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DISK 1

This is an interview with Ralph Middenway and Bob Dickson discussing the Union Building at the University of Adelaide. This is for the University of Adelaide History in an interview on 24th August 2007, interviewer Rob Linn.

Well, starting with you, Ralph, do you come to Adelaide Uni in 1964, is that right?

RM: I came to Adelaide Uni in 1964 on a visit. I was here for a UNESCO¹ conference – I'm a composer by trade and it was a UNESCO composers' conference – and I decided that I would like to work here if I could. I was schoolteaching in New South Wales. I decided I'd like to work here if I could, I was sick of what I was doing, so I poked around and I got involved actually in a production in the Union Hall – this is actually relevant –

Yes, sure.

RM: – and decided that I would actually like to manage the theatre, I thought that would be a very nice thing to do. Now, sure enough, a matter of weeks after I got back home there was an advertisement in the paper asking for applications for the position of Assistant Secretary with part of the job description being managing the Union Hall. So I thought, 'Well, this is what we've been waiting for, isn't it?' so I applied and then got the job; and so my particular focus – two foci or focuses, whichever you prefer – they were managing the Union Hall and being dogsbody in the office as Assistant Secretary of the Union and the Sports Association.

Now, it's worth backtracking and saying that, at that stage, the Union consisted of the George Murray Building and the Lady Symon Building, which dated from the late '20s and late '30s, one or the other; and there was the Helen Mayo Refectory in between; and someone had – I should say that when the War broke out there was something like seven hundred students at the University so it was really quite a tiny thing and everything was in scale for seven hundred students: really quite depressing, given the numbers that we had at that stage,

¹ UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation.

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which was roughly ten times that number, I think. There was also a Wills Refectory which had been built and an upper storey on that and there was a coffee lounge and some higgledy-piggledy stuff built round the back. There was, when I arrived, a submission into the Australian Universities Commission for the next triennium – well, the current triennium – and the proposition was to build a common room between the George Murray basement and the Lady Symon basement, in other words a common room half-submerged in the ground linking two lavatories; and I thought, really and truly, who are we kidding? I got more and more cranky about this proposition – and of course it was knocked back, being so stupid – and round about the middle of 1966 – I started work in '65 – round about the middle of 1966 I'd reached the conclusion that nothing but a complete rethink would do the job and, however nice my boss was, he wasn't the sort of person who would dream up something of the scale that was required. So I set out on my own – irritating a few people, but I did anyway – and worked out what I thought was a useful sort of brief for an architect.

Now, I need to say that I was using ideas some of which came from the chap who was Warden of the Union at Monash at the time, Graham –

Sweeney?

RM: – Sweeney, yes – I was using some of his ideas, in consultation with him, in developing this brief and I reached the point of dropping it on the Union Council one and saying that I thought we really needed to do something or other like this – it was the Union House Committee, actually. And it happened that the Chairman of the Union House Committee at the time was Jim Warburton –

Oh, yes.

RM: – as I remember, and Jim I think it was said, 'Did you have anybody in mind as an architect?' and I said, 'Yes, it strikes me that really the best architect round the town is Bob Dixon'. Now, I didn't know at that stage that Bob had designed Jim Warburton's house (laughter) so my suggestion fell on receptive ears, we'll say.

I've been in the house, Bob.

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RM: (laughter) Yes. And so it all went – it had become obvious that the Union needed to reorganise itself, and so I was translated into the position of Secretary of the Union and my former boss became Secretary of the Sports Association only and round about that time the Warden of the Union, Frank Borland, retired and so through 1967 I was Secretary of the Union, Acting Warden and working up this stuff. (addresses BD) I think you were involved by that stage, '67, weren't you?

BD: Yes.

RM: Yes, and working up this stuff with Bob, and I didn't really have time to scratch myself. (break in recording)

Ralph, you were talking about 1967, about mid-1967 I think it may be, where Bob actually comes into the process. Now, would this be a time to talk to Bob about his background first, do you think, or have you got more that you could add to that?

RM: There's a couple of things to say about why Bob's work had caught my eye.

Yes.

RM: I'd been very interested in architecture in a detached kind of way, you know, an amateur kind of way, and I'd been working, running a theatre at the school where I taught in New South Wales and I'd had dealings there with one of the good, reasonably modern – well, 'modern' is the wrong word; with a group of architects in Sydney whose worldview was not unlike that of Bob's, so I was used to that idiom. And I came to Adelaide in 1960 and 1964 and I saw the Arkaba building and I thought, 'This is really lovely. It's obviously not finished, but it's a lovely building'. And it seemed to me then, it seemed to me in 1967, that the kind of architect who would do something like the Arkaba was the kind of man who would probably be sympathetic with the ideas that we were working with at the Union. End.

Bob, can you talk a little bit about your personal background prior to coming into the university situation? When did your partnership with Neil Platten begin?

