

TO KNOW THE REASON FOR THINGS
Re-engaging with Canberra's planners, designers and visions

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PART 1 PAST VISIONS

Background: figures in the landscape

2009 is a notable year for Australia's national capital: it was in February of that year that Charles Scrivener, a New South Wales surveyor, whilst thinking it by no means ideal, recommended the Canberra site. He suggested that 'A city could be located at Canberra that would be visible on approach for many miles ... The capital would probably lie in an amphitheatre of hills with an outlook towards the north and north-east, well sheltered from westerly winds ... I regard the Canberra site as the best that can be obtained ... being prominently situated and yet sheltered, while facilities are afforded for storing water for ornamental purposes at a reasonable cost.'¹

Scrivener's recommendation followed the Australian federal government's Seat of Government Act which saw the Yass-Canberra district finally designated as the location for the new federal capital of Australia. He was responding to instructions received in late November 1908 to recommend a specific site:

... the Federal Capital should be a beautiful city, occupying a commanding position, with extensive views and embracing distinctive features which will lend themselves to the evolution of a design worthy of the object, not only for the present but for all time; consequently the potentialities of the site will demand most careful consideration from an hygienic standpoint, with a view to securing picturesqueness, and also with the object of beautification and expansion.²

Scrivener's recommendation was endorsed. His reference to an ornamental water body met one of the recommendations of the first conference on city planning held in Australia, the 1901 'Congress of Engineers, Architects, Surveyors, and Others Interested in the Building of the Federal Capital of Australia.'³ This event was in the same year – 1901 – as the act of federation was passed (1 January, 1901) when the modern nation of Australia was formed. The congress coincided its meeting in Melbourne with the sitting of the first federal parliament.

The Congress posited that site selection of the capital was a matter for professional and aesthetic judgement through a commission. Harrison indicates that it also proposed that the commission, in its site selection, should take into account the need for 'abundant Water Supply ... For creation of artificial lakes, maintenance of public gardens, fountains etc.'⁴ Looking out over the magnificent setting of modern Canberra, the far-sightedness and wisdom of this view are apparent.

From the outset therefore the concept of a federal capital, choice of site, and initial planning of Canberra from the 1911 international design competition were seen as a public undertaking. At the beginning of the process there were public finances for the competition to decide on a winning design and the intention of a federal public body to oversee development. The public were even invited to submit suggestions for naming the city.⁵ Public planning has therefore been a cornerstone of Canberra's development from the start. Not least it established and maintained the fundamental priority of the concept of the setting of the city as a city in the landscape⁶ through various successive federal agencies and visionary planning professionals following the initial Griffin plan. These include people like Charles Weston who came to Canberra in 1911 and worked there until 1926. John Sulman who assumed planning control of the city with the Federal Capital Advisory Committee (1921-1925) when Griffin resigned. John Butters and the Federal Capital Commission (1925-1930) then continued the early city development planning. After an interregnum of nearly twenty five years came the advisory work of William Holford followed by the National Capital Development Commission (NCDC). The Commission was responsible 1957-1988 for the remarkable thirty year period of

development of the city when figures like John Overall, Tony Powell, Richard Clough guided the city's path.

The advent of self government for Canberra in 1988 saw the period of overall federal (Commonwealth) control of the city's development abolished with the exception of national areas and designated areas under a national agency (formerly the National Capital Planning Authority, now the National Capital Authority (NCA)) to formulate and administer the National Capital Plan. For the remainder of the city – that is the major extent – The ACT (Australian Capital Territory) government has been and remains responsible for land-use planning through its planning agency and the Territory Plan. Central to the planning aims of the federal and ACT plans has been the expression fundamentally of the landscape as the major foundation for the city's character. In 2008 the NCA has had its federal budget cut (A\$1.69 million out of a total of A\$20), and has had to shed 33 of its 89 staff,⁷ with planning staff severely decimated.

City in the landscape ethos

From its inception in the nineteenth century, and before the Walter Burley Griffin entry won the 1911 international competition for the city's design, the concept and ideal of an Australian federal capital envisaged a city in the landscape. This set in train the foundation for Canberra as a remarkable city. In the true sense of the word it is a unique city, for there is no other city like it in the world. Walter Burley Griffin declared in 1912 that he had planned a city not like any other city. These were prophetic words, for its development over the years has maintained its status of being unlike any other. Why is this? There are roads, houses, offices, schools, shops, parks – all the components we associate with urban development – as in any other city.

