

To the National Capital Authority, Canberra.

Submission on the NCA's Acton Peninsula Precinct Draft Structure Plan, May 2017.

Background.

These comments and suggestions are based on the author's involvement over several years as president of Canberra Community Action on Acton Inc. (CCAA), the many public meetings of that organisation, and attendance and evidence given at numerous official meetings etc on the topic of the future of Acton Peninsula, including Committees of the Parliament. The work and activities of CCAA focussed on the history, future, and community values of the former hospital complex on Acton Peninsula, and on the precinct generally. The organisation gave expression to the views and aspirations of thousands of people. This submission takes into account post-CCAA events.

Summary.

Opportunities for buildings of scale on the peninsula, and better connectivity with the National Triangle precinct are noticeably missing in this Draft Structure Plan. It falls short of setting the scene for the peninsula precinct to develop and flourish appropriately, now and into the future.

Walter Burley Griffin's plan for the Acton Peninsula and West Basin is the key to an exemplary structure plan. His vision is largely ignored in the Draft Plan, and it needs to be embraced by the NCA and the other stakeholders.

It's time for a more visionary plan for the Acton Peninsula precinct, based on Griffin.

Understanding and achieving a better Acton Peninsula Precinct Structure Plan.

Significant buildings, with prominent scale and distinctive massing, characterised Griffin's Canberra hospital, which he located in the therapeutic Acton Peninsula setting, created by his superb lake design. That building-height designation reflected the time-honoured expression of significant structures located at such places - think lighthouses, forts, the Sydney Opera House.

1960's planners and architects respected and realised Griffin's vision in the development of the main block and nurses quarters of the former Royal Canberra Hospital, tragically and ignorantly demolished by explosion on July 13, 1997. Those substantial and well-built buildings presented wonderful opportunities for renovation and continuing use. (The aerial photo of the completed hospital complex on page 15 of the Draft Plan should be labelled 1960s, not 1940s.)

Saved from demolition were several early low-rise hospital buildings strung along the sunny western end of the northern shore of the peninsula. These now have heritage status. To his credit, the ACT Health Minister at the time went ahead, before the ill-fated explosions, with the conversion and extension of one of the buildings into a fine hospice.

The hospice, which a later ACT Government dangerously kept occupied during the nearby explosions, was in a sunny location, close to the established trees along the Lennox Crossing road, with fine water views and connective prospects of Civic across West Basin. For no good reason, the discrete hospice was wastefully closed by that government, and a

new one sited on remote south facing Grevillea Park on East Basin's shore, right on Griffin's Causeway Axis.

The peninsula was Territory Land, and using the "priceless" argument to avoid valuing it realistically and having to pay parity, the Commonwealth managed to acquire it from the ACT in return for a small strip of Commonwealth land at Kingston Foreshore, a place the Territory was keen to redevelop. The peninsula hospice could have remained on the new National Land, by arrangement.

For years, Yarramundi Reach was the preferred site of museologists for the proposed National Museum of Australia, and detailed concept plans were prepared for that site. Those experts had been looking for a unique Australian museum expression, reflecting its differences in character and content from the fine State museums, and overseas examples. They had found it at Yarramundi.

The NC(P)A carried out a study looking at a range of sites for the museum. The study included Yarramundi Reach, the Parliamentary Zone (which the Authority clearly preferred), Kings Park, and Acton Peninsula.

A scheme to relocate the National Museum from Yarramundi Reach to Acton Peninsula was meant to give the institution "commercial visibility", ignoring the fact that the museum's brief was basically for low-rise pavilions ("sophisticated sheds"), and that they would be largely hidden by the peninsula precinct's significant cultural landscape, including fine trees planted around the shoreline, echoing planting on the opposite side of the lake.

Worse, it appears that the compactness of the museum on the peninsula site more or less forced its designers and operators to imitate the scale and nature of the States' museums, while trying to find a point of difference regarding content. However, at Acton there is a high content of "popular culture", with occasional "blockbuster" exhibitions, and the substantial First Australians: Gallery of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. So the Yarramundi concept of a unique Australia-wide national museum was lost, at least for the time being.

After the hospital explosions, the then NC(P)A set a building-height limit for the peninsula at no higher than the treetop line. That low permissible height was clearly a rationalisation of the museum's likely building height, and ignored and insulted Griffin's completely logical and exciting concept of prominent tall structures in a pleasing and accentuated architectural composition.

The museum project went ahead on the peninsula, and the "commercial-visibility" solution was to cut down virtually all of the outer trees and incorporate a spiralling looped element above the museum entry way.

