

## **CANBERRA: SOUL OF THE AUSTRALIAN NATION? 100 YEARS OF THE GRIFFIN PLAN**

Brett Odgers 5 September 2024

There were high hopes for the new nation's capital city as the politicians, surveyors, engineers, scientists and bureaucrats searched for a site and a concept - notwithstanding the limitations written into the Constitution: not Melbourne, not less than 100 miles from Sydney and its purpose 'the Seat of Government (defined by Quick and Garran) as a place for arrays of executive decisions.'

The new 'science of town planning' was rapidly evolving to produce more attractive, hygienic, creative and liveable cities.

In Chicago, Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony were very well apprised of these developments and mixed in a progressive circle that included Stella Miles Franklin, visiting from Australia. The two women became great friends. Walter was sufficiently inspired by Australia's reputation to actually indulge in starting very early a design for the new nation's capital.

Of his eventual competition-winning plan, Griffin told the New York Times on 2 June 1912:

*I have planned an ideal city - a city that meets my ideals of the city of the future.*

Coinciding with the first session of the inaugural federal Parliament, also in Melbourne, over ten days in May 1901, a Congress of Engineers, Architects, Surveyors and Others Interested in the Building of the Federal Capital of Australia had resolved upon the 'adoption of the most perfect design.' Many of the participants argued for an essentially Australian character, reflecting the 'spirit, which in so comparatively short a time has made us what we are.'

At this Congress, the vision and the landscape design of the eventually awarded Griffin Plan were in fact anticipated.

Many years later, Marion Mahony Griffin would enlarge on the 'soul requirements' which she felt Canberra needed to exude.

What is this 'soul'? Both Marion and Walter were admirers of the Australian people for their democratic institutions, liberty, independence, originality and social policies. 'Soul' connoted their appreciation of Australians' spiritual and intellectual energy, a distinctive ethos of spirit and attitudes.

Griffin was replaced as Federal Capital Director of Construction and Design in 1920 by a Committee, but he kept Canberra under surveillance. He published articles in 1927 and 1934 which the editors of the Melbourne Herald and Canberra Annual (Federal Capital Press), respectively, titled Canberra Founded on National Sentiment. He pointed out that great capitals are centres of national sentiment, noting that 'Canberra is a transitional vacillating experiment.' He lamented the political, official, commercial, imperial influences that were causing delays and compromises. He was optimistic, however:

*It is not so important that [these forces] have been strong enough to delay the Federal Capital for a quarter century and belittle its growth. But it is significant that an unorganised, incoherent, unvoiced Australian sentiment [has] sufficed to impose on all these special interests the compromise that is Canberra after a third of its first century. Though not yet victorious, that sentiment is intact as yet and is ever less liable to*

*dislodgement as time goes on.*

Griffin was saying here that the future of Canberra depends on strong national sentiment and support, for building a nation and realising the potential of Canberra as a great national capital.

During his epoch and into the formation of the Anzac legend and later episodes such as post Second-World War reconstruction, cumulative mass sentiments of national pride, creativity and cohesion were indeed manifest. On the other hand, other forces and events in Australia and the rest of the world have in the meantime affected the development of Canberra in ways that reflect Australia's changing values, priorities, flaws and foibles, identity and reputation, as well as ethos and achievements.

In 2022 Julianne SchuItz published *The Idea of Australia: a Search for the Soul of the Nation*. It was widely accepted as 'a significant contribution to the never-finished project of forging a national identity.' She highlighted Canberra's mixed success and challenges in conveying and epitomising Australia's character and experience.

### **Is Australia getting the national capital it deserves?**

Canberra is known, justifiably, as a highly planned city. Central to this heritage is Griffin's Plan. It was enshrined by the Seat of Government (Administration) Act 1924 and gazettal of the Griffin Plan under this Act on 19 November 1925, thanks primarily to Prime Minister SM Bruce and Minister for Home Affairs Littleton Groom.

