs of urban despoilation lopped trees, widened roads, service stations, terrible waiting seats for buses, hoardings, advertisements of one sort or another all over the place, the general sort of ugliness that was pervading the cities at that time as cars were beginning to mess up the old city structures. It had been organised in Sydney by an architect called Don Gazzard.

There had been a book published, and the book had been available for some time, but we decided that we would try and bring the ‘Outrage’ Exhibition to Adelaide, to try and interest the locals in improving the quality of the city. We knew if we put the exhibition on it wouldn’t be much chop if we just held an exhibition and that was that. So we decided that if we had an exhibition we should have a seminar to go with it, and the seminar should discuss the stuff which was in the exhibition, and so decide, *What are we going to do about this to come to some sort of conclusion?*

Jack McConnell was the President at the time. He was a personal friend of Bob Kidney. Bob Kidney, I hope I’ve got that name right, was the CEO of David Jones, and Jack prevailed upon Bob to assist us in providing (a) a space for the exhibition, if we brought it over, (b) space for the seminar if we had one, and Kidney agreed, so David Jones came to the party then. In those days they had a gallery on the top floor, sometimes they’d have shows there during festivals, so that space became available to us, and the exhibition was available from New South Wales where it had been exhibited, and Don Gazzard agreed to
come over and speak to a seminar.

With all that out of the way and dates fixed, we had to then promote the seminar. Now we knew that just deciding to have a seminar and then leaving it at that, nobody would come much. We, we thought we had to get all the Local Government people involved, people from the Opposition, people from the advertising industry, people who had to be persuaded that things can’t go on as they’re going on, and to do that we just had to lobby everybody. So my little committee, myself included, would turn up at Council meetings and we would speak to the Council, we would tell them that this meeting was on and they just had to come along to it.

**OH:** This is local Councils?

**NP:** Local Councils, yeah, sorry, metropolitan Councils. I think we went to pretty well every metropolitan Council, promoted the work. Usually these were evening visits we had to do. Somehow or other we got in contact with the advertising industry, probably through their association, I don’t remember all the specific details. Anyhow, so we did all that preparatory work, got onto the Councils [talked to] some Councillors and Executives, and so when we had the seminar finally there were some 200 people there. It was, from that point of view, it was a success.

We also didn’t believe that if we just had the seminar and then all went home, something would happen. There had to be some, the agenda had to include a next step, so I prepared a motion, I just forget the exact nature of it, but it was to the effect that, *This committee, this meeting, agrees that a number of people shall set up an action committee to look at further action.* Or words to that effect, at the end of the meeting, which went off very well. Don Gazzard spoke well, he showed a lot of slides, and it was good. People were attentive and interested. At the end of the meeting I got up and put this motion, everybody said, *Cha, cha, cha,* and that was that.

So we formed a little steering committee, and the steering committee included three architects, Brian Claridge was one, I was another, Brian Snowden. There was Doug Speechley from the Town Planning Department. There were, there was someone from the advertising industry too I believe on it, and we just ... Oh, I’m thinking now. There were a couple of lawyers on it; Lance Lee, from the firm of Roder, Dunstan & Lee [legal firm], I think that firm was; Jim Warburton from the Department of Adult Education, and some others, I can’t quite remember.

But anyhow, so we met and considered what to do, and the solution that eventually emerged, mainly led by Doug Speechley, was to form a Civic
Trust. A Civic Trust had been functioning in England for some time. I think Prince Charles was its nominal Head or Patron or something, and it had done some significant work. At first I was slightly, I didn’t think a Civic Trust, Civic Trust sounded a little bit sort of top hat to me, it sounded [laughs] awful – not quite sort of wow enough. But anyhow, we all went along with it because it seemed like something that would get off and get going. Then there was another public meeting, quite a number of people came, and the Civic Trust was born. Jack McConnell, who was President of the Chapter at the time, was elected President of the Civic Trust. So that’s how the Civic Trust came into being.

OH: What were the goals?
NP: Of the Civic Trust?
OH: Just in general.
NP: Oh, to encourage quality in the urban environment, and discourage bad things basically, and it did this by establishing, first of all a number of awards for good developments. It continued handing out awards for many years, I think it still does. At some stage later on the idea of the brickbat was added, which was a bomb for a bad development. That was, that was added and that proved popular too because people like slinging off at something if they can help it. It went on for years and years and years, and I kept associated with it for some time. At one stage I was indeed President, but by that time it had become rather, it had become very old people. The people who had formed the Civic Trust were still sitting around [laughs] the Council after 20 years, and it seemed to me at that time it had reached the stage of, what’s the phrase, not quite (       ) but getting something close to that [laughs], and it really needed a shake up. I found it depressing going along to meetings, they’d become very conservative, and sort of sitting around there making a lot of decisions that seemed to be also conservative, patronising. There was something about it that was just not working, to my mind, and I thought we needed a shake up. So I thought, Well I can start shaking things up by resigning myself and getting someone to replace the President, someone younger and a bit more vital, or someone with something.

Don Dunstan, at the time, had just come back from Melbourne. If you remember Don Dunstan retired from Parliament and took a job as an overseer, CEO or something, of Melbourne’s, Victoria’s Tourist Information Promotional Committee, whatever, and he’d left that and he was back in Adelaide, and I thought, Well, Dunstan will want something to do. I thought he’d be ideal, charismatic character and get people on. I went and approached him and he was agreeable, yeah, quite happy to
become President of the Civic Trust [laughs]. I went back to the Civic Trust and informed them that I’d talked to Dunstan, and I thought I was tempted to resign, and if everybody was agreeable we would replace me with him. There was an elderly gentleman on the Council of the Civic Trust, he’s a builder and he received this news with great consternation. He said, If that man comes on this Council I’m leaving it. I sort of thought, Wacko, I’ve done a terrific job here, I’m getting rid of two [laughs], two elderly encumbrances [laughs]. So he resigned and I resigned, and Dunstan did come on board, and that was the last I really had to do with the Civic Trust at that stage. But it still goes, it still functions.

Now it’s called the Australian Civic Trust. I think it was at that time the first and only Civic Trust in Australia, and so I think it maybe is still the only Civic Trust in Australia, so it’s now calling itself the Australian Civic Trust. That’s how the Civic Trust was born, but for a long time, for a number of years, particularly in its early years, it was quite, quite a vigorous and effective promotion of good urban design. Jim Warburton himself wrote a book about it called, Sustaining our Heritage. I don’t know if you’ve ever seen that, I can show you a copy if you’re interested at some time.

OH: Thank you, Newell. One other public kind of movement that you were involved with, I understand, was against the Metropolitan Adelaide Transport Study, or the MATS Plan.

NP: Indeed!

OH: I’m wondering if you could perhaps just outline first of all what the MATS Plan was, and then perhaps the opposition, the movement, against it.

NP: Right! As I recall the MATS Plan, the MATS Plan was originated, the originator of the MATS Plan was the, were the, what did they call themselves, office out at Walkerville, the government ( ). What was it called, the Roads ...? I’m sorry.5

OH: Roads and Transport, or something like that?

NP: No, it had another name in those days. Anyhow the people who make roads [laughs], make highways and roads, had a big office out in Walkerville. They, it was a time when American cities were building freeways madly, and some Australian cities were also building freeways. Perth has a system which includes a few freeways around the

---

5 ON review of the transcript, Newell has added, Highways Department
city. Sydney has got a, got a few. These people came up with a grand plan for freeway in Adelaide. It was a huge, ambitious plan that would have had freeways spidering all around the place. A major north/south freeway would have torn around the west side of the city and south. It would have divided communities, it would have caused major dislocation of certain points where the various freeways met, and you’ve got all these ramps and things. It was a very ambitious freeway program which would have put back public transport, and other ideas about how people get round cities, for years and years and years and years. It actually assumed that people would only move to cities and through cities by motor car. That was it, that was the future. A lot of American cities had been built that way. Los Angeles is notoriously a freeway city.

And they, the promoters of this, the Motor Vehicles Department, Motor Vehicles ... Am I getting close? Anyhow, they promoted it with great zeal, and the government of the day, the government of the day was the Liberal Government led by Steele Hall. They, they generally supported it, they, they thought it was a good way to go – there wasn’t much costing yet – and started acquiring, indeed they started acquiring land in bits and pieces, particularly in the areas of Hindmarsh. Some opposition began, it wasn’t unanimously approved, and the opposition largely started with the University of Adelaide’s architectural professor, one Rolf Jensen.

Jensen was a controversial figure in many ways, particularly as a professor. He ran his School, I’m told, like a regiment might be run in the Army, but on the ... MATS Plan issue ...

[Recorder is turned off and then back on]

OH: We’re resuming the interview with Newell Platten. We were talking about the Metropolitan Adelaide Transport Study, or the MATS Plan, which was in the late-1960s, Newell, and you were going to tell me the correct name of the government department.

NP: The correct name for the government department was the Highways Department. Their responsibility was to build, they might suggest highways, for that Brompton area, and also in the country. It was their baby the MATS Plan. They achieved the idea, or got the idea that to make Adelaide an up-to-date city we needed a good, fast highway system through it and around it.

It’s true that Adelaide has some inherent problems with road management, in that all north/south traffic seems to need to feed through the city, and indeed a good deal of the east/west seems to feel it wants to feed through the city. There are very poor bypass roads now, they’re
probably improving over the years, but still a lot of people would say, *If you want to get south or north, or north/south, the easiest way is to go straight down King William Street*, which puts far too much traffic in the city. If the MATS Plan had diverted this, that probably would have been some use, but whatever uses it had, and it had to be arguable, it came at a huge cost. It imposed upon the City of Adelaide and the metropolitan area huge networks of major roads, some elevated, some tunnelled, some cutting into hills, many of them rushing, running down through existing communities, separating one side from another. The social effect and the environmental effect would have been huge and adverse. At least that’s what many of us thought.

The person who thought this most vocally at first was Professor Rolf Jensen from the University of Adelaide, who started writing letters to the paper, talking about it to everyone who would listen, saying *This was just the wrong way to go.* That might surprise some people because Rolf in other ways was a right out there in the front Modernist. His idea of housing was to put everybody in tall blocks of flats [laughs], and never mind how many neighbourhoods you pulled down to do that. In fact he proposed doing such a scheme at Stepney, not Stepney, St Peter’s [laughs], but putting that aside let’s just concentrate on his, his objections to the, the MATS Plan.

In this issue he was nothing less than heroic. He actually became, for some time, particularly from a professional point of view, a lone voice, but slowly other people began to follow suit. What emerged, which was interesting about the opposition to the MATS Plan, it didn’t form along the usual lines. Most planning activity in those days were groups involved with either architecture, or with some sort of social kind of provisions like the National Fitness Council’s idea that we need good playing space for people, and other people’s environmental interests, and things like that.

In the case of the MATS Plan, it drew opposition from people who would normally oppose the sorts of things that the other side of politics was promoting. In other words people from the Right Wing of the Liberal Party, for example, suddenly got rather anxious about what might be happening, and the opposition then became quite strong, so strong in fact that, that it kind of stymied the momentum that the Highways Department had been building up by promoting the scheme, politically. The fact was that the Liberal Party of the time, if I’m correct, Steele Hall’s Premiership, endorsed, endorsed the, the MATS Plan.

My involvement was mainly, in opposition, but the department, probably the Department of Adult Education, organised a seminar on the matter. And I was given the task of presenting a paper on behalf of the architectural profession, which I did. I examined mainly the, the sort of
environmental impact, the urban impact of the network of freeways, and the great spaghetti arrangements of interchanges, and so on and so. I was one who presented a paper, and I think others did, Hugh Stretton is one name that came to me, and I know that Alex chaired it, Alex Ramsay chaired it.

OH: And the fact that Alex Ramsay, who was then Head of the South Australian Housing Trust ...

NP: That’s right.

OH: ... as a Chair, what did that indicate to people?

NP: He would have been selected, he would have been selected by the people putting on the show, which I think was the Department of Adult Education. He was, he was neutral on the issue, officially at least, during the seminar. I don’t know what his private thoughts were. In the end, in the end he summed up, he told me my paper was beautiful, and I remember the phrase he used, but criticised it for not presenting alternatives. Well I didn’t see that was my role in the paper [laughs], I was only there to criticise, but be that as it may. It, it, I don’t know whether that had an impact or not.

It had a slightly interesting afterlife of my own personal life, is that when I was researching my father’s life – I don’t know if I’ve mentioned this before – but you know I’ve written a memoire, but I’ve also written an account of his life as a missionary. I was in the Mitchell Library in Sydney and I thought, Oh, I’ll see what he’s got in the reference, little reference card files. I pulled out the drawer for Ps and dah, dah, dah, and I got Gil Platten, and there were a few things there, he was stored in the Mitchell Library, and I sort of like pulled that forward. [laughs] And lo and behold there was my name next to it! I was rather touched by this, I thought, Me and Dad sitting here in the file [laughs], filing cabinet together, how nice! In my case, it was a reference to this paper, which apparently for some reason was stored by the Mitchell Library. They have the records of the whole, whole, all the papers presented at the seminar.

So whatever impact that had specifically, I don’t know, but it was just another voice in the whole opposition to the MATS Plan. What happened was that eventually the, the government, which had been slowly buying up properties, particularly in the Hindmarsh area and a few other places, in preparation for the land, the land they were going to need for these huge interchanges, whole bloody suburbs wiped out practically, were just put on hold. The Dunstan Government, I think, put the whole thing on hold before it finally decided that it was not going to
proceed with it, and that was the end of the story. So Adelaide did not get a freeway system that the other states have, and that was that.

**OH:** Newell, I understand that in the ’70s, that you did some consultancy to the Advisory Committee of the Noarlunga Regional Centre, and this committee was Chaired by Hugh Stretton.

**NP:** Noarlunga, yes, it’s true. I was still in private practice then, yes, and the, they’d set up a little committee to advise the Housing Trust on what it should do with land it owned in Noarlunga, in readiness for a new town centre down there that they were going to oversee, the Housing Trust was going to oversee, and a small committee was set up, he was the Chair. Am I correct, or you just said that, I think you’re right [laughs], and two or three others. I was appointed and we duly met, and I think at the end we concluded that the Trust itself should go ahead and develop the Centre. I forget what alternatives we looked at, maybe it was just selling the land to a developer, or something like that, but it was decided the Trust should develop the Centre.

All sort of reasons were given for that, but basically the idea was that the Trust was in the best position to successfully combine the social needs and the commercial needs of a … of a Centre, so it wouldn’t be just some ordinary commercial development. It would include social amenities and recreation amenities, and so on and so on, so it would be the whole deal, not just something which was profit minded. That went to the, that went to the Housing Trust Board and the Housing Trust Board accepted it. So it then became a proposition about that the Trust should, the Trust should design, should design the Centre. With the way things happen I was given the job of designing it as an outside consultant, so I did the schematic design, and that was a design for a town centre which never quite eventuated. That’s another long story which we might get onto … when we talk about the Housing Trust.

**OH:** I think that that’s a great place to end this interview, Newell. Thank you very much. There’s more to talk about the ’70s in the next interview.

**NP:** Okay, thank you.
Oral Historian (OH): Well, Newell, thank you again for being a participant in this oral history.

Newell Platten (NP): My pleasure.

OH: We’re going to begin this interview by talking about the issues related to planning in the City of Adelaide, in the 1970s, and you’re going to, we’ve agreed that you’ll give a context for this topic.

NP: Yes. I think I can only find my way into discussing the events of the ’70s by going back really to the, perhaps the ’40s and ’50s, and just looking at what Adelaide was, and what it had become.

When I was a young architect in the ’40s, the late-40s and the early-50s, Adelaide was to the City with a strong residential population. I think at one stage it had been up to about 40,000, but it was already beginning to change, and the changes were occurring for a good number of several reasons.

