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Submission Cover Sheet

Nature in Our City

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Submission to the Nature In Our City Inquiry

CANBERRA CITY IN THE LANDSCAPE

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Following is a submission to the above inquiry which specifically addresses criterion 2a Social Amenity. It draws somewhat from my 2006 book *Canberra City in the Landscape*.

Recently a visiting urbanist to Canberra, Professor Greg Clark, made the point ‘there’s a design ethic in the heart of Canberra that gives it a distinctive look and feel and sense of place. So as Canberra grows, it needs to figure out how it can retain that.’ Precisely and it is a point repeatedly made by local commentators on our city’s future. A common theme running through public comments is the importance of open space and associated tree planting to the distinctive and much loved sense of the city as Canberra, city in the landscape. It has been a distinctive theme through various visionary phases of planning and open space development: Griffin, Weston, Sulman, Pryor, NCDC. Even before the Walter Burley Griffin entry won the 1911 international competition, the concept and ideal of an Australian federal capital envisaged a city in the landscape and of the landscape. The instructions given to Scrivener in 1908 to finalise the site choice in the Canberra-Yass area were explicit:

... 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.

At this stage in the city’s history what is needed is for the landscape ethos of the city to be reimagined and applied rather than ignored. This is particularly so in new medium and high density developments where regrettably we have had an approach driven solely by land economics hitherto. It remains to be seen if the replacement for the unlamented LDA, the City Renewal Authority, makes any difference. A central vision for the city as the city in the landscape has increasingly dissipated since 1988 and particularly so since the mid-1990s as densification of the city has increased. This is not an argument against densification, but against the lack of spaces and effective tree planting between and around buildings leading to soulless built zones. The term ‘garden city’ has been synonymous with Canberra, underpinning the idea of the ‘bush capital’ since the 1921 when Griffin left and John Sulman was appointed to direct the Federal Capital Advisory Committee (1921-24). Originally Ebenezer Howard’s garden city concept (early twentieth century) was a social reform initiative to improve living conditions for industrial cities with new towns separated from older urban centres, surrounded by farm

land, and with town form in which public parks and gardens, private gardens, communal gardens and street tree planting would form a visual and physical link with the surrounding farm land. It was the linking of town and country.

The garden city idea became associated with low density single detached residential housing with generous gardens as in Canberra's early inner suburbs (Reid, Barton etc) and then in NCDC planning of the 1960s 1970s and 1980s. But it was never intended to be solely low density and there are examples worldwide of medium and higher density developments that reflect the garden city paradigm through inclusion of landscape spaces in their layouts: private spaces, semi-private and public. An added benefit socially is the contact with nature in the city that such an approach provides. The distinctive aspect of Canberra is its landscape ethos: the NCOSS (National Capital Open Space System) consisting of the inner and outer hills, ridges and valleys from landscape space flows into the built form through larger public parks, smaller neighbourhood parks, street tree planting and private spaces around dwellings.

It is this urban form we have inherited from previous planning visions and visionaries which has made Canberra special. It is an inheritance that should be cherished but it is a vision that has been trashed in much of the new developments in favour of an approach driven solely by land economics. Nevertheless and notably Ben Ponton the Chief Planner recently mentioned the role of landscape (*The Canberra Times* 28 April) when he reflected that, in terms of increased residential densities, it is not necessarily the height of buildings that is the real problem for people, but how the buildings relate to the landscape, and the people in the landscape. Critical to this image is Canberra's landscape ethos right down to spaces between buildings.

The committee should note there is a steady flow of letters to *The Canberra Times* referring to the importance of landscape spaces in the city and the meaning of these to people and how they help establish a sense of place, what Canberra means to them. J. B. Jackson an eminent writer on people and sense of place suggests that:

Most of us, I suspect, without giving much thought to the matter, would say that a sense of place, a sense of being at home in a town or city, grows as we become accustomed to it and learn to know its peculiarities. It is my belief that a sense of place is something that we ourselves create in the course of time. It is the result of habit or custom.