Griffin's Plan was declared in 1997 by planning historian John Reps as 'deserving recognition and protection as one of the treasures not only of Australia, but of the entire urban world.' After visiting Canberra in 1966, urban designer Edmund Bacon wrote 'Griffin's Plan is one of the greatest creations of man. Now that you have produced such a masterwork, the great issue is that you don't wreck it.'



ABOVE: Lake Burley Griffin in 1965 shortly after the lake was filled with water. Photographed by Robert Stephenson.

The fact that in our time cogent nominations to register the Griffin Plan on the National Heritage Register, and thus the UNESCO World Heritage and World Biosphere Lists, have been regularly thwarted, is testament to the same political, bureaucratic, business and local interests that have obstructed and compromised implementation of his Plan in the past.

The creation of Canberra has been the achievement of many individuals and organisations, but it is still ascribed to Walter Burley Griffin, popularly and by special pleading, positive or negative, of planners and developers, public and private, including ACT Chief Ministers.

In his Walter Burley Griffin Lecture, in Canberra 18 August 1988 (the centenary of Griffin's birth), Professor James Weirick, eminent Griffin scholar, said:

*The Canberra we have built is not Griffin's Canberra, or anything like it. In spirit and detail, Canberra today is the complete opposite of the city Walter Burley Griffin intended.*

In 2002 the National Capital Authority undertook their *Griffin Legacy* project. After extensive research, consultations with stakeholders and the community, the Griffin Legacy Report was published in 2004, culminating in four major amendments to the National Capital Plan under the Seat of Government Act, Amendment Numbers 56, 59, 60 and 61, expedited through Parliament and gazetted together in 2007.

It was no coincidence that the NCA published in 2003 *The Symbolic Role of the National Capital* by their Cultural Advisor Dr David Headon, nor that the USA National Capital Planning Commission in Washington DC had produced in 1997 their *Extending the Legacy* with sweeping ideas for change, imagining Washington as worthy of a great nation and based upon the L'Enfant Plan of 1791 and McMillan Plan of 1901.

The Griffin Legacy Amendments offered a re-examination, revival and promotion of the Griffin Plan, most particularly a blueprint for the future development of the Central National Area of the National Triangle, Kings, Commonwealth and Constitution Avenues, City Hill, West Basin and linking Civic to the Lake.

The statutory Amendment process breached convention by failing to refer the Amendments to the Parliamentary Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital (PJSCNCET). Responding to widespread public outcry, the latter held a Public Inquiry, inviting submissions and broad expert and stakeholder attendance at a Roundtable public hearing in Parliament House on 23 February 2007. The Committee's report *Review of the Griffin Legacy Amendments* issued in March 2007 recommended to Parliament that all four Amendments be disallowed and returned to the NCA for further work. Tasmanian Senator Bob Brown's formal motion for disallowance was defeated in the Senate on 10 May 2007, so the Government ignored the Committee's report and Roundtable deliberations.

The inadequacies and issues with the Griffin Legacy Amendments have since regularly caused conflicts, controversies and distractions regarding the National Capital Plan. The Amendments were manifestly developer-driven, excessive in scale and neo-liberal 'new urbanism', short on detail and impact assessment, with significant departures from the Griffin Plan.

There has, as far as I know, been no attempt since 2007 to assess, evaluate or audit the history and ongoing prospects of the *Griffin Legacy Amendments*. Case studies of problems are well documented: opposed alienation of the Albert Hall precinct, the failed Immigration Bridge, rejected high density towers development at Barton and war

memorials on the Rond Terraces, dubious location of the ASIO building, Nishi building at Acton, opposed Stirling Ridge embassies estate, sales of West and East Blocks, submersion of City Hill and conversion of West Basin.

The comparison of the USA capital Washington DC is entirely different, dating back to Home Rule in 1974, and the outcomes are manifestly superior to Canberra's. Firstly, the institutional arrangements are far better and more productive. The National Capital Planning Commission has formal, democratic representation and 'shared stewardship' processes with the local government and community, the federal sector, the Commission of Fine Arts (1910), the Commission for the Capitol, the National Parks Service and professional associations.

