

## SALON CANBERRA TALK

### Canberra : then, now, when?

Tonight I hope to stimulate our conversation by briefly reflecting on the wonderful and unique legacy from the Griffins, give some personal observations on the evolution to the Canberra of now, and speculate on future challenges, as well as the contribution the City Renewal Authority (CRA) might make to its future.

I am very fond of Canberra since many years ago living here briefly as a work experience architecture student, then having a branch of my practice here in the 1980s, and now involved in its future through my role on the Board of the CRA. I am optimistic Canberra can be a truly engaging city, respecting the legacy, while being relevant to future generations.

I am sure we would all agree that the Griffin/Mahony vision for Canberra was unique, inspired, and amazingly ahead of its time in western culture for recognising the need to celebrate nature and respect the land, as did the previous indigenous custodians. Yet Walter Burley Griffin was prescient in his observation that *"I had planned (a city) not in a way I expected any government authorities would accept – I had planned an ideal city."*

As a nation, we have a remarkable knack of outstanding choices in design competitions and then to diminish the outcome through compromise. The experience of Jorn Utzon and the Sydney Opera House is a prime example. So too with Griffin in the early period and arguably more so in subsequent times. Yet the strength of the vision for Canberra can sustain its spirit.

The current problem is that in the national consciousness, Canberra is not celebrated for its unique characteristic, but rather derided as a *'city without a soul'*, or more recently dismissed as the *'Canberra bubble'*. The tragedy is Canberra is notable in popular culture for commuting politicians, or freeways and roundabouts, rather than for the power of its urban landscape vision.

Strongly influenced by Jeffersonian democracy, the Griffins' vision for an urban landscape structure, expressed through a strong geometry derived from the natural topography and landform setting – an amphitheatre defined by surrounding mountains – was a masterstroke.

Interestingly for me this strategy of understanding landscape setting recalls the much later approach by Utzon in his response to site, landscape and landform of Sydney Harbour as inspiration when working from afar on his competition entry for the Sydney Opera House. Like Griffin, Utzon was labelled an *'impractical dreamer'* by a distrusting government and the public, and departed before completion of his work.

Following the competition 1912 plan, Griffin made adjustments from his detailed understanding actual site conditions, producing the 1913 preliminary plan over a three month period. By 1918, a final overarching master plan *"Canberra – Plan of City and Environs"* was produced, and this was followed in 1920 by a number of more detailed plans.

In the 1920's Griffin's vision was threatened through interference from various influences, namely the "Garden City" movement the "Mediterranean" aesthetic favoured by John Sulman, and the 'Modern Renaissance' of John Smith Murdoch as opposed to what Griffin imagined as a uniquely Australian architecture as he later designed elsewhere in Australia.

Then a more significant shift in the planning of Canberra occurred in mid-1950's. This followed a Senate Inquiry that established the National Capital Development Commission and the introduction of William Holford to transform Canberra into something more akin to an English "New Town". This was regrettably an anathema to the character of the local landscape leading to the "Y-Plan" and introducing freeways such as Parkes Way and a period of domination of traffic engineering, which remains to this day.

Many have bemoaned the departure from the Griffin Plan although there is confusion as to just which of the series of editions produced. Concerns over Canberra's character have been long standing, from continue – from Robin Boyd's despair at the 'Disneyland' architecture of the Embassies, to the current concerns of the Lake Burly Griffin Guardians in the press, and the Griffin Society and as expressed in Rosemarie Willett's recent monograph, *"The National Capital in the National Interest"*. This is an interesting and comprehensive exploration of the genesis and nature of the city, including an imaginary journey through an idealised future. While offering an impassioned celebration of Griffins vision, my disappointment is in the distrust demonstrated for a more dense and urbane Canberra, and the distrust of the motives of the Territory Government, dismissed as solely profit driven. If we are to have an engaged debate on the future it requires a degree of trust and optimism rather than cynicism.

Research by NCA from 2003 revealed the Griffins' drawings from 1921, previously forgotten or dismissed – proposing walkable streets, retail activation, tram networks, mid-rise apartments to street frontages, and carefully shaped central spaces – a horizontal city. The National Capital Authority's seminal 2004 publication 'The Griffin Legacy', led by Stuart Mackenzie and Ian Wood-Bradley, sought to recapture lost aspects of the vision, and while unfairly criticised by some for appropriation of the vision for property development gain, this significant document has provided an important focus on the capital's identity and sets some worthy aspirations and propositions.

This document interprets and builds on the Griffins' legacy as an enduring framework to:

- \_revitalise Canberra's centre to achieve urbanity
- \_link the city to central national area
- \_to extend the city to the lake
- \_to reinforce main avenues, and
- \_to link national attractions through pedestrian networks.