It is high time that more scrutiny is given to designs from developers for higher density developments, as for instance along Northbourne Avenue as gentrification takes place. Most of the old government housing layouts along Northbourne are distinguished by integral open spaces, private and public, with tree planting. If such spaces were thought important when the layouts were designed and built at lower densities than the current replacements, how much more necessary are they now? There is considerable focus given to the concept of 'urban villages' groups in the new developments. I ask the committee to stop to think what does this mean? The model of a village notion is presumably intended to conjure up reassuringly rather nice ideas of communities of people as in a village. Crucial to such communities is space between buildings, contact with nature and this is what is needed in the new developments which will mean compromising on how many dwelling units can be crammed in.

Following is an excerpt from *Canberra City in the Landscape* pp.16/18). Whilst it repeats some of the above commentary members of the committee may wish to read it and ponder on the question in the last paragraph:

A City Like No Other

Canberra is a remarkable city. In the true sense of the word it is unique; there is no city like it in the world. That it was conceived in anticipation, fervour, and pride by a new, small nation at the beginning of the twentieth century—and continued to flourish as a renowned piece of planning despite early setbacks and carping criticism—should be a matter of national pride.

Walter Burley Griffin declared in 1912 that ‘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 governmental authorities would accept. I have planned the ideal city—a city that meets my ideal of the city of the future.’¹ These were prophetic words, for the city over the years has maintained its status of being unique. There are roads, houses, offices, schools, shops, parks—all the components we associate with urban development—as in any other city, yet it is unlike every other city.

The reason lies in the way landscape defines and articulates the city plan. Changes over the years to the form of the city and hence to the Griffin ideal have taken place and are well chronicled elsewhere, for example in Paul Reid’s *Canberra Following Griffin*. Still the landscape basis which binds form and content remains vividly coherent. 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 and Kyoto are similar in the way landscape open space surrounds and penetrates the city, but not to the comprehensively planned extent nor with the same founding visions.

Underlying the city’s spatial structure is the premise that Canberra is 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.² The extraordinary expansion period of the National Capital Development Commission (NCDC), 1958 to 1988, kept these elements as the structure of the city plan. These were the very landscape elements that impressed Scrivener in recommending the site in 1909 and their splendour has proved an enduring and distinguishing characteristic of the city. The magnificent panorama over the city from Mount Ainslie is testimony to this aspect of Canberra. It is surely impossible to take in this prospect without thinking, if not saying, what a beautiful city, bearing out the comment by King O’Malley, Minister for Home Affairs (1910) that ‘Moses, thousands of years ago, as he gazed down on the promised land, saw no more panoramic view.’³

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) that articulates the city plan—it is the landscape nature of the city that predominates physically. In turn this tangible physical presence has inextricable, intangible meanings and values,

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confirming that landscape is not just what we see. Rather, as Denis Cosgrove remarks (in *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*), 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. [p.1]

When you look out over the magnificent prospect from Mount Ainslie or from Parliament House (Figures 1.1 and 4.6) across the city to the hills that form its embracing backdrop, or enjoy the tree lined streets, gardens, and parks of the suburbs (Figures 6.5), the landscape itself is more than physical elements. It has a meaning and significance that communicate what Canberra is.

Consideration of these special aspects is critical for Canberra as national capital and home to 320,000 people. How will the city expand 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

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special sense of place? Even before the site was chosen, landscape imagery and an associated sense of Australianness drove the enthusiasm and resolution for the country to have a federal capital. ‘As an Aboriginal teenager once said on television, you can’t have a future without a past.’⁴ It is important 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.

Mirroring the wise comment from the young Aboriginal man quote in the last paragraph is that of the philosopher Hegel:

What experience in history teaches us is that **governments have never learned anything from history or acted on principles deducted from it** (my emphasis).

It is regrettable that this applies to the current ACT government with its approach to eschewing the history and past achievements in planning the city, apart from when it claims spuriously to acknowledging a Griffin legacy. Apart from the fallacy of that statement the city has a series of histories that have cumulatively created the city we have and that many people love and admire. As change takes place as it surely will and must, we need political leaders who understand how to carry forward the best of the past into the future. The underlying question should be what are acceptable levels of change and how do we achieve these.

I am happy to attend any session to enlarge on my comments or respond to question if I am in Canberra. I have two trips one to Vietnam in August and the China/Taiwan in September.

W. S. C.


29 June 2018