The underlying reason lies in the way landscape defines and articulates the city morphology starting with the Griffin plan. Changes over the years to the form of the city and hence to the Griffin ideal have taken place. Nevertheless the landscape basis which binds form and content remains vividly coherent in the city plan. The form of the physical landscape – natural and created – is a palpable, tangible presence defining the city; but equally so is its content or intangible, symbolic meaning. Places like Zurich or Kyoto are similar in the way landscape open space surrounds and penetrates the city, but not to the comprehensively planned extent or with the same founding visions as Canberra.

Underlying the city's spatial structure is the fundamental premise of Canberra as a city in the landscape. Its spatial structure has been progressively and incrementally planned from the beginning to maintain continuity with existing design elements, in particular the hills, ridges, and valleys.⁸

From the symbolic heart of the city and the nation in the National Triangle with its serene symmetrical beauty, out through the tree-lined streets, neighbourhood and district parks and open spaces to the hills, ridges, and valleys – the National Capital Open Space System (NCOSS) – it is the landscape nature of the city that predominates physically. In turn this tangible physical presence has inextricable, intangible meanings and values, confirming that landscape is not just what we see, but as Cosgrove suggests, it is

... a way of seeing that has its own history, but a history that can be understood only as part of a wider history of economy and society; that has its own assumptions and consequences, but assumptions and consequences whose origins and implications extend well beyond the use and perception of land; that has its own techniques of expression, but techniques shared with other areas of cultural practice.⁹

When you look out over the magnificent prospect from Mount Ainslie or from Parliament House across the city to the surrounding hills that form the embracing backdrop for the city, or enjoy the tree-lined streets, gardens, and parks of the suburbs the landscape itself is more than physical elements. It has a meaning and significance that inform what Canberra is.

Consideration of these special aspects of the city are critical for Canberra as national capital and as home for 330,000 people. How will the city expand in the future and house a growing population whilst respecting its landscape image? What is the future for the national areas, for the parkland around Lake Burley Griffin, for the NCOSS without which Canberra would be like

any other city and which gives it a special sense of place? What is the role for private enterprise and its increasingly heard voice and stress on market mechanisms which often resonate as disengaging with previous visions?

Even before the site was chosen, landscape imagery and associated sense of Australianness drove the enthusiasm and resolution for the country to have a federal capital. It has formed a potent symbolic role in planning hitherto, but is now seemingly of lesser significance within the mindset of private development where national standard planning guidelines are preferred. There has been a move to have a planning system that gives consistency across the eight planning jurisdictions (states and territories) across Australia in terms of development application tracks.¹⁰ But there is also the planning orthodoxy that similar approaches across the board to residential design guidelines for urban areas are advisable. These in particular relate to increased densities, urban infill, urban consolidation and reduction in residential block sizes. One rationale for this is the ubiquitous reference to sustainable development, although what is meant by sustainable is left vague. Therefore, on the understanding that 'You can't have a future without a past'¹¹ it seems important to me that we have a firm perspective of where we have come from and what visions and decisions have brought us to where we are today.

City form

Driving into Canberra from Sydney, Melbourne or Cooma, or flying in over the paddocks and forested hills, is a strikingly different experience than the approach to any other Australian city. The boundary between the city and the bush is abrupt. Paddocks give way to houses, tree-lined roads, and open space with sweeping panoramas of forested hills forming an immense and magnificent landscape backdrop. In the centre around Lake Burley Griffin are the city's monumental national buildings majestically poised in a sylvan setting, again with the defining backdrop of hills. Lake Burley Griffin offers contact with nature in the heart of the city.

The reasons for these differences lie historically in the visions behind the idea of an Australian capital city. They explain why Canberra is unique internationally, different from any other city, and why in 1910 the Minister for Home Affairs, King O'Malley, proclaimed 'This must be the finest Capital City in the World – the Pride of Time.'¹² Underlying its inception at the beginning of this century lay two basic visions. The first was that a vigorous Australian national identity existed, that this was related to the ideal of the Australian landscape itself and that it could be symbolised in the layout of a capital city. The second was that city planning could create a better and healthier society.¹³

The utopian ideal of new cities and redevelopment of selected parts of existing cities as a way to social reform and realizing landscape idealism took firm root in Australia. In entering the winning design in the Federal Capital Competition in 1911 Walter Burley Griffin declared:

I have planned a city not like any other city in the world. I have planned it not in a way that I expected any government authorities in the world would accept. I have planned the ideal city – a city that meets my ideal of the future.¹⁴

That Griffin's city met the ideals current in Australia was no accident. The competition and the Griffin scheme were the culminating pinnacle of the utopian visions for a new Australian city that would lead the world. In short the Griffin plan – so exquisitely illustrated by Marion Mahoney Griffin's water colour prospects – was beautiful in design conception and physical presentation. It was the City Beautiful with Garden City overtones *par excellence* and matched Australian visions of the ideal city. Here was inspiration for the creation of a grand capital that grasped the idea of landscape as the structure for a city where social reform through healthy living was integral to the structure and life of the city.

