

*Planning the National Capital:  
Interventions by the Walter Burley Griffin Society*

Brett Odgers

Sir William Deane has written ‘many individuals have contributed to the development of Canberra. One stands above all others as the individual who did most to shape this city. That person is Walter Burley Griffin.’ Roger Pegrum, distinguished Canberra architect, entitled his autobiography published last year *A Very Great City One Day*. I would add ‘becoming a great national capital one day.’

Griffin was persuaded to alter his competition winning plan in 1913 and 1918. His design was enshrined in 1925 in statute and has since been amended 93 times. Invariably these changes warrant reference to and have impacts on Griffin’s original Plan. So, the Walter Burley Griffin Society strives to protect and promote appreciation of that Plan, in addition to the Society’s usual activities of heritage conservation, exhibitions, talks, seminars and publications.

The specific purpose of this talk is to survey high and low points of the battles to sustain Griffin’s Plan and ‘ideal city.’. How much has been achieved by our interventions and by what means, in Canberra’s democracy?

The second part of my talk will survey what remains to be seen nowadays of Griffin’s Plan in the nation’s capital.

Canberra has been nominated for heritage recognition and protection on the Commonwealth and National Heritage Lists, indeed as a prelude to a claim for World Heritage listing, and possibly as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. It has earned consistent international acclaim as a planned city. Griffin’s original 1911 national capital plan was assessed in 1997 by 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.’

Accession to National and World Heritage status would, in my view, enhance Canberra's potential as well as protect what's left of the original Plan. At the same time, as the national capital, Canberra reflects layers of planning and reflects Australia's priorities, flaws and foibles, identity and achievements, along with global trends.

My account dates from 2002 when the National Capital Authority initiated their **Griffin Legacy Project**. They carefully researched and reviewed Griffin's designs, publishing in 2004 *The Griffin Legacy: Canberra the Nation's Capital in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, complete with eight areas of development propositions and strategies. The community and business sectors were involved, along with the ACT Treasury and Planning agencies and Howard Government appointees to the NCA Board. In August 2006 the NCA advanced four Draft Amendments to the **National Capital Plan**, covering Principles and Policies, City Hill Precinct, Constitution Avenue and West Basin. By December 2006 the Amendments were tabled in Parliament.

This exercise led to momentous consequences. The federal parliamentary committee responsible for oversight of the NCA had been bypassed by the federal Minister, contrary to parliamentary convention. A broad collection of community groups, professional bodies, business firms and organisations, property and heritage councils, and expert individuals were invited to a Roundtable in February 2007 by the **Parliamentary Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories (PJSCNCET)**. A critical and comprehensive submission was lodged by Professor James Weirick, then President of the Walter Burley Griffin Society.

Following the Roundtable, the Chair Senator Lightfoot from Western Australia issued the *Review of the Griffin Legacy Amendments* (March 2007) report calling for disallowance of all the Amendments and more detailed work. The Government typically ignored the Committee's report, a motion of Disallowance failed in the Senate and the whole episode has provided the patent source of major planning issues, problems and controversies to this day. It was easy to conclude that the half-baked Griffin Legacy Amendments had become a charter for developers and source of land sale revenue, courtesy of the ACT Chief Minister and Treasurer, Jon Stanhope's Canberra Central Task Force (2005) and the Howard Government's readiness to convert designated National Land to urban and private sector development.

The first Griffin Legacy project, unveiled by the NCA precipitately in March 2007, within a month of the Parliamentary Roundtable, proposed redevelopment and privatisation of the **Albert Hall** and Hotel Canberra Precinct and Flynn Place adjacent to Commonwealth Bridge. Community protests ensued with the formation of resident groups, support of the National Trust, a coalition of public and private sector organisations and two lively public meetings in the Albert Hall with federal and Territory politicians involved. Friends of the Albert Hall was formed in May 2007.

Print, TV and radio publicity were intense and a petition with over 3000 signatures was lodged in both parliaments. All local politicians were lobbied and a debate held in the Legislative Assembly which resolved to keep the Albert Hall in public ownership and voted funds for major improvements. Lobbying also produced \$500,000 heritage restoration funding from the Commonwealth Government. Draft Amendment 53 was withdrawn and eventually cancelled.