BD: 'Fifty-eight. I went overseas. I started out young and, after some time in the Air Force I came out and took up architecture, and then I built myself a house at the early stage. (laughs) It was the first I'd ever done, and I had a

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lovely piece of land up near Morialta, and it was just sort of something that my wife and I just thought alike and we just built this thing. When I say I built it myself, I did. I couldn't get a builder, so I had to. (laughs) Yes, days of great restrictions and so on. So that took me a year or two and from then, after a few years, doing a few small jobs – I was working with Hassell McConnell all the time, one of the bigger firms here, and met Jack McConnell, who to my mind was a very good architect. And I decided that I wasn't happy with modern architecture the way it was going the corporate, all this stuff, and I decided – well, I didn't decide; I found that there was a movement in Italy, in the North of Italy, which had grown late because it was all repressed during Fascism at that time, they had a late flowering and were doing some wonderful work. And I wrote away and actually got an offer of working in Milano. That was a dream situation, you know: in a sixteenth century palazzo couple of wonderful fellows, and after the first afternoon I not only had a job but I had [?a partner/an apartment?]. (laughs) So it was just a dream situation. And I spent there through to – '55–57 in Europe and came back reinvigorated, you might say, to get into architecture here and I started out.

I had met a Hungarian entrepreneur before I went away and we got on well and just got him out of some sticky problems and that sort of thing, and I was no sooner back and I had a phone call from him. 'Oh,' he said, 'I would like to see you. I want you to do a house for me and I've got a hotel in Darwin I want you to do', and this sort of thing went on and on and I had a ten-year flow of work from this Mr And he was a demanding person.

How do you spell that surname, Bob?

BD: Zsolt, Z-S-O-L-T. He ran a trucking firm background, and he just was a mad entrepreneur, he just wanted to do things all the time. We used to warn him, he wanted everything done overnight, very quickly. I warned him all the time, you know, 'If you don't document things properly things will go haywire'. 'Whatever we build, we will have the problems', he said. (laughs) He was very philosophical about it – easygoing up to a point, but I always say he controlled people, circumstances and money like a magician. He was a wonderful fellow – not *wonderful* fellow, but he was an amazing character. And that was a long run,

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and that run virtually came to an end; it was inevitable that he'd have to go broke eventually, and he did, about '67, and that was about the time that Ralph and I noticed ---.

The wonderful thing, if I can say it, put it that way, is that we worked solving problems. You know, we built this round building and it was built as we went along. Witlow[?] said, 'Where's the front door going to be?' 'Let's keep building piers[?]', you know. Solving problems, that's what we were doing, in a way. So in a way we got a really free hand, in design terms. He was very conservative and very difficult, but it was a wonderful thing about it, you worked directly with the trade, solved problems with them and it was just a dream experience for me to with building, architect.

Bob, I was amazed to find that virtually simultaneously the University began talking to you about the Union but then Kathleen Lumley College had also fallen into your lap.

BD: Exactly the same time, yes. We had a – I was waiting for a call
The fellow from Kathleen Lumley rang – forgotten his name now – and we got straight into doing drawings for Kathleen Lumley.

RM: Was that after the Union had got under way?

BD: Just before, I think, before we'd had a meeting on the Union.

RM: Oh, really? Yes.

BD: And I was helping Ewell[?] on Kathleen Lumley.

RM: Yes.

BD: Then I got the call from Angus Hearst[?] to come and talk to us about the Union, so we had almost overnight these two magnificent jobs to do. And in the case of the Union it was pretty difficult (laughs) because the brief was
....., wasn't it: three times the size of the area, not much room to go anywhere.

RM: Yes, it was a very interesting project. It's one of the most interesting things I've ever been involved in in my life.

BD: The lovely thing was we had this client body, Professor Hearst was the chairman, and Ralph was delegated –

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RM: Well, I was the nominated client, in practical terms.

BD: – my client representative, and Ralph couldn't have been a better person. He was on the ball and with ideas, brought forward ideas [?which I discussed them?] and it was like the Arkaba experience but it was interesting, it was very direct.

Ralph, what point had you got to when you met Bob? Had you prepared a brief by then?

RM: I had a rough idea of the sorts of spaces that would be desirable.

BD: Statement of need.

RM: Statement of need, yes. And the obvious thing to say was that the Cloisters had to stay – for me, at any rate, the idea of getting rid of the Cloisters was unthinkable – and it was really unnecessary that the University pontificated that the George Murray and the Lady Symon and Cloisters had to stay because they were never going to go, anyway. But a lot of the other stuff was really dead useless in terms of scale, which was the predominant consideration, in my view.

I'd really had a sort of rough idea that something like what we now have would be the answer but, of course, the fine print was entirely beyond me. At any rate, put it this way: I knew roughly what I thought we needed. It turned out to be what I wanted and it also turned out to be the way Bob thought and it was a most happy conjunction.

There's one interesting little side issue, and that is that we needed – one of the other people involved in the Union project was Harry Medlin –

Yes.

