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Public parklands traded for apartments

A line of buoys in Canberra's Lake Burley Griffin delineates the proposed infill extending approximately 80 m out from the present lake shore at the boat ramp.

Major changes and development can affect public parks and urban open spaces – including landscapes of national significance such as Lake Burley Griffin.

photo Juliet Ramsay

If you are reading this, the chances are that you like plants, gardens and parks: the smell of flowers and earth, the sound and sight of birds and bees, reflections off water, tall trees and the variety of a layered landscape, perhaps with views to the distance.

The importance of this connection with nature is well evidenced by therapeutic gardens in hospital settings, the growth in urban demand for community gardens, guerrilla gardening on nature strips, and high-rise balconies crowded with pot plants as testimony to people's wish to tend gardens, even miniature ones.

With a rise in apartment living and houses built on ever smaller blocks with scant space for gardens, the reality for most people is loss of opportunities to connect with nature – unless one drives to a national park. This makes the surviving urban public parks and open space even more valuable.

Open space or waste space

Hardly a week goes by without media comment on Australia's rapidly increasing population, the resulting congestion in our main cities and the building of new 'landmark' apartments. New housing estates are being built onto small towns and whole new towns at the perimeters of our main cities. With denser occupation open space is threatened through disappearance of front

(and back) gardens, ever decreasing building setbacks, and building on undeveloped blocks previously believed by their communities to be reserves – or in some cases even public parks.

'Space' is an increasingly important landscape value but some people believe that open space is wasted space. It is not contributing by making money as a part of overall progress and development to the economy. Space is greedily sought after and mined by governments and developers. Any urban open areas that are not manicured parks designed for ease of maintenance, with hardscape walkways and simplistic easy-care plantings, are in danger of being termed wasteland ripe for building development. Sustainability arguments and the need for denser living to avoid urban sprawl, are used as justifications. Cultural landscapes as heritage places are most vulnerable to this exploitation.

The concrete jungle is not only often unattractive and unhealthy. Intergenerational equity, the environment including important wildlife habitats and corridors, and significant landscape experiences, vistas and views are all under threat. Once open space is built on it is gone, with the impact of that loss being felt ever after. A further consequence of such building on open space is that a rise in land values closely follows residential development, inevitably leading to further development for private use and encouraging even denser infill.

CASE STUDY 1

Lake Burley Griffin and its parklands

Planning for ornamental waters was a prerequisite for Australia's national capital. In the winning entry to the capital's design competition, a substantial lake system was planned by Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin in 1911, and amended by WB Griffin in 1913 with further modification in 1918.