The Griffin design admirably suited the natural amphitheatre qualities of the site where, as Freestone observes, 'the setting [was used] as a theatrical whole' to give a design that 'was rich in symbolism'¹⁵ by its use of radiating avenues with the hills as focal points and the use of dramatic views out of the city to the magnificent hill-landscape surrounds. Its geometrical major and minor axes created impressive vistas. Of equal significance was Charles Weston who, from 1913 to 1926, laid down the innovative and visionary landscape planning framework for the city with his tree planting schemes. He set up experimental nurseries to

raise the necessary tree stock; some indication of Weston's achievement can be seen from the fact that between 1921 to 1924 1,162,942 trees were planted in what is now the inner city suburbs.

Notwithstanding John Sulman's support for the Griffin plan it was he as Chairman of the Federal Capital Advisory Committee 1921-24 (FCAC) who instituted changes when Griffin resigned in 1921. The FCAC reflected Sulman's influential ideas as a leading town planner and educator, in particular his advocacy of the garden city and garden suburb. The FCAC therefore declared that in the first stage Canberra was to be 'a garden town, with simple, pleasing, but unpretentious buildings'; it saw houses as single storey cottages standing in their own garden. Sulman in 1910 had suggested that Australians preferred the single storey house; evidence from various developments in Australian cities pointed to this phenomenon.¹⁶ In 1909 before the competition for the Federal Capital design was announced Sulman wrote a series of articles in the *Daily Telegraph*.¹⁷ In one article he stressed the need for parkways, playgrounds, vistas, and a hierarchy of streets going from wide to narrow. He advised incorporating into the plan a central area with Parliament at the hub surrounded by public buildings, shops, and hotels set within a diagrammatic radial-concentric plan with radiating avenues which he likened to a spiderweb pattern.¹⁸

Sulman as FCAC Director also conceived of major public buildings and national institutions as separate buildings standing in a park-like setting: an urban picturesque personified. This is the current pattern for Canberra's national buildings and institutions in the central National Triangle. The Federal Capital Commission (FCC) under John Butters continued the garden city concept in residential areas, domestic FCC style of architecture – unique to Canberra – with its Arts and Crafts Movement genre and public buildings like Old Parliament House.

An enduring legacy

The 1920s and 1930s saw the central symbolic heart of the city and nation from the Griffin plan with its national triangle and exquisite axes and vistas established in outline. But buildings spaced in a park-like setting, not Griffin's more symmetrical urban spaces with paving, water and trees between buildings. Surrounding this were the early garden city residential suburbs of detached cottages in large gardens. Street planting had taken place and public parks initiated. The basis for the landscape city *par excellence* was in position. Even so the city grew slowly; by 1958 its population was a mere 36,000. It was at this stage that the decision was taken by the then Prime Minister, Sir Robert Menzies, that Canberra should expand and that Government Departments and workers would relocate from Melbourne and Sydney. Parliament was housed in Canberra (Old Parliament House built in 1927) but not the machinery of government.

Following a 1955 Senate Inquiry on the Development of Canberra and a 1957/58 report by the British planner, Sir William Holford, the National Capital Development Commission (NCDC) was set up by Menzies in 1958 to plan, develop and construct Canberra. The underlying landscape foci briefly reviewed above were grasped by the NCDC. They continued to suffuse planning ideas during the crucial years 1958 to 1988 (when the NCDC was disbanded) where land-use planning policy and implementation integrated civil engineering and landscape concerns in an holistic approach to planning. The garden city ideal flourished to create a city known affectionately as The Bush Capital.¹⁹ Not least was the adoption of the Y Plan in the late 1960s as a linear model for city growth, with a series of new towns rather than the concentric pattern of other Australian cities. The Y Plan, formalised in the 1984 NCDC *Metropolitan Policy Plan*, articulated the form of urban growth on the basis of a series of new towns (Belconnen, Woden/Weston Creek, Tuggeranong, Gungahlin) separated from central Canberra and each other by landscape corridors. Landscape maintained its primal position as articulator of urban form. With over 14 million trees in the city and its immediate surrounds with associated public and private open space and wildlife, Canberra became and remains the epitome of nature in the city.

