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**Acton Peninsula Precinct**

Draft Structure Plan

**Introduction**

1. Ancestors of the traditional owners enjoyed the location, environment, resources and spirituality of Acton Peninsula, hosting important ceremonies and occupations.
2. Walter Burley Griffin's winning entry for the international competition to design Australia's national capital accorded Acton Peninsula an integral part of his landscape architecture, geometry and symbolic layout of the central area.
3. Acton was a hive of activity for the early planners, administrators and builders of Canberra, amidst recreational, sporting, plant nursery, community, cultural and health facilities, the source of abundant stories and heritage.
4. The history of the Acton Peninsula since 1989 has been highly unsatisfactory. Nevertheless, at this point in 2017 the potential development and redevelopment possibilities for the Precinct are plentiful.
5. The Walter Burley Griffin Society welcomes the opportunity to express its views and appreciates the detailed and thoughtful ideas formulated by the NCA and Peninsula Partners in this timely Draft Structure Plan.
6. In the Society's view, the Draft Plan demands a **much higher order of long term vision**, greater respect for heritage, wider consultation and a richer, more reliable data base than is apparent in the Draft Structure Plan.

**Consultation**

7. The stakeholders, who have to date been consulted, are named as the 5 Peninsula Partners: NMA, AIATSIS, ANU, ACT Government and NCA. They had the benefit of workshops, discussions and exchanges.
8. Why was the Canberra Environment Centre not included among the stakeholders? The Centre has a large, wide community and professional membership, occupy a key site in the middle of the Acton Precinct, hold exhibitions, festivals, workshops and classes that engage a wide range of people of all ages in environmental and sustainability activities, research, learning and production.
9. The last time that consultations were held (by the National Capital Planning Authority) on Acton Peninsula and Acton West Basin (1992-93) the broad Canberra

community and specialist organisations had the benefit of a Draft Discussion Document, Community Urban Design Forum, series of community workshops, professional Urban Design Forum, National Design School Charrette, community consultative committee and expanded period for written submissions.

10. The priority, long term and complex nature of planning for Acton Peninsula would patently benefit from a more extensive public consultation process than given here. The usual constricted time frame for submissions of 5 weeks to 13 June and absence of prior workshops are inappropriate. Early community consultation is far more valuable and effective than later with a final Structure Plan.
11. For comparison, the current consultation process for the *Kings and Commonwealth Avenues Draft Design Strategy 2013-2017* is allowing plentiful information, understanding of issues and objectives and community deliberation.
12. Why is the process for Acton so restricted and why the rush? The dangers in its apparent convergence with the ACT Government's dubious West Basin Plan warrant careful review of both Draft Plans.

### **The Walter Burley Griffin Society**

13. The Walter Burley Griffin Society promotes a better understanding of the ideals, vision and works of Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin. As a priority, the Society serves the goal of Canberra being a great national capital of Australia, especially by conserving and realising the enduring potential in those elements and principles of the Griffins' plans for Canberra that have survived until now.
14. The Society has demonstrated over the past ten years its interest in the **significance of the Acton Peninsula** Precinct by making quite **relevant**, carefully considered submissions and representations with regard to: the Griffin Legacy Amendments to the NCP; Albert Hall Precinct; Humanities and Science Campus, Parkes, ACT; Old Canberra House, ANU; City Hill Development Plans; Parliament House Vista; Immigration Bridge Australia; Lake Burley Griffin and Adjacent Lands; Rond Terraces War Memorials; Nishi Building; City Plan; City-to-the-Lake; West Basin; the Chinese memorial in Lennox Gardens; and Stirling Ridge Diplomatic Estate.
15. In addition, the Society has also made strong representations with respect to the various federal parliamentary and executive inquiries from 2008-2011 into the role and powers of **the National Capital Authority**, taking a consistent line in support of greater powers and resources for the NCA, and as well for the Canberra National Memorials Committee.
16. The Society has several hundred members from various parts of Australia and the USA. Through annual general meetings, management and special purpose committees, a n award-winning website, quarterly newsletter and prestigious publications the Society maintains continuous discourse on the Griffins' legacy. **Members of the Canberra Chapter** have prepared this submission, with endorsement from the WBGs Management Committee.

### **National Capital Plan and Griffin's Plan**

17. The layout of Central, East and West Basins of Lake Burley Griffin, the National Triangle, Avenues, the Land and Water Axes, extended vistas and the alignment of public buildings in the landscape exhibit an integrated, formal, legible national symbolism. This simple, powerful, beautiful idea of Griffin's should be refurbished and enhanced, **not degraded**.

18. Moreover, Griffin's Plan envisaged ample areas for parklands, national institutions, memorials and monuments. Griffin did not propose mixed uses urban development on the lakefront in the three central Basins. Griffin placed great emphasis on public open space along the Lake foreshores and planned extensive parklands around West Basin. Ease of accessibility was shown by contiguous roadways.
19. One of the strongest principles of his life and work was continuous access to foreshores. The examples of Chicago and Lake Michigan, the Mall in Washington DC and of his and Marion's own love of water recreation influenced him. It was a distinguishing characteristic of the Canberra Plan and the Castlecrag venture.
20. By the same tokens, witness Grant and Millennium Parks in Downtown Chicago: Walter and Marion would certainly have been in favour of more stimulating lakeside activities and features than West Basin presently provides.