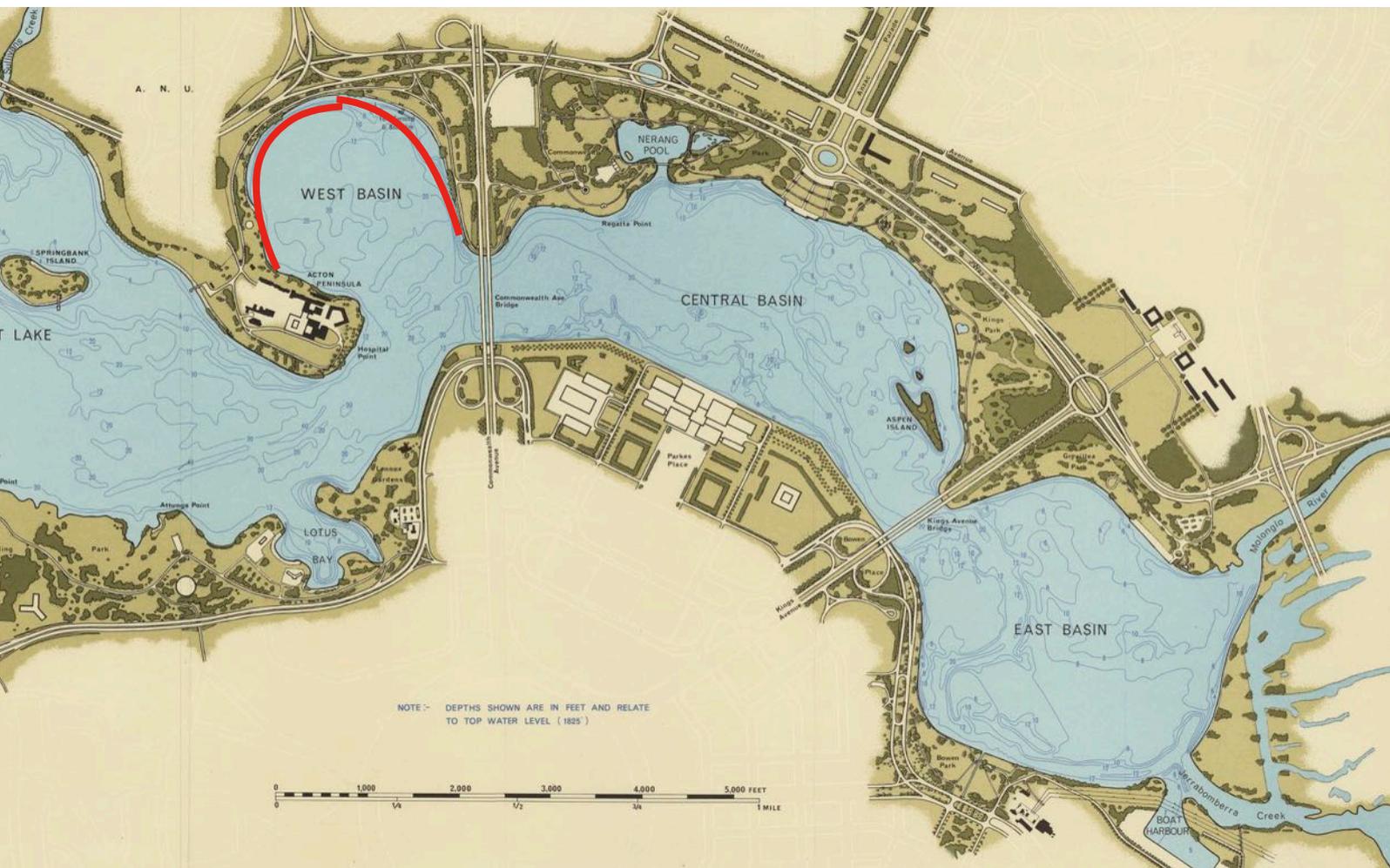
The Menzies Government's National Capital Development Commission undertook intensive technical research and strong consideration of practical requirements, including a scale model to test variable water flows and their impacts, that made the lake system plan work. In doing so, Griffin's three-basin composition was kept but altered in the light of greater understanding of the course and flow of the Molonglo River to be impounded. This delineation softened the hard lake edges so that the East and West Basins had a naturalistic edging more in line with physical contours, in a style noted by experts as 'modern picturesque'. The lake was modelled for formal and informal areas and expanded in parts to create rowing and sailing courses. West Basin

was developed as a horseshoe shape to utilise the natural form of Acton Peninsula as a partial boundary.

The lake works included the two bridges and a dam wall, each of which was considered an outstanding engineering work of the time. Over 40.5 ha of landscape planting was done – a total planting of 55,000 trees, stretching around 35 km with character areas using existing native trees and groupings of willows and poplars and more regular plantings in the formal areas. From the moment the lake filled in 1963 it became a major recreation feature of the fledgling city, with people enjoying the natural (soft) lake environments as well as the structured (hard) environments.

The completed lake and parklands was a stunning masterwork of landscape design and engineering that successfully kept the spirit of Griffin's plan but achieved a functioning and modern attractive expression. It received the Australian Institute of Landscape Architecture Award of Landscape Excellence in 1986. In 2001 the lake received an Award of Excellence from Engineering Australia. Today people use the lake and its landscape for water sports, fishing, cycling, walking, events and visiting for relaxation and enjoying views and vistas.

Lake Burley Griffin foreshore parkland [detail]. National Capital Development Commission map G8984 C3G45, 1964. The authors have superimposed the red line to show proposed lakebed reclamation. National Library of Australia





Above: The Land Development Agency plan for proposed West Basin development in 2015. The superimposed red line shows the existing lake edge.

Right top: Aerial view of Lake Burley Griffin West Basin infill line – the lake and parkland left of the buoy line is planned to be appropriated for residential apartments and formal promenade against a retaining wall.

photo Alan Robertson

Right bottom: Community picnic in the windbreak rows of trees at Haig Park, Braddon, November 2018.

photo Anne Claoue-Long

Despite considerable professional research on the history and value of the lake and its designed landscape setting, including several heritage nominations to the Federal Government accompanied by continued lobbying in the face of inactivity to process these, the heritage significance of the entire Lake Burley Griffin and lakeshore landscape remains officially unlisted, and therefore lacks official heritage protection.