RM: – you know, the sublime Harry Medlin – and Harry had been saying for a long time that he wanted a theatre licence liquor licence for the Union Hall and I couldn't see any obvious reason (laughs) why not and it seemed like a really good idea; and it occurred to us – me, him, I don't know – that Bob would be the obvious person to ask to do it so we could get in some joint time together so we could talk to each other, understand the language. So Bob did the liquor lounge in the front of the Union Hall under the foyer and we all had a jolly good time with that until some genius decided it wasn't a good idea any more and it's now

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closed or it was closed the last time I saw it. But that was lovely, and the net result of all of that was that we were all good friends and jolly good company.

Now, I wanted to ask you about that at some point because I hadn't realised until I read the piece that you wrote together that you'd seen, in fact, the Union as including the Union Hall and the basement part there as well; that you had a picture beyond just that one space, is that right?

RM: Ah, well, the Union – when I arrived, the empire that I came into – was spread as far as West Beach. We had playing fields and change rooms and stuff at West Beach and the playing fields in the parklands and the University Oval and the whole catastrophe, so one just got used to the idea that the Union family was spread over a very big area, and the Union Hall just happened to be on the other side of the Lawn but it was part of the Union.

Now, Bob, how did you two first deal with that space that you came to have to grapple with?

BD: You mean the Cellar whole thing, Union Hall?

No, I'm getting away from Union Hall, coming back to this union complex itself, because as you said earlier they wanted something three and a half times bigger than was there at the time.

RM: (laughter) That's right.

BD: Yes, on about the same site.

On about the same-size site.

BD: Yes.

RM: Yes.

And also, as Ralph said, there were sacred bits to it that weren't going to be touched – in terms of the Council, anyway.

BD: Yes.

How did you first get your heads around that space?

BD: We've got some nice photographs of the back south wall with a bit of a mishmash of – – –.

RM: It was a dog's breakfast.

Yes, it was.

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BD: Strangely, enough, there was some reasonably new building in there. There was an aluminium window wall bit there, was a dreadful overflow and trashcan and all this sort of stuff. It was a mess of one thing after another, and you've seen some photographs of it on there.

Yes.

RM: What had happened was that there was the Lady Symon Building first, because Sir Josiah Symon gave the money for that –

Yes.

RM: – so we had that. Then we had the George Murray Building because George Murray wanted to get in on the act as well, and so obviously the thing to do was have war memorial cloisters in between, and the lawn, and the Helen Mayo Refectory, there was money raised for that. So we had those, that central core of the whole thing, and that was the guts of it. And there was a kitchen behind the Helen Mayo Refectory. But, from the days when there were seven hundred and fifty or something students, every time someone perceived need they just clapped another bit on and it ended up just a complete fruit salad because there was no grand plan. No-one said, 'What do we want this place to be like in ten years' time?' But the sort of thing that Graham Sweeney was doing in Melbourne and the sort of thing that I was doing here was saying: not 'What do we want in three, four, five years' time?' even; 'What do we want in twenty or thirty years' time?' was what we were saying. And it shows. In Monash it shows; here it shows. There's just no point in fooling around when you know that the population is growing and the University population is growing and the University is growing. And we tried to estimate what the ultimate size of the University population was likely to be on this campus and we tailored what we were doing to that pattern of demographics.

BD: Looking at the site, you had this very delightful front with the Cloisters and the Lady Symon and George Murray and you had, along the back, the sort of back ends and they were approaching the back roadway but not quite, and there was a retaining wall there which was inside the boundary; and we were able to come over that retaining wall with a bit of structure, and we reckoned that that

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was a part of the thing that we could redevelop and pick up a lot of space there on several levels, and it seemed to be the, the way to go. And I had a very good structural engineer, Philip Fargo[?].

Phil, yes, I saw that.

BD: He's a rare engineer. He's a thinker, a designer, and we worked over that back wall there and he was going to span the structure clear over the retaining wall and down to the east clear over that. And I was frankly worried: I thought, 'If we're not careful we'll finish up a fortune and not anything as well as we should be able to do it'. But he convinced me and we developed that as the master plan for Stage I and worked to that, and it really was very fortuitous, I think. And Philip, of course, had to do some pretty clever structure there to span over that. There was beams coming – we kept the colonnade, Cloisters as the module for the thing. We found that the – we measured them

found the Cloisters columns are ten feet, seven and a half inches apart, by taking the end, you know, and dividing it up, and along the east front we've got about eleven feet. It's sympathetic to that. So this became our module for the thing, and there's a lot of architectural structural thinking going on about that, and that was really the core of the whole thing, I think.

Did you know at that point you were going to have to come up as many levels as you did?

BD: Oh, we planned that as Stage I. In this book you'll see the basic diagram of what the first stage was going to be, and we'd have to get rid of a lot of that tatty stuff along the back and get a new structure going, and the structure was going to be long span, both in the north–south direction and in the east–west direction, and some very clever engineering.

So as the client, Ralph, were you involved in these discussions as well?