An unrealised proposition was to promote the Griffin legacy through a "Griffin Institute".

Despite this framework as adopted by the NCDC in the National Capital Plan and some good planning initiatives, the light rail, and landscape improvements in and around the city centre, the irony is that the enticing vision of the landscape city has morphed away from Griffin's urbanity, appropriated as the 'Bush Capital', to a place of isolated "satellite towns"

with poor quality centres, dislocated low suburban density and connected only by expressways.

Most of the newer suburban housing is unsuited to climate, has poor and inadequate environmental ratings, and is poorly orientated. This leads to a city that struggles to be environmentally and socially sustainable.

There is, as with most Australian cities, a huge challenge for Canberra to effectively control sprawl, deal with poorly designed and poor performing residential stock, and dependence on cars in the absence of effective public transport. The remedy for this is to increase density in the centres while ensuring it is delivered through good design – indeed a charter for the CRA in central Canberra.

Despite the provision of extensive public space, and perhaps because of the essential landscape character, and the influence of the garden city and city beautiful movements, Griffin's vision of grand civic and cosmopolitan spaces is yet to be realised.

As urbanist Jan Gehl observed *"I have the feeling that I've been invited to a party where they've not invited enough guests."*

The monumental urban structure that underpins a character fitting for the nation's capital needs to be given counterpoint through more intimate and human scale elements. The design of the public realm, and particularly its streets, built interfaces and local spaces is critical to improving the amenity, comfort, legibility and vitality of the city. There is an emerging opportunity to recapture this urbanity through increased density, while reinforcing the intensity and essence of the landscape setting and urban experience. Public places and spaces are critical. This relationship between density and public space has been recognised recently in NSW, where the Planning Minister Rob Stokes has also been made Minister for Public Spaces. The outcome of this is yet to be experienced however; it is an important beginning of a shift in priorities.

Griffin believed in a responsive, and what we would call today, a sustainable architecture – and one that was uniquely Australian. This he realised elsewhere rather than in Canberra. Reinventing his approach now in Canberra is not possible, however, the quality and performance of the city's architecture is critical to addressing future challenges of climate change and equity. Canberra needs contemporary architecture that respects its remarkable setting - architecture with landscape engagement, authentic materials, one that is visceral and experiential.

Canberra also needs a planning focussed on three-dimensional experiences rather than simplistic zoning plans with minimal development controls. This, together with an expedient development culture, leads to poor architecture that currently dominates the city centre despite the efforts of many good architects. I commend Government Architect Catherine Townsend for introducing a focus on design quality through the recently established National Capital Design Review Panels.

Canberra can be proud of many fine buildings over many eras. The suggestion that it has the "worst buildings by the nation's best architects" is untrue.

Some of my personal favourites (most of which engage with their landscape setting) include:

- \_ Roy Ground's Academy of Science from 1959 (my most favourite for its elegant simplicity)
- \_ early domestic architecture by Kenneth Olifant and John Smith Murdoch's Kurrajong Hotel
- \_ the Australian Institute Architects headquarters by Bryce Mortlock
- \_ Sir John Sulman's fine Sydney and Melbourne buildings
- \_ ACT Supreme Courts by Yuncken Freeman
- \_ Roy Simpson's Civic Centre's – although the square is now in need of revitalisation
- \_ much of the work of the late Enrico Taglietti – Dickson Library, AWM Annex, and houses
- \_ Swinger Hill (Ian McKay with Bert Reid) mid density housing

I am also fond of brutalist works in public architecture:

- \_ National Gallery by Colin Madigan with Kris Kringas including the beautiful sculpture garden by Harry Howard and Barbara Buchanan, and the High Court also by Madigan
- \_ School of Music – Daryl Jackson/Evan Walker
- \_ lost and modified work of John Andrews - Cameron Offices Belconnen, also Toad Hall ANU

Monumental and more formal public buildings have come to characterise Canberra

- \_ Australian War Memorial by Emil Sodersten and later DCM (Anzac Hall) and JPW – although I strongly oppose current plans for demolishing Anzac Hall
- \_ Parliament House by Aldo Giurgola of MGT, with its incredible contribution to Australian art and craft
- \_ Portrait Gallery by Richard Johnson (JPW)

Also more recently important landscape projects including:

- \_ National Arboretum by Taylor Cullity Lethlean + Tonkin Zulaikha Greer
- \_ upgrade to Constitution Avenue by Hill Thalys and Jane Irwin

In addition, for the bad:

Robin Boyd's comments on the "featurist" embassies and "Disneyland" of ANU ring true - and there is good and bad in both. The bland place-less-ness of much of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century commercial architecture of Civic further denies the urbanity Canberra deserves. The rash of recent rebuilding on Northbourne Avenue, despite good intentions of planning and development controls, is resulting in walls of mediocre buildings, with poor relationship to the streets, and little contribution to the landscape. This expedient and low order development is not the "well-rounded personalities" called for by Catherine Townsend who is trying to lift the game of the industry. Also the newer suburban Canberra including Molonglo with lack of landscape and amenity and badly designed housing bearing no relation to the Canberra of the Griffins.