The Australian Garden History Society has added Canberra's Lake Burley Griffin and lakeshore parklands to its list of Landscapes at Risk because of industrial and commercial developments as a result of land rezoning for apartment blocks and a contested planning process.

The Lake Burley Griffin Guardians, a community group who are spearheading the campaign against proposed loss of public park to private development, were formed in February 2015 and are committed to safeguarding one of Canberra's greatest treasures: the open space of Lake Burley Griffin and its lakeshore landscape setting.

Proposal to turn lake and parkland into an apartment estate

There is a proposal for extending the lakeshore by up to 80 m near the existing jetty, to appropriate an additional 2.8 hectares of West Basin's lakebed and thus create a sizeable estate of private four to six storey apartments. The current informal open public park, Acton Park, and its public vistas will be privatised. A new formal promenade frontage with concrete boardwalk will be constructed resulting



in damaging the three-basin lake form carefully researched and constructed in the 1960s.

The alteration of current natural earth lake edges with small beaches to hard form walls, with problematic public access for all but new apartment dwellers, will result in a loss of a wildlife environment (for platypus, water rat and waterfowl), loss of around 100 mature trees, loss of opportunity for the public to connect with nature, and loss of public vistas and views including those experienced from the Commonwealth Avenue, the major route to Parliament House. The apartments will create cold winter shadows over most of the public area. There will be increased heat bank, winter wind channelling, increased wave action on the lake edge, and traffic issues arising from the increased residential density.

CASE STUDY 2

Haig Park, Canberra

Another area of Canberra parkland noted by AGHS as being at risk is Haig Park, just north of Canberra city centre. This area of mixed evergreen and deciduous exotic trees was planted in 1921–23 as a windbreak for the newly developing city. The linear composition of uniform planting and absence of formal



finishes provides its defining character. It is a rare example of its type and an integral component of the landscaped open space between adjoining suburbs. Despite heritage listing, 'renewal' proposals now aim to develop and enhance the park space into separate areas of differing character with additional recreational facilities, formed paths and hard curbing to better serve the projected population growth from an explosion in apartment building along Canberra's new light rail route adjacent to the site. The recognised informal and linear heritage aspects may be sidelined.

The importance of community advocacy

Don't presume major changes and development activity won't happen to public parks and urban open spaces near you. Just listing landscapes at risk is not sufficient. In the spirit of 'use it or lose it', communities who value their open space and parks should make that fact known to their governing authorities through visible documented use and by campaigning for management strategies to protect these important urban assets for their green character and heritage values if applicable. Do this before land economics and developer-driven strategies can overtake community wishes and expertise in planning design and heritage identification.

In Canberra now there is community concern about a lack of an overarching master plan for the ongoing development of the city. Increasing densification and resulting loss of green space might also mean the loss of a vision of the city as defined by its landscape. Open parkland spaces, such as on the lake foreshores and Haig Park, should be retained and maintained as the lungs of the city without further residential infill or neatening up for ease of maintenance or to increase the potential attractiveness of adjacent apartment sales. The value of the natural green

infrastructure of the urban forest, parks and open space for public health and environmental benefits in a changing world is in need of greater recognition.

Acknowledgement

This article was produced on behalf of the AGHS ACT Monaro Riverina branch committee who wanted to publicise the issues concerning two of their local landscapes on the AGHS Landscapes at Risk list.

West Basin taken looking westwards, with the Nishi building on the righthand side.
photo Juliet Ramsay

For more information see:

AGHS Landscapes at Risk (AGHS website).

Lake Burley Griffin Guardians website.

National Capital Authority *Lake Burley Griffin and Adjacent Lands heritage management plan (2008)* and *Assessment report (2010)*.

As yet unprocessed nominations to Federal Government Department of the Environment for heritage listing of Lake Burley Griffin and Lakeshore Landscape.

Haig Park heritage registration www.environment.act.gov.au/.

R Clough and J Gray (1964) *Landscaping Lake Burley Griffin*. Instit Parks Admin Conf, Canberra.

J Ramsay and H Feng (2011) 'Space is not nothing: aesthetics and the struggle for space.' Proc 17th General Assembly and Scientific Symposium of ICOMOS, France.

Juliet Ramsay has a background in landscape architecture and heritage assessment and management experience with Australian landscapes and overseas. She is the convener of the Lake Burley Griffin Guardians.



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