Moreover, the NCPC regularly supplements their *Extending The Legacy* (1997) with Strategies, Comprehensive and Master Plans for quadrants of the city and region, transport, parks and open spaces, the National Mall Trust and Monumental Core of memorials, monuments and museums, heritage, reservation of lands for symbolic functions, the Federal Government Elements, historic, commemorative and artworks programs, Arlington National Cemetery, Foreign Missions and International Organisations estates, Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation and (the latest and especially pertinent to Washington's symbolic role) the *Beyond Granite* project *What Stories Remain Untold*.

In stark contrast, the 'authorities that be' in Canberra have contrived over the years, without relief, to burden Australia's Capital City with a regrettably inadequate, fragmented and dysfunctional system of governance. The NCA lacks resources, corporate knowledge, democratic links, expertise and advisory bodies, consultative and accountability processes. Simple measures such as ACT representation on the NCA Board and mechanisms for integrating the respective federal and Territorial planning and administration and statutory plan procedures are lacking.

A signal failure was the renewal of the Canberra National Memorials Committee statute in 2022, which expediently replaced the 1928 Ordinance with the same impractical membership (chaired by the Prime Minister, with the Leader of the Opposition Deputy Chair), failure to appoint historical advisers or fill the two ACT seats on the Committee and without accountability.

On the bright side, I must say right away that the signs of Canberra becoming a great National Capital have been, nonetheless, remarkably good of late. I would acknowledge this year's Enlighten Festival, the resurgence of the National Museum of Australia and curtilage, major exhibitions at the National Gallery and National Portrait Gallery, the recovery from vandalism and development of the Museum of Australian Democracy, new Parliament House, the maturing of the National Arboretum Canberra, Metro Light Rail.

With respect to the National Capital Plan and the Territory and Municipal Plans, there have been remarkable revivals of Griffin Plan elements at new Acton, Kingston Foreshores ('miraculously', as Paul Reid wrote), West Fyshwick and the suburbs of Campbell, Braddon, Griffith and in the campus Master Plans of the ANU at Acton and the University of New South Wales in Civic.

It is particularly notable that half of these boosts to significance and symbolism have been ACT Government projects, not Commonwealth or federal Government-inspired: e.g., the Arboretum, Curtin and Chifley statues, the SIEV X Memorial at Weston Park.

Despite the hiatus in updating the Canberra National Memorials Committee, Commemorative Guidelines, expertise and procedures, the advent of proposals and construction of new monuments and memorials has accelerated: for example, Andrew Inglis Clark at the entrance of a Terry Snow building in Civic, John Gorton, Senarons Lyons and Tangney and Susan Ryan.

There are anomalies with Constitution Place and Magna Carta Place: the former merely records that a 1999 Referendum rejected the republic proposal; otherwise, Canberra does not yet celebrate the Federation Story or founders. The Magna Carta Place monument was primarily a gift of the UK Government and chiselled into its wall is a timeline entry "Eureka Rebellion 3 December 1854."

It is rare to see around Canberra inscriptions of inspiring language and events, such as extracts from speeches by Curtin and Evatt, Henry Lawson, Whitlam and Keating, Donald Horne and Manning Clark's 'Mammon or millennial Eden' at the Federation Pavilion in Centennial Park, Sydney.

There are delays in building a new National Archives building, Museum of Aboriginal Australia, Natural History Museum and National Museum of Labor. At risk or neglected are City Hill, Commonwealth Avenue, Griffin's Water and Land Axes, West Basin still unresolved and main vistas from within and beyond the Central National Area, even the 'City in the Landscape' and 'Bush Capital' images and Canberra's own inherent heritage assets of the pioneering and modernist eras.

### ***A Capital for All Australians***

A milestone in this story of Canberra's evolving significance is the May 2024 report by the PJSCNCET *A Capital for All Australians*. The Inquiry assumed there was a need for fostering and promoting the significance of Australia's National Capital. The Committee, as agent of the federal Parliament and all Australians has a good past record in oversighting and reviewing the NCA's performance, but in this instance has disappointed. Unfortunately, the Committee focussed on upgrading Canberra as the city rather than national significance criteria and credentials.