RM: I was involved in some discussion, not with Philip, but it was pretty obvious to everybody that the Cloisters were going to provide the module: convenient sort of distance apart from a structural point of view, anyway. One of the interesting things from my point of view was that it's common knowledge that if you're looking at something and you see a curve and a straight line you'll look at

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the curve, it's just the way things are, and so we have this rectilinear structure behind but the Cloisters, the semi-circular arches of the colonnade in front, and it's that which gives the building its character from the front, these semi-circular arches, and it would have obviously been ludicrous to try and mimic that behind but what Bob did so successfully was to use the same-coloured concrete as the render and the same-coloured bricks as the original and so it looks as if it's just grown there.

BD: We were lucky to get the bricks; they'd forgotten how to make them.
(laughs)

Now, that's something that fascinated me, Bob, because not all architects have that desire with bricks that you had. You seem to have some special love of the way bricks worked.

BD: Bricks used to be lovely things. They were hand-made, you know? Then they got into the big tunnel kilns and they became all very identical, homogenous things and don't have the character they used to have. Now, we were lucky here in that, firstly, we found someone who remembered how to make the old face bricks, [?they were called a dome brick?]; and, secondly, we chanced on a very interesting brick for the interior. It was a standard brick and we looked at it being laid down in the kitchen: they looked dreadful, you know, just a bland, hard But the back: lovely. The character, the variations of tone and colour, the clay. So we ordered up those bricks, used inside-out, for all the internal work, and that was very good.

RM: This reached its apogee in the Little Theatre because there, if you look around, you'll see there's a percentage of hard-burnt and there's a percentage of glazed bricks, and Bob and I were poking round the brickyard looking at different sorts of things and I've got one of the bricks at home and it's like a brick-sized emerald. It's just absolutely wonderful thing. And the character of the inside of the Theatre is really, as I say, the apogee of this approach to the use of bricks.

BD: The best bricks were made by small kilns. They'd load them by hand and fire them by hand, and the brickmakers say, 'If I'm not careful I'll get one big brick'.
(laughter)

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Oh, yes.

BD: So that was good. And one brick kiln in particular at Kilburn there, they're used in my office and I reckon every brick is like an abstract painting, you could put a frame round it. (laughs) They're just beautiful. But you don't get those any more now; they're very accurately made and sharp-edged and uninteresting.

RM: Oil-fired.

BD: Yes.

Ralph, how did the University Council respond to these first moves to make the Union into something, well, pretty spectacular – not modern as such, in the Modernist sense, but – – –.

BD: Perhaps those two temporary jobs, the theatre and the ground floor – remember we had to open up the whole of the Cloisters, I think the back area there and clear it out. I remember all the rubbish going out in little trolleys on railway tracks, and it was wonderful to go into the back of the Union and there are these old buildings all around and the trucks all taking this stuff out. It looked like a Roman ruin. (laughs) Lovely quality.

RM: Sorry, your question? Oh, how did the University Council view this whole thing. Well, there were some members of the University Council who were about six months away from the fossil stage in terms of having a bright idea, which was really rather a shame. But it's worth saying that, at least in my perception, at that time the University Council seemed very much to me like the Adelaide Establishment with its brow furrowed – (laughs) not so much at play, but thinking, deeply thinking.

BD: We only hit the front page of *The Advertiser* once buildings called 'Funny', 'Revolting'.

RM: And the story there is that one of the – well, part of the story is that one of the members of the Council, a senior member of the Council, was an engineer on the staff here and his solution to the problem was to knock everything down and put up a huge, square tower. Well, no, not knock everything; leave the Cloisters where they were and the front buildings and put up a vast square tower in the back, right-hand corner or something or other.

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BD: Yes. Of course, we were speaking for people moving on foot and flexibility and trying to get as much space as we could near the ground, near the two ground levels.

RM: Then there was also trouble with some people who really had a deep attachment to parts of the building that they'd been associated with. But ultimately it became really quite clear, even to the most dyed-in-the-wool – and I think it's fair to say that there were some – that if the University was going to consider what it was going to be like in the future, it was heading in some direction or other, that the present arrangement was simply no good and it was really going to look like a pigsty.

BD: We got the impression that those two early jobs – you know, the Asian servery here and the Little Theatre down there, set up a theatre bar, were sort of appetisers, you know, for the community.

Oh, yes.

RM: I suppose there's another thing that I could say, which would perhaps seriously offend some people but I'll say it anyway and you can cut it out of the tape if you want: after I'd been here for about a year, so we're talking about the end of 1965, Harry Medlin had decided we needed a rehearsal room for the Union Hall and so we set to and where would it be and all that sort of [thing], how would you get there. And we wanted to duplicate the floor area of the stage for the obvious reasons, and theoretically the space there was big enough. But the architect, who was from the then University architects, who shall remain nameless, he reckoned that we wouldn't be able to do it because you needed two staircases for fire, all that sort of stuff, and it simply would take up too much room. So I took this as a personal challenge and I went home and designed a staircase that was half the width that he was talking about and still satisfied the requirements, the fire regulations, and instead of having a staircase on the other side we had a trapdoor and a secure sort of escape ladder. I dropped this on him and he was not at all pleased and he had actually been the architect of the Union Hall in the first place and he talked about 'massing' and the reason why the Union Hall looks like it looks is because of massing. So he was concerned with the outside appearance of the building and you fitted things in as best you could.