Essential to the Y Plan is the integrated open space system of hills, ridges and buffers: the National Capital Open Space System (NCOSS). The 1992 report *Our Bush Capital: Protecting and Managing the National Capital's Open Spaces* refers to the NCOSS covering 72 per cent of the Territory as 'a valuable legacy of visionary design and planning.'²⁰ In *Tomorrow's Canberra* the forerunner of NCOSS is referred to as 'the emerging metropolitan

park system [which] encompasses a wide range of parks, recreation areas, reserves, and other open space.' By 1977 in a report by George Seddon²¹ the term NCOSS – reflecting NCDC nomenclature – was used. It embraced the comprehensive network of inner and outer hills, ridges and buffers, Lake Burley Griffin, river corridors and mountains with associated bushlands. The primary significance to Canberra's post-1945 planning of the open space system may be gauged from the view expressed in the 1970 NCDC publication *Tomorrow's Canberra*:

The fourth major component of land use, open space, will probably be the most enduring element of the urban structure.²²

It is this comprehensive network which articulates the city plan. It was pivotal in guiding the physical layout and planning structure of the new towns inherent in the Y Plan concept.

PART 2 POST-1988

Maintaining the landscape setting ethos? The devil in the detail.

The inception in 1988 of ACT self government heralded winds of change. Two planning authorities – a local and national – replaced one single agency. In addition to the two statutory planning agencies, Canberra International Airport and its extensive Brindabella Business Park development of fifteen commercial office blocks has effectively become a third quasi-planning authority no longer subject to the control of either the local or national body.²³

Canberra's population is now around 330,000 people; not big by world city standards and predictions for growth by 2032 vary from a moderate figure of 389,000 to a high of 460,000 in *The Canberra Spatial Plan*.²⁴ Nevertheless the issue facing the city is how to expand without destroying the rich landscape heritage and open space system that defines the city's special character. The ACT in which Canberra sits is around 2000 sq kms entirely surrounded by the state of New South Wales as determined at the time of Federation in 1901. About 75 per cent of the land is in the form of forests and river valleys. These are unsuitable for building and also comprise valuable water gathering grounds and wildlife habitats.

Various options for expansion have been considered under the aegis of the Spatial Planning exercise by the ACT Planning and Land Authority (2004).²⁵ Central to the options has been the goal of conserving the Bush Capital image and the National Capital Open Space System whilst acknowledging decreases in household sizes and an ageing population. The change and consequent effects on housing needs have increased the attraction of town houses and apartments and the challenge is where these can be sited so as not to destroy the leafy character of traditional suburban housing areas which many people still value. Herein lies the dilemma of occupying a living, heritage city. How may it change without destroying its sense of place?

Ebenezer Howard asked this question over one hundred years ago: 'The People. Where will they go?'²⁶ This is critical now to Canberra's future and the protection of its heritage context with both tangible physical values and intangible values that Canberrans place on the very nurturing idea of nature in the city and living with it. John Ruskin, the nineteenth century art and architectural critic, referred to the way people see things and attach meaning to them as 'seeing with the soul of the eye.'²⁷ At the heart of attachment to the Bush Capital image is this very way of seeing so that it is not just what is seen that is important to the Canberra community, but the way it is seen and the meanings and values attached to it.

In *The Canberra Spatial Plan*.²⁸ the ACT Government through its planning agency (ACTPLA) proposes increased densities along transport corridors (roads) and around shopping centres which are strategically placed in the new towns. Whilst these zones have been delineated for increased density, planning and design guidelines to safeguard residential area character have not been promulgated. Loss of landscape space results from reduced front and side setback standards for houses (see below). One visually dominant effect is a move by many developers to flat roofed, grey rendered buildings, lacking harmony and balance with their setting of Canberra's traditional, leafy residential neighbourhoods. Even in what might be seen as acceptable building form, garden space is all too often replaced by hard surfaces thereby increasing stormwater run-off and reducing opportunity for tree planting .

The Canberra Spatial Plan also proposes 33,000 houses (73,000 people) and units at Molonglo and continuing development at Gungahlin new town with an additional 28,500 dwellings. Molonglo occupies former pine forest destroyed by the January 2003 bushfires and adjacent rural areas/open grassy eucalypt woodland along the Molonglo valley. *The Spatial Plan* approach proposes continuation of a planning system whereby the external landscape framework of the city connects with its internal public and private open space components.

