

Acton Conservation Area – a story yet to be told?

The Draft Structure Plan demonstrates scant appreciation of the historical and heritage importance of the Acton Peninsula, not just to Canberrans but to all Australians, as the birthplace of the Nation's Capital and its first suburb. The Plan fails to recognise both the outstanding historic values of this area and its heritage value as a tourism resource for centuries to come.

This is evidenced by:

- Lack of any reference in the heritage section of the Plan (page 15) to the historical and heritage importance of the Peninsula as a whole as the first administrative, residential and social centre of Canberra from 1911-1940s. From 1911, the detailed planning and construction of the National Capital was orchestrated from Acton until the 1940s. In 1911 the young Federal Government realised the advantages of this site near to the river crossing and between the planned municipal centre (Civic) and the site for Parliament and national institutions. It annexed 214 acres here for government offices and other uses. The Residency (Old Canberra House) was built to house the Administrator of the Federal Capital Territory. A Professional Officers Mess (Lennox House) was built to house single male public servants - engineers, surveyors, draftsmen. Houses for married officers were erected along Liversidge Street. Many of these historic buildings survive. Hundreds of artisans and construction workers lived in tents and humpies below the ridge. Further houses followed in the 1920s. Charles Scrivener and Charlie Weston both lived and worked at Acton Peninsula for many years, as did many other important people who shaped the new city. The first plant Nursery was here and provided many of the trees which still grow in Canberra's inner areas. The first government offices, first hospital etc. were here. It is a rich and little known story, waiting to be told.

- Apparent lack of understanding that buildings from this era survive and form a unique, continuous, heritage precinct, the Acton Conservation Area, Commonwealth Heritage List Place ID 105340. The Acton Conservation Area, its history and its heritage values are comprehensively detailed in the Acton Conservation Area Heritage Management Plan produced by ANU in 2011. This precinct extends beyond the northern boundary of the Acton Peninsula Precinct as defined in the Draft Structure Plan. The Plan needs to take account of this reality and of the Plan's potential impact on the part of this precinct that is outside the Acton Peninsula planning area. These are not individual heritage buildings dotted on the landscape as the Plan suggests (map page 15) but a continuous and intact precinct representing, to quote the heritage citation, 'the most extensive surviving historic cultural landscape of that period'. The whole is far greater than the sum of the parts. The Lennox House zone is opposite Old Canberra House (which has other heritage listed built elements in its grounds) and these are adjacent to 1913 and 1925-9 cottages on Lennox Crossing and on both sides of Liversidge Street. Behind the cottages on the western side of Liversidge Street are 7 further houses in Balmain

Crescent from 1924-9, and listed buildings in the Old Community Hospital zone. Placing the proposed Water Axis Plaza (page 33) in the middle of this heritage precinct would split it in two and place an alien element at its heart.

- The Plan maps (pages 15 and 23) appear not to recognise that 16 Lennox Crossing and 8 Liversidge Street are part of the Acton Conservation Area and heritage listed. The CHL heritage citation regards 16 Lennox Cottage as 'individually important as a highly intact example of the earliest surviving government housing erected in Canberra. The significance of Number 16 Lennox Crossing is reinforced by the early garden and intact outhouses including a loose box and standard buggy shed and stalls, the latter shared with the former adjacent property'. On page 23 of the Plan the sites of 16 Lennox Crossing and the adjacent Constables Cottage car park are shown as an Indicative Development Zone. It also appears to be the case that 8 Liversidge Street is shown in an Indicative Development Zone.

Acton as a 'destination'

The Plan talks about creating a 'destination'. Acton Peninsula's rich heritage is nowhere incorporated in the Plan, indeed it seems to be a nuisance which may impede development, something to be worked around rather than central to Acton being a meaningful 'destination'. The dangers are of course that without a deeper understanding and appreciation of the value of this area to future generations (not to mention the tourism industry), these buildings will be isolated by new developments rather than drawn together by a sensitive and imaginative design which would bring its history to life, and provide a walk through the past. The streetscape of the area lends itself to this, being relatively intact. When number 1 Liversidge Street was rebuilt by ANU in 2002 it was in a style in keeping with the adjacent listed buildings.

Let's imagine for a moment the possibilities here. A heritage trail with interpretation panels explaining these buildings and their history? Even in lower Acton, where much of the early heritage has been destroyed and is covered by the Museum car park, imaginative interpretation could bring the past back into the present. Given its importance in Canberra's and Australia's history, and its identification as an area for cultural activity under the Plan, what better site than Acton Peninsula could there be for a new building to tell the 'The Canberra Story', a modern, interactive, playful Canberra history experience taking the visitor through the Aboriginal history, European exploration and settlement, the search for a Capital City site, and the history of this unique planned city's creation and development? With imaginative design it would attract a broad demographic and be of greater relevance and interest to international visitors than many other Canberra attractions. It is a story that can only get more valuable as a tourism resource with time. A possible site on the edge of the heritage precinct would be the Constables Cottage car park site between Lennox House and 16 Lennox Crossing. An opportunity for a creative building (hopefully low rise and screened

by trees) and for raising revenue through entry fees etc? A reason for being for the area (and not just another place to drink coffee) - a true 'destination' at Acton?

The attached annotated sketch map shows key heritage sites, the approximate northern boundary of the Acton Peninsula Precinct, and the approximate boundary of an Acton Heritage Precinct.

Trevor Lipscombe