No recommendations are made about implementation of the Griffin Legacy or enhancement of the symbolic role of the National Capital, nor is there any recommendation made about governance or Griffin's vision and Plan.

Senator Pocock's Additional Comments are interesting in that he at least addressed aspects of the Griffin Legacy and the integration of Canberra as our National Capital and a thriving city, albeit mainly for the purpose of advocating more infrastructure funding, for sports, entertainment and tourism, rather than national significance, identity and symbolism.

Notably, Senator Pocock joined with the Committee's Chair, Alicia Payne MP, in severely criticising the ACT Government for their reluctance and very poor submissions, evidence and responses to Inquiry Questions on Notice.

In face of persistent outworn anti-Canberra mantras from State Premiers and other politicians and influencers, Canberra always needs individual champions, but they are rare in the current federal Parliament and in Government and the bureaucracy.

Prime Minister Albanese and his fiancé Jodie Haydon are based at The Lodge in Canberra. He praises the benefits of maximising his time there and appreciates the Australian Institute of Sport, the Bruce Precinct, light rail and the national cultural

institutions. Finance Minister Katie Gallagher recently negotiated an infrastructure 'city partnership' deal with the ACT Government, which she was unable to do when Chief Minister.

To return to the Griffins' optimism, that Canberra would grow over time in accord with their competition-winning Plan, commensurately with the unified democratic spirit of the Australian community, they would have drawn some reassurance from the NCA's Griffin Legacy project. It may have been half-baked, detracting from national values, the symbolic and ideal, excessive and still largely in limbo, yet still driving private sector development plans, but it validated the original gazetted Plan and re-established its contemporary relevance, as the Griffins would have adapted. It is presumed to be the most important reference for the NCA in guiding Canberra's future development.

Griffin modified and clarified his Plan until his 1918 composite, which was gazetted in 1925. It has had detractors and opponents all the way from his time as National Capital Director of Planning and Construction, but we can see today touring Canberra in plain sight the enduring basic purpose, structure, principles and values of the Plan.



ABOVE: The grand vista looking towards Mt Ainslie from the forecourt at new Parliament House Photograph Luke Wensing, 2020.

An inventory of enduring elements of Griffin's Plan can draw on around 40 such standout, fundamental objects and concepts: covering the National triangle, constitutional and democratic layout, federal structure, the Land and Water Axes, Anzac Parade, grand avenues, landscape vistas, the Lake, hilltop lookouts and forests, nomenclature, General Bridges memorial, murals, arboreta, architecture and symbols. The Canberra Chapter of the Walter Burley Griffin Society has produced a handy brochure *Following the Griffin Trail* with additional links.

Recalling Walter's and Marion's markers of the Australian national 'soul' and a unified 'sentiment' warranting and underwriting a worthy National Capital, these attributes have waxed and waned over the decades. Lost Referenda about becoming a republic and responding to the First Nations Uluru Statement for a Voice in Parliament,

treatment of refugees, culture wars, threats to multiculturalism, inadequate actions on climate change, racism, divisive public discourse and debate, domestic violence, uneven commitment to the United Nations and international treaties, failures in urban and regional planning and weakened democratic institutions have exposed current national flaws and issues.

As a consequence, Canberra has lost momentum as the National Capital.

Canberra - a city designed for the future, placed in a beautiful natural environment, firmly rooted in democratic spirit and high aspirations - as a worthy National Capital is in the balance under present ACT and federal governance, declining heritage, prevailing national values, policies, democracy and prospects.

As Griffin said, 'it is a city like no other,' but may also justifiably be said to be (by Nicholas Brown in *A History of Canberra*, 2014) 'more Australian than any other Australian town or city.'

