



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY**  
**FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**

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STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT, CLIMATE CHANGE AND BIODIVERSITY  
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## Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into ACT's heritage arrangements

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# **Submission to the Standing Committee on Environment, Climate Change and Biodiversity**

## **Inquiry into ACT Heritage arrangements 2023**

As a city planned in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Canberra is lacking the heritage structures dating back to past ages of other capitals. It does, however, have something other capitals are lacking: a garden city lay-out with a lake as its centre, rather than a heavily built-up area. This unusual plan and its acceptance in Australia were the result of a new way of thinking. The industrial revolution had caused the rapid growth of densely populated cities, opening up seemingly endless commercial possibilities. But there was an ugly underside: the slums where deprivation and illnesses thrived, creating new generations of unhealthy human beings.

Walter Burley Griffin (1876-1937), the young Chicago architect and urban planner whose design for Canberra won the 1912 competition, explained the object of his plan as: “the provision of fresh air and sunlight; comfortable homes, amid healthy surroundings and ample spaces for recreation, so that our city dwellers may acquire some of the advantages of a country life and city children no longer be permitted to grow weedy, stunted and deformed.”

Perhaps this new way of thinking considering the health of the population to be more important than commercial expansion and profit would have had little impact on the selection committee if it had not been for a British emigree architect who had moved to Australia to escape illnesses spread by high-density, unsanitary housing. This was John Sulman (1849-1934) who outlined his vision for Australia’s new capital in a journal article of 1909 as:

“The closely-packed miles of streets of the older cities are no longer regarded as inevitable ... In a new city such as we are contemplating, where there is no lack of land obtainable at agricultural or grazing values, it would therefore be a sin to permit of the old conditions being repeated ...”

Thus, Australia was fortunate to receive a capital with a lay-out advanced for the time that put the health of its inhabitants above commercial profits. The money W.B. Griffin thought the country would invest in its new capital did not come forth, and development was slow. Many changes were made, but the essence of Griffin’s plan, the ecological sound garden city, was preserved. By the 1980s Canberra became famous as the Bush Capital and when Covid came to Australia the “healthy surroundings” that Griffin had designed made the city the envy of others with its short lockdowns. Even during these lockdowns, the greater part of the population was less affected than in other cities: with the high percentage of individual homes, many took the occasion to spend some time renovating and gardening.

However, despite Griffin’s design being ideally suited to the ecological challenges we are now facing, our local government seems set to destroy it. What the government seems to be looking for are the “closely-packed miles of streets of the older cities”, which Sulman considered “a sin” to repeat, but are increasingly found in metropolises like Sydney and Melbourne.

When Edmund Bacon (1910-2005), the American urban planner of modern Philadelphia, visited Canberra in 1966 he warned:

“The great accomplishment of Walter Burley Griffin, and of the Australian nation which selected, and up to now has supported the Griffin plan, was the capacity to conceive space itself as

the basic design issue ... Now that you have produced such a masterwork, the great issue is that you don't wreck it."

Many are of the opinion that parts of Canberra have been wrecked in the last decade when areas in the North of this garden city were turned into a light rail corridor with high-density, high-rise housing. Here Griffin's 'healthy surroundings' will no longer exist when the El Niño weather pattern returns with its long, parched summers. The Urban Heat Island effect, produced when the heat of the sun turns concrete structures into radiators, is likely to raise temperatures to life-threatening levels in this heavily built up area.

The question is, will the ACT government continue to destroy Canberra's world-famous heritage, the Walter Burley Griffin garden-city plan, by encroaching on the open spaces central to this design with its 70% infill policy? Indicative is that the so-called reform of the urban planning system shows no concern for either Canberra's heritage or the Urban Heat Island effect which scientists see as the greatest threat to the world's cities.

As I have argued elsewhere (*City News*, April 2023), the claim that high-rise housing reduces the ecological footprint is a fallacy. Moreover, the so-called greenfields used for new suburbs are rarely pristine land, but mostly areas which have been degraded by logging to produce pastures for sheep and cattle raising. If the latest technologies of revegetation and water conservation were combined with sustainable building materials – such as rammed earth and straw-bale – the human footprint could be much reduced and Canberra's most precious heritage, Griffin's plan to create a city with "the provision of fresh air and sunlight; comfortable homes, amid healthy surroundings and ample spaces for recreation" could be preserved and extended.

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