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This leads us into all sorts of trouble and so, for example, the fly tower is about half as wide as it should be because he didn't like the look of a full-width fly tower, so we have almost lethal counterweight systems in the wings and it's just an appalling theatre to work in when you're flying stuff because you're working from the gallery and so on. Now, I mention this particularly because the approach that we were evidently going to get from this firm was, 'We'll produce something that looks nice, that we think looks nice, and we'll fit inside it something like what you're asking for', whereas Bob says, 'What do you want? How can we accommodate it?' And in the process he produces a building which looks really lovely but it works in a practical sense. So you solve the problems from inside rather than from the outside.

BD: Yes. That whole approach to design is to let your problems lead you and to solve the problem you have to study it pretty carefully, and so you let the planning of your building govern everything that follows. You stop worrying about what it's going to look like; you just concentrate on planning, getting things working in the way they do. Plan is everything. And then you think about structure, and only then you think about delight. (laughs)

Yes.

RM: The particular reason that I mentioned, that I got onto this business with the other architects was that, because I had been dissatisfied with the University architects who'd done every job on the place forever, we bought into a fight straight away and the Union said, in effect, 'We do *not* want to use the University architects, thank you very much. We want to use Dickson and Platten', and that in itself created a certain amount of, but eventually we got there just simply by saying, 'Well, this is what we want'. I reported my dissatisfaction with the way in which the Union Hall work had been done and we put up a convincing argument and so we changed.

BD: We had in those days a staff architect who lived in the front of the building and he kept us on the straight and narrow, you might say. Ralph would say, 'He gives us a hard time ahead of the next barrier we have to face'.

RM: Yes.

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BD: And we had a Sites and Grounds Committee, who were people interested in the ---.

RM: And the Sites and Grounds Committee was, to say the least, fuddy-duddy. If it didn't look like their grandfather's mansion in Springfield it was no good, fundamentally. (laughter) So we got into more strife than Ned Kelly with the Sites and Grounds Committee, I think many or most of whom were on the University Council, and they set themselves up as fine judges of everything architectural and so on. And the stuff about the 'Revolting', 'Funny', was that Bob's -

This is in *The Advertiser*.

RM: - in *The Advertiser* - Bob's plan lobbed on the University Council or the Sites and Grounds Committee, I forget which ---.

BD: I think the meeting overflowed or something and it went to the Council from the Sites and Grounds Committee.

RM: Yes. And so there was this huge fuss and bother because two of the people on the Sites and Grounds Committee simply didn't like the look of the building. Well, you know, sorry.

BD: (laughter)

Now, I'm quite intrigued by the fact that once there is an acceptance that this is needed and once Bob's ideas start to become accepted it doesn't seem to take long at all for funding to come through AUC² and, given my background knowledge, AUC took *forever*, so I'm quite mystified as to how this developed.

RM: Ah, well, there were a couple of things that happened. The first was that the AUC was seriously annoyed with the Mickey Mouse submission in the previous triennium and - lo! and behold - in the next triennium, they get a double-barrelled one coming up and Stage I, which we were going for in the '69 triennium, was backed up by a statement about what was going to happen in Stage II, which we were going to go for in the following triennium. And so here was this mob that had come up with this common room between two dunnies

² AUC - Australian Universities Commission.

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who now had come up with a serious, fully thought-out, two-stage project. And the University Council eventually turned round – well, when it turned round it turned round a hundred and eighty degrees – and they gave that and the Barr Smith [Library] extension top priority for the '69 – – –.

BD: That was the big thing, wasn't it?

RM: Yes, that was the big thing. So they gave those two jobs the priority, and the AUC could see we knew what we were doing and they could see the University agreed with what we had in mind and so it was plain sailing.

Bob, it fascinates me that up until that point you were really doing – was it more conceptual planning, would you call it? And the fee, in today's terms, seems miniscule.

RM: Oh, that two thousand dollars was just a retainer.

Oh, I see. Still seems

RM: That was just to cover the preliminaries so we could get something conceptual in.

BD: When we got into it the AUC turned out to be very helpful. The south wall, we had these going up and down like that; we originally hipped them all down because the existing building was hipped down, but that meant a little bit of complication in the roof and they said, 'Well, that looks a bit complicated'. So we're, 'Fine, we'll just go boom, boom, do it that way'. It was much simpler, straightforward. We had to get rainwater off, of course, in between the bays.

RM: The AUC was extremely well-organised and thoroughly helpful, all the way through.

BD: The next bit hurdle was the east elevation, remember? The we're up there but the roof was going on when the Sites and Grounds Committee are going, 'Can't you just put one big roof over the whole thing?' What we were doing was building in stages, separate buildings, and it needed to be a building of that sort. So they were worried about the appearance of the front elevation and there was a big argument over that, too.

