



Designers for a Circular Economy

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The Issue ... Achieving a Circular Economy

The dominant approach to our use of materials, the creation of manufactured goods and the design of buildings and spaces, is best described as a 'take-make-waste' approach to consumption and production. This has resulted in a variety of environmental impacts and social challenges, including the depletion of non-renewable materials, the use of toxic substances in some products and the landfilling of materials when furniture, appliances, packaging and many other products reach the end of their life.

Designers are the key to shaping a sustainable future that includes paying greater attention to benign and renewable materials, waste avoidance, re-use, repair and recycling. More specifically, design and designers are central to achieving a circular economy based on the "principles of designing out waste and pollution, keeping products and materials in use, and regenerating natural systems."

The Ellen Macarthur Foundation (UK) provides a widely accepted definition:

*"A circular economy is a systemic approach to economic development designed to benefit businesses, society, and the environment. In contrast to the 'take-make-waste' linear model, a circular economy is regenerative by design and aims to gradually decouple growth from the consumption of finite resources."*¹

The transition to a circular economy requires enthusiastic collaboration and a much more rigorous view of the tools, models, strategies, investments, policies, regulations and standards that can deliver next level change.

This policy statement on Design for a Circular Economy seeks to communicate the DIA's commitment to a circular economy and underscores the essential role that designers can and must play in shaping a sustainable future that values responsible prosperity.

The Need for Reform

Most sectors and industries in Australia are confronting waste and recycling issues, and the need to step-up with improved performance, good design and greater innovation. This includes how the industry, designers and their clients deal with products, spaces and services.

Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments have also worked cooperatively to develop and agree on a National Waste Policy Action Plan which incorporates attention circular economy principles, including the role of design.²

Recent announcements and new policy initiatives by the Australian Government places these issues firmly on the national agenda and most importantly the role of good design is acknowledged. The Review of the Product Stewardship Act specially recommends that the objectives of the Act be broadened to include product design improvements related to durability, reparability, re-usability and recyclability. All 26 recommendations of the Review have been adopted by the Commonwealth Government.⁴

Furthermore Prime Minister Scott Morrison has not only appointed an Assistant Minister for Waste Reduction and Environmental Management – the Honourable Trevor Evans MP – he has also earmarked \$20 million for a product stewardship investment fund. The Government has also pledged to fund a circular economy hub that will include attention to design and innovation.

In addition to national reforms, State and Territory Governments together with many local councils, and NGOs are also pursuing circular economy objectives and outcomes with urgency and innovation.

Collectively, these actions and commitments hold great potential progress the transition to a circular economy if effectively executed.

Given the DIA's vision, purpose and membership, there is great scope to work collaboratively with governments, industry and other relevant key stakeholders to demonstrate the role of designers in achieving a circular economy.

Building capabilities and capacity across the design industry can underpin the practical implementation of circular economy principles. It can also differentiate Australian designers and companies in the marketplace while also highlighting the role of design in delivering a reduced environmental footprint that consumers and wider public can understand and value.

More specifically, the DIA will develop a phased program that is outcome-oriented. The following activities and measures will be pursued subject to available resources:

- develop and promote industry-relevant resources to inform, equip and encourage its members to adopt circular design principles in their projects;
- develop and promote a member's circular economy pledge and code of practice to further engage clients and suppliers in circular thinking and action;
- develop and promote professional development courses and associate online events featuring practical application of circular design principles;
- include specific circular economy principles and circular design criteria in its awards programs to reward and acknowledges best practice in industry;
- develop a procurement guide for specifiers that can inform and educate designers about the value and significance of recycled content on products and materials;
- work closely and collaboratively with its members to further advocate the value and role of design and professional designers to key decisions makers in government, industry and education;
- Align its circular economy resources and communication with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs);
- develop and implement a targeted communications campaign to better inform, educate and engage senior government officials and MPs on the relevance, value and role of circular design;
- develop and implement a targeted communications campaign to better inform, educate and engage the media, including journalists, editors, producers and presenters;
- develop and implement education initiatives to better inform procurement professionals to recognise and purchase Australian designed products and services demonstrating circular design features; and
- work closely with tertiary education institutions to encourage the uptake of circular design content in current and future curriculum development.

The DIA also recommends the following actions:

- Federal, State and Territory Governments should ensure that circular design principles are incorporated into the policy development process across all relevant portfolios, departments and agencies.
- Federal, State and Territory Governments should adjust their procurement process for products and services to ensure that circular design principles and outcomes are included, and that Australian design businesses and end-users of Australian designers are given preferential purchasing status.

As a priority, the DIA is calling on Federal, State and Territory Governments to incorporate circular economy principles and circular design measures across all relevant policies and programs. This should include increased investment to enable widespread adoption of circular design across all sectors and industries in Australia.

Benefits of change

A circular economy underpinned by responsible design, smart production and responsible consumption, will not only strengthen Australia's competitive advantage, it can deliver social and environmental benefits that are measurable and sustainable.

The imperative for the designers, their clients, industry, retailers, government and policy-makers, researchers and consumers, is very clear i.e. shift from the take-make-waste model of production and consumption to a circular mode thinking and action.

The benefits include:

- Reduced environmental impacts as a result of designing-out waste and pollution from the outset.
- Longer life products that are design for durability, repair, reuse, repurposing, remanufacturing and/or recycling.
- Creation of spaces, places and built forms that are restorative and regenerative with explicit attention to human health and wellbeing.
- Sustainable materials use through closing materials loops and striving for higher levels of widespread upcycling.
- Regenerative and restorative design approaches and outcomes, as opposed to merely doing 'less harm' and being ameliorative.
- Decarbonising our products, services, processes and habits by shifting to clean energy.
- Creation of high-value upcycled products, materials and related design services that close supply chain loops and maximise the specification and procurement of recycled content and/or renewable materials.

Other specific benefits of promoting and supporting the value and role of circular design initiatives include:

- Maintain and increase the international competitiveness of Australian design through attention to environmental performance.
- The growth and development of intellectual property related to circular designed products, spaces, materials and services
- Enhanced R&D initiatives involving circular design expertise and knowledge.
- The harnessing of design expertise and knowledge to address complex environmental challenges.
- Meeting expectations of the design education sector, and graduate designers.

Next steps

The DIA will continue to work with key stakeholders including government officials, elected representatives, industry

associations and other professional bodies to highlight the relevance, role and value of circular design and related services provided by its members.

If you have specific recommendations or proposed initiatives and measures related to design for circular economy, then we want to hear from you.

About the DIA

The Design Institute of Australia (DIA) is the peak professional association for designers and design businesses in Australia, representing professionals in all design disciplines for over sixty years. The DIA is run by and funded by designers for designers. The DIA champions design and design thinking as a central element in a flourishing digital economy and a sustainable future, and believes that Australia's highly skilled and innovative design community offers the prospect of solutions to the world's most pressing problems, as well as ways to make everyday life more comfortable and enjoyable.

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¹ Ellen Macarthur Foundation, <https://www.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/explore/the-circular-economy-in-detail> (08.07.20)

² National Waste Policy Action Plan, <http://www.environment.gov.au/protection/waste-resource-recovery/publications/national-waste-policy-action-plan> (08.07.20)

³ Review of the Product Stewardship Act 2011, <http://www.environment.gov.au/protection/waste-resource-recovery/publications/product-stewardship-act-review-report> (09.07.20)

⁴ Media Release: Turbo charging a recycling nation, <https://minister.awe.gov.au/ley/media-releases/turbo-charging-recycling-nation> (09.07.20)