The vision of the landscape city is maintained in such local planning documents as The Spatial Plan and ACT Territory Plan, but it is at the detail planning, design, and implementation levels that things start to fail the grand intention. Molonglo, for example, fractures the integrity of the Y Plan and separation of new town areas. If it proceeds in total it will effectively join Belconnen to Weston Creek/Woden, eliminating a major open space component of the city's structure. However, the ACT Government has announced (May 2008) a 20 year moratorium on development in the central section whilst a 3 year natural resource evaluation is undertaken.²⁹ This begs the question of why such a study was not a core part of the planning studies some three years ago. It ought to have been. Excision of Central Molonglo would also go some way to maintaining the open space buffer between Belconnen and Weston Creek and maintain the landscape link into the urban area from Canberra's broader landscape setting.

What we also see is the ignoring of community preference for design guidelines covering architectural form, materials and tree planting space in private development. This is now left virtually to the discretion of developers as long as they adhere to minimum space and setback dimensions for housing areas in the Territory Plan. With reduction in residential block sizes and propensity for McMansion style houses³⁰ crowding the smaller blocks there is real reduction in private landscape space, reluctance to plant species that will grow into large trees, reduction in privacy, and increasingly less opportunity for ground water recharge. The latter is, I suspect, likely to become of increasing concern with climate change projected to induce warmer conditions and less rainfall for the southeast region of Australia. This will compound the effect of an already dry climate with evaporation annually exceeding precipitation. Monitoring and finding strategies to maintain ground water reserves ought to be a matter of concern in policy aspects of Canberra planning, but is a subject that is ignored.

Recognising national importance, the National Capital Plan within its overall goal of ensuring that Canberra and the ACT are 'planned and developed in accordance with their national significance' embodies specific objectives reflecting the unique importance of the city in the landscape.³¹ These include the maintenance and enhancement of the landscape character of Canberra and the Territory as the setting for the National Capital and the protection of the undeveloped hill tops and the open spaces which divide and give form to Canberra's urban areas (ie NCOSS).

Overview: changes and dilemmas

Can change and private interests affecting public planning be accommodated? These are complicated matters, not least given the national role of a city like Canberra and the existence of two public planning agencies. Following is a list of the nature of changes that have potential to compromise the special nature of the city in the landscape. Behind them remains the question of whether planned cities such as Canberra with a dual role of national capital and a series of distinguished historic planning sequences deserve special attention with planning guidelines geared to recognising and protecting the special role and sequences that have created the city not like any other.

i Land sales and profits.

Increasingly since self-government successive ACT governments have sought to maximise profitability by land sales. All land in the ACT is crown land subject to 99 year leases. Prior to 1988 developers took on land with its unimproved value as a tax base and paid accordingly; they were subject to strict guidelines on such things as densities and building heights. Now land with its development rights, commercial and residential, is auctioned to developers who are able to profit by it. The initial idea of crown leasehold for the federal capital was to prevent developers from land profiteering. Packaged with this change is the fact that anyone buying

land at an auction can then return to the government with a revised density proposal. A betterment levy is payable, but this is likely to be less than the price would have originally been paid if the land had been bought with the higher density figure (see also ii below).

ii Residential planning codes and reduction of layout standards

ACT Treasury has effectively encouraged reduction in planning standards so that 'inefficient planning' does not take place. This has followed private submissions to the ACT government since 1988 (date of self government) to the effect that reductions to street verge widths, footpaths, building setbacks (see also iii below) and amount of public open space will increase the lot yields and also englobe land (parcel of land prior to its subdivision) prices accruing to the ACT government and reduce need for municipal services.³² In residential development in places like Gungahlin this resulted some ten years ago in minimal public and private open space standards, overly narrow streets, overdevelopment of residential blocks accompanied by block size reduction, loss of tree planting potential (public and private), increase in hard surfaces and stormwater run-off with decreased ground water renewal. Parallel with this is the separation of the Land Development Agency (LDA) from ACTPLA which originally oversaw residential layouts, including new subdivision planning and layout. LDA now controls land release and sales and lets out contracts to its own agent surveyors/planners for layouts. ACTPLA in this regard is then reduced to a development control role, rather than a strategic planning role, and its development control guidelines are regularly set aside. This, for example, occurs when a successful bidder for an englobe residential site makes a subsequent submission to increase overall yield and thus profitability on payment of the betterment levy.³³

iii The orthodoxy of standardisation and reduction of residential layout standards