And here we had a wonderful experience. Mr Edgeloe, the Registrar –

Vic Edgeloe, yes.

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BD: – Vic Edgeloe, he was wonderful. ‘Could you just put another room out there?’ And it turned out that the Cinema Club wanted a clubroom, any rate, (laughter) and so we were careful, you just swung that room, had that roof continue over. It really softened the elevation and won us the battle, so we got a plus.

One thing intrigues me in this story, and that is – I think Harry Medlin’s involved – and that’s the bookshop.

RM: Oh, is Harry Medlin involved or is Harry Medlin involved? (laughter)

So I wonder if you could talk about that, because that seems – was that an add-on?

RM: Oh, hell, no. No, no.

BD: Well, in a way it was – when we got the request to proceed with Stage I: ‘And, by the way, we want a bookshop’. It was like that, wasn’t it?

Was the bookshop Harry’s idea?

RM: Yes. Harry had a poor opinion of the WEA³ Bookroom, as did many, and Harry is a good, straight-down-the-middle – well, straight-down-the-middle-left – thinker about things and co-operatives were obviously the way to go; and he formed the thought, years before, that what the University needed was a co-operative bookshop and if anyone was ever going to do anything about it it would be the Union, and that was his power base anyway. So he started out pushing the argument for a co-operative bookshop. Now, Jim Bettison who, like Harry, went on to become a deputy chancellor, Jim Bettison is a sort of middle-of-the-right side of the spectrum and he reckoned that co-operatives were a pain in the neck and you spent all of your – they were just too expensive to run. So there was a meeting of minds between the two of them over a period of a couple of years and eventually Harry conceded that maybe we didn’t need a co-operative but we did need a system whereby the students actually saw the benefit of having the ear of and the mouth of the University, so the University could tell the Union Bookshop what it wanted for next year in time for the stuff to be ordered and, if the University was going to help this commercial enterprise, then obviously the

³ WEA – Workers’ Educational Association.

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commercial enterprise had to return something to the University and it would happen by way of discounts on books to students. And it worked an absolute treat.

Bob said, ‘Oh, yes, we want to rebuild the Union and, by the way, we need a bookshop’. So the same kind of exercise we went through with the bookshop as we had done with the Union as a whole. And the question then came who was going to pay for it. I went touting around the Bank of Adelaide and the Commonwealth Bank and a couple of other banks, the ANZ, because we thought we’d like a bank as well. So I went round and said to four banks, ‘We want a bank branch in the rebuilt Union and we want a bookshop and we would be happy with an arrangement if you pay twenty-one years’ rent in advance for your premises we can use that money to build a bookshop’. And the ANZ was the only one that put in what we’d regard as a realistic offer and it was enough to do the job. We had a piece of building – at least a chunk of building – that was no use to man or beast and so we got shot of that and put the bookshop up in its place. That the sort of thing you’re – – –?

Yes, exactly. That’s exactly what I was after. One of the things that intrigued me from reading what you two wrote, though, was just the trials and tribulations of actually putting the bookshop together, particularly with that magnificent roof structure which I’ve never forgotten from the first day I saw it.

BD: Really?

It’s just such a beautiful piece.

RM: Yes, it is.

BD: The Cloisters had to hold it up, of course. (laughter)

I was going to say ‘But it didn’t come easy, did it?’

RM: No.

BD: Not easy at all. I remember Oscar Jones saying, ‘I don’t know how you’re going to *do* that’. (laughter) Oscar Jones was the first Warden.

RM: The most wonderful moment of all was when Frank Krall, who was then the boss man at Hansen and Yuncken, came to inspect the thing – a short,

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ex-brigadier with a cigar clapped in his mouth – and he came in there and looked around the place with a face like a shoebox.

BD: This is because they'd made a mistake in this roof structure thing.

RM: There'd been two mistakes that the builders had made. Anyway, he stood there, the cigar stuck in his mouth, fished the thing out, looked around, said, 'You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear' and clamped the cigar back in his mouth, and that's all that he had to say about the interior of the bookshop that we all love so much.

But that mistake that the builders had made with that roof structure, though, actually ended up in the Union's benefit, didn't it, the way it worked?

BD: No, it was put right.

It was put right?

BD: Yes. It's where the verticals have to go up to support the lantern, they were placed in the wrong position in manufacture, so they just had to – – –. It wasn't a big job in the end; they put it right. But, see, we went up to the Vice-Chancellor with the, because they were offering money instead of, and the Vice-Chancellor said, 'We're in this for the long term'. It was a wonderful statement, anyhow.

Absolutely.

BD: The crane was there waiting to remove it all and they fixed it up and it
..... ..

That's the part I didn't understand: did you actually have to take it out and redo it, or could you – – –?

BD: They did.

They did, yes. So the crane was used.