However, the buildings on the peninsula remain barely visible from many inner areas of Canberra, notably from Mt Ainslie. Compare that with Marion Mahony Griffin's world famous rendering of the city viewed from there, clearly showing the appropriate scale and form of the planned hospital buildings etc. and how they fitted with the overall city arrangement, providing focus and interest. And they didn't rely on a denuded landscape for visibility and legibility.

To use a quaintly anachronistic term heard of late, the present peninsula development is a bit of a "damp squib".

We should not be stuck with the current lowly building height restrictions, as proposed in the Draft Structure Plan. And decision makers should not be so apparently afraid of architecture and buildings in any case, and encourage (as the NCA is meant to) properly convened design competitions to achieve optimum results in that regard.

The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies was formerly housed in the former Acton Hotel buildings, located in what is now the New Acton precinct. The national museum had been carefully planned by experts to be sited at Yarramundi Reach, and a well designed initial building was installed there. The building remains at Yarramundi today used by local indigenous groups. AIATSIS was given no choice but to move to Acton Peninsula. However, it is a place of significance for native Australians.

The museum's architects, in their initial design, expanded their above-mentioned spiralling loop element into a strange bridge-like link extending from the outer centre point of the museum across the lake to Lennox Gardens. The link, which was deleted, probably for cost reasons, may have made passing but inappropriate reference to Griffin's proposed Acton - Lennox Gardens bridge. His bridge beautifully echoed the circular shape of his West Basin, and preserved the integrity of the peninsula's form, which the museum architects' cross-lake link design did not.

The extant Development Control Plan for the peninsula, prepared by the NC(P)A before the NMA/AIATSIS development, required car parking for the museum to be unobtrusive, located underground or in a small-footprint structure. For cost reasons, the museum planners summarily ignored that requirement, and the current vast open car park squats in the body of the peninsula on some of the most prime land there. That clearly needs to be redressed.

Apparently, budget constraints excluded grade separation of public and service entries in the adopted museum arrangement. The Sydney Opera House design achieves that separation. So, shamefully, the museum has its loading docks on the lake side of the building, adding to the compromised nature of the whole NMA development. The above described shore line tree panting should be re-established to soften the loading dock blight, and encourage visitors to this vital part of the peninsula.

It has to said that the architecture of the museum and AIATSIS is deeply idiosyncratic, more of an expression of the architects' desire to stretch the imagination of visitors and users with their far-out style, startling use of materials, colours, reflectances, and symbols, and obscure "tributes" to famous architects and architecture from other eras and cultures - possibly for valid-ish reasons that are not fully explained on site.

We see Braille embossed into facades, a "copy" of the famous Berlin Jewish Museum housing the NMA's First Australians Gallery, and a black version of Le Corbusier's famous all white 1920's Villa Savoye at Poissy in France, placed on the roof of AIATSIS. Debate continues over the validity and appropriateness of all that. The Garden of Australian Dreams in the museum's forecourt by the project's landscape architect is a brilliant and somewhat more self-explanatory element in the overall composition.

But without doubt, the scale of the existing buildings in their setting is a failure, and an insult to Griffin. The new Precinct Structure Plan must address that.

ANU land adjoins the NMA-AIATSIS site. The university, with its reported lease in perpetuity, was quick to preserve its boundary line with a substantial but well-designed metal fence. To its credit the ANU established a fine "international" sculpture garden inside the fence. However, it is rather cryptic and rarely visited. Other ANU land extends along the western edge of West Basin. Both parcels are sensibly included in the Precinct Structure Plan, and they present national capital development opportunities by arrangement. Historic Springbank Island is also logically included.

Regrettably, the museum seems to be destined to stay on the peninsula, at least for the medium term. That's despite the fact that the preferred site, Yarramundi Reach, not that it needed it, now has significant "commercial visibility" connections brought about by its proximity to the popular National Arboretum.

In the long term, at least the museum should move back to Yarramundi Reach, enabling it to have that unique Australian tract expression in a natural lakeside landscape setting, with the opportunity to grow incrementally over time, incorporating large outdoor exhibits of natural, indigenous, and post-1788 items, including earthworks, natural and cultural landscapes, industrial and agricultural exhibits, relocated structures, and so on - a true national attraction.

The peninsula already stands quite visually remote and isolated from the body of Civic, even from the emerging West Basin lakeside enlivenment. However, it's been said that Acton Peninsula, although not *in* The National Triangle, is certainly *of* it. Griffin understood that, so ways and means of improving readily interactive accessibility or connectivity between the peninsula and the triangle need to be found.

The Draft Structure Plan doesn't address that fundamental issue.

Given budget cutbacks to the development of the centre of national capital, and the shocking proposed sell-off of significant buildings in the National Triangle, the stakeholders in the subject Structure Plan, instead of tacitly accepting that situation, must impress upon the powers-that-be that a visionary approach to the future of the peninsula precinct is required.