One significant reason was that there was no prohibit, prohibit, prohibition on change. We had the Building Act to work to, which prescribed how you … built something, but nothing prescribed what you built in the City of Adelaide, so it was possible to replace any residential building with almost any building of any other purpose.

Adding to this, was the fact that the Building Act prescribed a certain area as the minimum requirement for a new dwelling. Most Adelaide, I think it was about 4,000 square feet, something in that order, most Adelaide dwellings were on much smaller sites. Therefore it was impossible to replace a dwelling which would run down and perhaps suffering salt damp, and all the other problems that existed in a lot of old Adelaide houses, with a new one, as a new house, but it could be torn down and replaced with a warehouse or a workshop, something like that.
Thirdly, it was not possible in those days to obtain loans to buy old houses. The regulations were such, and the banks controlled money in such a way, that you could only borrow money to build new houses. So the emphasis, I suppose, to keep the building trades happy, was to put new dwellings on the fringes of the City. As a consequence of this the City began to lose its residential population, as old buildings were replaced with workshops, old houses were replaced with workshops and warehouses, and little office buildings, and stuff like that, and I personally worked on such a few replacements. Sometimes the building had been knocked down, sometimes it would be merely altered, but nevertheless the occupation of the building changed and its purpose changed, so the population began to decline.

Abetting this was the, the introduction of the Metropolitan Plan, which zoned that whole south Adelaide area as business, light industrial and commercial.

OH: Was that the south-west part of the City?

NP: The whole south.

OH: The whole south.

NP: The whole south area.

OH: And that was the MATS (Metropolitan Adelaide Travel Study), Plan?

NP: No, that was the Adelaide Metropolitan Development Plan, I think it was called. The Hart Plan anyhow.

OH: Right.

NP: Pressures for this were probably allowed to come from the City. I think a lot of the businessmen thought that they needed a lot of business area in the City to maintain Adelaide as a central business district. So consequently more and more residences disappeared, and that was the situation right until the area we’re going to talk about, the ’70s and the development plans.

Sometime, sometime during this period the City Engineer, called Hugh Bubb, decided that Adelaide needed more roads, and needed to get traffic through it easier. It needed another north/south road, and he proposed that a road ran through what was previously Margaret, Margaret Street (North Adelaide), and across the river and went along Frome Street, right north/south through the City, and it was going to link up with some unknown place on the other side. As a consequence of this, the Council had been buying properties along that particular
corridor, on Margaret Street and on Frome Street.

That was also occurring, and part of that grand vision of Bubb’s was to erase eventually all the properties in the south-west, south-east corner of Adelaide, and replace them with high rise. He did, perhaps to his credit, realise that Adelaide needed to rebuild as a residential population, back to about what it had been previously, to maintain a viable City. The ambition was probably a good one, but the way he proposed to do it was not acceptable, of course, it would have been a very bad one for the City.

So where do I come into the picture in this? Not very much at the political level. I was hardly aware probably of these things that were going on because I was simply a little old architect, little young architect at the time, just trying to get a few jobs out of the way [laughs] and make myself a career.

Eventually I was somehow or other, and I don’t quite remember the connections here, I was invited to be one of a group of people who were asked to prepare submissions for redevelopments of ... No, I think I better go back, I think I’m trying to get ahead of myself.

Politically, politically the scene changed. A bunch of Councillors began to feel that the approach that Bubb was proposing was wrong. Hugh Stretton, who became very influential in everything that happened thereafter, became alerted to potential problems when he discovered the Council was indeed buying up properties behind his property in North Adelaide, and these were the properties that were being bought up along Margaret Street.

He, as I understand it, then started talking to people on the Council, and discovered what was going on. This alarmed him and he begun to talk to other people, and at the same time that this was going on, I understand people in the Council like John Chappel, John Roche, Jim Bowen, were also becoming concerned about the activities of, of Bubb. Activities is probably the wrong phrase but his proposals and draconian measures he would take upon the City of Adelaide.

There was a counter movement to, to stop this, to change, change direction. I think, I think what happened then was that Bill Hayes, who was also a party to the movement to change direction, was elected Lord Mayor, and (Don) Dunstan, more or less simultaneously. He was Premier of South Australia. It just so happened that a lot of networking, consultations, arguments, discussions, a general movement, was put in place which conjoined the City of Adelaide and the State Government in trying to develop new directions for the City of Adelaide’s growth.
I think I came into the picture first of all on the issue of Margaret Street. Now, as I mentioned earlier, I think, Margaret Street, properties on Margaret Street were being purchased by the City Council in order to widen the road for the Bubb plan for the new north/south road through Adelaide. As a halted input to this and policy had changed, so that this was no longer part of the plan, Margaret Street became one of two other parts of Adelaide which could be redeveloped, somewhat, in a modest way. My office was asked to make … we made a submission. We applied for one of these particular sites. As I recall ...

OH: That was Dickson and Platten?

NP: Dickson and Platten, yep. As I recall, Margaret Street was the smallest, smallest of these projects and we probably preferred, would have preferred to have one of the bigger ones, but nevertheless, Margaret Street came our way, so we took it on.

Now the idea was, it was non-specific, we were just asked to make a report on how Margaret Street might be redeveloped, having in mind the Council already owned quite a lot of the land along Margaret Street. I think the City Council intended that redevelopment would be a lot of beautification, perhaps better paving, trees planted, and general, general, I wouldn’t say the word gentrification at this stage but that direction was to be taken.

So okay we started off, and first of all we interviewed, inspected, we interviewed every, every occupant in Margaret Street. We went all up and down Margaret Street and knocked on doors, and chatted to people, and we looked at the quality of existing houses. So we made a report on the standard of house, salt damp and all sorts of stuff like that that was observable, and also got the resident’s attitude to what ought to happen there.

What was surprising to me was that most interviewees and residents didn’t want anything to happen, they liked it very much as it was. It was a little viable working community, and they were mostly pensioners, and what they feared was that if the place got tarter up in any way at all, the property values would go up and they’d have to pay more rates, and thank you very much, that’s not what they wanted in the least [laughs], and this ... I must say as a young architect I thought everybody would want a more beautiful street [laughs], so I was surprised at this. Anyhow, that’s what it was.

So we went along and we finally concluded in our work that there was just a couple. I remember one but apparently there were two study areas. Oh yes, there were two – one was large and one was small – which could be redeveloped because the Council already owned the properties
either side of the road. Apart from that we shouldn’t do anything at all much. The only thing that the residents seemed to agree should change, was that through-traffic should be stopped somehow. That was the only grievance they had, was the number of cars coming up and down the street. It’s a very narrow street, and merely two lanes wide, so they, they, they didn’t like the traffic.

So our proposal in the end recommended several things. (1) No change generally speaking, people like it just as they are, don’t interfere. (2) Study, one of the study areas we could, we could stop the traffic there. We could realign the, we could replace the houses on either side which were a bit rundown, with new, new dwellings, and turn the road into a little mini park. That would stop through-traffic coming down. The houses were still accessible because the lane is around the back. Then that was basically it, it was a not very big report. I mean it was a fairly substantial one but didn’t … [laughs] wasn’t very ambitious, you might say.

In fact it was rather unambitious and I think this wasn’t well received by some of the Council, who were really hoping for something much more positive about it. Anyhow we presented it and that was that, and there it lay. It just so happens that later on in my time at the Housing Trust the land was taken by the Housing Trust, and the, one of the areas that we recommended development on, the one that, where the road was closed and the houses on each side were developed, was in fact redeveloped by the Housing Trust, so I had that slight connection with it at the very end.

I don’t know that we did it all that well. We, we put in standard Trust housing, and I think on retrospect we should have tried a bit harder and put in specially developed housing for that particular site. Anyhow, it was good enough to get an award or something from the Civic Trust at one time, and that was that.

It was very interesting for me, and I, you know, it was really a revelation in a way to, to, to find that often as you see something from outside, as an architect you have this vision of what the world should be like. It can be quite contrary to other people [laughs] who actually have to live in the place and support it. That was a, that was a, that was fascinating. I learnt a lot on that little, little effort.

So where do we go from there? Perhaps you could ask me the next question and then you can remind me where we’re going in all this.

OH: Thank you for that context because I think that’s really interesting, Newell. You were a member of the eight-member City of Adelaide Development Committee (CADC), which was established in 1972, and you’ve already alluded to that about the State and the, the City Council
working together. The eight members of the committee included you as a State person.

NP: Yes, yes.

OH: Could you just name the other people who were State representatives?

NP: Hugh Stretton, Bob Bakewell, and John Brine. Hugh, Hugh was the, Hugh was the most important I suppose, person, to talk about. It was Hugh that was leading the, what shall we say, the citizens’ movement, more than anybody else. He’d already, he was already well known because he’d already published his book, *Ideas for Australian Cities*, which was highly regarded. He, his idea about cities was pretty straightforward really. He just thought that people wanted land, and they wanted space, and they wanted housing, and they just wanted it well organised. Later on sometime, I’m not sure that I always saw quite eye to eye with Hugh, but the differences were, were kind of detail, if you like, or specific, not in general, general ambitions. Anyhow, we were all appointed to this. Now when was it, 1974?

OH: ’72.

NP: ’72, ’72. I think I’d already worked on the Margaret Street development at that stage. I think I had. I’m not quite sure why I was appointed. Anyhow I was, and we began. Now politically it was an extremely powerful committee.

And the people from the Council?

NP: People from the Council? Bill Hayes who was Lord Mayor at the time; John Chappel, who was an architect, and Jim Bowen and John Roche. John Roche was a property developer; Jim Bowen was a citizen and a businessman I suppose, and John, as I said, was an architect. … He worked next door to us in North Adelaide. So we knew each other fairly well – also a, also a contemporary, we both studied at the same time in university. John was a dedicated Modernist, but his ideas on the City were good. He wasn’t a Modernist in the Hugh Bubb term that he wanted to tear down all the old buildings [laughs] and replace them with high-rise flats, he just wanted to tear down the old buildings and replace them with small [laughs] modern ones. But no, he also did quite a lot of conversion work, and so I musn’t disparage him now, even, even in the slightest way. Where are we?

OH: The work of the ...

NP: So the City of Adelaide Development Committee, Planning, what’s it called, the City of Adelaide ...?
OH: City of Adelaide Development Committee.

NP: Development Committee.

OH: The CADC.

NP: They changed its name, changed its name later on. I get confused. The City of Adelaide Development Committee was given a carte blanche, and that was we were to control the development that occurred in the City of Adelaide virtually unhindered. This, this had been agreed to by Council, and agreed to by, by the State, so there it was, and it was set up as this joint Council/State thing, joint Council/State operation, realising of course that they are connected, that the State really functioned as part of the City, the City of Adelaide has often been called the City State – and the, you just could not plan Adelaide without having its role as the central area of the State recognised. So anyhow, there we were.

Because we had this carte blanche, we had to sort of start somewhere, and we prepared some small documents. There was a document called the Green Book, and there was a document called the Red Book. Now one was a sort of motherhood statement, and the other was more specific, and I remember working on the, I think it was the Red Book, the Red Book with Hugh Stretton. The Red Book tried to prescribe the character of places in the City, how cities should really function in general terms.

Now housing was the particular driving force, as I mentioned. The population was diminishing very rapidly under previous regimes, and the ambition was to build the population up, and the way to do this was to protect certain areas emphatically so the population, the residential population remained intact and could be reinforced. So first of all, you had to establish the areas where this should happen, a sort of zoning I suppose, but certainly the whole south-east corner of Adelaide, most of North Adelaide, were considered sacrosanct, they were residential areas, and the residential areas were those areas, residential activity, residential population in those areas should be saved, should be protected and enhanced.

So we wrote, we wrote this, this book and it, or letter I suppose, it was only a little thing. We just tried to set out our principles and goals in this, and there was a strong emphasis on the way the suburbs were built. The residential areas would be, would be re, re-established. Flats, this is where I slightly disagreed with Hugh, but I could see that under the times that nothing else would have worked really, flats were not encouraged.
What was encouraged was what you call medium density townhouses, linked buildings with small gardens, two, perhaps three storeys high, mainly two. I think we had problems with that that we’ll come to later if you like, but that, that was, that was Hugh’s way that he thought it would work. It would fit in with existing smaller development areas in North Adelaide particularly, and also here, and you could building, the Building Act could be modified so you could actually build these smaller units on smaller, smaller properties than previously had been allowed. In fact I think at that stage, if I remember correctly, the Building Act had been replaced by the new Building Code, which would have been a different system. Okay, sorry, my, memory is a bit slight on some of these [laughs] issues, Madeleine. You’ll have to forgive me.

OH: I think you’re doing really well, I think you’re doing really well.

NP: Yeah, I’m straining. However, where are we?

OH: We’re with the committee.

NP: Oh, the committee.

OH: And you were talking about writing that first Statement of Policy.

NP: Yes, and somewhere along the line the other book must have specified building heights and things like that in, in the cities and things. This is, this gets terribly confused in my mind because at the same time we were engaging, or the Council engaged, George Clarke, Gazzard.

OH: That was around, yes.

NP: To start the City Plan going.

OH: Yes, but I think that your committee was in existence for ...

NP: Before that, yeah.

OH: Yes, for maybe a couple of years?

NP: A couple of years, oh.

OH: And I was going to ask you what was the workload involved in being a member?

NP: Oh, the workload was enormous. We had to meet every week, every Monday evening. The meetings started early evening, after dinner I think, maybe before, I forget, and often went on until 11 or 12 o’clock at night. We had to assess every building application that came to the City
of Adelaide to see if it conformed to our motherhood statements, and whatever other regulations we’d, or conditions we, we decided to impose. It was a very, very powerful committee. There were, there were difficulties. For example some buildings, some building applications had come in and been accepted before the committee came into existence. Why they came back to us I don’t know, but they did.

I remember that the South Australian Hotel was a terrible situation. Do you remember the old hotel, the old South Australian, very graceful three-storey building with balconies at each level, cast iron fronts, very beautiful, very famous, very popular building. But there was an application that came in before us to knock this building down and replace it with a tall hotel. Everyone was very unhappy at this proposal, but when we looked back at our legal position we discovered that from approvals that had been given previously, we were powerless really to stop it, so we oversaw that demolition very reluctantly.

Quite often proposals came in that were new and we were able to amend them, or do things to them which helped, helped, helped achieve our ambitions and any of that.

One of the [laughs] things I often remarked on was that we were so powerful it was amazing that nobody, nobody ever tried to bribe, at least nobody ever tried to bribe me. I’m sure in some other States this would have happened. In some other States it was said that you built, you, you put in your building application to the City Council, or the, whatever Council you’re going, you’re putting an application into, in a brown envelope, separately to each Councillor [laughs]. Well nothing like that ever happened, it was all very clean and above board.

OH: Did you work with George Clarke when he came to do the study in Adelaide?

NP: Only, only remotely in the sense that I was part of the committee, and George used to talk to the Committee, or the Commission, from time to time, but I had no direct dealings with him at all. No, he worked more closely with the City of Adelaide Council staff than he did ever with anybody like me.

OH: Newell, how did you balance all the things that you were doing, because you continued in your private practice at this time?

NP: At this time, in ’73. Oh, I don’t remember [laughs] I mean that was probably one of the reasons I’m so confused over all those times, that’s probably, that’s probably [laughs] ... Yeah, I don’t remember. I mean, yeah, it was a lot of work [laughs].
OH: And I understand that at one point you were living at Aldinga and having to travel?

NP: That’s right, yes, my, my relationship with my wife had, had broken up at that stage, and I was living in the family holiday [laughs] house down at Aldinga, and travelling up to Adelaide every day to go to work, and also to come up at weekends and do the inspections. Yeah, it was pretty, pretty tough [laughs], I mean it was, yeah, always going off.