In 2002 former Snowy Scheme workers and Canberra business and community organisations proposed an Immigration national memorial. In 2003 NCA offered them **Immigration Bridge** from Acton Peninsula to Lennox Gardens near the Albert Hall, which was duly included in the Griffin Legacy report and **West Basin Draft Amendment 61**. The Griffin Society spearheaded community concern. There was widespread opposition expressed by individuals, the National Trust, Canberra Yacht Club, Pedal Power and Friends of the Albert Hall, leading to **two PJSCNCET Inquiries**, one concerned with NCA's commemorative works and memorials guidelines and the second on the proposal itself in March 2009.

The issues, neglected in the Griffin Legacy, were vista and heritage values of the Lake, recreational uses, funding policy, future maintenance and alternative proposals. The proponents and the NCA were advised by the Parliamentary Committee's report to change the location and propose an alternative. The project lapsed.

The open-ended development strategy and vague criteria imbedded in **Amendment 61** have resulted in a plethora of unresolved issues in subsequent Commonwealth and Territory proposals regarding **City Plan, West Basin, City to the Lake** and **Acton Peninsula Precinct**. In March 2020 the NCA handed West Basin over to the ACT City Renewal Authority in exchange for a diplomatic estate in Woden. The CRA persists in falsely claiming its West Basin

urban development was envisaged by Griffin and they still confront unresolved issues of heritage, traffic, vistas, bridges, accessibility and public consultation.

In February 2009 the NCA issued Draft Amendment 57 to facilitate development of land on Rottenbury Hill in **Barton**, opposite the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture, for **residential blocks** in the form of high-rise towers. It reflected the poor plan-making processes of the Griffin Legacy Amendments, in this case overdevelopment of, and restriction of spaces between buildings in the symbolic Central National Area and breaching heritage height limits and vistas across the Parliamentary Zone.

The Society collaborated with local residents and St Mark's National Theological Centre to good effect. The NCA responded with changes that addressed heritage concerns, reduced height limits and protected vistas.

**Amendment 60 Constitution Avenue** has produced mixed results, mostly spectacularly bad. We were inevitably involved in the **Bridging of Kings Avenue** over Parkes Way, the **ASIO Building** and the proposed **World Wars I and II memorials** on the Rond Terraces south of Anzac Parade.

We must now add the **privatisation of the Portal Buildings** (2018-9) at the end of Anzac Parade and the demolition already of East Portal, at the instigation of the Commonwealth Department of Finance. Members of the Society, concerned citizens, architects and planning associations protested through the media but secret and expedient approvals processes allowed no scrutiny or prevention.

We believed the \$26.6 million **Kings Avenue/Parkes Way overpass** (2008) was an extravagant, oppressive structure, unrelated in its form to the other bridges in the National Triangle. An alternative roundabout would have been much less expensive than the \$26.6 million price tag. Professor Weirick again submitted a comprehensive, cogent 40-page submission and verbal evidence before the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works in August 2008, facing the NCA, ACT traffic planners and their consultants.

Professor Weirick recommended that Parkes Way be re-designed as a tree-lined urban boulevard to calm and distribute traffic through urban blocks, networks and cross streets. The Committee still allowed the project. By 2018 the ACT Government was seeking to vary street crossings and bridging over Parkes Way east and west of Commonwealth Avenue.

The following year we were involved with the adjacent **ASIO Building**. It had been agreed by ASIO, the Department of Finance and the NCA, without any parliamentary scrutiny and only came to public notice when referred to the Environment Department for approval. To be the largest building in Canberra after new Parliament House, 0.6 km in length and 7 ha in size, it claimed to be in accordance with the National Capital Plan, Griffin's Plan and the Griffin Legacy. Placed on Parkes Way and the Lake foreshores, directly across from the High Court, the ASIO headquarters would effectively lock down, with the Russell Defence complex, one half of Constitution Avenue, alienating the community and making a mockery of Griffin's municipal boulevard and cosmopolitan hub (which he named Capital Terrace). Environment and Heritage Department cleared the project in June 2009.

Early on we obtained an interview on site with the ABC's Stateline TV program. The public outcry was prolonged and widespread, including the voices of **Enrico Taglietti** and **Romaldo Giurgola**. In a way, the Government and ASIO were roundly shamed and continue to be satirised for their hubris. The building should have been placed outside the Central National Area, but it symbolises a legacy of the Howard and Rudd Governments.