BD: The truss manufacturer offered a credit and that's what the Vice-Chancellor was not interested in, so that was nice.

No. It's a very far-sighted view.

RM: Well, I would like to interpolate something about the University of Waikato. There are some really good blokes around and good women around as vice-

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chancellors, and the University of Waikato Vice-Chancellor recently did something which I think is as courageous. A friend of mine's a fellow composer in Waikato, in Hamilton, and he was the consultant for a new concert hall they were putting up and he specified what reverberation time he wanted for this concert hall and the architect came up with something and reckoned that it was going to be half a second less than my friend had asked for and my friend said, 'Well, how much more would it cost to get it up to where it's supposed to be?' And the fellow said, 'A hundred and fifty thousand dollars', and so he went off to the Vice-Chancellor and said, 'Look, we can either build a superb concert hall or we can build an okay one and the difference is a hundred and fifty thousand dollars'. And the Vice-Chancellor said, 'You really think so?' 'Yes.' 'Go ahead.' And it's these courageous decisions that you really want from people in positions like the vice-chancellor in universities, and it's really wonderful when you come across someone who is like that. And Geoffrey Badger was certainly one.

BD: He was a wonderful Vice-Chancellor.

Yes. How did the building of the next stage occur, because my memory is that part was being used by then, is my memory right?

RM: That's right.

How did that occur with the works going on at the same time? I have a good memory of lots of builders and chippies and all that sort of stuff being around.

BD: Different builder for the second stage.

Yes; but the first stage was functional by then, wasn't it?

RM: Yes, but the first stage could be operated separately from the second stage.

The kitchen was common – in terms of catering, the kitchen was common to first and second stages, so the first stage was continuing to operate with – – –. The first stage continued to operate with the kitchen, and it was noisy and horrible and so on but they sealed it up as best they could and just went on, just went on and did it. Yes, it was inconvenient. But one of the things that I do remember with considerable pleasure is the absolute certainty of the student body at that time that it was necessary to do this and that if it meant that they had a bit of a

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hard time, well, tough, because they were contributing in their own way to the future of the Union and the University. It was really very far-sighted of the student body at that time.

Bob, as you saw the building rise up to this upper level we're looking down towards from here, were you just so pleased to see that the structure was actually coming up as you had that vision?

BD: It was a joy, it really was, to see each significant stage going [up]. And it was the time that we had to prop two levels of the lower levels of the east refectories, to in precast beams. It was just a builder's idea. He said, 'We could have these beams in on a Sunday morning', and he did. It was just wonderful. Then of course there was special structure for that and Phil Fargo, who's recently been called to task over the structure of the thing, did a wonderful job. The steel rod came up through the corbel, passed through the precast beam, over into the slab: the thing is as tight as a drum.

RM: Oh, absolutely.

BD: But when they had this earthquake scare they've got bolts plugged in there, they've done some dreadful things, they really have.

This is post the original, of course, yes.

BD: Never spoke to us. We studied the whole problem and put in a report, an estimate, for what had to be done and the Union or the buildings office put it out to tender. Five architects. 'We could have a look.' But they didn't even bother to reply to our tender when we put it in, and they all these people who knew nothing about the structure and we had lived with it – and they were boys instead of men, in my opinion – and what they've done is disgusting. And now we've got this stuff that how on earth can it be put right.

Ralph, you were going to say?

RM: I couldn't agree more. How silly is it to talk about structural modification to a building when you don't know what the structure is?

BD: Exactly. They didn't know what the structure was.

RM: But I made a point of touring the work site through both the building periods, or all of the building periods of the Union, I would tour the worksite at least

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twice and sometimes three times a day in order to keep tabs with what was happening so that Bob and I would have common ground when we were discussing contract variations and job instructions and stuff, and every time I saw something that I thought we needed to modify I would say to Bob, 'I think we need to change this' and all that kind of stuff. So that I had carte blanche from the builders and from the architect to interfere as much as I wanted to, providing, of course, one observed the protocol and didn't tell the builder to do anything; I mean, the idea's absurd. But if I had problems I'd raise them with Bob and it would all happen.

So in effect, the way you gentlemen have described it, it was a team approach, truly a team.

RM: Well, how else do you do it?

Yes. Where you on behalf of the Union and Bob as the architect and the builders were working together –

RM: Yes.

– to really make this building the best you could.

RM: Yes.

And I know as a user I've got to say it was a fantastic building at the time to be involved in.

BD: Absolutely.

But I mean the refectories you lived in, pretty much, but the other spaces, like the top storey, was just fabulous – on the eastern end, where the table tennis tables [were].

RM: Yes.

And I can remember that being used for exhibitions and many other things up there. It was an amazing space, really. But did you expect that whole series of spaces to be so functional?

RM: Oh, yes.

BD: It sort of fell out in a way. It was called a 'gallery' but it was wrong, because people expected a display of paintings, whereas the walls were red brick, brick, that sort of thing, so it wasn't really suitable.

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RM: And the Gallery is one thing and the Games Room that you're talking about was another.