A key problem has been the lack of quality control over architecture, urban design and landscape, and while this has been partially addressed through the introduction of the National Capital Design Review Panels process, it is of limited value without more rigorous development controls and frameworks such as in other cities, and particularly in Sydney, through the City of Sydney's Design Excellence Policy and the NSW Sepp 65 legislation and associated Apartment Design Guidelines.

While the ACT Government is to be commended on its aspirations and actions on sustainability through declaring a “state of the climate emergency”, there is still needs to be a greater focus on sustainability in the built environment and transport.

Which brings us to the City Renewal Authority. I am sure, you are aware the CRA was established in 2017 charged with shaping the growth of the central part of Canberra including the Northbourne Avenue corridor down to Civic, and the West Basin of the lake. We have an enthusiastic board and an ambitious charter. Place planning is a key focus, in order to create well-designed physical settings that support interaction and engagement. Our City Precinct Renewal Program which sets out how we will implement the different renewal initiatives will be launched early next month.

The designated CRA area comprises some 420ha, yet of this 40% is road reserves and parking, with less than 10% of the area being public open space. The area has a current population of 13,500, which is projected to grow to 30,000 by 2021, and some 50,000 by 2046.

In order to achieve this rebalancing from inner suburban to vibrant city centre, the CRA will:

- \_be outcomes focussed
- \_increase quality of public places and private development
- \_reconfigure streets and significantly improve landscape quality
- \_focus on actions that support community life and connectedness
- \_support creativity through cultural activation and an urban art strategy
- \_implement an ambitious sustainability plan with climate wise design:
- \_increase tree cover, permeable surfaces and support active travel
- \_encourage increased use of public transport, walking and cycling
- \_utilise digital tools to measure place performance - both quantitative and qualitative

Our key challenges include:

- \_not to be overcome by process and protocol, and avoid the risk of drowning in bureaucratic stasis.
- \_listening to community but also leading and taking risks through action to achieve tangible outcomes.
- \_deliver greater design quality and urban amenity outcomes through increased responsibility as a referral agency for development applications
- \_transforming community expectations for the reliance on the car by facilitating convenient, alternative travel modes

Central Canberra’s geometric urban form and flat topography are supportive of a walkable city, yet current conditions are preventing high quality pedestrian linkages on the ground including freeway barriers, level changes to building frontages, drainage channels, frequent slip lanes and driveways. Lowering vehicle speeds in the city centre and having shorter signal phases on main roadways would help rebalance these conditions, and we will be advocating such measures to TCCS and Government.

The Authority, guided by the Board and the Design Planning and Public Realm Committee is actively working on a number of programs and projects to deliver our outcomes. These include:

### Northbourne Avenue Gateway

As the main approach to the national capital Northbourne Avenue needs to be a high amenity boulevard. Much development is already approved or built, so the focus is now not only on lifting the design quality of future development, but also transforming the public realm by changing the balance to pedestrian and cycle amenity, and to intensifying the landscape condition. Design concepts have been prepared and we will be seeking funding to implement these important and transformative proposals.

### Place Plans: Dickson and Braddon neighbourhoods

From the outset our approach is to prepare 'place plans' as urban design frameworks with a focus on activation and public realm quality through active community engagement, using the successful 'Town Team' model to build capacity but not reliance.

### Sydney and Melbourne Buildings

The historic Sydney and Melbourne Buildings have a special place in the hearts of Canberrans. Designed by Sir John Sulman and inspired by Brunelleschi's Foundling Hospital in Florence, the buildings were constructed between 1926 and 1946, intended as the city's premier "retail traders block". In the early 1920s, the government auctioned off 102 separate 99-year Crown Leases, with each lessee constructing their own separate 'lot', to an overall common design. Recent activities and ephemeral events have brought new life to the public spaces in and around the buildings, and this will continue. We are currently investigating legislative options to stimulate renewal and investment by government and the owners, and to capitalise on the major improvements and activation related to the completion of the new light rail nearby.