OH: And on the weekends the members ...

NP: On the weekends, well on the weekends we, we, because we had to assess these development applications on Monday nights, we had to trawl around the City on Sundays looking at the development sites to see what was happening [laughs], or what was proposed, and how we thought about it, yeah, it was a busy period.

OH: And with the City of Adelaide Plan, how influential was that when it was developed by Clarke?

NP: Oh, totally, totally, I, I imagine totally. It was just accepted by the Council in the end and became the Plan, so from that point on it just controlled the way buildings were put up in the City of Adelaide, where they should go, what uses were prescribed, where, how they should fit in; their building heights, their plot areas, and so on and so on and so on. So the City had, the first time I believe, it was the first time the City had any real guidance on the sort of buildings that should go on it.

So from the, so from, in those years, from, where are we, from the ’50s when it was carte blanche, to the ’70s, a period in, in 20 years, we moved from with very little, very little guidance whatever, from a City that potentially could disappear or become a light industrial site, to what we’ve got today. It was a really vital and important period, and I think one of those rare times when Adelaide sort of worked.

It reminds me a little bit of the time we put up the, we began the Festival. The Festival was an interesting combination where the City Council and the City, and the State, and the establishment, and the press, The Advertiser, it was, all conjoined and achieved, achieved something. It was a good outcome for the City. Often the forces that are at loggerheads, the forces that are often loggerheads, just sometimes, every now come together and something good happens, and this was, this was such an occasion.

Although it’s not to say it was all smooth sailing. I think there was a lot of resistance from the, from the, from property owners particularly, and the people in the Legislative Assembly, who would, would argue that
property rights were … should be sacrosanct, that property rights should control everything that happened, it should, should not interfere with property rights, and of course planning ultimately does that because you own property somewhere and you can’t always do what you might like to do, what’s most to your advantage. Okay.

**OH:** You then became a member of the City of Adelaide Planning Commission, after the Act was passed in 1976?

**NP:** That’s right. This really continued on a rather similar sort of function, it sort of flowed together. I can’t remember much changing [laughs] except there was a change of name, but it was the same people around the desk every night. The government members came and went a little bit, depending on circumstances, but Hugh Stretton stayed on. I stayed on for a good number of years. John Brine I think reappeared, Judith Brine was there for a while. Bob Bakewell moved on, somebody else took his place, but I can’t remember all those details I’m afraid.

**OH:** Obviously as you say ...

**NP:** But it was not, it didn’t have, it didn’t have the power, as I recall. It was more or less a consultative body then, but it must have done something useful otherwise we wouldn’t have been there.

[OH and NP laugh]

**NP:** I remember it was very much the same, you still had to go around and look at all these damned buildings every weekend, and front up on Monday nights and talk about them.

**OH:** Newell, around this time, 1973, you made a decision to change your working life?

**NP:** That’s right, yes, yes. The Housing Trust, I don’t know if I’ve mentioned this before, but the Housing Trust, the Housing Trust had become, the Housing Trust was famous of course for many of the good things it had done, and the way it supported the Playford Industrial Program, and for the provision of houses at modest prices for people on modest incomes, and for being a public housing authority in the sense that houses in the Housing Trust were available, both to purchase and to rent, for anybody regardless of income. It was never considered to be a social welfare housing body.

So the Housing Trust had a long and highly regarded reputation, but it also had a counter reputation that had occurred perhaps during the ’60s, when, to accommodate a great wave of immigrants and new arrivals, and demands for housing, it had built a number of, or vast areas of what they called a Cowell house, which was a very plain – plain is hardly the
word – it was [laughs], sorry, plain houses on the western suburbs and
north-west suburbs, a double unit of singularly inauspicious appearance,
spread in vast areas of these treeless plains. Despite the planners’
attempts to vary colours and setbacks with things like that, they all
looked the same [laughs]. They seemed to somehow signify the Trust
had lost its way.

Now also Dunstan, of course, had changed the nature of the Trust by –
this is interesting, I don’t know if I’ve mentioned this before – how the
Board was replaced. Did I mention it last time?

OH: How the?

NP: How the Board was replaced.

OH: No.

NP: Oh! What happened was that under the Playford, under Playford’s
Government, the Board was kept intact, it didn’t change membership.
The membership of the Board should have changed continuously,
because I think every Board member served four years and then was due
for replacement, but could be reappointed on an annual basis simply by
the government saying, You’re reappointed. You didn’t have to be
replaced but the reappointment was only for 12 months. This had gone
on for so long that most of the Board, by the time Dunstan became
Premier, was in fact on a 12-month notice of effect, and this fell right
into Dunstan’s lap. Now, Dunstan did not quite trust Ramsay. Ramsay
himself admitted that to me once, and I might get onto that later.

OH: This is Alex Ramsay who was the ...?

NP: Alex Ramsay, General Manager, highly revered, lovely man, because I
think Dunstan associated Ramsay too much with Playford policies.
Dunstan’s policies were more urbane, or urban. He wanted the Trust to
be actively involved and building up residences in the City. He wanted
that sort of activity, he didn’t want the activity all in the suburbs. He
thought that Alex was too kind of immersed in the old way of doing
things, to respond to the ideas he had for the Trust. But he had a
wonderful opportunity because lo and behold! All the Board was due for
re-election [laughs], renomination – I think the government just
appointed the Board – and Dunstan seized on this and changed the
Board almost entirely. The consequence that Dick Roberts, an architect,
became Chairman, Hugh Stretton became appointed. Clifton, Clifton
Pugh, Cedric Pugh, was one appointment, and there were others, I can’t
remember them all. Oh, Jack McConnell, an important one, Jack
McConnell, the architect, one of Adelaide’s most esteemed architects,
was also appointed to the Board. So you had a completely different
Board, you had a Board that for the first time included a couple of
architects, and would be interested, sympathetic, to new architectural directions. You had someone like Hugh Stretton who was very interested in the social aspects of housing, and particularly interested in the City where he lived.

One thing this Board decided to do was to advertise for two new positions. The old Principal Architect was retired, or he was about to retire, and also the Chief Design Architect had retired or was about to retire, so they created two new positions, a Principal Architect and a Chief Design Architect, and they advertised for these. I was aware of the advertisement, it was an advertisement as you’re aware of, which I ignored the first time around. Apparently they did not get an application for the Principal Design Architect that they wanted, or for the Principal Architect if it comes to that, or Chief Design Architect, and they advertised again. I don’t know, I suppose, I might have been a bit burnt out at the time, I think I probably was [laughs]. Oh, the practice, the practice was facing expansion difficulties, the practice had got busier and we had trouble acquiring a staff, and Bob and I didn’t quite agree on which way the practice should move – a whole lot of things, negatives and positives came into it – but one, one that did come in, this might sound a bit silly, but I come from a working class family.

My grandfather was a train driver, my father was a Methodist missionary. I’d grown up in a poor family, and I would never have gone to university had I not been able to acquire a Commonwealth Scholarship. That had been introduced of course by a Labor Government, Chifley’s Labor Government I think it was, just after the War, which enabled me to go to university, and that was great. So I always felt that somehow or other I owed something to the [laughs], to me class, you know, to the working class, and I thought, Oh, if I can work for the Housing Trust for a while and try give something back ... It sounds very, it’s a case of hubris gone mad isn’t it, really [laughs]?

What can I do? [laughs].

Anyhow, there it was, these sort of things went through my mind, and eventually I, I did apply. One day I was talking to Dick Roberts about something or other in his office in the Housing Trust, and he suggested I should apply. He said, flatteringly, that I was the sort of person they were looking for. Oh, righto, this is very nice. Anyhow then I, then I, then I thought about it and I thought, Perhaps I should take this seriously. I talked to Stretton, and I talked to a few old friends, and finally I talked to Ramsay and Ramsay said, Look, put an application in. We don’t even need an application from you, you just, you can have the job if you want it. I just took it on and there we go, went on from there.

OH: Your role was Chief ...?
NP: Chief Design Architect, not Principal Architect. There’s a distinction there and this led to great problems as well, we can come to later if you like [laughs].

OH: I’m just giving the year there, so that was 1973?

NP: ’73 I think it was, yes, yes.

OH: And what was the distinction between those two roles?

NP: Oh, well the Principal Architect controlled the operations of the Architectural Section in effect. He made decisions about which builders should do which projects. He looked after the tenders, he looked after the payments to the builders. He looked after all the admin that went on in the Architectural Section. He was in fact the Principal Architect in that sense. I was the Chief Architect, Chief Design Architect, and my job was never terribly clearly specified to me, but I was somehow to improve the design output of the Trust. I thought bravely that I naively thought this will be a bit of a hoot! This is not going to be very hard [laughs]. It’s all so bad now with ... it can’t do anything but improve. It didn’t turn out quite so easily as all that.

OH: Who was the Principal Architect at that time?

NP: Alan Phillips.

OH: And then what, what was your role, because you worked there from ’73 to 1980.

NP: That’s right. I went in on a seven-year contract, and I saw that out all but the bit of a long service leave. My role was to simply improve the quality of design in the Housing Trust. That meant that I somehow rather had to lift up the whole design level, but there was no specifics – granted [laughs] they’d given it to me, so that’s, that was my job – so how to do this? I must say I started [laughs], there were times when I thought, What the hell have I done? I’d come from a rather nice office building facing Park Lands in North Adelaide, and suddenly I was in this great labyrinth of offices, and there were grey/green, brown/green carpets and brown walls.

OH: Where was that situated?

NP: Everything was very drab. Where the…what’s the building, the Federal Court Building?

OH: Oh!
The new one in Angas Street it is now, some old buildings, two and three-storey buildings which were linked up. Anyhow, there I was, I’d burnt my bridges as they say, and I was, I was stuck with it so I ( ), but it wasn’t easy from there, and I write up this in my memoirs a bit, and I won’t go too far into it now. Basically what happened was that the Principal Architect and I discovered we had nothing in common at all about design, about architecture, about anything really. We never, never got on, we never, never could coalesce. And I found also, a lot of resentment in the architects who had been comfortable, as one does in a bureaucracy, been comfortable doing things a certain way. When I was trying to sort of urge different directions I found there was a lot of resistance to this. I probably was naïve in thinking that everybody would just want to do something different, that people would want to improve the quality of the design and maybe I can give them a hand doing that, but, but I didn’t realise at how much ego massaging would have to occur. I think I was probably too abrupt to do it [laughs], and I didn’t, probably didn’t handle it all that well. I got a lot of resistance also from the architects, so it wasn’t an easy time, and the fact that I didn’t get on with the Principal Architect at all well meant that he was trying, he tried to exclude me from a lot of the activities as much as he could [laughs], and I had to sort of try and get in as much as I could. It was a very uneasy time.

As you say challenging. Did you work on significant projects yourself, or were you removed?

Well that probably saved me in the, in the way that that happened, because Alex Ramsay would, from time to time, direct major projects straight to me, projects, mainly, mainly large-scale development projects. There were several in Norwood, Dr Kent’s Paddock.

Dr Kent’s Paddock is in Kent ...?

It was Norwood. That’s typical, there were probably a dozen or so of them that came my way during the time I was there, and they were interesting because it gave me a chance to sort of work seriously on something or other. Dr Kent’s Paddock was to a normal, what we called the Hallwell Project up in Brown Street, a few in the City.

Which ones in the City do you recall?

The corner of, corner of Frome Street and Angas Street; corner of ...

What was that called?

Playford.

Right.
And a small one opposite the, a small one off Hurtle Square, red brick buildings, and then, yeah, the Box Factory.

Were you responsible for the development around the Box Factory?

That stuff near the Box Factory, yes, there’s some housing stuff there. Mostly they, mostly we just developed standard plans. The one in, the one in, the flats in Carrington, flats facing Carrington Street, but also the flats facing Rundle Street in Kent Town, Dr Kent’s Paddock, are the same basic plans, and they were plans we designed for noisy sites in that the street frontage is mainly service rooms, bathrooms, laundries, stairs, or the kitchens, or something like that. Where you’d want quiet in the living rooms and the bedrooms, face away from the street. And they face Dr Kent’s Paddock into an internal garden space.

So we tried to accommodate our houses and our flats and whatever, to the situations that might occur, and I tried in my time there to build up a whole lot of housing types to suit different locations, different orientations, sloping sites even, and stuff like that, to get away from the usual sort of plod, plod, plod stuff. I found the, I found the architects difficult to lead, really difficult were the planners. I saw the Planning Department, mainly old English planners, excuse me [laughs], terribly resistant to anything, anything at all … anything that changed, and just, just hated being told that something else could be done a different way to the way they’d always done things, and they’d always done things simply by taking from the, from the housing vocabulary, which was a number of stock plans, and putting them on the site, and vary them a little bit so they’d look interesting, but there was no consideration for orientation, where the sun was lying. There was no consideration for sloping sites, and furthermore there was no consideration for land use.

One of the first things I discovered was that in no Trust development, either flat or a townhouse, or an individual house, could you get to your backyard without going through your laundry. Now that’s terrific if you’re coming in and out with muddy boots, but if you want to have barbeque or something in your backyard, if you want to use your garden in a more relaxed sort of way that most people do these days, you don’t really want to move from your laundry, from your living room, and so I was trying to get units, or develop, develop plans where the houses would open up living areas to the backyards, and things like that. All these little improvements which are very, very mundane, were really often so resisted.

The other area of resistance I discovered was [laughs], strangely enough, was from the people who handled rentals. They, they got so used to very low-density developments they thought that two houses
connected together, what they call a semi, we call a semi-detached unit, was about as far as you wanted to go on linked units. The idea that you might link up a dozen or so in a terrace was very difficult for them to take in, and the idea of flats was even more incomprehensive. It was interesting times [laughs] there were ...

[Recorder is turned off and then back on]

OH: We’re resuming the interview and Newell, you were going to talk about another aspect of the Trust, which we’ve touched on before, and that was the Noarlunga Regional Development.

NP: Yes, I was, and I shall, briefly. The Noarlunga Regional Development, the committee that I was part of, I think recommended to the Trust that the Trust should control the development of the Centre, as opposed to the alternative which would be shuffling it off to some developer to come up with their own plans. Hugh Stretton supported that because he would have liked to have kept control of it. I might have mentioned, and I hope I did in my last discussion, that the proposal I came up with was very much pedestrian centred. We saw the car as being sort of kept in the outside of the development as much as possible. I had a somewhat romantic of something like a Greek or Spanish small town, where the streets are fairly narrow and people walk along them, and how cars are kept at the outside of all this and just do their job to service the place but don’t, don’t make their presence felt too much.

So I wanted something very human, human centred, and in accordance with my ideas about topography and how buildings should be related to it, I put the biggest building on the highest part of the site, which just happened to be the furthest part of the site away from the train line. This was already a matter of debate when I was working on the plan, but I thought that it was, it was about the same distance that the Adelaide Railway Station is from Myer’s or something like that. I thought, *This is not impossible for people to walk.* Anyhow, very few people go shopping from trains, and very few people when they do they ... and if they did they could, they can have a shuttle bus, if the demand is there. I mean you could have a little shuttle bus running to and from the train line. So I thought the topographical circumstances of my plan should prevail.

Furthermore another problem I would expect, I expected to encounter, was the fact that my proposal was to put all the cars on one side of the shopping centre. Conventional wisdom has it that people don’t like to walk too far from the car to the shopping centre, therefore you’ve got to get every car as close as possible, and to do this you surround the shopping centre with cars. You’d be familiar with that sort of environment, they’re everywhere. Anyhow that was where we stood,
and Stretton supported my plan so it became temporarily, provisionally, the plan.