They need to confidently promote a ground-breaking plan, which not only realises Griffin's vision, but creates opportunities for brilliant new largely self-funding developments in the precinct. The stakeholders must take the peninsula precinct forward and not let it stagnate by tinkering with existing compromised developments.

Better integration with the Lennox Gardens precinct and beyond, is the key.

(The NCA's own 2008 *The Griffin Legacy* publication touches on this with its *Strategic Initiatives* recommendation No 27 in the section entitled *Extending the Griffin Legacy*, which suggests a thin straight-line pedestrian bridge extending from the tip of the peninsula to Lennox Gardens. This perfunctory item clearly compromises the integrity of the peninsula form and that of circular West Basin, limits the nature of the connectivity, and sadly looks like an ad hoc afterthought.)

The solution is to take direction from Griffin, and connect the peninsula to the Lennox-Gardens/Flynn-Place precinct across the lake from a point some distance away from the tip of the peninsula, so preserving the integrity of its land form and that of circular West Basin.

Notwithstanding any proposed change in his lake levels, the connection needs to reflect Griffin's stunning formalised circular geometry of this part of his lake system, seen in his 1913 plans. Today, that would involve significant earthworks, creating approximately 12 hectares of superb additional land on the Lennox Gardens shore, and about 3 hectares of land on the southwestern shore of the peninsula.

Based on today's as-built dimensions of the peninsula and the lake, the new lake crossing bridge would be approximately 350 metres long following a gently curving level segment of a circle with a radius of approximately 300 metres, springing from the above-described new Lennox Gardens land on one side, and from the new land on the southwest peninsular shoreline on the other.

Lawson Crescent would be extended on the new peninsula land out to the bridge abutment; and on the other side of the lake, the bridge would be connected to existing Flynn Drive at a convenient location via a section of road passing across the Lennox Gardens extension. Both sections of new carriageway would be "shared zones" for traffic calming and to enable safer pedestrian crossings.

The memorial to young Katie Bender at the spot in Lennox Gardens where she was shockingly killed by the hospital explosion, must be kept in situ.

Exactly how Griffin's link/crossing would be planned, designed, and implemented today obviously requires further work, encompassing technical studies, and notably modal use. A personal choice would be for pedestrians, bikes, small buses, and cars including (not-so-futuristic) mini self-docking electric hire cars. Heavy vehicles would be banned. The pedestrian sections would offer a path sheltered from the weather. The new level bridge would be physically subservient to the existing Commonwealth Avenue Bridge.

The above-mentioned museum architects' cross-lake looping link; the *Griffin Legacy* item No 27 pedestrian bridge; and the recent ill-fated "Immigration Bridge", would all be excluded from consideration. They all compromise the peninsula's defining land form, the West Basin geometry, and they all limit connectivity.

What to do about yachts, especially those with tall masts? The formalising of West Basin's circular geometry in current plans, and this new bridge proposal, would indicate that such craft be kept to the sublime and not insubstantial West Lake and beyond. The current sailing course could be reshaped slightly to avoid the newly created bridge, and could extend slightly more into Yarralumla Bay, while still passing between the peninsula and the island, and maintaining its current length. (Hopefully, the mooted extensive Jerrabomberra Creek dam in the Symonston valley, with its planned safe and full 2,000 metre rowing course [unavailable in Lake Burley Griffin] and sailing course, will be realised before too long.)

With Griffin's cross lake connection in place in the Structure Plan, we should now look to the development opportunities that are integral with it, while preserving much loved areas of heritage and natural beauty.

Looking firstly at the "head" of the expanded West Basin shore on and near the Water Axis - "The Lawson Precinct". Any non-ANU development here would clearly require cooperation between, and consideration of the university. The Draft Plan indicates a "key landscape destination" on the Water Axis in the Lawson Precinct. This would divide development here in two, creating an interconnectivity problem and a possible unresolved architectural duality. Better to encourage a significant publicly-accessible and permeable architectural element on the axis, forming a focus, and uniting the built forms on each side of the axis line. Contemporary "green" landscaped characteristics could be incorporated into this built element.

The current plan for the proposed National Convention Centre, or People's Forum, sees it located in the southeast segment of City Hill. Briefly, that site has never been satisfactory for many reasons, not the least being to do with its restricted area, and the preferred general symmetry of development about the highly important Commonwealth Avenue axis (notably when viewed from Capital Hill), which the unique architectural form of the convention centre would preclude.