### Civic, Arts and Cultural Precinct Plan

The arts and cultural sector in the Territory is flourishing. To encourage this cultural dimension of city life, we are currently developing a Civic, Arts and Cultural Precinct Plan to guide the revitalisation of the area around Civic Square and the Canberra Theatre to create a vibrant arts and cultural district. With a new government office block and hotel, already underway on the southern section of the precinct, further projects are proposed including a new theatre and complementary mixed-use development in the northern quarter. An overarching development plan will connect and shape the revitalisation of underperforming public spaces, with a focus on activation, and flexible, adaptable spaces that support cultural activities.

### Transportation

A feasibility study is also underway to test the idea for an underground city bus facility, protected from the weather and with direct connections to the new light rail.

An integrated underground bus interchange would allow the site of the current interchange to be liberated for more attractive, lively activities. The CRA controls two future sites in Civic that will be considered in the study – on the City Hill corners of London Circuit and Northbourne Avenue that could significantly define the entry to the city centre.

### West Basin

While strongly disputed by the Lake Burley Griffin Guardians, Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin's original plan did intend that the city's public street and space

network would continue down to the lakefront in West Basin. Griffin was keen to bring people from the city to the green spaces, and the promenades - to what was referred to as places of "plaisance" (pleasure ground laid out with shady walks etc.). There is around three hectares of surface carparks at West Basin. A future waterfront will create four hectares of new public space, including parkland, and also a network of generous tree-lined streets and paths. Most successful city centres are enlivened by the immediate adjacency of mixed-use residential neighborhoods. An urban West Basin will encourage locals and visitors to enjoy the lake, and create a neighborhood that has local amenity as well as a complementary role in the wider city centre experience. Just as with Sydney's revitalised Darling Harbour and Brisbane's South Bank connect their respective waterfronts, an extension of the urban fabric to West Basin will unite the city centre with its most potent landscape attribute.

### The Future?

Canberra is facing an opportunity to build on its intrinsic character through the intensification of its inner urban localities to achieve the Griffin vision of a cosmopolitan and urbane city. Key to this will be the transformation from a vehicle dominated city to a more equitable and sustainable transport and movement network - more amenable streets for all modes of movement.

Canberra has great potential through its relatively intimate size, its well-educated community, its strong food and arts culture, and the incredible legacy of the Griffins' vision, to be a great city. The foundations are strong, the limitations can be transcended, and the transformation is limited only by the motivation of its communities and governments.

Griffin himself recognized and promoted the organic and evolutionary nature of cities, noting in 1914: *"in the light of the ever increasing rate of social progress during the past 100 years of the modern city, manifestly it will not suffice to accept the already established requirements as the conditions for centuries to come"*.

So what could that future hold?

\_an holistic renewed strategic vision and action plan for the transforming the Griffin vision to a sustainable urban framework?

\_high speed rail links to Sydney and Melbourne right into the civic heart?

\_increased density in middle ring(s) with diverse housing typologies for equity and affordability? (refer to discussion of these issues for Australian cities generally in 'City Limits' by Grattan Institute 2015, and 'No place like home' by Peter Mares 2018)

\_a reconfigured Civic Centre with a diversity of uses and pedestrian and electric vehicle networks?

\_transit links to the satellite towns, with transformed, re-urbanised and cosmopolitan centres? This could involve greater investment from Federal government (a city deal?)

\_an extensive trackless tram network throughout the city with localised transit loops?

\_a new public forum surrounded by a new Legislative Assembly sunken into a forested yet traversable City Hill?

The challenge of its leaders will be to inspire and unite the citizens in developing and supporting a vision. Not a literal return to Griffin but a reinterpretation of the spirit and energy of its legacy, befitting to our national capital. This will take demonstration projects to

provide evidence, healthy and informed debate and the will and commitment of political and community leaders. I do have faith in the emerging generation who are transforming community values and enlivening the city.

I do hope more of Canberra's citizens can embrace the merit of a shift in density to achieve a real urbanity, sustained by the distinctive identity of the essential landscape vision of the Griffins:

- \_enriched by a diversity of communities and places surrounding the centre
- \_transformed by eliminating the dominance of cars over people;
- \_with insistence for excellent in and design quality and performance of its architecture;
- \_and, above all expressing and celebrating the culture of an intelligent and inclusive city.

I conclude with a last observation by Walter Burley Griffin:

*"We can all be interested in the Australian Federal capital city, not so much for what it is now or will be necessarily, but because of what it stands for: an opportunity, the best, I believe so far afforded for an expression of the democratic civic ideal and of all that means in accessibility, freedom, wealth, comfort, convenience, scale and splendour"*

This still can be Canberra of tomorrow!

Ken Maher AO  
June 2019