Now in the Trust there was a little set, the town, the Noarlunga, what do they call themselves, the Noarlunga Planning Group or something like that. Anyhow, a section, Noarlunga Planning Section, was set up, and consisted of two people and a part-time, or perhaps even fulltime, secretary. Their job was to, I don’t know, oversee what the future of the Noarlunga Centre might be, but nothing much was happening so it just sort of sat there as an idea.

A very bright young graduate called John Byrne, who was running this particular little show, he, he thought I was wrong. He thought my plan was wrong, that the Centre should be over the railway line. He had in mind some Swedish models he had seen where you actually built a Centre across the railway line, and the railway line went underneath. Furthermore the train was going to be electrified and this would add to the number of people who would come to the shopping centre by train. I could see his point but I just thought it was the wrong decision at the time for the site. The right decision would have been to move the train line [laughs], but that wasn’t possible either.

So there it was, all sorts of stalemate existed when John would ... The plan just sat there and John didn’t like it very much, and I just thought it should stay on, but neither of us could make any decisions anyhow, nobody could make any decisions because we didn’t have any, nobody had any funds, or there was no budget for it, there was no program even about what it should do.

Also in the Trust they had what they called a Commercial Department, or something like that, a Commercial Section, and they were unhappy about my proposal of putting all the cars on one side. They knew very well that this would prove difficult to sell to a developer of a shopping centre. Anyhow, there it all sat for a while, and there was Hugh Stretton supporting my proposal, and these other people opposing it, and there it was, but nothing was happening.

But finally, finally, the Trust came to some agreement with the AMP [Australian Mutual Provident Society], CML [Colonial Mutual Life], I’d have to check that, but one of those big, big, big insurance companies, to become developers of the site, and as soon as that happened I knew that the plan was lost really, because while ... The Trust, if the Trust went ahead and built the Centre, as they had built Elizabeth out of their own funding, we probably could have put up my plan, and I think it would have worked. I could not see a commercial operation under the circumstances that prevailed at the time, getting the advice they would have got from all the developers and architects involved with shopping
centres ever agreeing to it. So I thought, *Oh well, that’s it, it’s not going to work out my way* [laughs].

In the end what happened was that they appointed a very good team of architects, and I respected them, very good people from Perth, the big architects of the new shopping centre. There was at this stage no fixed plan, there was only my schematic plan, there were John Byrne’s ideas for a different development, and an empty site.

So I proposed, well I said, *Alright, well the only, the only way out of this, this mess is to let the, is to give it over to new architects* [laughs] *and let them decided where the shopping centre should go*. I went over and talked to them and told them about all the history of the things that had been going on, and they thought, and as I said they were very good architects, I respected them, they were probably one of the best architectural firms in Australia at the time, and they came up with what effectively was a compromise, that it was neither over the train line or the top at halfway between, and cars came in from both sides, but they did maintain a little continuous pedestrian way from the station into the shopping centre and around it and beyond, so in some senses the pedestrian network was contained, but it was never as broad or as complex and as interesting as the one I proposed.

So, so that was that, so that’s where the Centre got built now. So it’s never conformed to any particular plan at all. The shopping centre was placed, and then a plan was placed around it, and it looks like that. It looks, it looks, it looks formless, it doesn’t seem to have any real character about it. I think it’s a testament to the way we, the way the Trust went about it.

Doxiadis, with whom I’d worked previously, maintained that you’ve got to have an orderly progression which starts with a policy, and then you have a program, and then finally you have a plan. *Policy will obviously include decisions about who was going to do things, what the principal objectives would be, how the money would be acquired, and so on and so on and so on, and then the program would give you a statement of what order these things should be done, and then finally with this information you prepare a plan.*

We, as so often happens in Adelaide, started the plan and then decided to try and build a [laughs] a policy and a program around it. It never quite works out, and that was the case. I think it’s a disappointment what we’ve got there now, that I suppose in a way I contributed to as much as anybody, so I’ll have to take some responsibility on the matter.
OH: Well I think that’s an interesting point at which to complete the information that you’ve given about the Trust, and we’ll pick up the rest of your professional life in the next interview, so thank you, Newell.

NP: Okay, thanks Madeleine.
Sixth interview with Newell Platten, AM
recorded by Madeleine Regan

8 May 2013
Adelaide

for the City of Adelaide Oral History (Extension) Project 2012/2013

Oral Historian (OH): Thank you again, Newell, for your participation.

Newell Platten (NP): As always my pleasure.

OH: Today we’re going to pick up on a little vignette really, that’s related to your time in the South Australian Housing Trust, and you were talking after we’d finished the last interview, about Dr Kent’s Paddock residential project on Rundle Road, just east of the Park Lands.

NP: And I think I told you about an incident concerning the design of that project. The project lies in the land which was previously occupied by the E&WS (Engineering & Water Supply) Department. The E&WS Department, as it was then called, it’s now called SA Water, had a number of sheds there for storing vehicles, I think, and whatever, but they came to the site and it was empty, except for the old structures were still there. The government owned the land and Dunstan, in whose electorate the land was, handed the land over to the Housing Trust, under what economic circumstances or financial circumstances I don’t know. But the land came to the Housing Trust with the instructions that they should put housing on it for the usual clientele for the Housing Trust.

In those days the Housing Trust of course was a public housing authority, not a welfare housing authority, so many of the people who lived in Housing Trust houses were professional people, working people, all sorts of people, a whole range of people would live there, but a lot of them of course would be Labor supporters, one would think, and it was in Dunstan’s political interests, obviously, to have some more supporters in his electorate. I don’t know if I’m being cynical in saying that but I’ve seen enough political machinations [laughs] in my life to think that I’m not. Anyhow, it became one of the projects I worked on. It was one of a number of those larger projects that I worked on in the Trust, and it was one of the last ones I think that we did, when my time was there.
It was a large project, it was a very nice one to work on because it was a very agreeable site. We had the support of Council, and it flowed fairly well with discussions with the Council, and looking at the analysis of the site and what you could do with it.

We assembled a composition of buildings. We had three-storey flats facing busy Rundle Street, and they were designed in what I call the sound, sound-diverting design, or something or the other. They put service rooms to the street, and we managed to relate all the living rooms, the bedrooms, and the living rooms, on the, on the back of the units from the street, and they looked into an internal garden. Another road called Capper Road, which formed one boundary of the site, we had townhouses which also backed on to this internal garden, but it was a nice, nice development which had this big garden inside which all the, all the inhabitants of the place could share, whether they lived in a townhouse or a flat, and overlooked if you lived in the flats, so it went, it all went pretty smoothly with Council. We sorted things out, we didn’t stress their desires to keep everything fairly low, and I accepted that we could use certain materials, and away it went.

Finally, when we got the design up to that point that the Council were going to be happy with it, we showed it to Don Dunstan. We made a model and we were taking it down to Parliament House where his office was at the time. Well I suppose it had been taken down there before we arrived actually, but we arrived there; we being Alex Ramsay, General Manager of the Housing Trust, and myself. We met Don and we talked through the project with him, and showed him what we were on about. He seemed to think it was all pretty nice and approved it, and that was that.

Then Alex and I left, leaving the model behind, and we walked outside. I can remember very clearly standing on North Terrace in front of Parliament House, and Alex turning to me and saying, after this interview with Don Dunstan, turning to me and saying, You know Don’s problem? He doesn’t know who his friends are – a thought that has stayed with me. I thought it was very interesting because this was a time when Don himself was, he was probably riding fairly high in his period of popularity, but it was also realisation that Alex, who was a loyal public servant who would follow the policies of the present government, whatever it was, whatever they were, felt distrusted by the man he was serving, and I think it related very much to, not only Alex’s perception, but the reality was that Don associated Alex with political periods in which his opposition, the Playford Government, had been in power. He thought that the policies pursued by that particular government would be deep in Alex’s psyche, they were not the policies he wanted to pursue,
and he thought he couldn’t rely on Alex to pursue the policies he wanted. Nothing could be further from the truth as it turns out.

I thought that was one aspect of it, but I also thought what was really significant were the choice of words, *He doesn’t know who his friends are*, that he thought Don didn’t know who to take advice from, and I think that became very clear in the late period of the Dunstan Government, when he had around him a bunch of acolytes, who I think were self-serving and serving his, you know, sense of certainty rather than a sense of what ought to be done. I just, it just stayed with me, and I think it was rather sad because they were both extremely intelligent people who just probably never achieved what they could have, if they’d trusted, well if Don had trusted Don, if Don had trusted Alex a lot more than he did. Anyhow, it wasn’t long after that the Dunstan fortunes turned and indeed, Don needed friends that gave him good advice.

**OH:** Newell, in 1981 you completed your seven-year contract with the Housing Trust.

**NP:** Yes, that’s about right. Perhaps slightly before I completed it I took whatever long service leave was due to me and resigned. I could have stayed on in the Trust, it was open to me to stay on if I wished, perhaps not as Chief Designer, although Alex had offered me the job as long as I liked, but I decided I needed to get out. I could see people who stayed on in the Trust for too long, and it’s not a, not a healthy thing to do to stay in those sort of big bureaucracies doing the same rather tedious and for an architect, one of the mundane work, time after time after time. Housing might be a very good social kind of, social kind of activity to get into but it’s, for an architect it’s ultimately at that level [laughs] rather soul destroying, not very uplifting.

**OH:** So what did you do when you moved from the Trust?

**NP:** Well I thought there was nothing else I could do but go back to private practice, but seven years out of private practice is a long time. Most of my own contacts had moved on. People I used to know where I might find, you know, jobs with, had found other people to employ [laughs]. Fashions had changed which is itself very interesting, and worse I suppose I’d become kind of a typecast as a housing architect.

**OH:** And what did that mean in the ...?

**NP:** Oh, you know, you know what typecasting means, when certain actors get typecast as certain characters for far too long, they find it difficult to get another job. It can happen to an architect, I discovered. Anyhow, I tried to get this and that and the other. What saved me in the end I suppose was the fact that the Housing Trust themselves gave me a few commissions to take on. One was a second stage of Dr Kent’s Paddock,
and there was also some work at Pennington, and various other places I
did a few projects. Slowly the odd little commercial project would come
my way, an odd little domestic project.

OH: Where were you working from at that time, Newell?

NP: At that time, oh, that time I was, from home, wherever that was. For a
while that was in North Adelaide, in Barnard Street, North Adelaide.
Then I moved to an old cottage which I renovated in … not a cottage,
more likely a barn I’d call it, which I renovated … in Hawthorn. I
worked there, I just worked at home from that time on, and I just
worked by myself.

OH: When you say you worked by yourself, did that mean that you had no
other employees?

NP: I had no employees. On one or two projects I did, I did work with
associate architects on particular aspects of a project, but no, I was just
by myself. I was my own secretary, wrote my own bills, took my own
phone calls.

OH: What was that experience like moving into that context?

NP: Well it was, it was interesting. I mean it wasn’t a high point in my
career, let’s put it that way, but I enjoyed the freedom of working at
home. I enjoyed the freedom to come and go from the practice when I
felt like it.

Things happened to me personally during that period. I don’t know if
I’ve mentioned Monarto, but I met my future wife, Alison (Main), in the
Monarto, while I was working for the Monarto Commission, and she
came to live with me in 1986 when I was still working … Oh, that’s
probably a bit later, isn’t it? Sorry, I’m getting a bit confused. I left in
’82, I think the Housing Trust. Oh no, it’s not that much later.

I built a little shack on Kangaroo Island and I thought if nothing else
works I’ll become a beachcomber, built this little shack which was
really kind of, you know, … like a hard-top tent. It had no facilities at
all but it had some room [laughs], I had a few holidays there. Alison
joined me on one of them and then she subsequently decided to come.
She came to live with me in Adelaide. So we lived together in the
property in Hawthorn that I’d renovated.

That wasn’t a great period in my professional career, but it was an
interesting period in my personal life, and together, because I arranged
my work to sort of suit me [laughs], we were able to find time to go
travelling a little bit. In 1980, 1985, this is before we got together
actually, Alison decided that we should travel somewhere together. She
said I was too hooked up in Greece, you know, I’d been to Greece in the early-60s, and hadn’t got it out of my head. I needed a change and we should go to India. That was fine, that was fine with me, and we looked up travel books and such like, and India sounded great.

But then I was having a lot of back problems then. I’ve got a back problem which spasmodically gives me, or gave me then, a lot of trouble. I’d go into back spasms and be disabled relatively for months at a time. I’d just come through an episode like this when we were contemplating going to India, and I thought the trains and the hotels might be rather difficult.

So we opted for Japan as an alternative. I didn’t know much about Japan except that I knew about their architecture; I knew they had nice gardens. We went to Japan in late-October. We went to Tokyo, we went down to Kyoto, and in Kyoto I saw a couple of gardens and thought they were pretty terrific, particularly one, the Silver Pavilion Garden, struck me as being extremely exquisite.

Then we got a book called, The Guide to Gardens in Kyoto, by a couple of American landscape architects, and I discovered that what we’d seen in Kyoto was just the top of the treasure chest of all the other gardens one could see. I’d also been very attracted to the City of Kyoto. And we found time to read books we’d brought back with us. As the years passed, I developed a desire to go back again, and we went back in November 1989, so it was a good three years later we finally went back. Three years? Yes, three years later. I think I said ’85, I must have meant ’86, no ’85. Anyhow, sorry, [laughs] rambling on.

We went back in ’89; we went back in November. We thought we were going to be too late for the autumn colours because Alison was doing an Art course here, and she had to do some presentations. So we went too late for what we thought was the real time to be there for autumn colour, but we discovered the season itself was also late, and the season was not only late, but because the season was late the tourists had gone home, so we had this combination of wonderful autumn scenery, and the freedom to enjoy it without too many other people around. It was brilliant, it was the best autumn I ever saw in Japan, and I’ve seen quite a few subsequently, but it was just glorious. The sight of a grove of Maple trees in full autumn colour, it’s just absolutely mind-blowing. We saw a number of gardens, and there were some gardens that were so emotionally overwhelming that I cried, tears came to my eyes in the sheer beauty of the gardens. I was just amazed.

When we came back I was absolutely hooked, I was besotted with these gardens, it became an obsession for me, so we decided to go and see them. The ideal would be to go and see them as often as we could, as
many seasons as we could. The next one we chose spring, spring we came two or three years later, then it was winter.

Then about that time I suppose Alison said, *We’ve seen so many of these gardens. We’re learning only so much about them, we could write a book,* and I thought, *Don’t be crazy, who’d read a book by a couple of Australian architects, nobody would take that seriously, a book about Japanese gardens.* Well we had some advantages and the more we thought about it I thought, *Well why not?* We could travel cheaply in Japan, which sounds ironic, but the fact that you’re a foreigner you can get a thing called the Rail Pass, which gets you on all these fast trains relatively cheaply, so you can do big distances quite cheaply, compared to what the Japanese themselves would pay. Furthermore, the Japanese back then didn’t get very much time to go travelling because they were working long hours, and many days of the week, I think they were still working all day Saturday, or certainly most of it. Anyhow the idea took us on, and we thought, *Why not, give it a go.*

I cashed in some superannuation policies I had to fund the thing, and then we travelled up to Japan several times, about a month each time. We went for two or three trips when we covered the country from the north right down to the south, and visited as many gardens outside Kyoto as we could. Most of the gardens are in Kyoto because that’s the traditional capital, but there are other sorts of gardens all over the place. We travelled up and down the country, it was great fun, and finally wrote the book.

**OH:** And taking photos?

**NP:** Taking photographs, yep.

**OH:** Noting?

**NP:** Yeah, and Alison prepared a little presentation which we showed to Wakefield Press at one stage, and rather to my surprise they said, *Yeah, well this is just mad enough, we could, might go somewhere with this* [laughs], and they supported it and so ... Well I mean they didn’t support it by giving me finance, but they agreed that they would publish it, and so we went ahead and we completed the thing, and lo and behold we published a book in 2002, I think. It was published, by Wakefield Press.