The process referred to above is parallel with lobbying of some groups, private and professional, for universal Australian model residential planning codes: standardisation is the orthodoxy. In Canberra it has been a co-contributor (with iv below) to reduction of front and rear setbacks to minimum standards and side setbacks virtually to nothing with a resultant loss of opportunity to plant trees. Historically views along Canberra streets of residential buildings have been filtered through a leafy screen. In a revision of the ACT Territory Plan general residential plot ratios are now increased from 35 per cent to 50 per cent, with 80 per cent in specified areas with virtually no restriction in areas within 200 metres of a shopping centre, including local residential area centres (A10 areas). Front setbacks have been reduced from 8+ metres of pre-1988 to 6 metres for single story and 7.5 metres for two storey with 4 metres in some medium density developments. 'These have resulted in the spacious leafy character changing. Some residents view the change as a change for the worse. The character they value is usually expressed as that of the streetscape. It is a factor that has consistently been used in evidence and cross examination in the Administrative Appeals Tribunal (AAT) by objectors to urban infill development proposals.'³⁴

iv Reasons for standards being reduced

There are two reasons cited for reduced residential standards. The first is the pressure by buyers for more house on a block: the McMansion factor. The second is the planning dogma that low density development has to be curtailed in favour of urban consolidation and infill on so-called sustainability grounds. This is argued on environmental grounds, that the preference for a detached house and garden is waning, that there are significant economies of urban infrastructure flowing from higher densities, and that social interaction is damaged in the traditional detached house and garden. This planning orthodoxy has been challenged by a variety of authors and research projects,³⁵ but still holds sway. It is interesting how the Territory Plan provision now for development and redevelopment for the right only to 2 hours winter sunshine on the north face of a building neatly escapes the sustainability question. The problem for Canberra in these provisions is that the very scale and character that made it *the* landscape city are compromised with building form dominant over landscape form. A particularly concerning example is Gungahlin new town centre medium density development: this is so intense and without any open space provision of note within 2 kilometres that it is likely air conditioners will have to be used in Canberra's hot dry summers. Not exactly an environmentally sustainable solution.

v Central Canberra

Within the central part of Canberra – Civic³⁶ – high rise office development has now substantively blocked views of the surrounding hills thereby creating a claustrophobic character that strikes at the very heart of the Griffin vision, a vision that was continued by Sulman and later by the NCDC. The NCA announced in 2007 that it would review further the building height restriction of 50 metres,³⁷ the height which symbolically limits buildings being no higher than the Australian War Memorial dome and the flagpole base at Parliament House. A significant location targeted by the NCA for tall buildings is City Hill, one of the pre-eminent landscape landmarks marking Griffin's national triangle and facing Parliament House along Commonwealth Avenue. An Amendment (59) to the National Capital Plan positions 18 storey 'landmark' buildings at four corners of the hill. Such action accords with lobbying by groups such as the ACT Property Council and developers. The question may be asked "Why do we need more vertical built intrusions on Canberra's skyline under the guise of 'landmark' dwarfing the landmark of City Hill in mute mockery and blocking views to the magnificent hills that act like a stage setting for this city, helping to make it unique and not like any other The dictionary definition of landmark is 'a conspicuous object in a district; object or change marking a stage in history or turning point in history'. If allowed to proceed, the vertical edifice complex will certainly be conspicuous and will change history. It be another nail in the coffin of this city being not like any other, because we will become like other cities, hemmed in by high buildings."³⁸ In support of the overall proposal for land around City Hill that was the subject of public submission objections to a Joint Parliamentary Committee hearing in 2007, the NCA posited that it hoped to have the opportunity to set the design standard around City Hill ... and in connection with one block of 2.65 hectares (including 18 storey building) that sold for \$93 million 'we will be looking for something really outstanding.' Pouring cold water on this in response, one representative of a national firm of valuers reflected that 'If the government expect too much from the site in terms of architectural significance that would add to the developer's costs ... There may be a conflict in what the NCA wants and getting the best revenue for the ACT.'³⁹ What price good design when land sale priorities dominate planning?

vi Canberra Airport

Outside this, but having considerable impact on Canberra, is the privately operated Canberra International Airport. Originally the National Capital Plan included the airport land and hence the NCA controlled planning decisions at the airport. This approach was abandoned by the previous Howard federal government and the Airport operates as a private agency with no planning control except through the federal department of transport. In addition to building 15 office blocks which has created unprecedented traffic chaos, not least for travellers trying to get to/from the airport early morning or late afternoon, the airport authority has announced it proposes to have unrestricted 24 hour flights, including commercial flights and aspires to become Sydney's second airport. Such *laissez faire* growth is projected to bring with it, according to the think-tank, Australia Institute, an increase in aircraft emissions from 117,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide in 2005 to a staggering 3.6 million in 2050. It is estimated by the institute's director that this will undermine efforts to reduce the ACT's total emissions by more than 60 per cent by 2050.⁴⁰