### National land

21. Current planning and property management by Commonwealth agencies are reducing, alienating and privatising the land estate of the **central national area** that is held by the government on behalf of the Australian people for the future development needs of the national capital.
22. Public buildings in the Parliamentary Triangle are being privatised. Monuments, memorials, recreation facilities and pavements are rapidly occupying land in Kings Park. Embassies are expanding around land along Commonwealth Avenue and adjacent to Capital Hill. The ACT Government's plans for **West Basin** will further deplete the national land bank as well as threaten to alter the **overall form and architecture** of the setting of the National and Parliamentary Triangles.
23. The future will certainly produce continuing demands for land by federal departments and agencies, by proponents of memorials and monuments and by national organisations, other nations and international bodies. Land will be needed for accompanying landscape settings, pathways, sculptures, furniture and amenities.
24. The problem is that the Draft Structure Plan for Acton, presented with Griffin imprimatur, shows scarce appreciation of Griffin's visionary concepts and design principles, still enshrined in the National Capital Plan, and pays no heed to the depletion of scarce national land. It seems for the most part to be in effect a complementary extension of the intense, high density urban development incorporated in the ACT Government's West Basin Plan.

### The Water Axis

25. Axes, radials and avenues are important for the structure, layout, landscape setting, geometry, and symbolism of Griffin's Canberra. Unlike the strongly defined Land Axis, the Water Axis has always been more subtle yet constitutes a basic datum against which the placement of buildings, symmetry of the basins and spatial relationships become clear. It runs parallel to the municipal axis (Constitution Avenue) and continues to be recognised in most plans, statutory and otherwise. It is highlighted in *The Griffin Legacy* (2004, NCA). However, its significance seemingly remains to be fully appreciated, reinforced or exploited.
26. Griffin's Water Axis is the east-west generative line of his scheme projected from the summit of Black Mountain at right angles to the Land Axis, projected from the summit of Mount Ainslie. It is a clear line through the central Basins and further through the planned East Lake (now wetlands and Molonglo River corridor) and the

elevated country alongside the Molonglo River. The combination of hillsides, water, foreshore parklands, Acton Ridge and Black Mountain render it a nature axis: *Linking the topographic features of mountain and valley, the Water Axis provided a symbol of nature in the heart of the city and formed its principal recreation setting (The Griffin Legacy, 2004).*

27. As focus on the western end, Griffin's idea was to site an amphitheatre higher on the Acton Ridge (not on the water's edge) as a magnificent outdoor convocation place for the university, poised above the lake to have a sweeping vista over the Commonwealth Avenue Bridge down the Water Axis – which in this location, was also the main organising line of the 'Education Group' campus, thus visually connected to the other Federal Groups in his Plan.

### **Scope of the Acton Structure Plan**

28. The geographic boundary of the draft Structure Plan warrants major qualifications. Firstly, although the line is drawn between the Acton Plan and the ACT Government's **West Basin Plan**, there are risks that ensuing development will draw both areas into excessive built and mixed use activities which transform the whole area way from basic elements of the Griffin visionary concepts, even the totality of the National Triangle and central Lake Basins, which are desired to be protected and recovered. The Kingston Foreshore shows what can happen adversely. These are the fundamental objections to the ACT Government's plans for West Basin, incorporated in the **Northbourne Avenue Precinct** under the City Renewal Authority.
29. Secondly, **the ANU** has within the defined Acton boundary major present and prospective roles and responsibilities that should be expressly described in the Plan.
30. Thirdly, **The National Museum of Australia** after 17 years remains a disappointing and controversial national institution. It is fair to say that the NMA falls short of public expectations regarding the nation's premier cultural institution. Questions of significant upgrading and expansion, and even in the longer term of relocation to Yarramundi Reach should be addressed at this Draft Plan stage.
31. The NMA site is cramped, the museum's status and capacity are limited, and its integration with the landscape and broader ensemble of national forms and buildings remains to be addressed. Parking will become a bigger problem.
32. **Yarramundi Reach** may have to come back into calculations for the NMA given these problems plus the developing popularity of the National Arboretum Canberra and western end of Lake Burley Griffin.
33. Fourthly, the Society believes serious consideration should be given to connectivity with **Lennox Gardens**. Typically, Griffin solved this connection as part of his carefully designed and organic Plan. Following Griffin's land bridge to Lennox Gardens (as in the 1918 Plan and at the point of Kaye's farmhouse and RCGC clubhouse) would yield accessibility, connectivity and a considerable area of land adjacent to the Peninsula.