Brett Odgers  
Swinger Hill, Canberra

Talk at Warrigal, Canberra  
5 September 2024

### **GRIFFIN IN PLAIN SIGHT**

The competition-winning maps, plans and drawings [National Archives of Australia]

The concepts of an ideal city and the city as a work of art (best seen from Mt Ainslie, Black Mountain and the National Arboretum)

The National Capital Plan

Lake Burley Griffin

City in the landscape

Regatta Point National Capital Exhibition

Marion Mahony Griffin View from Mt Ainslie

\* The Land and Water Axes

\* The National Triangle and Parliamentary Zone (symbolism of democracy and the Constitution)

New Parliament House (Romaldo Giurgola's empathy with Griffin's Plan; Capitol elements)

The flag structure atop Parliament House (Griffin's Capitol suggested)

Bridges' Grave, Duntroon

The ANU and the High Court (Griffin locations)

Metro Light Rail tram

Anzac Parade and the Rond Terraces (saved for Griffin's land uses from more war memorials)

Constitution Avenue (now reviving Griffin's residential and cosmopolitan precincts)

\* Civic Centre, City Hill

\*\*\* Axes, radials, boulevards, avenues, symbolism, geometry, vista and termini in landscape features

\*West Basin and Acton Peninsula

Manuka – Initial City, Manuka Circle, Wellington (Canberra) Avenue and Telopea Park

Collins (Blandfordia Christmas Bells) Park and Hobart Avenue

Melbourne Avenue/Empire Circuit survey benchmark for the land axis, energy matrix, solid mandala and three-dimensional plan (Peter Muller, Walter Burley Griffin Lecture 24 November 1976)

The Causeway, Hume Circle, Sturt Avenue

Captain Cook Crescent and Stuart Street ('the noblest radial, dramatic and pivotal' – Roger Pegrum)

WBG-designed ceremonial golden trowel, wooden mallet and decorative casket made of over 50 native timbers used at the laying of Canberra's foundation stones by the Prince of Wales in 1920

National Archives of Australia (plans and illustrations)

National Library of Australia (architectural office archives; Marion's flora registers and Tree Portraits)

National Museum of Australia (Knitlock materials, window, chairs)

Walter's Arboretum and Eventual Botanical Reserves Canberra 1915 (Green Hills, Roman Cypress Hill, Himalayan Cedars, Weston Park, Black Mountain Peninsula, Yarramundi Reach, National Arboretum Canberra and the Cork Oaks Plantation) [the history of this area is related in the March 2023 edition of the *Canberra & District Canberra Historical Journal* by Trevor Lipscombe, The Green Hills: Griffin and Weston's Forgotten Arboreal Backdrop]. Other experts, such as Lenore Coltheart, Christopher Vernon and Dianne Firth, have written on the heritage significance of Walter's Arboretum proposal.

Walter also included in his Canberra Plans a botanic gardens and a national collection of Australian plants (he and Marion had a great love of the Australia bush and Marion made extensive catalogues) near the university on the lower slopes of Black Mountain. Correspondence between Griffin and the respective Directors of the Sydney and Melbourne Botanic Gardens reveal his visionary and thorough scientific approach. His Arboretum concept was both global, illustrating Australia's significance in the recently discovered Gondwanaland, the uniqueness of its flora; and local for testing and contribution for the natural beautification of Canberra.

\* Californian Redwoods forest, Pialligo (planned East Lake)

Griffin's revegetation and beautification of Canberra's Inner Hills, including the Coloured Hills Scheme (only partly realised with Red Hill heritage callistemon, Mugga Mugga and Mt Ainslie), selected as the termini of principal axes and avenues of as many important vistas as possible – ['One of the greatest achievements of the Griffin city design, but one that is not recognised by any heritage listing' – Trevor Lipscombe and Tony Maple, 16.3.2023]

\* Yarralumla Incinerator (Griffin influence)

Sewerage vents in Westbourne Woods and on Stirling Ridge

Griffin's housing designs for early Canberra, compiled by Peter Freeman, UCAN and AIA

Hyatt Hotel Canberra (Griffin, Prairie School influence)

St Paul's Church Manuka (Griffin influence)

Street nomenclature past and present

Mural of Walter and Marion on the south wall of Woolstore Residences, the Causeway/Cunningham Street.



## References

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