Conclusion

The new federal Labor government initiated a review of the NCA's powers and the relationship between the Territory planning authority and its powers. One outcome that seems likely is that the National Capital Plan and Territory Plan may merge into one document in some form, albeit there is strong professional support for retention of an NCA agency to oversee national planning imperatives. The review is timely and after 20 years of self government and the national capital plan it is appropriate to look at options for one plan, assuming that the matters referred to above are given due consideration. But the slashing of the NCA budget and loss of staff (see above) before the review hearings suggest a self-fulfilling prophecy. National capitals, not least planned national capitals are special places and require and deserve special merit.

Whether the politicisation of planning will be given due consideration is debatable. It is vital to the very meaning and being of Canberra as national capital that any transfer from national to local control through one planning document does not put the national capital ideal and idea at jeopardy. The increasing trend of local and national government withdrawal from public

interest to allow private interest to dominate and belief that national market is the best to determine what is needed is a major concern and needs to be addressed in the review. Can a predominance of the private market be relied on intellectually, politically and morally to promote the best planning outcomes? History suggests this is not always the case.

Endnotes

- 1 Taylor K (2006), *Canberra: City in the Landscape*, p. 31; Halstead, Ultimo. See also Frederick Watson, (1927), *A Brief History of Canberra, the capital city of Australia*, Federal Capital Press, Canberra, p.129.
- 2 Dept of Home Affairs, Information, Conditions, and Particulars for Guidance in the Preparation of Competitive Designs for the Federal Capital City of the Commonwealth of Australia, Melbourne, 30.4.1911, p26. See also NAA:110, FC1911/738 Part 1 Yass-Canberra Site for Federal Capital General (1908-1909).
- 3 Stephens J C, ed. (1901), *Proceedings of the Congress of Engineers, Architects, Surveyors, and Others Interested in the Building of the Federal Capital*, May 1901, J C Stephens Printer, Melbourne.
- 4 Harrison P, (1995), *Walter Burley Griffin Landscape Architect*, ed Freestone R, National Library of Australia, Canberra; p. 4.
- 5 These included bizarre concoctions such as Cooeoemoo, Kookemuroo, Kangaremu, Marsupiala, Boomerang City, Gonebroke, Federalia and even Syd-Mel-Ad-Per-Bris-Ho. See Wigmore L, (1963), *The Long View. Australia's National Capital*, F W Cheshire, Melbourne; pp.62-63.
- 6 Taylor K, (2006), *Canberra: City in the Landscape*, Halstead Press, Ultimo, Sydney.
- 7 *The Canberra Times*, 2 April 2008, p.1.
- 8 National Capital Development Commission, (1970), *Tomorrow's Canberra. Planning for Growth and Change*, Australian National University Press, Canberra.
- 9 Denis Cosgrove, (1984), *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*, Croom Helm, London & Sydney, p.1.
- 10 I am grateful to Neil Savery, CEO of ACTPLA for explaining this system. Also See: *Leveraging the Long-Term. A Model for Leading practice Development Assessment Volume 1*. This report prepared by the Centre for Developing Cities, University of Canberra, Australia in 2003 reviewed best practice from the eight planning jurisdictions and developed the model for Australia wide application. The 2007 Planning Act for the ACT tries to apply these principles. A problem for the ACT is that all land is leasehold crown land and the guidelines are best suited to freehold.
- 11 Aboriginal teenager, ABC TV, July 1993 quoted in David Carter, (1994), 'Future Pasts' in David Headon, Joy Hooton, Donald Horne, eds, *The Abundant Culture. Meaning and Significance in Everyday Australia*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, p.3.
- 12 See Peter Harrison, (1995), *op cit*, p.6
- 13 Taylor K, (1999), 'Picturesque Visions of a Nation. Capital City in the Garden', *The New Federalist* Number 3: June 1999, pp.74-80. See also Mark Henry Haefele, (1995), *Ideal Visions of Canberra. An exploration of the aspirations and assumptions behind the planning of Canberra during its two greatest periods of growth*, thesis submitted for the degree of Master of Arts of the Australian National University, June 1995.
- 14 Walter Burley Griffin, (1912), *New York Times*, 2 June 1912. See also Donald Leslie Johnson, (1977), *The Architecture of Walter Burley Griffin*, , p.20, Macmillan, Melbourne.
- 15 Freestone, R. (1986), 'Canberra as a Garden City 1901-1930', *Journal of Australian Studies*, 19; 3-20.
- 16 Sulman, J, (1921), *An Introduction to the Study of Town Planning in Australia*, New South Wales Government Printer, Sydney.
- 17 These were published later together as one monograph: John Sulman (1909), *The Federal Capital*, J Sands, Sydney. See also John Sulman, (1909), 'The Federal Capital', *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects*, 28 August 1909.
- 18 Sulman, (1909), p.682.
- 19 Bush meaning in Australian open eucalypt woodland and grassy glades. It is also applied to grazing land and originates from early colonial days and when it referred to land outside the city.
- 20 Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital (1992), *Our Bush Capital: protecting and Managing the National Capital's Open Spaces: Report of the Joint Committee on the National Capital*, (Parliamentary Paper No 1992/253, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra.