Stephanie Johnston, who was part of Wakefield Press in those days, arranged a co-publication with an American company called Norton’s, and Norton’s brought about ... Norton’s thought this would go alright. Americans like small coffee table books. Americans don’t travel but they like to think about travel, so we thought the book would be a travel,
a travel guide. We thought it was a guide to the gardens, but the Americans wanted something a little bit more sort of formalised, to use the phrase, a little hardcover book which actually also looked like a kind of a coffee table book, sorry, mini coffee table book. It wasn’t quite our idea, it was what they wanted, and they ordered 5,000 of these things, which Stephanie thought was just terrific. You can sell 5,000 in … No, 7,000, they ordered 7,000, that’s right, and that paid for the publication, so that was good. So everything Stephanie made on top of that, was going to be a profit, so she thought, *If we can sell 7,000 in America, we might be able to sell about 5,000 in Australia* [laughs]. Alas, I don’t think that quite worked out, and I think there’s a [laughs] big stack of remaining books somewhere at the moment. Every now and then somebody tells me, *I’ve just bought a copy of your book for about $5, or something*, the price keeps coming down [laughs]. So that was fun, and that was part of my retirement program. So in between these little jaunts up to Japan and back, I did potter around doing a bit of work.

Perhaps one of the most interesting ones I did, perhaps the most successful one, was the second stage of Dr Kent’s Paddock.

**OH:** And was there land that was available to be built on?

**NP:** This land, this land had been reserved. One thing that actually the Council did not agree with our original plan about, was our desire to build a tall residential block. On the high end of the site, that’s up near the old brewery – remember the old brewery there – on that end of the site we had intended in our original thinking, back at the time I was with the Trust, to put an eight-storey I think it was, unit for pensioners to live in. Now I knew from my experience that pensioners actually liked living in high buildings because they spend a lot of time in their rooms, and they like to see a view, and that particular site had a fantastic view because it overlooked Prince Alfred College oval to the hills, so it was just an amazing, amazing place to live. The scale was right, the scale would not hurt anybody, just this big open space in front of the other Trust units down the hill a bit, they were up to three storeys high, and there was already high buildings on the brewery site and so I just thought it knitted in with all that.

But the Council, particularly Brian Polompka, who was major at the time if I remember correctly, he was convinced that old people should not live high … Adelaide has got this fear of height. Alex, Alex used to say, Alex Ramsey used to say that Adelaide people are born with the knowledge they can’t walk up stairs, and the idea of a high building alarms people living in Adelaide. In other parts of the world they seem to accept them quite cheerfully, but here it’s, there’s something about a high building which is extremely problematic, and they were convinced that old people should not live up in a high building. So we didn’t get
anywhere with that, and then I think the Housing Trust internal costing made them feel they couldn’t really [laughs] support a high building. They’re fairly expensive things to maintain, they’re expensive with lifts to run, and the cost of building high became more expensive over the years as building controls became more strict.

So okay, the land was there, so the Housing Trust decided just to put up this, another group of three-story flats and some two-storey townhouses, which I did, and that worked alright, and we got a bit of recognition from the local government, some sort of a, I don’t know, award for something or other.

So a few projects like that kept me rolling around, but it was a, it was not an extremely productive year, time of my life.

**OH:** Dr Kent’s Paddock was recognised by a number of awards in the 1982-83, the Institute of Architects (Local Chapter) and the Civic Trust.

**NP:** It got a Civic Trust award. The Institute of Architects gave it a commendation in that year.

**OH:** Right, but in 2007 the Institute, the South Australian Chapter, gave it a 25-year award.

**NP:** That’s right, that’s right. That was a great surprise to me [laughs]. I don’t think I mentioned this last time but ... I did a number of these bigger projects, and I always thought Dr Kent’s Paddock had an edge on the others, it just seemed to work better, a better site, perhaps more interesting, a big development and you were able to do more with it. The internal garden seemed to work nicely, so we thought, Let’s nominate this for an award. We’ll get one this year or we never will on this building, that’s it [laughs], that’s the whole lot done.

Then we got a phone call from the Trust [Institute] saying, You’d better turn up for the award ceremony. So we thought, Oh, we must be successful, but when we got there we didn’t get what we wanted, we got a commendation. A commendation is okay, that’s the second prize. The first prize went to a little development by Guy Maron in Carrington Street, which surprised me a little bit, but anyhow that’s the way it worked out.

So what you do at these sort of ceremonies, you’re all dressed up in your monkey suit, and you go up and collect your little ticket, and you go and sit down. But the Principal Architect and I were both there, and the Principal Architect decided that we would both go up together and do this. I sort of followed the Principal Architect along and got the presentation, the certificate.
Now normally nobody says anything at these things, particularly anybody who receives a commendation, but the Principal Architect decided that this was time he was going to make a speech. [laughs]. And he made a speech about how this was the first award that the Housing Trust had ever received, and how proud he was of his colleagues [laughs]. I always cringed when I was referred to as one of his, not colleagues so much as his team, this, that and the other, and to do so with all those people grinning from all these tables was a [laughs] humiliating moment, like a dream when you find yourself walking down the street undressed [laughs], in some embarrassing position. Anyhow that passed and I never quite got over it [laughs]. Then one day I was sitting at the table here, I was sitting up and I was looking at The Independent ... little paper that came out for a while, Saturday morning it was. I opened it up and lo and behold there’s all the architectural awards announced, and this thing had picked up a 25-year award.

Now the 25-year award had only just been instituted I think two or three years previously, and in fact the first such award had gone to the University Union Building that Bob Dickson had designed. This was the second one after a gap of about two years from that announcement, and apart from being amazed, of course I was obviously chuffed about it, and there it was. So we didn’t get what we wanted back in 1982, whenever it was, but it was very nice to get some recognition later on.

OH: That’s a great story. When you were in your private practice after you finished with the Housing Trust officially, you were doing a bit of tutoring at the University of Adelaide?

NP: Mm.

OH: What was that experience like?

NP: I found it very interesting. I did that mainly through the good offices of my friend Albert Gillessen, who was a lecturer down there and when they, when the, at the end of the year the thesis students, the final year thesis students, they usually used to invite other lecturers in to help the thesis students through with their, their thesis work, and Albert got me this gig a few times. I enjoyed it very much, I just liked working with the students. I like engaging with these young minds, it was good, but that was all it was. I met some nice kids, some of them I still speak to now and then [laughs].

OH: That’s nice. Newell, what about design and architecture in Adelaide in the ’80s and early-90s?
Well this was the other thing which had stymied me a little bit when I came out of practice. Not only was I considered old hat, well I was considered old hat I think. I mean I think it’s an aspect, you can go through various stages, and I think Bob shared this too from a different perspective. You start off and you may be regarded as promising, if, if things go well for you that is, you’d be promising, and then you become – what’s the next from promising? You’re promising for a long time.

[Laughter]

Then you become established, and then you become respected, and then you become old hat. Then you’ve got to live another 20 years to be rediscovered, if you’re lucky. So when I came out of the, when I came out of the Housing Trust it was my old-hat period [laughs]. Fashions had changed. Modernism, such as it was, had been abandoned by all the architects who were interested in post-Modernism. There were all sorts of theories about what buildings should look like, which were certainly antithetical to some of the ideas of Modernism, the theories about concept, theories about this, that and the other, and post-Modernism looked at history and revisited history, and looked for historical references and buildings, and so on, and the ideas that we formulated were no longer of much interest in the profession. Also, also, perhaps more importantly even, was that the circumstances that we built up our original vocabulary on had also changed.

Our buildings were very much craft buildings, that they relied very much on the crafts of people who worked with timber, and people who laid bricks, those sorts of hands-on factors in the building, hands-on circumstances. Timber itself was changing, the availability of certain timbers had become more problematical, and furthermore one began to worry about the sorts of timbers we used. In my earlier days it was nothing, you would specify jarrah or some Australian hardwood, or imported teak, or whatever, without questioning the fact that it was fine to use such a material. But by the time I’d returned to practice, one began to worry about such things as sustainability, and it became very difficult to your, to yourself, to say, Let’s do this, let’s do that, and let’s use these materials. You’re thinking, Oh my God, what rain forest am I chopping down in order to do this? At least I began to worry about that quite a lot, and you find that you’ll begin to restrict your palette.

The bricks themselves had changed because the old way of making bricks, which resulted in uneven bricks, they used to burn them, burn bricks around coal fires, and those closest to the fire would get very over-burnt and rough, and often mould together. Then those the further distance away would be the perfect bricks, and those on the outside would be used for inside bricks, they’d be soft. So you had this slight range and variation in colour as you looked through the brick matches
you were getting. I found the bricks interesting.

Then there became a desire for bricks to have perfectly square arrises. People would look at the brick and they’d find a little bend or chip or something in the arris, and that’s not very good brick, and so they wanted perfect bricks. So the manufacturers decided to support this new fashion, they made perfect bricks, and the perfect bricks were so boring [laughs], you couldn’t, you couldn’t really use them to get an interesting wall out of them, and then manufacturers started doing things to them. They tumbled them and they bashed them around, and they mixed up funny colours, and things like that to make them interesting again.

So the materials became difficult, the craftspeople disappeared, so the buildings that we did just became more and more difficult to achieve I think. So that, that combination of fashion movement and the unavailability of certain resources, the difficulty in doing the things that way, just meant that fashions had moved on and we were regarded as part of the old fashion.

I think Bob in his own way had the same problem too for a while. His practice suffered.

OH: Interesting! I’m getting the feeling almost of a generational change in the way that architecture, say in Adelaide and perhaps wider ...

NP: Well it’s, it’s natural. I mean we did the same thing when I was young to a previous generation [laughs]. We rejected wholesale-y their ideas about style and detail, and history, and all that sort of thing, it was rubbish, Away with that, Modernism in. So it’s what every generation does to the previous one. It’s the way they survive I think, you see sort of the young bull, old bull, taking over the herd.

[Laughter]

OH: That’s, that’s a nice image! So you’ve touched on retirement in terms of the project with the Japanese gardens. What other benefits were there for you in retiring, Newell?

NP: Well that really, I think the, the benefit of being in control of your own time and your own life. That sums it up, yep! I retired slowly, I didn’t retire in a heap, I just kept on working until finally the work became less, less than I could manage to support an insurance policy on. [laughs]. No, I don’t think I can say much more about that. It’s a rather boring part [laughs].

OH: Recently you’ve been involved in writing your memoirs, and I am interested to know what has that process involved for you.
Oh, well that’s slightly complex. The memoirs came, came out of a previous idea. I probably have mentioned that my father was a missionary in New Guinea for many years. He started up there in 1927 off and on, mainly with a break for the War. He was a missionary there until 1949, 1950, something like that. He had a very interesting life. He went up there in the days of high colonialism, he had had many adventures. He had survived the War somehow, he’d been through an eruption. He’d gone back to the islands just after the War was over and seen all the destruction. He’d done all these things and you’d be interested to hear ... I, I found him an interesting subject because as a missionary he went I think as a theologian, but when he was there I think the more interested he became in the anthropological aspects of living in the islands. And he became … in fact he called himself an anthropologist as much as a missionary. And most of his writings about life in the islands was really about his fascination, his search for examples of instances of spiritualism that he saw in traditional native life.

He was interested in the way magic was used to, used in a number of ways. Magic could be used to instil confidence in people who were trying to do something dangerous, like sail across a difficult sea. Magic could help your crops grow; magic could destroy an enemy. Magic could do many, many things, and magic was often associated with the spiritual power of an individual, and spiritual power lay sometimes in the head and sometimes in the body. Various aspects of cannibalism are more to do with, the ritual of cannibalism more to do with access to spiritual power that you feel might belong in somebody. You can get access to the spiritual power by consuming part of that person.

Incidentally, have you ever read a book called Perfume?

By Susskind?

[Recorder is turned off and then back on]

We’re now resuming the interview after a phone call.

But when my father, when my father left the church he did so under difficult circumstances which, which were understandable from his perspective, but I don’t think were well-respected by the church ( ) much to do with the enormous problems he faced after four years of working in the islands by himself, trying to support a family down here, and things just were not working out, it just became unsupportable, that sort of life. So he had a choice of letting his family starve virtually, or leaving the church. He left the church, went and got a job as an Education Officer for the government, got much better pay and was able to retire with at least a little bit savings after a number of years, so
much, so much so. Anyhow that disassociated him with the church, and I think it also disassociated him from the work he really loved.

When he came back to Australia he didn’t have too many friends down here, and when he died finally, there was no eulogy for him. I hadn’t prepared one, my mother had organised the whole funeral, and nobody else had one. In fact the eulogy was a reverse eulogy. He had given a letter to the Minister who presided over the funeral to read. It was very moving, it was a letter of love to life and his family, and all he had done. It was really touching. I’ve, I’ve always, I thought then, *This is not good enough in the sense it’s far too civilised for somebody. Something has got to be done about it*. That was in the back of my mind for many years, and when I retired I finally thought, *Well I should try and write something about this*. And I was encouraged to start by the birth of a granddaughter, our first granddaughter, and I looked at this little kid, and I was already in, let me see, I was already in my early-80s. No I wasn’t, that’s not quite true. How old am I? I’m 85, 2004. No, late-70s wasn’t it, something like that, sorry.

So I started … first of all, I wrote her a long letter. Anyhow I don’t want to go through all the boring detail, but I started writing her letter, and this became a document about my father’s life, and I thought, *While I’m doing this I might as well write myself up*. So I wrote these two great long documents about 100,000 words each, one about his life and one about mine.

**OH:** So you must have had to do a considerable amount of research on your father’s life, Newell?

**NP:** It was very difficult. Yes, I did some research, I did what I could. I went to the Mitchell Library and looked up documents there. I got in touch with the Uniting Church to get their own historical documents and whatever they had, but unfortunately there wasn’t much material because what happened was my father did have a lot of material, but this had got destroyed during the War, so that was all, that was all gone many years of work, a lot of stuff. It was tragic to read the list of stuff that he lost. When he made a War Claims, a War Damage Claims at the end of the, end of the War, just a list of stuff, the work from translations and all sorts of work on dialects and language and stuff, lost all that, and my mother threw out all his personal letters. So there wasn’t very much to go on except a lot of articles, and some notebooks he’d made of newspaper clippings and things like that, and fortunately all his photographs. So that, that was a resource, plus my own memories, and my mother’s. My mother did write a little memoir herself before she died and I had that. So we just had that to go on.

It’s not a, it’s not a scholarly work because I don’t really have personal
insights, and that’s, that’s a great lack. It would be a much more interesting book if he had written it. In fact I once asked, I once told him when he had retired, I said, *You’ve had such an interesting life, why don’t you write a book?* But he wasn’t interested, he was more interested in growing some plants and building up a little garden in the Adelaide Hills. It was a pity but I can understand that having retraced his life, because I think his business of leaving the church would have been such a difficult thing to handle that I don’t think he wanted to, wanted to approach it. Besides he was just a man who liked being active out in the garden.

So that started it, and then I just thought, *Oh well, I’ll do my memoirs.* And I wrote them both, and then I talked to an editor called Penelope Curtin, who said to me, she said, *Look Newell, everyone is writing school-day stories these days, nobody wants to read about missionaries, but maybe if you just pull these two things together and just talk about your career as an architect, and your father’s life in the islands, and find some connecting themes, if you like, maybe, maybe you can go somewhere with it.* So I tried that, I think it works alright.

**OH:** Can you give some examples of the connecting themes?

**NP:** Well Methodism, my father was a Methodist minister, and I was brought up a Methodist, and I’ve got all Methodist hang-ups about self-denial and frugal living [laughs].