Close by are **the Rond Terraces** at the southern end of Anzac Parade, chosen by the NCA with alacrity to meet a request from a Committee of retired military men to erect **World War I and II memorials**. By surreptitious means, the project was signed off by Prime Minister Rudd in 2007, then endorsed by Governor-General Jeffery in February 2008 at the competition design launch in the Great Hall of Parliament House. The public only learned of it when photos appeared in The Canberra Times of the competition jury testing the designed heights of the monuments.

Sue Wareham of the Medical Association for the Prevention of War and Brett Odgers representing the Griffin Society, after contacting the proponents, co-wrote an article *New Memorial Misguided* for the 4 October 2010 *Canberra Times*. It started an avalanche of opposition and campaigns embracing all media, public meetings, workshop debates, action committees, experts, former senior public servants, a dedicated website and the PJSCNCET. The proponents and the NCA abandoned the project in 2012 after they lost support on the Australian War Memorial Board. Dr Bruce Kent, veteran of the 1974 Battle of Black Mountain, was a key advocate in the successful campaign.

In view of the war memorials debacle and their responsibility for overlooking the NCA, the PJSCNCET chaired by Senator Louise Pratt of WA decided to inquire into the **Canberra National Memorials Committee**. Chaired by the Prime Minister and managed by the NCA, this Committee gave initial approval to the project. It affects to operate under the **National Memorials Ordinance 1928**. The Walter Burley Griffin Society was prominent among the submissions and witnesses at the Inquiry urging wholesale changes.

The Parliamentary Committee issued their *Etched in Stone* report in November 2011 recommending the Ordinance be repealed and replaced by an efficient and accountable *Commemorative Works Act*. The Government delayed responding until 2019, promising a reform strategy which has yet to appear. It is an example of Commonwealth Government disinterest and Departmental subservience regarding the National Capital.

The PJSCNCET chaired by Senator Pratt was also responsible for the Inquiry and report **An Estate for the Future** (March 2013). The Griffin Society has a longstanding concern about the alienation and privatisation of national land held in trust for development of the National Capital. In November 2012 the federal Minister directed an Inquiry into the **allocation of land to diplomatic missions in Canberra**. Simultaneously, the NCA issued **Draft Amendment 78 Stirling Ridge and Attunga Point**. This move represented significant expansion of the diplomatic estate in the suburb of Yarralumla from Perth Avenue along **Stirling Ridge and Park** on Lake Burley Griffin foreshores.

Accordingly, we became involved in public meetings, parliamentary hearings and making submissions to both the NCA and the PJSCNCET on their broader remit of diplomatic landholdings in general. We were joined by the Yarralumla and Deakin Residents Associations and Gai Brodtmann MP. The Committee recommended DA 78 be **withdrawn** and the NCA complied (2014).

At the western terminus of Constitution Avenue is **City Hill**, vital to Griffin's great National Triangle. Of the utmost importance, it has regularly demanded the Society's attention. On the **Griffin Legacy Amendment 59 City Hill Precinct**, we have worked with developers, business leaders, planners, architects, historians, property owners, the National Trust, pro bono lawyers and others to protect and enhance City Hill. We have failed, up to this point, to forestall steady degradation due to neglect, the vagueness of the Griffin Amendment 59, lack of a master plan and Canberra's dysfunctional dual planning system.

The fatal flaws in Canberra's planning system are its dual framework and lack of integration between the Commonwealth and Territory governments and the under resourcing of the NCA. For example, our objections to the **NCA's works approval** process for **The Barracks One City Hill** could not overcome the absence of a joint master plan. Further, the public consultation process was so inadequate that no other organisation or person submitted an objection.

The Parliamentary Committee (PJSCNCET) has held numerous inquiries into the role and accountability of the NCA. A regular objective has been to establish greater collaboration between the Commonwealth and the ACT on planning and related matters. The Way Forward report of July 2008 recommended integrated governance, policies and statutory plans; community consultation protocols; and heritage responsibility. No changes happened.

Allan Hawke's Reviews of the ACT Administration and the NCA in 2010-2011 perpetuated the dual planning system. The need for reform has been a constant and strenuous theme of Griffin Society representations since 2004, but on this subject achieving nothing.