- ²¹ Seddon G, (1977), *An Open Space System for Canberra: A Policy Review Prepared for the National Capital Development Commission*, Technical paper 23, October 1977, NCDC, Canberra.
- ²² NCDC (1970), *op cit*, p. 69.
- ²³ The airport was placed under federal department of transport jurisdiction about four years ago.
- ²⁴ ACT Government , (2004), *The Canberra Spatial Plan*, ACTPLA, Canberra. See p. 6 which says: 'Prudent planning therefore requires that *The Spatial Plan* caters for both moderate and high population projections – that is a population between 389,000 and 460,000 for the ACT and between 430,000 and 500,000 for Canberra-Queanbeyan.
- ²⁵ *ibid*.
- ²⁶ Howard E, (1902), *Garden Cities of Tomorrow*, Son Sonnenschein, London.
- ²⁷ Ruskin J, (1843), *Modern Painters*. Reprint 1987 Knopf, New York. See also Ted Relph, (1979), 'To See with the Soul of the Eye', *Landscape*, 23:1; 28-34.
- ²⁸ ACT Government, (2004), *op cit*.
- ²⁹ *The Canberra Times*, 15 may, 2008, p. 10. Central Molonglo is substantially grassy open eucalypt woodland of high conservation value. It is a significant remnant of this type of system once extensive through the ACT and is home to several threatened bird species. It is reported that the study 'will help inform future planning for the valley and help inform things like how big a buffer zone we should have around nature reserves.'
- ³⁰ <http://www.wordspy.com/words/McMansion.asp>: A large, opulent house, especially a new house that has a size and style that doesn't fit in with the surrounding houses.
- See also: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/McMansion> which describes the term, first used in 1988 in the USA, as pejorative to describe a particular type of [housing](#) that is constructed in an assembly line fashion reminiscent of food production at [McDonald's fast food restaurants](#).
- In Australia it now denotes houses with large footprint out of scale with their block size and connotes the idea of being vulgar.
- ³¹ National Capital Authority (2002), *Consolidated National Capital Plan Incorporating Amendments, Updated February 2002*, National Capital Authority, Canberra.
- ³² Pers comm Tony Powell, former Commissioner NCDC. I am grateful for this background outline of the interplay between private and public sectors in Canberra.
- ³³ *ibid*
- ³⁴ Taylor K, (2006), p.152
- ³⁵ See for example (i) Troy P, 1997, 'Social Aspects of Urban Consolidation', *Historic Environment*, 13:1;18-26; (ii), Gleeson B, (2006), *Australian Heartlands: Making Space for Hope in the Suburbs*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, NSW and — 2000, *Australian Urban Planning: New Challenges, New Agendas*, Allen & Unwin; (iii) Bob Day, (2006), 'Sprawl the answer to home ownership crisis', *The Australian*, Opinion p.14, 17 February 2006.
- ³⁶ The name 'Civic' (Civic Centre) originates from Walter Burley Griffin's name, Civic Centre, for central Canberra. It is connected with the early twentieth century interest in town planning—as an art and a science—and the civic ideal where building better cities would assist in building a healthier society and foster civic pride. It also connects with Patrick Geddes' 1915 classic text, *Cities in Evolution*: see Taylor (2006), *op cit* chapter 3.
- ³⁷ *The Canberra Times*, 8 September 2007, p.1.
- ³⁸ Taylor K, (2007), 'Griffin Legacy amends his vision by design', *The Canberra Times*, March 29 2007, p.19.
- ³⁹ Todd Rohl, NCA Manager of planning and urban design quoted in *The Canberra Times*, August 29 2007 and response.
- ⁴⁰ *The Canberra Times*, January 19 2008, p.1.