### **Canberra local and early capital planning history and heritage**

34. There have been in recent times remarkable illustrations of the rich history, heritage and artworks of Acton. The guided walks, tours, talks, informative and interactive website, and exhibitions run by Dr Kirsty Guster's **Acton Walkways** from 2009 to the present (7<sup>th</sup> year!) have been highly popular and well supported by the suburb's stakeholders. Allen Mawer's *Canberra Tales* (2012) provided a colourful reminder of Acton's contribution to Canberra's social, cultural, recreational and political history.

This year's Heritage Festival Walk of West Basin/Acton conducted by the **National Trust (ACT)** was very popular. They have demonstrated the public appeal, education, tours, signage, recreational and tourist potential of Acton.

35. **The ANU** has commendably maintained in fine condition the historic cottages in Balmain Crescent and Liversidge Street. However, the heritage conditions decreed by the federal Minister for the redevelopment of Old Canberra House (after Old Parliament House, Canberra's most historic building) have regrettably not been implemented and the Lewis houses in Brian Lewis Crescent are at risk of demolition.
36. On the evidence of this May 2017 document, **the data base** and full value understanding of the local Acton history and existing assets are sadly lacking. For example, the references to Old Canberra House and the Acton cottages, the hospital and hospice presence and the landscaping and tree plantings for the era after 2011 (pages 15-16) are all inadequate and show no proper valuation of their significance.
37. The Society endorses strongly as authoritative reminders of the heritage significance of Acton in the submissions on the Draft Plan from **Jack Kershaw** (21.5.17), **Trevor Lipscombe** (22.5.17) and the **Australian Garden History Society** (22.5.17).

### **Acton Precinct vision and objectives**

38. Besides its significance in terms of the Griffin Plan and heritage assets, the site is of uncommonly high value. It is relatively undeveloped, has incomparable water frontage and vistas in all directions, notably the spectacular east-west vistas of sunrise, sunset, Lake and nearby foreshores, distant hills and the Brindabellas.
39. Future development should enhance the Griffin Plan **connectivity with the Parliamentary and National Triangles**. Marion Mahony Griffin's renderings of the Mt *Ainslie Summit view* and *Water Axis NW perspective* show an impressive massing of buildings (Hospital Group) on Acton Peninsula. Her sketch of the university showed a modest high rise structure (the Library) attracting attention across the Water Axis. Here is the idea for a more impressive architectural ensemble, buildings of scale and prominence, than the existing museum buildings.
40. From their life works, Walter and Marion provide additional concepts and principles of a social nature which resonate strongly a century on. They held and applied strong beliefs on **democracy, community development, cultural expression and environmental sustainability**. In setting a vision for Acton development, these system-wide multiple objectives are desirable.

### **Recommendations**

- A.** The Structure Plan should raise the **vision and objectives** of Acton Peninsula to a higher scale of uses and architecture commensurate with its proximity to the National and Parliamentary Triangles and with the inherent potential of the area. It should serve both national and local metropolitan purposes.
- B.** Future development on the Peninsula should enhance the connectivity with the National and Parliamentary Triangles.
- C.** **The Water Axis** warrants more careful consideration in order to highlight its character. A 'built form arrangement' (p 24) can well signify the ANU's alignment and anchor the vista but should not detract from the natural backdrop.

- D. Along with West Basin, Acton Peninsula Precinct needs much better public accessibility and stimulating lakeside amenities than presently exist.
- E. Acton should retain open spaces and parklands to afford people the experience of the land, scenery, institutions, heritage trees and limestone outcrops, without pervasive concrete and paved surfaces. There remain glimpses of Old Acton, notably around the Water Axis area and Acton Ridge.
- F. The optimum role of **Acton Peninsula**, as envisaged in the Griffin Plan, was not addressed in the **Griffin Legacy West Basin Amendment** except by the radial and arc of foreshore to City Hill and the suggestion of a bridge (the later 'Immigration Bridge') across to Flynn Place. As a result, the subsequent morphing of West Basin into high density residential blocks, mixed commercial uses and reduced parklands threatens to run counter to the Griffin Plan. The **ACT Government's City to the Lake and West Basin Plans** and the Acton Draft Structure Plan should be jointly reviewed.
- G. The Society's concern about the close correspondence between the controversial West Basin Plan and the Acton Draft Structure Plan could be met by both the NCA and the ACT Government giving more genuine consideration to Griffin's Plan and intentions, particularly with respect to national land, parklands, the spacing of buildings and landscape vistas.
- H. With their uneven record on heritage (Old Canberra House, University Avenue and Bruce Hall) and the importance of Acton Ridge and evolving land demands, along with the developmental potential of Acton Peninsula Precinct, the ANU's role in the Acton Plan should be stressed.
- I. Further public consultation should precede a final Structure Plan - see paras 7-12 above.
- J. As national designated lands are alienated, diminished or handed over to the ACT Government or other federal agencies, the NCA should make a comprehensive study of possible future demands for and supply of national land, similar to Washington DC's Monumental Framework (National Mall) Plan (US Commission of Fine Arts, National Capital Planning Commission, 2009) and Memorials and Museums Master Plan (National Capital Planning Commission, 2001).

Brett Odgers

On behalf of the Canberra Chapter

Walter Burley Griffin Society Inc.

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