**OH:** Hard work.

**NP:** Doing the right thing and being ethical, and all that stuff. I mean I make a point in my memoirs I think, this can affect a career in a sense. I found it very difficult to work for people I didn’t admire, and who I thought had ethical values I didn’t really respect, people who were simply business people, who just were interested in making money I think. My father was, my father was absolutely uninterested in the idea of making money, so I grew up very naive about the idea of making money myself. I don’t think my father ever owned a cheque book in his whole life. He never handled the money in the household. He gave all his income to my mother who did all that, and gave him back a little bit of pocket money. He didn’t need very much, he didn’t smoke, he didn’t drink, he had very few needs as an individual. As long as he had clothing to put on and something to eat at home, he was happy [laughs]. So Methodism was that.

But also, more importantly, I mean it’s terrific I suppose what I’ve just been saying, the aspect of Methodism which I think was significantly a connection, at least I say this and I don’t know whether many would agree with it, this idea of reform. Methodism is inherently a Reformist
movement, its origins were in reform, and reforming the Anglican Church. So the notion of reform is something in the Methodist genes if you like, and in my father, he just wanted to reform a whole society [laughs], and I got into two reformist movements. One was Modernism and the other was Town Planning, not that I’m saying, going out and then saying, *I must find something to reform, here’s my flag.* It just, it just happened to fell my way that way, and it was just something, that I happened to be born at a time when these things were issues, and I got involved with them.

Now I say that was something genetic because I happened to be [laughs] of that inclination, because I come from a background of that inclination. So that was really the biggest, the biggest connecting theme. I don’t try and dwell on this too much in my memoir, but I do hope that the point comes through.

**OH:** Newell, in a previous conversation you talked about the fact that your father built a beautiful house in Rabaul, and you have a photo of it, and I think you made the connection there about his love of structure and beauty and form?

**NP:** Yes.

**OH:** Is that a connection?

**NP:** If I said, if I said Rabaul I misled you, it was in a place called Tabar, but also in Namatanai. He, he I think was, yeah, I think he had, I think he had a great sense of form. I think he was inherently artistic although he never found ways of expressing that. He, he could write very well, he had a lovely use of words. He could speak well, he could write with great flourish from time to time. He, he had a love of space, he loved gardens. He had a natural eye. I’m seeing little things he did. Once he got hold of a concrete slab outside of the house he was living at in New Guinea, and worked the slab out and just smashed it up with a sledgehammer, a very strong man, and then relayed the whole thing as crazy paving. A bit later I could see there was a certain sort of sense of form, an intuitive sense of way of doing these things, and when he built houses for himself.

When he went back after the War, all the houses had been destroyed. The Japanese had either chopped them up to build little huts in the jungle when the bombing, when the bombing started, or they’d been bombed to bits, or whatever, they were just all destroyed, so he had nowhere to live and he had to build a house wherever he went. So be built, he built in that period [laughs] four houses actually, four houses. The first was a rebuilding of a Namatanai house, and that was the most substantial one, but he also had to work up into the northern end of New
Ireland, and he built two houses up there, which were rather very small, nothing more than a hut really, and then finally built another on Tabar. They’re all very interesting houses to me because they show first of all a great sense of appropriateness, the way they are adapted to their environment, the way they exploit breezes and keep sun out. The materials they used always native, they just look as though they belong, they look very interesting. I just find that, I just find that an interesting aspect of him. He never said, Look at me, I’m a great builder. He just did these things, but they just worked, they just worked so nicely. Yeah, he was a good man for that. But he was very religious. We do have a distinct difference because I’m an atheist [laughs].

OH: So the process of writing the memoirs must have provided you with opportunities to reflect on your own kind of practice?

NP: Well, I mean yes, I suppose once you start down that track you just automatically get into wondering why everything happened. It is interesting to trace back and see that your life has a certain pattern, and maybe this pattern was, in a way, predestined by circumstances, by luck, by genetic attributes, whatever. I tend not to believe in the self-made person. I believe we’re all just happenings, that things happen to us which are really out of our control – where you are born, who you’re born to, the year you’re born in. Had I been born two or three years earlier, I’d have gone to the War, and the chances of being here now probably less than 50/50. So that sort of thing.

I think even the decisions you make that you might say, are acts of will, are partly character, and character is partly formed by your genetic background and the way you’re brought up, and who your parents were. There’s just so much luck, just so much luck in the world. But anybody who thinks that they’re superior for any good reason of their own abilities, or own character, or own invention, as though they’re an invention and therefore they’re, and they’re a terrific invention, I think they’re misleading themselves. I mean nice to think that but I don’t think it’s true [laughs]. But they’re the sort of things that I began to think about as I was going through all this, as I was tracing the connection between my father, and interesting in my own children.

Can I just digress here because you might be aware that I’ve two daughters who are quite fine artists.

OH: That’s Anna and ...?

NP: Anna and Bronwyn, and I can see how they also flow back almost through me to my own father, that they’ve inherited that gift, whatever it is, to see, to see things in certain ways which translate themselves into other forms of expressions. My father, mainly it was words, but the
houses he built, and also as a kid he used to, he’d write to me, not very often, my mother used to write, this was when I was at boarding school, and quite often he’d put little sketches in his letters of somewhere he’d been or something he had seen, or something, little sceneries and things like that. They were sweet. So I think there was always that feeling.

My father, my father was a spiritual man in a deeper sense of the world, and he emphasised the importance of the spirit as being the great gift, I think. In his case it was a gift from God. I don’t know who it’s a gift from, but I certainly think it’s the, it’s the essence of us, is our lives outside the material world, or what goes in our heads, which is not the material business of the day-to-day living, or making and getting and spending. To him, that was the all-powerful reason for existence. And of course he found it, he found it in his work. Others have to find it other ways.

My daughter, Anna, if I can digress a bit further … my daughter Anna, who is like me, has no particular belief in a Creator or certainly a personal God that keeps looking over our shoulder and helping us win matches if we’re a footballer, whatever [laughs], finds a need for some sort of spiritual connectivity with other people. She feels that she wants to be somewhere where she can share whatever she thinks is happening in her own spiritual world, with other people who might be having the same spiritual world. I think that’s one of the deepest things that religions gives you, and it’s one of the things we atheists miss a little bit that there’s nowhere we can go and share those thoughts and moments. There should be a … I think there’s somebody who’s written about cathedrals for atheists. Is it … what’s his name? I haven’t read the book myself. The art galleries anyhow, these art galleries are the new cathedrals for a secular society. Sorry that was all a, that was all a crazy aside.

OH: No, not at all, and your third daughter, Tessa, her eye is for …?

NP: No. Anna once said that Tess could draw a perfect circle when she was very small [laughs], but she’s a nurse. Whilst she has a good sense of, good, yeah, I’m sure she has a good, good sense of, a good eye you can call it, a sense of aesthetics, but her practice is nursing and motherhood.

OH: And that’s another form of creativity really.

NP: I suppose so yep.

OH: Newell, just to finish off that part about your memoirs, you and Alison made a recent trip to Papua New Guinea?

NP: Oh well, that was of course, stimulated by writing so much about my father’s life in Rabaul. Rabaul, Rabaul has fascinated me. I mean I have
such a strong emotional connection with the place. When I was a 
boarder I would leave Adelaide, I’d travel by train to Sydney, stay a day 
in Melbourne and on to Sydney, and then I’d catch a boat. I’d go to 
Rabaul where my parents would be waiting, and I’d have a holiday in 
New Guinea, and then after a holiday I would leave Rabaul and go back 
to Australia. So there would be outward voyage, the arrival in Rabaul, 
and it would be an exciting, happy time, and then leaving Rabaul would 
be sad, gloomy. So I have this very strong emotional connection with it, 
which has remained with me I think. But not only that, Rabaul itself had 
changed so much.

It had been destroyed during the War. I last saw it in 1939, ‘39–’40, so 
the next time I would have gone back probably would have been ‘42, 
but the Japanese had invaded, so that was it, that was the last time I saw, 
saw Rabaul, and 72 years on now I’d started, I’d drafted these memoirs 
out, and I thought, Gee, I’d like to go back. I kept thinking in various 
ways of going back, but the older I got the more difficult it became, 
because travel problems in New Guinea are painted at least as being 
pretty terrific. Air transport is dangerous, and people were dangerous, 
the towns are dangerous, there’s terrible diseases you can get, 
accommodation is pretty poor, all these things. And the older you get 
the more difficult it comes in your mind to cope with these sorts of 
difficulties, you know, you want your comforts and certainties [laughs]. 
Anyhow, then we discovered this little cruise which went up there, and 
stayed for a day and a half. I thought, Whacko, that will do, we’ll get 
back there.

Sorry, go back to Rabaul. Of course after the, after the War, it was 
blown up during the War, after the War it was rebuilt, and then in 1994 
an eruption buried the town, destroyed most of the buildings, and so 
now it’s just a desert, ash plain, where the town was. I thought I’d like 
to see it nevertheless, because I remember the harbour being so 
beautiful, it’s a beautiful harbour.

Anyhow, Alison and I went up. We had a nice little time there, and 
yeah, it was good, and then I revisited it again this year. This time we 
did a double-leg cruise thing which gave us three days there. And I was 
able to find the site where the parsonage was, where I was born, locate 
it, photograph it, see how different it was. It was interesting but it was, 
all this has really just sort of generated because of the memoir writing, 
because I don’t think I’d given much thought to Rabaul for 30 or 40 or 
50 years between, you know, between departing and recently.

OH: That’s a really interesting process that you’ve described, Newell, 
and that’s a great place for us to complete this interview.

NP: Okay.
OH: And we’ll pick up the final themes in the next interview.

NP: Oh, is there more?
Oral Historian (OH): Newell, thank you once again. I believe this is going to be our last interview, so thank you.

We finished off last week talking about your memoirs, and today I’m going to ask you if you could give some of your reflections, first of all on the focus of architecture as your profession, and over time how has your view, I guess, of your role in the profession changed?

Newell Platten (NP): That is a very deep question. Thank you for asking me [laughs]. How do I feel about my roles in architecture in the City? I suppose by saying the words architect and City in one sentence comes almost to the point, because a good deal of my life I’ve never been quite sure whether I was an architect or not. That is to say that I’ve always been equally interested in the notion of the city, what makes a city good, how can a city grow, what a city is about, whereabouts in the city do you want to be, what a city is for, so on, so on, so on and so, as much as architecture, and my attitude to architecture has always been that the architecture belongs, as it were, to the city, if it’s in a city that is. If it’s in the landscape, it belongs in the landscape. That is the architecture should never assert itself at the expense of the community it’s in, if the community be a community of buildings. This is a rather European attitude towards building.

Now if I can reflect here, maybe I did this earlier, but I have a notion that when young architects travel from Adelaide, they travel either west to Europe, or they travel east to America, and whichever way they go, they come back very different species. The architects who travel to Europe and work in Europe tend, I believe, to have a different attitude in the sense that they see the cities, or see their work in more contextual ways. Pardon me, oh dear, I’m getting scratchy … Whereas, the architects who train in America tend to see the building as a, as an object in its own right.

That’s an over-simplification of course, you get cross-fertilisation from
both sides of that point of view, but, but I can say Bob Dickson and I, in our own practice, were predominantly of European species, and that is we thought that buildings should have a connection with buildings around them, be it in a university attitude or in a suburb, or in a, or the city itself.

Sadly the Modernist period in which we worked tended to be an alternative view of the building was an isolated thing that hunched into itself in the building was \textit{it}. The context was just something that happened to be there [laughs].

So that kind of marriage of attitude to architecture and ideas about the city have influenced me for most of my career, and I sometimes merged from one to the other. In my active period as an architect I was always very interested in things which were happening to the City. I used to get involved in the various debates which were going on about, like the MATS (Metropolitan Adelaide Transport Study) Plan for example, the insertion of great freeways into the City, and the preservation of open space, and general feeling of this quality of the City, a City as an environment to be in, instead of an environment to move through to be somewhere else.

So those two things have always interested me, and I’ve always sort of counterpointed. Consequently I spent time as a private architect working in private buildings naturally, and then I went into the Housing Trust [South Australian Housing Trust] and working more in the public area, and putting those two together has been part of my life. Now I would not have chosen that, it’s just something that happened, and it was because I felt that way about things, but that was that, so that’s, that’s the most sensible reflection I can say about my life as an architect I think. It’s not been just really about being an architect, about me being an architect in a certain place at a certain time.

I was lucky as an architect, I’ve got to say. I also had a strange view that buildings had ethical value. That is to say they’re not just about gain, so I’ve been attracted, really attracted to buildings which served some sort of public purpose, or some sort of academic purpose, some sort of cultural purpose, as opposed to buildings which were commercial office blocks, and things like that. I don’t think I’d have known how to handle them. I needed that sort of emotional relationship with the work that was going on, and thus, thus a lot of my work was private housing, because housing after all is, is about love. I mean people, people build houses because they love the idea of their wives, their families, and things, they build houses to procreate in and bringing up families. It’s all, houses are, are sort of, I’ve used the phrase, which is grandiose I know, but a ‘temple to love’, and how can you not enjoy being involved in something like that? Whereas, if you’ve got an office building, what is
it? It’s a temple to Mamon, and that didn’t interest me at all because of my background from Methodist parents and so on, and so on. I was lucky at a time I think I just sort of fell into that sort of work, and I just kind of left. Had I been in a different sort of environment trying to do commercial buildings, the whole result would have been a terrible failure. And we wouldn’t be sitting talking now.

OH: And of course you had influences along the way that you benefited from, and also sought, like your work with Doxiadis and ...

NP: Well Doxiadis, I mean that gets back to the original point that I was never quite sure which was most interesting, the idea of the architecture or the idea of a city. Eventually it’s always architecture that wins out because cities are something so remote, something so far in the future you can never really ... They’re never tangible, they’re just ideas which may ferment and may not. As architecture you get your hands on, and some people think architecture is too slow. I knew a guy once who gave up architecture, he went into the theatre because he thought buildings [laughs] were too long to get up.

But, but the, cities basically interested me. I’m never in the city buildings per se. I don’t go into a city to look at buildings. If a building happens to be there I’ll look at it. But I go into cities for other reasons, the feeling of space, the feeling of community, feeling of activity, and the sort of detail, the tensions you get in, you know, as you move through cities, its streets and the shopfronts, and building fronts, and domestic fronts. So I’m interested in the city more than I am in the individual building, but my practice was individual buildings, and that’s what I had to do. Furthermore of course, when I was younger there wasn’t really such a thing as a planning regime in Adelaide. I mean, you could promote one, you could idealise about one, but nothing was actually happening, and we’ve been through all that before. So there you have it, really, a kind of mix between always falling between two schools and never knowing which I belonged to.

OH: What about your achievements, what are the achievements that you feel most proud of in your career?

NP: Oh, I don’t feel entirely proud of anything because if I look back at anything I’ve done I can always see the mistakes in it, and things which could have been improved. [laughs] And I wish I’d done something about it at the time, if I’d only noticed and had the attention to detail to do it, but there are buildings which sort of stand out in my life for various reasons, not only because they were reasonably successful at the time, but because for some other reason I’ve just been connected with them.
Probably the principal one I’ve got to refer to here is the Kathleen Lumley College, which I’ve had a connection with, ever since it began. I’m still connected with it, I still go to dinners there, and I’m a Life Member of the Council, or the College actually, which is very nice. And if I can say so, they’ve just hung a copy of the portrait that’s behind you somewhere. I hope it’s in a dark corner where nobody can see it, but I’m very happy to have my daughter’s work recognised in that way.

So I’ve had the connection with it, and that’s been rather wonderful, not for the buildings. I mean I’ve been able to see the buildings mature and they’ve hung in pretty well, that’s nice. But the wonderful thing is being able to see the garden grow, because I think I mentioned earlier when we discussed the building, it was planned around the garden, so I saw it there in its infancy. I saw it when it was a dirt patch, and now I can go in there and see the whole thing in a very mature state. Having watched that happen over the years has been really quite a delight actually.