There are many other examples where the ability of the Society to participate in and influence policy and development proposals has been limited or unsuccessful. West Basin and City Hill continue to be the most intractable. Our experience with respect to the ACT Government has been generally futile and apparently unproductive: for example, **City Plans, Northbourne Avenue precincts**, Kingston Foreshores development, Molonglo suburbs, the **Nishi Building** at New Acton and nominations of **Canberra to heritage** registers. **Redevelopment of Yarralumla Brickworks** is of considerable interest where the Society has met with better outcomes.

Since ACT self government in 1988 the Commonwealth Government has steadily relinquished responsibility for and commitment to Canberra as the National Capital. Developments are occurring as ever by stealth and short shrift to public consultation: sales to the private sector of **East and West Blocks** and **East and West Portal Buildings** in the National Triangle. In his 2009 Canberra Day Oration, the Clerk of the Senate Harry Evans observed that the ACT Government had overtaken the Commonwealth Parliament, in particular, with respect to development of Canberra as the national capital.

The Public Consultation Protocols of the NCA are too restricted in times allowed for comment, debate and feedback; their public consultation reports

give good coverage but are generally unresponsive and lead to rare changes in original plans. The resources and leadership of the NCA are very limited. Their website is frustrating for monitoring and commenting on planning proposals. The NCA has scarcely ever acknowledged or responded positively to WBGS letters or submissions, except when allied with other community and professional organisations, media and public meeting campaigns and petitions.

The Commonwealth parliamentary committees are very hard work for the Society, subject to increasing Executive control and their memberships uneven, never more so than the current PJSCNCET, which has only one ACT representative, out of 13 MPs and Senators, and no Chair. The Society's lobbying successes have declined sharply since 2014.

In crude terms, the lobbying by the Society can be said to have enjoyed success in 8 out of 22 major national capital projects.

The battles over West Basin, City Hill and main avenues continue. Even the high level and resourceful activities of the Lake Burley Griffin Guardians since 2015 have not saved West Basin yet. The institutional, political and economic forces are relentless, but still **vulnerable to concerted community activism**.

## **PART TWO What remains of Griffin's plans for the national capital?**

Ideally, one would like to imagine what the city, envisaged by Walter and Marion, would have looked like. Griffin Society member Rosemarie Willett, in her book **The National Capital in the National Interest** (self published, 2019) has obliged by taking the reader on 'a train trip to visit the city that Walter Burley Griffin designed in 1912.' She discusses the basic design elements, the historical changes, and contemporary economic, political and planning influences on their integrity.

Basic elements of the original plan have been lost or degraded, yet there endure in plain sight a three-dimensional structure, symbolic street layout and evidence of the Griffins' (Walter and Marion) rich legacy. An asterisk indicates currently under threat.

## **The main intact Griffin legacy includes:**

\* Lake Burley Griffin

City in the landscape

Regatta Point National Capital Exhibition

Marion Mahony Griffin View from Mt Ainslie

\*The National Triangle and Parliamentary Zone

New Parliament House (Romaldo Giurgola's empathy with Griffin and his Capitol)

\*The Land and Water Axes

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, boulevard embankment (Parkes Way section) and Acton Peninsula

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

Collins (Blanfordia 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 of all')

WBG-designed ceremonial golden trowel, wooden mallet and decorative casket made of over 50 native timbers, used at the laying 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)

## **The following require historical background, guidance and imagination:**

Canberra's Arboretum and Eventual Botanical Reserves (Weston Park, Black Mountain Peninsula, Yarramundi Reach, National Arboretum Canberra and the Cork Oaks Plantation)

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

Griffin's painted inner hills with flowering natives, Red Hill callistemon

\*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 (1996) and modelled by students

Hyatt Hotel Canberra, St Paul's Church Manuka (Griffin influences)

### **There is no memorial to the Griffins in Canberra**

like the statues of Robbie Burns, King George V, Al Grassby, Ben Chifley and John Curtin and in Washington, Pierre L'Enfant; and

Colonel William Light with three statues and Light Square and grave, in Adelaide.

WBGs Canberra Chapter is working towards a Griffin Institute proposal in discussion with interested people and potential sponsors.

Brett Odgers

Walter Burley Griffin Society Inc.

Canberra Chapter

23 April 2020