That site is currently open space (car park) more or less matching the open space (cloverleaf carriageway) on the other side of Commonwealth Avenue, an arrangement that enhances expansive vistas to and from the City Hill hilltop park, which need to be preserved (see also supplementary comments on Parkes Way and City Hill at the end of this submission). As well, that site does not offer a good line of sight to and from Parliament House, a preferred and laudable symbolic prerequisite of the People's Forum. The People's Forum's original proponents chose the West Basin shore for its location.

With the additional connectivity from the Central National Area to the Acton Peninsula/Lawson Precinct being afforded by the above described new Griffin crossing, the Lawson Precinct emerges as a highly suitable site for the National Convention Centre, with the emphasis on "national". It would be highly visible and derive prominence from the Water

Axis location, and great connectivity with the ANU, West Basin, hotels etc in the New Acton precinct and beyond, while being afforded ready access to the Parliamentary Zone, the Hyatt Hotel etc. And it would command a good line of sight to and from Capital Hill.

Turning now to the body of the peninsula. Clearly, Griffin's peninsula building heights, recommended for adoption above, would enable at least one new carefully designed linear tower structure to be installed on the peninsula, say on the ill-sited main car park land (with a new shared car park located underground).

This building or group of buildings could include a hotel (including affordable accommodation, especially for Australians of modest means to enjoy close-up, the national capital they paid for), and would have great connectivity with the Central National Area via the above-described new Griffin lake crossing, the nearby suggested Lawson-Precinct National Convention Centre, the city, and the ANU.

Further carefully designed and sited medium-tall slender buildings could be installed on sections of the rising Lennox Crossing ANU land to the west of the main peninsula, characterising say, an Italian hill town with the taller building on the higher land. This precinct would be studded with sculptures from the existing garden gallery.

Looking now at the above recommended newly created land on Acton Peninsula, forming the approaches to the new bridge. It should be kept as recreational open space relating to the existing public open space and "grasslands" west of Lawson Crescent. A replacement jetty would be installed off the extended Lawson Crescent near the new bridge abutment.

The Draft Plan contains several interesting and attractive proposals for new public spaces, and building extensions for the extant institutions, on the peninsula and beyond, and they are certainly worthy inclusions.

The existing heritage-building precinct on the northern shore of the main peninsula needs to be retained. The buildings and grounds need to be made permeable in their community uses to allow physical and visual connections for the public between the lakeshore and Lennox Crossing and vice versa. The museum should be discouraged from adaptive reuse of those buildings, in favour of new extensions to its own complex, indicated in the Draft Plan (notwithstanding the preferred return to Yarramundi Reach).

Ideally, a significant hospital-related complex with scale and presence, à la Griffin and his built forms, should return to the peninsula, replacing the re-located museum.

However, the above newly created Lennox-Gardens land offers a fine opportunity in that regard, echoing the former hospital functions. In response to advancements in the fields of health and well-being, it is recommended that a National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health (NCEPH) be established there, relating to the ANU, and offering some clinical services, and a hospice. Such a complex would desirably not be high-rise, but a low-rise grouping set in a landscaped lakeside setting.

It's time for the NCA to push for and embark upon a more visionary plan for the Acton Peninsula precinct, and beyond.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Jack Kershaw FRAIA
Canberra
May 16, 2017
02 62310524

Supplementary related comments.

On a related issue, the implementation of the above proposed plan would be more realistic for the Commonwealth and the Territory than embarking on the highly expensive, disruptive, technically difficult, and politically fraught vertical duplication of Parkes Way, part of the covetous City to the Lake Plan.

Parkes Way is an important element in the history and development of the city, and deserves preservation and even heritage recognition. As is, it works very well as a vital east-west traffic link. It's well designed and built, particularly at its intersection with Commonwealth Avenue, which thankfully prevents that increasingly heavy east-west traffic from directly entering City Hill and vice versa. The proposed duplication will permit that intrusive access to City Hill.

The existing Parkes Way-Commonwealth Avenue-London Circuit intersection arrangement includes cloverleaf carriageways inside and outside London Circuit, and these fine evocative traffic elements assist in the creation of desirable open space in this important southern sector of the hill, enhancing Central National Area views. A fourth cloverleaf should be added in the hill's southeast sector, enhancing traffic movement, views, and symmetry. Clear pathways from the hilltop park to Commonwealth Park, Commonwealth Avenue Bridge, and the West Basin shore should also be added.

Parkes Way does need more and better pedestrian overpasses for improved City-Lake connectivity. What is not needed is the intense elitist development proposed for West Basin. It is not suitable for the Central National Area. The Kingston Foreshore development is enough of that.

The City to the Lake developments will destroy the feeling of legible open space connectivity, as well as impeding the superb vistas of lake and mountain available from City Hill, Commonwealth Avenue, and the Basin parkland.

If it's required, residential redevelopment near Civic should be focussing now on Reid, designed in a contextually sensitive way.

JK