So there’s that, but in the City I actually didn’t do very many buildings in the City. There would be one, there may be one or two private houses around the place, but much of the work I did was out in the foothills or in the hills itself, themselves, and so that’s it. Oh, the other thing I suppose is the work I did in the Housing Trust, and some of those better jobs are probably out of the City too.

I think [laughs] oddly enough, the thing I’m most proud about is the thing that is sort of almost the most intangible thing … and that is that when there was no, when the City of Adelaide was growing badly as it was back in the ’50s and the ’60s, when it was just a happening, when there was no guidance, when the vegetable gardens and the orchards and the vineyards were being ploughed under and turned into housing, all sort of formlessly sprawling all over the place and nothing was happening, hills were threatened to be covered with housing, and everything looked very grim, foreboding, and nobody was doing anything about it. And it was this emerging activity in the citizens of Adelaide to do something …

And I got quite passionately involved in that in some stage at the various degrees and various times. I was one of the voices, there were many, but I was one who agitated publicly in lectures and also in the press, for a change, and change eventually happened, so I’m proud of that. I think that’s, that’s a happy reflection for me that I did something and something came out of it. I’m not too sure that what came out of it was [laughs] quite what I wanted at the time, but at least it was something. That activity I suppose, as much as anything else, brought me in contact with people like [Hugh] Stretton and [Alex] Ramsay and the Housing Trust and, and just led on to those sorts of developments.
It’s very hard when you look back to know just what happened, you can’t quite connect all the links. All you can say is that there was this going on, then that went on, and you somehow infer that there was a connection of some sort. You can see those things happening in your past, and at the time of course you don’t, you don’t have a plan, you’re not following some sort of formulated plan that says, *If I do this now and I do that then, and do this, I’ll finish up doing that.* It doesn’t work like that at all, it’s just all sort of random events and you pick and choose according to your personality.

**OH:** But Newell, it was obviously important that alongside your work as an architect with your interest in planning, that you were involved in public citizen kind of work?

**NP:** Yep! Well that’s what I am. I mean I don’t think any of us plan to do these sorts of things, they’re just, just where I was. I blame my parents for all this, of course, because my father was a Reformist in his own work in the Methodist mission up in New Guinea, and I just happened to come into a time when there were two reform movements going on. One was the first one through architecture, through Modernism, and we discussed that, and the second one of course was the idea of planning a city and could we control a city was the idea of the city being as a thing you could actually manage, as opposed to something which just sort of happened.

I no longer hold the view that you can entirely manage a city, I think you can direct a city but you can’t control it, a bit like a child I suppose, in a way. I mean you can encourage a child to do certain things in certain directions, but you cannot say to the child, *This is what you shall do.* If you do try and do that of course, you’re heading for some sort of disaster, and cities cannot be too rigidly controlled. Cities are too complex, I mean there are too many events going on in a city, too many contradictory events often, too many influences, too many things, too much stuff, too many people, too many ideas, too many brains, too many of everything for anybody, no matter how gifted, to sit down and say, *It shall be this way. This shall happen and we shall have this outcome at the end of all these happenings.* Which it really is nonsense, and if it never works out, and it very seldom does fortunately, you get very sterile cities indeed out of that. Okay?

Sorry, ask me a question [laughs].

**OH:** No, I think that those reflections are really significant in terms of how they sum up, as I see it, the contributions that you’ve made. And of course you have been recognised in a number of significant awards, Newell, and I thought that I’d just talk about three of them. One was in 1993, the Australian Institute of Architects President’s Medal?
NP: Yes, that came out of the blue, that was very nice. In those days the President of the Architects, of the local chapter, was Sue Marsden. I’m sorry, Sue Marsden … this story, Mary Marsden. It is Mary Marsland isn’t it? I think so. Oh dear, a mental block here… She lives just up there. She, yeah, yeah, and they were allowed to choose someone to give an award to, and she chose me for some reason, and that was very nice, mainly because … I was kind enough to sack her once when she worked for me [laughs], she reminded me rather sourly one day.

OH: Do you remember ...?

NP: Back when she was young.

OH: [laughs] Do you remember the citation for the President’s Medal?

NP: No, I don’t, sorry.

OH: Was there an event for ...?

NP: Oh well, they, they, I think it was at the Annual Awards Night when they give the awards to all the architects who have submitted entries for the Awards of Merit and so on. I think it was tacked onto that. I think it still is. I know I had to get up and make a little speech.

[Laughter]

OH: In 1995 you were awarded an Order of Australia (Member of the Order of Australia), an AM, ‘for service to architecture and town planning’?

NP: Yes, yes.

OH: How or what did it mean to you to receive that award?

NP: Oh, naturally you’re chuffed to get these awards, you’re chuffed and also a bit humbled because all the time you think you didn’t deserve it. You don’t know about the award systems, what it really means, people get awards for doing jobs they’re paid for quite handsomely, quite often. I think the awards which are important are the next grade down, the OAM (Medal of the Order), which are always for people who do things voluntarily in the service situations. I’ve got a friend who got an OAM for services to refugees, having formed a circle of friendship for the support system for a bunch of refugees who had come out. Those sorts of things are valuable. The sort of thing I got, it’s nice, I mean of course it’s nice to have the recognition even if you think you didn’t quite deserve it, or maybe got it for the wrong reasons, it doesn’t matter.

OH: Another award in 1996 was Life Fellow of the Australian Institute of Architects. Was does it mean to be a Life Fellow?
NP: It just means you’ve hung around long enough and you’re still alive, basically.

[Laughter]

OH: But not everybody gets to be a Life Fellow.

NP: I suppose not, I don’t know. I never think much about it, to be honest, that’s all [laughs].

OH: Okay! I’d like to move on to a final section of the interview, which is about your relationship to the City of Adelaide. You are a resident in the City, and I’d like to know what it’s like for you to live in the City, because I think you’ve lived in a number of places in the City.

NP: I have lived in a number of places but most of my life I’ve lived either close to the City or in it. I go right back to my early days in boarding school when I lived at Prince Alfred College. That’s only a quick walk into the City and I used to walk in to Rundle Street and places like that on weekends, to go to the flicks or whatever, so I’ve always had that quite close connection from the very beginning. Then when I first married, I lived in Torrens Park for a while, but my offices were in the City all the time. It was just a quick drive into the City in those days. Then I lived in the City back in the ’70s, then I moved out of it, and then I lived in the City almost, I lived in the City until the mid-80s and I went to live in Hawthorn, a suburban suburb, for another 13 years, and down to Glenelg for another seven, and then back in the City again. So I’ve been in and out of the City most of my life. I’m pretty familiar with it, and I’m certainly aware of the way it’s changed over the years. You don’t notice change from year to year, when you look back and you can see you’re living in a very different city to the one you remember from a childhood, and that’s sort of ...

It’s gone through various stages. I think when I first knew the City as a kid it was a lot of homogenous stone brownish sort of City. Buildings were fairly compatible with each other, certainly along streets like Rundle Street and Rundle Mall now. There was a strong sense of unity right along the street, buildings about the same height, and looked much the same way, much the same details, and built much at the same time. Then the newer buildings, the buildings like Westpac, Bank of New South Wales it was then, the Bank of ...

OH: On the corner of King William ...?

NP: The corner of King William Street and North Terrace. Buildings like the South Australian ... The Savings Bank, the art deco building, a couple of art deco buildings we had in those times. They all, they all fitted, fitted quite well into the old landscape. It was an attractive City, I remember
enjoying Adelaide. In my university days North Terrace was important to me, North Terrace and the Libraries and the Galleries, and things like that. I always valued the way you could be a student in the City, and you could be part of the activities, the cultural activities of the City at the same time you were cheek by jowl with places like Galleries, and then across the road there was a shopping precinct. It was a pretty well-organised, convenient city to live in, and we didn’t have too much motor traffic back in those days, so it was an easy City to move around in too as a pedestrian.

Then I think it went into a rather bad stage in the ’60s, ’50s, beginning of the ’50s and running through into the ’60s when, rather without any hesitation, old buildings were knocked down, lovely old stone buildings, and even more large, even larger buildings were knocked down and replaced with a lot of Modernist buildings. While I regard myself as a Modernist architect, I think a lot of the commercial stuff built in those days was simply hideous, and still is, but spectacularly so in King William Street I think, particularly up the northern end of King William Street. So a lot of poor building went up, and the City seemed to change, and things happened in North Terrace which were, had the effect of destroying the good amenities about it.

I don’t know, you might remember a time when there was a, the Bonython fountain interrupted the space running into the Museum, and a large over-scaled flight of steps interrupted the courtyard that faced into, into the Library. Now they’d been rather attractive spaces when I was a student. There were just basically little bits of grass and trees and stuff, not very, not very ... There was very little detail in their design, but, but they were nice places to be. I might have mentioned this earlier, but I have very fond memories of the courtyard that lay between the Library and the Museum, and the way it was sort of semi-isolated from North Terrace. You could sit in it with your back to a bank of grass, and have lunch on a lovely, sunny winter day. As a student that was sheer ... it was a beaut place to be. Then all these things were destroyed in the ’60s, and North Terrace lost its attractiveness as far as I can see.

One of the nice things that’s happened lately is that first of all we got North Terrace back. North Terrace is terrific now, it’s really a very fine work of landscaping by, by our local landscapers too. So slowly these things have been returned, and the courtyard in front of the Museum is back, and the courtyard in front of the Library is back to us, and given to us in different ways. So I think the City is lifting, lifting out of its, out of that period which was rather a bleak period. There’s some more interesting buildings going up now which I think are more attractive in the City. The surfaces are more reflective, more interesting to look at.

It’s interesting how, for example, the work around Victoria Square now
... For a long time when I saw the building going up for the Federal Courts, the new one on the, where the old Housing Trust buildings used to be. When I saw it going up at first I was very unsure about it, and I thought, *Really, this is a bit much.* gridded wall, you know, with all these different bits of colour, and when it was still alone, it seemed to be hugely out of scale and too much, too much altogether by itself. But since it’s got a neighbour, it’s got a neighbour in the SA Water Building. And it’s meant that you now don’t see the building as a whole, but you see it in fragments, and somehow or rather it’s changed its personality almost, and I now think it’s a very attractive, interesting addition to Adelaide’s architectural landscape. I like it very much now.

There’s a few buildings going up recently in Waymouth Street and King William Street, and one going up in Franklin Street, that use lots of greenish glass, and the facades are modelled with little bits projecting here and there, and they have nice ways of reflecting other buildings and skies, and things like that. They fit, and interestingly enough they fit very well with one of the best modern buildings we had, which was the, is it MLC or CML, around the corner of Victoria Square and Franklin Street?

**OH:** On the western ...?

**NP:** On the, on the north ...

**OH:** North-west?

**NP:** North-west corner. It’s, it’s a building of about ten storeys, and its facade is in the bluey-green glass, most of it. That’s one building built in that period which has hung up very well, but a lot of the buildings perhaps are a bit cheaper, or perhaps they were less well designed, of that period, have just not survived the acid test of time at all, and they look pretty dreadful [laughs], most of them, I’m afraid, and I’d likely put that down to the over-simplification of their design process. I mean basically they were designed just to house layer and layer and layer of office workers, and make as much as money as they could for the developers, simple as that.

**OH:** Newell, as a resident, what are the advantages of living in the City of Adelaide?

**NP:** The advantage of being in the City is, the advantage of being in any city is that you have access to so much variety in terms of services and culture, professional services, commercial services, and cultural activities. You have quick and easy access to them, which is why people live in cities. I think, I think the people, people in Adelaide tend to think of the City as something outside their lives. Your life takes place in the
suburbs and the City is something else. You might go to the City every now and then, perhaps for some shopping, or perhaps for some professional advice, or perhaps for something like that, but that’s rather different, I think, to the European idea of a city, which is somewhere where you happen to live. So the city becomes more part of your life instead of being something outside your life, and just something for special occasions. I’m happy with that because I just like the idea of being in the City, having access to the City freely and easily, any time I wish.

One thing to do to make this available to a lot of people is to get the density of the City up. Now this raises all sorts of difficulties in Adelaide’s mind, Adelaidian’s mind, because we have as a community tended to disparage the idea of flat buildings. We usually regard them as something for transients, or something for people who are kind of down and out, you know, good citizens did not live in flats, they lived in houses with gardens, and that a garden is essential to the kind of the wellbeing of the human. The notion, I think, is just slowly changing now, and I think there’s a much better acceptance of the idea that you can actually live in a flat and live quite happily in a flat. Of course, I’m living in one and I’m very happy here and it’s got, if you look out there, lovely big balconies, and that’s one of the critical things you need in a flat. You need a big balcony to get outside so you’re not inside all the time.

So, yes I just like, I just like city living. I wouldn’t go back, I wouldn’t go back and live in the suburbs. In fact the idea of the suburbs sometimes horrifies me when I drive into the outer suburbs, and I think, God, we just keep on building more and more and more of these things, and they make life more difficult for everybody. Of course nowadays we push all the poor people into the outer suburbs because it’s too expensive to house them in the City. So the problems for the people who are on low incomes are simply exacerbated by the fact they have to run cars to get everywhere, everything costs so much and it’s, it’s ridiculous.

**OH:** One of the features that is important for Adelaidians now, a new feature, is the bridge over the [River] Torrens.

**NP:** Oh, the bridge [laughs].

**OH:** I’m wondering what your view is on that.

**NP:** I heartily support the bridge. I’ve always thought there should be a bridge over the Torrens about there, a footbridge. I didn’t necessarily connect my thinking with the notion of a big football stadium, but I support the idea of the football stadium too. I think the, the bridge, I like
the bridge symbolically. I’ll put it this way.

There’s two ways of looking at Adelaide. One is that the City is the South Adelaide bit, and the centre of South Adelaide is Victoria Square, and thus the tension always goes to, What can we do about Victoria Square? It’s a sort of hopeless place, we never know what to do with it. And they’re finally doing something which is nice, but you could also look at the City as something which includes North Adelaide, and when you do that, the City as a whole, you discover that the River Torrens in fact is the centre of the City, and that’s quite natural because that’s where the water supply was, and [Colonel] Light would have deliberately chosen to arrange his City equally distributed around the River.

Now for reasons of topography there’s a bit more concentration on the south side than there is on the north side, but you can be sure that the original idea was to balance the City either side of the River, and indeed some major functions go to the north side. There’s a cathedral [St Peter’s Anglican Cathedral] there, there’s the oval [Adelaide Oval] which we’ve just mentioned; there are education institutions there, and there are other major churches there, and so on. So the City was, I think, seen in the early days probably as being a fairly central, sorry, the Torrens was seen as being a fairly central part of the City, plus Government House is located there. Parliament Building is located on the edge, and so on and so on, and all the activities of South Adelaide drifted to the north of South Adelaide. So they’re fairly close to that river edge, and of course the rich people also tended to live in North Adelaide, so there’s trans-migration across there.

I think the bridge sort of symbolically recreates what would have been once a kind of a conceptual idea about linking those two, two things, naturally, without having to do it just for people only, at about that point where I think the River would be perhaps sort of the easiest place to cross, I’m not sure about that. Anyhow, I’ve always believed in the footbridge and I’m glad it’s happening. I know there’s been a lot of resentment to it, a lot of resistance, but Adelaide always resists any change. It resisted the idea of a tram running down to the Entertainment Centre, and now you can’t get on the damned thing it’s so popular [laughs], and I think the footbridge will be a great success.

I think also we need to pay attention to the south side of the River. One of my problems with, with the Festival Centre is that it put its back to, to the River. I don’t want to criticise what is obviously a very popular and no doubt very fine theatre complex, but if I’d been doing it I would have made sure that somehow or other the lobby spaces had an axial view onto the City. I would have turned the thing at least 45, 90 degrees, I think, so that the, the back, the stage stuff didn’t present itself to the
River but presented itself back towards the Railway Station. I know there are topographical reasons for dropping the, following the slope with the auditorium, and things like that, but I don’t think it’s a good enough reason for doing it.

Anyhow, part of that aside, there’s just, just something that happened that we turned our back to the River at that point. There’s some small gestures to addressing the problem by putting a kiosk at the back, and then later on when they added the, the smaller theatre, the (Dunstan) Playhouse is it called, they did then put lobbies and things around the back to open it up a bit, but you’ve still got that big, massive thing in the front. Then other institutions and the railway yards were in the way, and that whole sort of area along there was kind of, kind of neglected, and various things have ... I mean if you think about the opportunities there, if you think about the opportunities to have places of activity, places where you work, places where you relax and actually have that wonderful ... it’s a beautiful view across the River in North Adelaide.

It’s been neglected and when I think that ... and of course there’s very little activity down there. You go into the Festival Plaza, you walk along this riverbank development that they’ve put in off the Plaza, and there’s never anyone there because there’s just not enough happening. So somehow or other they’ve got to get more happenings down there, and I’m not quite sure how they can do this.

They talk about restaurants and cafés and such like, but I think the bridge will encourage some sort of developments there which will give more life and permanence to it. I think the problem with the bridge might well prove that there’ll be then pressure on the other side of the bridge, on the Park Lands side, the other side of the Park Lands, and certainly the oval side, for more activities over there. And how they’re handled I think will be a pretty interesting sort of judgement call for somebody to make, because I think the bridge ... I think the bridge will be just nice to have as a place of recreation, as just a place to walk over, to be able to make the connection across the River at that point, transfer your leisure activity of walking, cycling, whatever, from side to side. I think it will be a great gift, people will like it.

**OH:** That’s really an interesting view, thank you, Newell. When you think about the City of Adelaide, and include North Adelaide, are there some architecturally significant buildings that you think of when you think of that area?

**NP:** I like the cathedral (St Peter’s Anglican Cathedral). You mentioned North Adelaide quickly, there’s a very nice cathedral, that’s the North Adelaide Cathedral. I used to think the Adelaide Oval was lovely. I thought the only way you would want to be in Adelaide, you’d want to be at the oval on a nice day watching a cricket match, or a footy match,
or something like that.

Then, then going north [travelling south] from there, I like Parliament House, I like the old Railway Station Building, a very fine collection of buildings facing North Terrace, I think. Now only the facades remain but it was a good ... North Terrace was, North Terrace was terrific, and one of the things I’m terribly grateful for these days is that North Terrace has been given back to us after it had been stolen in the ’60s. Where are we? North Terrace. I’m trying to single out buildings which are especially attractive. We can say all of North Terrace from King William Street down to the, down to East Terrace. I always liked the Savings Bank Building, I’m rather fond of that.

OH: In King William Street?

NP: In King William Street, yes, the old Bank of, Savings Bank of Adelaide, South Australia was it called, Savings Bank of South Australia? That building. I rather like the T&G Building going further north [southwards]. I did like, I did like the CML or MLC Building, and I’m confused which it was, in North, in Victoria Square we just talked about. The Post Office and the Town, the Town Hall I think is a fine building, if you like the ... I like the, I like the backs of buildings too. Quite often the backs are more interesting than the fronts.

There was a building I used to admire, it was the, oh dear, the Post Office Building in, and I forget ... I forget what they called it, in Grenfell Street. The front’s been retained but all the back has been demolished, demolished, and it had some wonderful red brick stuff running on down the side street. I used to enjoy that building very much. Often, often, as I said, often the backs of buildings are interesting. I think a little bit of,... I admire, in the modern buildings I admire the building in Grenfell Street, corner of Grenfell Street and James Place, it was built for an insurance company I think, the name escapes me at the moment. Anyhow it’s on … the north east corner of the intersection of James Place and Grenfell Street. The name might come back to me. It’s a very elegant refined example of Modernist architecture. It’s, I think it demonstrates, that building particularly demonstrates how important judgement was in, in Modernist architecture. When you strip buildings back, there’s hardly anything there in the way of detail, except window openings and bits of solid and bits of void, I mean either glass or another material. In this case, it’s aluminium, it’s crucial just how well judged the proportions are. And that building is good, that building is good.

OH: Is that Da Costa Building?

NP: No, Da Costa Building is not a favourite of mine, no.
OH: Oh, so it’s …

NP: I think some people highly regard it. It’s a smaller building.

OH: And it’s James Place?

NP: James Place, it’s, Da Costa is on Gawler Place. The buildings, then there’s a lot of clunky stuff, a lot of … This is getting hard now to find something or other.

[Laughter]

NP: I’ll have to think about this a bit longer. In a day or two I might try to think more.

[Laughter]

OH: Well I think you’ve done very well to isolate those buildings that you have.

NP: Oh, thank you. I’m sure I’ll think of more after you’ve gone, gone away, I could think of dozens more, no doubt.

OH: You mentioned Colonel Light a little while ago, and I’d like to ask you how sustainable was Light’s vision for the City of Adelaide?

NP: I think it’s sustainable to the extent we wish to sustain it. I don’t think there’s anything inherent in the vision that’s not sustainable. I mean I think the grand thing Light gave us was the Park Lands. He gave us two things, he gave us the grid which I’ll come back to, and the Park Lands. The Park Lands is the great gift for Adelaide. It’s the one thing which distinguishes us from many other cities, and how we handle the Park Lands I think is the vital issue for Adelaide now. There’s always competition.

Even now I think there are developers and people lobbying for more stuff in the Park Lands, office buildings even, you know activity. Their argument is that Park Lands should not be empty. Well I agree with that, but what should they be full of? [laughs] I don’t think they can be full of structures if you’re there for good commercial reasons. They should be full of activities which people gravitate to, thus sporting activities and bikes, and anything, anything that people do by themselves without too much mechanical assistance is fine with me.

I mean, you could raise the issue, say for example somebody comes up with an idea of fun park, what would we think of that, a fun park, like in Denmark, in Copenhagen, they’ve got, what’s the name of that place, very famous fun park? I can’t think of the name offhand, sorry, my
memory keeps fading on these vital moments. Say somebody came up with the idea of a fun park, let’s just project. Do you mind if you just imagine this because it’s the sort of thing you have to worry about a bit.

I’ve just said, *Right, there’s a footbridge going across the Torrens.* There’d be pressure I think on the other side of the Torrens to do something. Okay, well there’s Pinky Flat down there. Now the name of Pinky Flat is going to be given over to car parking on weekends when, when there’s a footy match on. Well there’s nothing new in that, it was so in my youth when footy was played on weekends on the Adelaide Oval. But anyhow it’s a vacant bit of land all the time it’s empty. Say somebody says, *Let’s put a fun park there, a great place for a fun park.* You’d have to agree, wouldn’t you? *Get a nice big …* what do you call those big round things that go around and around and around and then ...

**OH:** Wheels?

**NP:** Wheels, Ferris wheel, got it! Slides, a Ferris wheel and maybe even a big dipper and, you know, sort of a Lunar Park thing there. Well I’m not sure how I’d feel to be quite honest. I can see that it would be a terrific asset to the City, but we’d lose some Park Lands in the process. Those sorts of issues I think are going to be judgements which hopefully people will make, because I think it would be interesting to have that sort of vitality in the City, that throws these, the ideas up and things are happening, but that’s the sort of pressure that will go on the Park Lands that, I mean that, that, that I think is a sort of interesting pressure because you can argue both ways quite, quite successfully, I should think, or quite logically, whereas if somebody …

I mean, there was this to-do about the so-called grandstand in Victoria Park, to accommodate this ridiculous race that we have every year and there’s still, I think pressure may well come back to make a permanent building out there. Now in promoting that, people who say, *Oh, it would save the cost of replacing the thing and rebuilding it every year.* Well that would be great if it saves the cost, but to save the cost that way [laughs] you should get rid of the whole race as far as I’m concerned. But that’s another issue. That, that was never a grandstand, it was never more than a corporate box, or many corporate boxes to be precise, and the grandstand would still have to be put for the plebs to sit in, and you’d still spend months and months and months putting up all the other temporary things that go on up there. That was a debate which was mischievous in many ways because the promoters never really revealed what, what really the objective was and what was really happening, and people were confused by this talk of a grandstand all the time. It was the sort of thing ...

Now those sort of pressures will no doubt come back, and they’ll always
be around because as long as there’s vacant space there, some developer is going to look at it and they’ll say, *Mm, opportunity here, opportunity if I get this land very cheap.* And how we handle that I don’t know, but there I think we have to be very, very careful about Light’s heritage, because I think that, as I said earlier, and which I’m happy to repeat, is the great thing he gave Adelaide.

Let’s get back to the other thing he gave us, and that’s the grid. Now here I, here I depart [laughs]. The grid is boring, absolutely, essentially, irrevocably boring. It’s fine in North Adelaide, because the grid is broken up in small sections by topography. Light was forced to do that, he would have just given us another boring grid up there if the topography had not intervened but let’s look at the south side that really is, really is not good.

There was a time, not very long ago, when people were saying, *The grid is what Adelaide is about, let’s revere it. We must make sure all buildings align to the grid, and everything should respect the grid, the grid is the thing.* But the grid is just like a squared, squared off lines, and they disappear in all directions, into sky and sun and glare. Light himself I suppose did intend to break up the grid a little bit in, well in South Adelaide, by putting a cathedral in the middle of Victoria Square, but even that hasn’t happened.

My idea of the grid would be to corrupt it [laughs], if I was a dictator. I would say, *Do what you can to destroy the grid.* Now it’s not easy because the [laughs] damned thing is down there and it’s going to stick with us, but I’d be trying to make, I’d be encouraging, somehow or other, buildings to kind of encroach on the grid at certain levels to even the bridge, the roads in some places to do things, to sort of make the City, to create a greater degree of intimacy in the City. It’s just too much, too going on, too much the same.

The emphasis on the laneways is, I think, a kind of an organic response to the dictatorship of the grid. In other words if you ... and the laneways which came in as a secondary sort of kind of organic adaption to what people required if they lived here, they’re, they’re more organic, they have a more organic feel about them, and that’s where people like to be. They’re tighter, they’re more human in their scale. They’re easily pedestrianised and I think that’s a kind of a response to the notion of this other thing out there which is far too authoritative, too dictatorial, to compete [laughs] against somehow or other. I don’t know how you could corrupt the grid, but I’d be very interested to find ways in which you could do it.

[Laughter]
Newell, in terms of your relationship with the City, how would you describe that?

Obviously I can’t dislike it too much, I’ve lived, I’ve lived here all these years, but I can’t say I love the City. I’ve loved other cities more. I loved living in Athens, I loved living in London, I love Kyoto. I’d happily live in those cities until the end of my life if I could, if means could be found to do so. Adelaide, Adelaide was terrific for me when I was a young architect, it gave me an opportunity to do what I wanted to do. It was terrific in those days when you were young enough, and things were interesting enough to feel you could have some influence in the way the place grew, grew I should say. Adelaide was interesting in that it functioned in a way in which the ordinary citizens such as myself, could, could participate in public debates. In a big city you couldn’t, you were just, just submerged in the mass, but in Adelaide you had that opportunity. So, at that time of my life when I was into that sort of thing it was fine, I had no worries about living in Adelaide at all then.

I mean I’d go to Sydney, I would see how beautiful the Harbour was, and I’d think, Oh, this is terrific just living around here, but then I’d look at all the aspects of living in Sydney and I’d think, Oh well, Adelaide is okay. But anyhow, Adelaide was where my family was, my work was, and my history, all those sorts of things, that’s why I’m here. Do I love living here? Not really. I like it, I get along with the place. I have moments. I don’t think you ever quite love a city in a way that ... You’ve got to find, you’ve got to find in the City I think, places where you actually want to be, and I’m rediscovering North Terrace which I’m very happy to be doing in the City. If I think of the City now I tend to think of North Terrace as being its heart, but I think the City still likes the place where you go and you say, Ah hah, this is the City, this is why I am here.

Imagine being in Venice, you’d go to St Mark’s Square and you think, Oh, this is why I’m here. In London you might do the same in Trafalgar Square or something like that; New York, perhaps Central Park. In Athens you’d go to the Acropolis, and you’d have this sort of magic connection with a place for a while and then you’d go away. You’d be away but you always knew you could get back there very easily. Adelaide still lacks that.

I mean Sydney Harbour is more than a harbour. You go to the Circular Quay or something like that and see all the activities, you know, This is why, this is why I’m living here. Melbourne I think has got it too now along the Yarra. Most cities that are of any consequence in the world have this, Adelaide regrettfully does not. I’m wondering maybe it can create something along the riverbank. That would be nice if that could happen. That’s my greatest ... The thing I’d miss about Adelaide is just
that feeling, *Ah, let's go and be there for a while today,* and that just doesn’t happen, but I, obviously I like the City, it’s convenient, it works very well for me and the family here.

**OH:** And do you ...?

**NP:** I’ve no desire to change [laughs].

**OH:** And you use it quite well.

**NP:** I use it, yes, I try and use it. I think you’ve got to discover things about a city that is the city’s unique, because every city has certain qualities, a certain aspect that’s there for you if you just want to take the trouble to find it. And I find it by walking here and there.

One of my great criticisms of Adelaide is it’s not a good place to walk around, too much, too many decisions have been made to advantage traffic, pedestrian crossing times are too quick going ... It’s improving but hitherto it’s been too emphatically for the motor car, too emphatically against the pedestrian. And I use the City, you enjoy a city … everybody uses a city by walking, and if cities aren’t good to walk around they’re never going to be good cities.

**OH:** Newell, drawing the interview to a close and thinking about the variety, and the wonderful kind of reflections that you’ve made as you’ve talked about your career and your relationship to the City of Adelaide in all sorts of ways, I’d like to say thank you very much.

Before I finish I wonder if there are any other things that you would like to say that we haven’t covered in the interviews.

**NP:** Oh dear, I can’t remember what we’ve covered.

[Laughter]

**NP:** It’s been going on so long! Really, I suppose when you go away I’ll have, *Oh my God, I wish I’d said that* or *I wish I’d thought of that thing.* That always happens, but as you ask me directly and as I sit here, I can’t really think of anything I haven’t covered.

I wish they’d plant more autumn foliage trees. I wish the trees would be planted closer together. Hutt Street is wonderful, Hutt Street is a great work, we’re very fortunate to have Hutt Street. Yeah, I have to say … just to sum up, Adelaide has improved in the last decade I think, quite, quite significantly. Certainly in the last 20 years it’s improved a lot.

I don’t know why they’re redoing Rundle Mall for the third time, I don’t think that needed to happen, and I think perhaps that’s a mistake. I’m
glad something is happening to Victoria Square. I’m happy about the footbridge as I mentioned earlier, and I think the tram was a good idea.

I think, just one thing, I think the idea … I think Adelaide … I think cities … cities compete these days I believe. I think cities have got to compete for brains. I think you must, must try and keep the brains in your city if you can, either attract them and not let them depart. And if you’re going to keep brains in your city you’ve got to offer things that brains want, and that is good cultural activities, good recreational activities, good, good stuff at a high level, happening around you. I think cities have got to get better, Adelaide certainly has to get better, in putting up good architecture, doing good infrastructure, doing that sort of stuff that will all be, keep its head above the pack, or keep its head up with the pack, in encouraging people to come and be here, so they can work here as well, but bring their brains and keep their brains.

OH: That’s a great summary statement. Newell, thank you very much for all the thoughts and reflections and ideas that you’ve contributed to the Oral History Project.

NP: Well I’ve been very happy talking to you …