Yes.

RM: There was a story about the Games Room which I think is interesting, and it's about the way Philip and Bob and I were a team. Bob and Philip went to the trouble of producing something as beautiful as the Games Room and then the electrical engineering consultant came along and wanted to fill it with fluorescent lights, because you need lots of light in a games room, don't you? And so if you had looked up you would have seen rows, a forest, of fluorescent light fittings, as you now do. And I said, 'This is not on', and we'd talked about the lighting thing and I said, 'This is absurd'. The electrical engineer said, 'Well, this is the cheapest way of doing it', and I said, 'I don't give a damn whether it's the cheapest way or not – yes, I do', and went away and did some sums and worked out how much it would cost to achieve the same result using tungsten halide, small tungsten halide. And the advantage of fluorescent is you get a hundred per cent spread, it's all the same; with the tungsten halide you get a variation with the pattern that we had. Well, it seemed obvious. You've got a distribution of one to two from the darkest to the lightest, but the eye can't perceive one camera stop, which is what that is, you can't tell the difference in one camera stop. So the obvious thing to do was to use tungsten halide, which we did, and that meant that in the Games Room you could actually see the Games Room rather than seeing the electrical engineer's thing. What's more, I demonstrated it was cheaper to use tungsten halide than fluorescent, and the last I heard the consultant was selling real estate. (laughter)

I'm not quite sure how to pull all this together.

BD: Neither am I. (laughter)

And I'm not sure that we even need to, other than to say the public's response to the building was – I don't know if it was within your expectation, but it was certainly extraordinary for a building like that to receive so many accolades.

BD: It used to be nice to go through it, but not any more.

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RM: I wasn't truly surprised because Bob and Neil are so good at what they do that it was pretty obvious that if you asked a sensible question, which was my job, you'd get a sensible answer, which was their job. And so I'd made sure, by consultation within the Union and as far as Melbourne and we actually went, the pair of us went, to Brisbane and Armidale and Newcastle and Sydney and Melbourne and Canberra and wherever you first thought of and talked to people about what had gone wrong in their places and what had gone right, and the result was that Bob was the full bottle on how unions work before he really got into it. That was a huge help.

And it was obvious to me right from the start, from when we really got going, it was obvious that it was going to be a really good building so I wasn't surprised.

BD: The rugged finish was recommended to us by interstate architects. He said, 'People stand up against the wall, put their foot up on the You don't want this white-painted, delicate sort of finish; you want a rugged building'. And that's what we set out to achieve. The bricks and the careful selection of bricks, the use of the concrete. I worried about this concrete and the colour of it. You could get additives in those days but I was always afraid of additives if things go wrong. I took the day off and I went up to Angaston and looked at their white cement: dreadful, looked like marble at a funeral. So we figured if we'd get a red sand and mix it into the white cement we could get a pretty good colour match to those Cloister columns, and we did. And we used that right throughout. They've simply painted in the bookshop, of course. You've got this sort of nonsense in the bookshop now. They didn't like the Cloister columns, they painted it white and now they're wrapped up in plastic and it's an affront.

RM: Yes. Well, I mean it's common ground that the Union has been allowed to run down and has been actively run down in a variety of ways – decisions not made and bad decisions made.

BD: See what Peter Ward wrote?

Yes, I've read that.

RM: But to go back to your question, the reception of the building: as I said, I thought it was going to be what we wanted and I thought that people would like

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it, and I wasn't really terribly surprised when, at the end of our first year of operation in the bookshop, it was assessed as the best academic bookshop in the country and the best bookshop in Adelaide. I was just not surprised at all, because of the work and this very broad consultation that had gone into it. And I have to say that I have seldom had a more delightful experience than turning up with Neil and Bob at the last annual dinner of the RAIA,⁴ when they got their gong for the twenty-five-year honour award – what do you call it?

BD: Twenty-five-year – it was the inaugural twenty-five-year – – –.

RM: Inaugural twenty-five-year award of merit for the building. It was just an absolutely delightful experience for me to be in the company of these two blokes where once again their work was being recognised as top class.

I wonder, unless you fellows have got anything else to say, whether that might be a good point to just round it off and to say that, from a user here, sitting in this chair, at the time it was built it was just such a fantastic building to be a part of and all my time at uni until the end of 1984 I can only recall with great feelings every part of that building that I was involved with.

BD: Lovely. Thank you very much.

And thank you, both.

RM: Pleasure.

BD: That's great to hear, thank you.

RM: An absolute pleasure.

And thank you, both, for being willing to come and talk about how you saw it put together as well as some of your crestfallen sense of where it's gone to, but thank you very much for doing that.

BD: Thank you for listening to us.

RM: I do have hopes that, before too long, we'll start repairing the damage.

Good.

BD: I showed you that paper of Ralph's about the dieback?

Yes.

⁴ RAIA – Royal Australian Institute of Architects.

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BD: I said, 'Ralph, right now we've got a bad case of dieback'. (laughter)

At university. Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW.