Imagineering Canberra

Sheridan Burke
Abstract

American idealists, British planners, foresters and botanists, politicians and bureaucrats, created one of the great planned cities of the twentieth century: Canberra.

Actually building the imagined communities, public buildings and civic spaces on the windswept Limestone Plains was to require great feats of intelligent imagination, professional courage and personal pain. Success was achieved through the brilliance of the Griffins’ original plan, an inspired commitment to the Australian landscape by Thomas Weston and Lindsay Pryor and a firm obligation to the art of town planning by successive national planning authorities.

Canny diplomacy and persistent endeavour gradually re-worked Australia’s great colonial adventure into a city that represented the founding of a nation. Yet the great achievement of the city of Canberra is not yet formally recognised as part of our national heritage, though many consider it well-qualified for recognition at a World Heritage level.

In more recent decades—and led in large part by the intellectual strength and personal commitment of many members of ICOMOS—Australia has developed an original heritage philosophy and a values-based management system that has also proved to be a world leader; yet that system is now under threat at some state and national levels.

Finally, I will speculate a little about the potential World Heritage significance of Canberra and reflect on its future – how can we capitalise on the vision we held so strongly as a nation to create the city, to inspire current decision makers to recognise those values through national heritage listing? Can we use that vision more broadly to sustain and celebrate Australia’s heritage system and places in the present and into the future?

Introduction

I would like acknowledge the Ngunnawal people who are the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet today. I pay my respect to the elders of the Ngunnawal people past and present and I extend this respect to all indigenous people at the Australia ICOMOS conference.

My presentation begins with a focus on the settlement period of Canberra but it does not examine the indigenous interaction and ongoing living traditions of this country, a subject which others will no doubt address in the days ahead.

I thank Australia ICOMOS for inviting me to deliver this lecture about the Imagineering of Canberra and congratulate the hardworking conference planning committee led by Tracy Ireland, on delivering a stimulating and reflective journey, with an outstanding array of speakers and experiences which will take us from Imagined Pasts into Imagined Futures.
Over the last 35 years, the intellectual strength and personal commitment of many of the members of ICOMOS Australia who are here today have developed a quite original heritage philosophy and values based management system that’s also proved to be a world leader. Our colleagues in China, the UK, and the USA acknowledge the international influence of Australian conservation planning theory, spread not by colonial imperialism but by the daily activity of practitioners such as our colleagues here today and many more. Yet the implementation of many of those benchmark heritage processes is now under threat at some state and national levels through changes to statutory process. It’s under threat from lack of resources and structural demotion within government portfolios in a neo-liberal era of small government.

I will argue today that it’s time once more to demonstrate our personal and professional commitment as ICOMOS Australia members to the integration of heritage conservation in the national economic planning agenda, to ensure that vital contributions to Australia’s cultural identity are recognised, celebrated and passed forward—and that might mean moving out of your comfort zone! Increasingly, the role of an NGO like ICOMOS as a public voice is a vital one, as communities once again become individually responsible for the things we want to keep, and we must look to new strategic alliances and communication media.

I will return to that subject later, but firstly, I’ve been asked to introduce the adventurous story of the design of Canberra and the enduring contributions of American idealists Walter Burley and Marion Mahoney Griffin who together ‘imagineered’ the original concept of this extraordinary city, aided and abetted by the forester Charles Weston and botanist Lindsay Pryor, and the generations of planners and landscape architects who have followed their lead.

I need to confess that since titling my paper to tune into the conference theme, I have found that it appears that the portmanteau word ‘imagineering’ was coined by Alcoa during WW2, as they found new military and future civilian uses for aluminium: ‘Imagineering means letting your imagination soar, and then engineering it down to earth’1… and that’s certainly what happened here in Canberra over the last century.

As we draw toward the end of the celebrations of the centenary year of Canberra, I would like to retrace some of the layers of Canberra’s planning history—a synthesis of twentieth-century planning ideologies which I believe deserve National Heritage listing. Indeed, I would like to promote the potential world heritage significance of the extraordinary city of Canberra. Many of you have seen Walter Burley Griffin’s winning entry in the 1911 design competition for the national capital of Australia, portrayed by Marion Mahony Griffin.2 Her delineations of comprehensive elegance outlined a utopian concept for an organic city—arguably one of the finest city plans of the twentieth century.

**Canberra’s design context**

Before the design competition was advertised in April 1911, extensive topographic surveys had been carried out across southeast Australia to identify suitable sites—that they be as equidistant as possible from the existing state capitals of Melbourne and Sydney being, of course, a political pre-requisite.

Detailed climatic data, the civic requirements for a city of 25,000, as well as photographs and cycloramic water colours of the selected site, were prepared. Entrant instructions required that their plans ‘embody in their designs all recent developments in the science of town planning’.3 Absent from the requirements was any acknowledgement of the indigenous communities and their thousands of years of knowledge of this country. Wooden competition brief boxes were dispatched nationwide and throughout the world in late 1911.

In distant Chicago, the newly-wed Walter and Marion Griffin had just set up a new architectural practice after resigning from the studio office of Prairie school architect Frank Lloyd Wright. Walter had worked for Frank Lloyd Wright for six years, while Marion had worked for him for fifteen years; his first and closest associate. The Griffins had followed the Federation of the Australian states with great interest, and Walter was enthusiastic about entering the international competition. He would aim to provide for its future citizens the daily experience
of a democracy at work and at play. It would be his first and last competition entry, he said. And so it was.

The Griffins’ entry box was one of the 137 competition entries that were received and at the end of the formal selection process; on 23 May 1912 three finalists were selected by an Advisory Board. The winner was then controversially selected by the Minister for Home Affairs, King O’Malley, rather than by expert adjudicators.³

Third prize was awarded to French architect-urbanist and social philosopher Alfred Agache, who would later prepare a master plan for the then-capital city of Brazil, Rio de Janeiro.

Second prize went to Eliel Saarinen of Helsinki⁵ who had recently won the competition for the design of Tallinn, the capital city of Estonia.

The competition winner announced by King O’Malley was Walter Burley Griffin, landscape architect of Steinway Hall, Chicago.

**The Griffins’ plan**

The Griffins’ winning design was portrayed in fourteen exquisitely rendered sepia and gold on silk panels and a large monochrome plan and sections. Most were prepared by Marion. These are persuasive works of art, as well as comprehensively informative city plans, now treasured within the National Archives of Australia collection and listed on UNESCO’s Memory of the World register.⁶ The plans illustrated the design report written by Walter, explaining his logical architectural approach to the function of the democratic heart of this new nation, the city of Canberra.

The Griffins’ plan identified the location of all the major building groups: governmental, military, municipal and educational, with emphasis on the perspective effect of avenues, axes and vistas. Griffin legibly set into the geometry of the new city his personal theories about democracy, giving symbolic meaning in its layout, relationships and the grouping of functional elements. Denser mixed-use inner areas of narrow terraces were to be linked by tramways and a railway system, with lower-density family neighbourhood units to the periphery, laid out on Garden City principles.⁷ The brilliant and bold geometry of the axial roads responded to the topography of the pastoral site and expertly capitalised on the Molonglo River running through it, by confidently envisioning the creation of a splendid lake in the open valley between the hills.

Many Chicago design influences were evident in Griffin’s plan for Canberra—the aesthetic concepts of the City Beautiful movement with its monumental edifices and sweeping vistas, and the practical elements of Daniel Burnham’s inspiring 1909 Plan for Chicago, with its grand geometry and interconnecting avenues, had indeed made a lasting impression on the Griffins.

**A city in a landscape**

What the Griffins’ plan understood better than any other competition entry was landscape—the power of topography, the essentials of a permanent water supply and recognition of an erratic Australian climate cycle—all informed the Griffins’ design. These very factors underlie its success today, as a ‘city in the landscape’ (Taylor 2006), planned with a magnificent central urban space: Lake Burley Griffin, a formal segmental lake and two adjacent circular basins of differing character, detailed by individual landscape edge treatments. It was no mean feat to conceptualise this from Chicago, let alone to practically achieve it, in the driest inhabited continent on earth.

Canberra’s early landscape planting was a high priority. By 1911 an Experimental Nursery at Acton had been established and by 1913 a visionary horticulturist, Charles Weston, was appointed as the officer in charge of afforestation for Canberra. He recognised the need for extensive scientific testing and acclimatising of exotic trees on the windswept Limestone Plains. He established an arboretum at Yarralumla in 1914. Weston experimented with hybridising eucalypts and selected exotics to swiftly create the sense of a mature cityscape with a reflection
of Englishness—memories of a landscape still regarded as ‘home’ by many Australians. Weston’s enduring legacy was to create a tree-dominated landscaped urban character for the city, overseeing in just three years (between 1921 and 1924) the planting of almost 1.2 million trees in what are now Canberra’s inner suburbs.

But the new city was essentially also a political dream that had to become a reality, and its swift accomplishment was an administrative priority.

**A city in painful reality**

Even before the national capital competition prizes were announced, and the premiums awarded, the Department of Home Affairs had begun to prepare its own plan for Canberra, incorporating elements and ideas from various entries, just as it had always intended. What a muddle!

The Melbourne Argus (24 May 1912) quoted King O’Malley as saying that:

…as Minister for Home Affairs, [I] would be justified in using all the designs if necessary in order to produce the working design on which the capital would be built. A park might be taken from one, a boulevard from another, and a public square from a third.

Meanwhile, in Chicago, the Griffins were assiduously collecting press clippings about the Canberra design competition and site development, compiling an impressive scrapbook of carefully curated articles clipped from a huge array of newspapers: The Dublin Evening Post; various African, German and French newspapers; the London Illustrated News; the Manchester Guardian; as well as all the Australian and major American papers. This rather nondescript loose-leaf blue folder sits quietly in the National Library Manuscript Collection today, an extraordinary treasure trove of the popular and technical press about city planning of the time, every one painstakingly clipped, dated and inscribed with its source, and occasionally underlined by Walter for good measure.

When he won the competition, Griffin had expected to be invited to Canberra to direct site works, but there was no invitation in 1911, or in 1912:

I do not know whether I shall be called to Australia to superintend the construction of the new city. I hope so. I rather expect I shall. It would be only fair to me. There is nobody in the world who can work out my ideas like myself…. I have planned a city not like any other in the world (Harrison 1995: 26). Fortuitously, in 1913 an honorary acting Minister for Home Affairs, William Kelly, was appointed, who decided to bring Griffin to Canberra as a consultant to the Australian Government on the new capital (ADB).

Walter Burley Griffin duly arrived in Australia in August 1913, but he found that he was not initially employed to implement his own plan, but rather to advise on the unpopular Departmental Plan and to answer the myriad questions from politicians worried about expenditures. Griffin’s charm, canny diplomacy and professional confidence initially prevailed and by late 1913 he had won executive control to lead city implementation works. His staff, however, included the very departmental officers who had been dismissed by Minister Kelly, and bitterness and recriminations would eventually thwart Griffin’s progress.

Despite the exigencies of wartime restrictions, by 1918 Griffin’s ‘Plan of City and Environs’ for Canberra had been developed, the axes and circuits clearly laid out with practical topographical (and economic) amendments to the original geometry and lake concepts. It had been a struggle every inch of the way, for Griffin’s Departmental adversaries were many, and delays, inquiries and a barrage of Ministerial questions prevented effective work practices. Eventually, by 1919, Walter was being employed on a month-by-month contract and by 1920 he felt that he could no longer work with what he considered to be an obstructive Canberra bureaucracy. He felt forced to resign as Director of Design and Construction, but did so ‘under protest and with great regret’, refused to join the proposed Federal Capital Advisory Committee and adjourned to Melbourne, self-publishing personally painful explanatory correspondence about the termination of his employment. But by then, the essential elements of the Griffins’ ideal
city plan—the geometric avenues, the axes and the form of the central lake—were firmly established.

The cutting down of the tall poppy, the creative genius, became a distressing Australian pattern—consider the case of the Sydney Opera House and Jorn Utzon.

**Sulman and the Federal Capital Advisory Committee: Garden suburbs**

Following the Griffins’ departure, a second conceptual layer of urban design was added to Canberra’s plan by recognised British architect John Sulman. Sulman had published his own ‘radial plan’ for Canberra in 1909 (Sulman 1909) and although he had been a supporter of Griffin, once Sulman was chair of the newly established Federal Capital Advisory Committee (FCAC) 1921-24, he successfully advocated and implemented major departures from the Griffins’ city design concepts. Sulman’s committee fundamentally converted the city development concept away from Griffin’s idea of a city of consistent streets of imposing, yet narrow two/three-storey terraces with rear lane access, to a much lower-density model of Garden City suburbs of detached single-storey cottages set in gardens. Without the consolidated avenues of denser mixed development to support the civic and commercial nodes planned by Griffin, the essential railway and the market centre did not proceed.

From 1929, the lingering effects of the Great Depression and the outbreak of WWII slowed, and then halted Canberra’s city construction, but fortunately the obligation to landscape planting city-wide continued under Weston, who was succeeded after 1936 by distinguished botanist Lindsay Pryor. The continued landscape planting underwent a gradual change from Weston’s often exotic preferences to Pryor’s increasing selections of indigenous species.

In terms of city planning and national capital development, little else was achieved for more than two decades. Although the Canberra population rose to 36,000 by 1958 and more than 70% of the city appeared to be vacant sheep paddocks, the government retained a firm commitment to the art of town planning, which was continued by successive national planning authorities.

**Post-war influences of international modernism: Holford**

Preparation for Canberra’s postwar era was marked by the establishment of the Australian National University, with H C (Nugget) Coombs meeting with prominent academics in England, including Australian expatriate medical scientist Sir Howard Florey, historian W K Hancock and the physicist Mark Oliphant, to define the institution and initiate serious site development. The Act to formalise the institution was passed under Labour Prime Minister Ben Chifley.

By 1949, Australia’s new Liberal Prime Minister Robert Menzies was actively trying to halt the threatening ‘brain drain’ to Europe, supporting the growth of the ANU facilities and proactively refocussing the nation on Canberra’s continued development, stepping up the transfer of public servants from Melbourne to the capital and establishing the National Capital Development and Planning Commission (NCDC) in 1958 under chief planner Peter Harrison.
Prime Minister Robert Menzies firmly encouraged Harrison to consult with England-based planner William Holford. Holford had recently been an adjudicator for the 1955 design competition for Brazil’s new national capital, Brasilia, which is today considered a landmark in town planning history by UNESCO. Harrison directed Canberra’s third major design phase, adapting the Griffin Plan to accommodate rapid growth, eventually expanding the city form into the Y plan by 1967. Although Harrison admired Griffin, this era was to see the denial of the Griffins’ vision of a compact city under pressure from the motor car. Holford’s New Town experience in Britain and his engagement in the planning for Brasilia also influenced Canberra’s future.

The influence of Brasilia

Lucio Costa’s plan for Brasilia was an assertive modernist response to a flat greenfields site in the centre of country, defined by functionalist geometry with a monumental grassed mall edged by Oscar Niemeyer’s governmental buildings and Lake Paranoa, the other major landscape element, created as an irregular ornamental lake to the east of the city. Holford visited Australia immediately after he had been in Brasilia in 1957, and his report recommendations were based on his belief that the future of Canberra would be as a city of car-based suburbs (Holford 1957: 6). The National Capital Development Commission converted the Griffins’ avenues of intensive city activities to multi-lane thoroughfares like Parkes Way, which would accommodate the ebb and flow of ‘modern traffic needs’, rather than denser community and civic development to the lake edge—an enormous and significant change of focus.

Lake Burley Griffin

The NCDC also amended Griffin’s formal lake design, favouring informal shorelines and edges (similar to Brasilia’s Lake Paranoa), rather than Griffin’s formal City Beautiful urban terraces and promenades, changing the geometry and symmetry of Griffin’s proposed water bodies. Whilst the maturing plantings of Charles Weston and Lindsay Pryor were providing a city landscape of shade, colour and sheltering beauty, work on the central unifying water body only began in 1960, when earthworks, dams, and bridges were constructed.

NCDC landscape architects, the late Richard Clough and, later, Margaret Hendry, working with the prescient advice of influential Englishwoman Sylvia Crowe, began landscaping the shoreline and created two islands, so that when impounding of the waters began in 1963, there would be facilities for recreation, boating, fishing, and swimming. Despite drought, by 1964 the lake had filled. It was the largest artificial ornamental lake in Australia and we will celebrate its 50th Birthday in 2014. Its shoreline was ornamented in 1968 with the National Library, then furnished with a Carillion and a water jet in 1969, the sculptural forms of the High Court in 1980 and the National Gallery in 1981.

Governmental planning

In the fourth major phase of Canberra’s planning, new development of the inner city area was restrained and commercial and residential densities were pushed to the periphery by the NCDC, commencing with new centres at Woden in 1964 and Belconnen in 1966. Under the 1968 ‘Y plan’ for Canberra, new towns were linked by modernist transport parkways to civic employment centres fringed by acres of parking; elements reflecting a linear growth model of a decentralised, low-density city, familiar to most Australian urban dwellers, but quite the opposite of the Griffins’ intended compact urban form.

In 1980, the decision to locate the new Parliament House on the crown of Capital Hill, instead of on the slope of Camp Hill facing the lakeshore, also challenged an original Griffin concept, but architect Aldo Giurgola’s inspired design to construct the new building within the hill responded creatively and elegantly to that conundrum. The change of site for the new Parliament House also provided an opportunity to create the foreshore terrace envisioned in Griffin’s original lakeshore plan, centred on Griffin’s Water Axis, and in 2005 the Commonwealth Place forecourt was opened, an interpretation of Griffin’s original Water Gate at the crossing of the Land Axis.
Lake Burley Griffin had become the link which unified the axes and vistas that Griffin planned, and, as prophesised, ‘the city was not divided, but became one. The vistas avenues and mountains became one, united by the locus of the lake; it became a sensitive and monumental landscaping achievement (Johnson 1977: 24).

Canberra’s planning future

Since 1988, when the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) became self-governing, the responsibility of planning the city of Canberra has fallen to two planning agencies, the ACT governments Planning and Land Authority (ACTPLA) and the Commonwealth’s National Capital Authority (NCA). In 2004 the NCA boldly set out its vision for the future planning of the Central National Area (CNA) of Canberra in The Griffin Legacy. It promotes conserving significant elements of the Griffin’s Plan and seeks, in its eight propositions, to revitalise and intensify development within the CNA into a more compact and sustainable urban form, extending the city to the lake through continuous waterfront promenades, reinstating Griffin’s connection of the city with Lake Burley Griffin and the National Triangle.

In October 2013, the ACT Chief Minister announced a new City Centre Plan for Canberra, which aims to significantly increase residential densities in civic and improve traffic management, re-orienting the city to the lake by lowering Parkes Way. Co-ordinated heritage conservation guidelines may yet be needed for the new City Centre Plan to successfully translate the Griffin Legacy-related development impacts.

Canberra reflections

It is evident that Canberra has many, many admirers locally and internationally. Academics cite Canberra in all the classic town planning texts, economists and developers rate its livability index strongly year after year. Urbanist Edmund Bacon wrote in 1968 that ‘Canberra confirms, beyond anything else I know of, the dominant importance of space design. Here is a network of sweeping vistas, vast gulps of fresh air, superbly exciting and dynamic interaction between the peaks of hills and mountains and the movement of people’. (Bacon 1968: 625) Sydney author, architect and historian Peter Proudfoot has written that ‘Canberra is the only really modern city in the world… its history from the beginning is the history of Town Planning or Land Planning in modern times’ (1994: 6).

The year-long 2013 celebration of Canberra’s Centenary has promoted its extraordinary history and heritage values to the local and national communities—and yet it is still not officially recognised as a place of national, let alone international heritage significance.

Canberra’s nomination to the National Heritage list

In June 2012, the Federal Government advertised the proposed National Heritage listing of Canberra under the Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act (EPBC Act), with the following statement:

Canberra is vital to all Australians as the heart of our democracy and pinnacle of our justice system. Born of the utopian ideals of the founders of Australian Federation and grounded in the Griffins’ visionary town plan, Canberra has grown to be one of the world’s great twentieth century cities.

The National Heritage listing proposal covers only property in public ownership including Canberra’s central historic area, surviving street pattern, the concept of the ‘Y Plan’ and the undeveloped inner hills.

The proposed National Heritage Listing aims capture those outstanding elements of Canberra which contribute to:

- Canberra’s historical and symbolic significance as a new capital city established by the Australian Constitution;
• the city’s role in facilitating public engagement in the political process and as a place of social significance, the site of landmark decisions and national remembrance; and
• Canberra as a showcase of cutting-edge twentieth-century town planning ideas and Australia’s only major city subjected to a centralised planning process, a designed landscape of great aesthetic appeal (Lawrence 2012).

ACT Chief Minister Katy Gallagher has said that listing ‘could enhance the city’s profile, and improve the awareness and appreciation of the nation’s capital in the Australian community’ and that ‘Canberra is one of the few places in the world where the original intent, design and plan of the city has been held true to form, and we have the opportunity to support the protection of that’ (McLennan 2012). However, that opportunity for a National Heritage List announcement as Canberra commemorates its Centenary year 2013, seems to have been overwhelmed by recent Federal election processes, and it is at present somewhere in limbo.

Being on that National Heritage list is of course an essential pre-requisite for consideration for a World Heritage nomination and entry onto Australia’s tentative list. The World Heritage (WH) list has a very high entry bar: Outstanding Universal Value ‘which means cultural and/or natural significance which is so exceptional as to transcend national boundaries and to be of common importance for present and future generations of humanity’. (World Heritage Convention 1975 Operational Guidelines 2011). Nominated sites must have authenticity and integrity and be well managed. Detailed Operational Guidelines and Nomination procedures govern the process, but economics and politics play a large role.

At the moment, Australia has just two sites on its tentative list for WH listing—extensions to existing natural areas. This is a very different situation when compared to other nations: for instance, China’s tentative list is of 48 sites and the UK has 13 places forecast for nomination in the next five to ten years. The lack of a carefully constructed tentative list which presents the breadth of Australia’s heritage is also a matter that ICOMOS might take an interest in!

**The heritage of modern planned cities**

If we look at how the modern science of town planning has already been represented on the World Heritage List, there are relatively few examples to compare to Canberra.

• Brazil: the national capital of Brasilia, designed in 1957 by Lucia Costa and Oscar Niemeyer (the city plan and major buildings listed 1987);
• Israel: The White City of Tel Aviv, designed by Patrick Geddes in the 1930s and 1950s (listed in 2003);
• Chile: Sewell Mining Town, built in 1905 by the Bradden Copper Company (listed in 2006);
• France: A section of the city of Le Havre, rebuilt by August Perret from 1945-1946 (listed in 2005);
• Germany: Berlin Modernism Housing Estates, designed from 1910–1933 by Bruno Taut, Martin Wagner and Walter Gropius (listed in 2008);
• Morocco: Rabat, the new town conceived and built under the French Protectorate from 1912 into the 1930s (listed in 2012);

There are several modern city/area plans already on national tentative lists for world heritage listing:

• India, the urban and architectural work of Le Corbusier at Chandigarh;
• New Zealand, the Napier Art Deco Historic precinct;
• Eretria, The Historic Perimeter of Asmara and its Modernist Architecture; and
• France, Firminy Vert, included as part of the Le Corbusier Serial Site nomination.
And this year, India has added to its tentative list parts of its capital city (New) Delhi (Shajahanabad, the Mughal capital and the Lutyens-designed New Delhi), as well as the Art Deco area of Mumbai).

How does Canberra ‘measure up’ in World Heritage terms?

I think many participants here today would swiftly agree that Canberra is an extraordinary cultural landscape of Twentieth Century Heritage significance. To adapt the World Heritage Convention wording slightly: ‘Canberra represents the combined works of nature and man, illustrative of the evolution of human society and settlement over time, under the influence of the physical constraints and/or opportunities presented by the natural environment and of successive social, economic and cultural forces, both external and internal.’

Once again to slightly adapt the wording of the World Heritage Convention: I am of the opinion that Canberra meets three of the criteria well:

(i) represents a masterpiece of human creative genius: The Griffins, Sulman, Holford and the many government planners of the city.

(ii) exhibits an important interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture, monumental arts, town-planning and landscape design: American, British influences in the Antipodes.

(iii) is an outstanding example of a type of architectural ensemble and landscape which illustrates significant stages in human history, that of twentieth-century town planning, landscape design and monument construction.

Criteria (i) is of course, always a high bar: the changes made to the originality of the Griffins’ plan have evolved the city plan—as did the changes made by Peter Hall et al. to the Sydney Opera House—and this same issue would need to be dealt with in the nomination analysis.

Nevertheless, it’s quite a compelling case!

I wonder what Griffin would think of the prospect of Canberra being recognised as World Heritage? Let’s allow our imaginations to wander a little for a moment.

From my years of research and working on the buildings and places designed by Walter and Marion Griffin, I feel that Walter would have expected serious public recognition of the plan for the national capital; a plan he felt was for an ideal city.

Last year, Canberra Lab (University of Canberra) initiated the Dear Marion Project, in which postcards were sent from a resurrected Walter Burley-Griffin about his impressions of contemporary Canberra to his wife Marion Mahoney Griffin in Heaven, via paste-ups on public walls around the city. Canberra Lab created alternate contexts for the consideration of public space, communal memory and culture. Ephemeral posters of Walter Burley Griffin appeared on bridge underpasses, in shopping centres and on walls. Life size cut-outs of Walter, holding in his hand a postcard to Marion appeared around the city. The postcards usually included messages about missing her, or observations of contemporary daily life.

I think however, that we should add another post card to the paste-up collection:

Dear Marion

I am pleased to tell you, dear Marion, that 100 years after our work in Canberra began, the people of this fine democracy have determined to recognise the heritage values of the national capital plan we gave them, and the work of colleagues who followed, by a National Heritage listing.
Perhaps they will take the next step and see that it is also recognised by the people of the world, as a one of the great planned cities of the twentieth century on the world heritage list.

We dreamed mighty dreams Marion …..

Your Walt.

**What are Canberra’s future prospects in ‘heritage terms’?**

Few are naive enough to think that heritage listing alone equals conservation outcomes, but we know from experience that it’s a badge of recognition that triggers a sense of political responsibility and community support and engagement. It seems that there is an absence of political will in the case of Canberra obtaining heritage listing. We also face the obstacle of major bottleneck, caused by the loss of resources at the Commonwealth level, specifically within Department of the Environment (Formerly SEWPac—Sustainability is no longer part of its name). The resources that are needed to manage and process such national list nominations or to develop a national tentative list for world heritage listings are depleted. Informed sources tell me that voluntary staff redundancies have reduced the staff by 50% in the heritage area in the last year. The Canberra nomination has been on the priority assessment list since 2009… a five year administrative bottleneck that leaves the whole national listing process open to ridicule and potential abuse.

Figure 2: Walt Paste Up. Dear Marion Project, Canberra Lab 2012. (Photo: Sheridan Burke)

Figure 3: Message. Dear Marion Project, Canberra Lab 2012. (Photo: Sheridan Burke)
ICOMOS, as a concerned community of experts knows that the erosion of staff and resources will have consequentially adverse impacts on Australia’s heritage resources more broadly, and on our international reputation for outstanding heritage management. It is in this context that the role of ICOMOS as an NGO may become more activist, as an authoritative voice in a variety of communication media. An increase in activism by ICOMOS has already occurred internationally, with ICOMOS developing a process of ‘Heritage Alerts’, using its reputation as an international advisory body to professionally assess and advise on selected projects to find a better conservation solution. Australia ICOMOS has continued to provide professional comment on legislative change.

But will this be enough in the context of diminishing governmental engagement? As yet, it appears unlikely that our incoming governments see heritage issues as a major matter of state or national interest. Other ways and means must be found to convey the heritage message in more political or pragmatic ways. We need to imagineer!

For example, in September 2013 the Climate Commission was abolished by the new Federal Government, but it was swiftly relaunched as a community-funded organisation. The group’s former chief commissioner, Australian of the Year Tim Flannery said: ‘We need a clear, credible and authoritative and independent voice in this area and there has never really been a more critical time for that voice than now’. Flannery then opened an online public donation scheme that raised over $1m in the first fortnight, from individuals, local councils and community bodies. The Australian community spoke strongly and quickly to retain an independent authoritative voice for climate science in Australia.

Conversations and meetings this week with colleagues from Europe and North America have confirmed that government support for heritage is weakening in many countries, although in contrast, China has just increased its cultural spending by 18% for 2012/13. This changing governmental context for heritage issues is a challenge for Australia ICOMOS to deal with effectively as a small but pre-eminent NGO. This context is also a challenge to each of us individually if we want our views to be heard; because the old methods are no longer working for us. During 2013 there were hundreds of press releases, media stories, and professional journal articles about the heritage values of Canberra. Robyn Archer, Creative director of the Canberra Centenary celebrations has organized an entire year of celebrations with Canberra Communities to celebrate this exceptional city—yet neither Labor nor Liberal politicians have supported its heritage listing.

Today we no longer absorb world or local news, opinions and views via traditional ‘news media’. Thanks to social networking, blogs and websites, there are many more ways to send our views, and be heard immediately, worldwide. A thoughtful communication strategy is needed from ICOMOS and the new 2013 Burra Charter and associated documents provide a great platform.

We each have a personal role to play and I will close now with a challenge. It’s time we looked closely at understanding and maximising our use of digital technologies, which can create heritage opportunities through new connections and networks—it just takes some imagination and creativity: IMAGINEERING!

When Turkish citizens in Istanbul occupied Gezi Park and nearby Taksim Square in late May 2013 to protest against a planned government development in an historic park, they set off a nationwide protest and faced a fierce government response. As demonstrators increasingly grew impatient with Turkey’s traditional newspaper and TV media’s lack of coverage of their movement, they turned to social media channels to draw attention to their cause. Over a 24-hour period in late May, at least 2 million tweets mentioning hashtags related to the protest were sent, most of them locally (Devitt 2013). A survey of 3,000 protesters found that 70% had no political affiliation and the majority had not protested before. How their message was finally heard by the Turkish government—through an explosion of technology from numerous apps to Web TV—has redefined the playbook for protesters and government dissenters worldwide (Konrad 2013).
Now I know that many of you are thinking there is hardly a comparison with protecting Australia’s environmental heritage and fighting for Turkish democracy in Gezi Park, but I’m old enough to have taken part in moratorium marches and several Green Ban actions with Jack Mundey. Much of my professional career has been worked through the cycle of Heritage Acts and Councils and Commissions, and now, in NSW at least, we are undoing those very heritage statutory processes that 35 years of ICOMOS expertise and self-confidence helped to create. The Bills were in the NSW Lower House in October 2013; this very week, the administrative re-structuring and staff reductions are in full swing, more dramatically than the Voluntary Redundancy process here in Canberra.

I am aware that a formal Declaration is to be issued by this conference: The Canberra Declaration. I urge you all to contribute, and I hope that we will endorse it before the conference concludes, because it is about the heritage listing and conservation of Canberra’s natural and cultural heritage. And I hope that ICOMOS will make good use of it in its lobbying and diplomatic work.

So, in conclusion I would like to invite you to consider taking a personal action of solidarity about Canberra’s heritage values.

Currently the fastest growing social platform on the planet is Twitter, with 288 million active users at the end of 2012. It’s becoming a passive source of discovery and action for users, used more as a tool or service rather than a pure social activity. Twitter is no longer about what you had for breakfast; it’s a tool for social activism. Surprisingly, the over-55s are the fastest growing demographic on Twitter. Active usage grew 116% in the last 6 months of 2012 while active usage among people aged 45–54 increased by 81% in the same period (Twitter 2013). The Victorian Country Fire Authority used Twitter to send out regular alerts and updates regarding the February 2009 bushfires, and the Queensland police used Facebook extensively for public messaging in the Brisbane flood emergency.

**Are we in a heritage emergency yet?**

It was canny diplomacy and persistent endeavour that gradually re-worked Australia’s great colonial adventure into a city that represents the founding of a nation. We have been given the city plan of Canberra by visionary planners, horticulturalists and Administrators. It’s surely worthy of national listing. In my personal and professional opinion, it’s worthy of World Heritage listing, too.

And right now, your heritage needs YOU. It’s time to imagineer—let your imagination soar about how to get this message across and engineer it down to practical implementation. It’s time now to open your envelopes (an activity for delegates) and I encourage you to imagineer with conviction and confidence in Canberra’s heritage future—let us, today seize the characteristic big vision which ICOMOS members share, and seize new ways to be good communicators of heritage values and community interests.
I leave the last word about Canberra to Walter Burley Griffin from 1912: ‘The very best design on the most modern lines for this City, which should be an example to the rest of the world … I have planned a city not like any other in the world. I have planned an ideal city.’

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References


**Endnotes**

1 _Time Magazine_, 16 February 1942 Advertisement titled ‘The Place They Do Imagineering’.

2 Walter Burley Griffin, architect 1876–1937; Marion Mahony Griffin, architect 1871–1961.

3 Federal Capital Design Competition Requirements, town planning.

4 An adjudication system that caused the partial boycott of the competition by the RIBA and local Institutes of Architects.

5 Competitor number 18 Elie Saarinen, Perspective view general. NAA: 710, 33.

6 http://www.amw.org.au/citation/6

7 Canberra was planned for 25,000 with the potential to expand to 75,000.

8 The ACT government’s Planning and Land Authority (ACTPLA) controls development of Territory land, planning Canberra’s future growth with the community through the Territory Plan, with advice from the ACT Heritage Council. The Commonwealth planning agency, the National Capital Authority (NCA) is responsible for the public interests of the national capital dealing with designated land, and the National Capital Plan is the strategic plan for Canberra and the Territory.

9 A ‘paste-up’ is a form of street art, using pre-prepared paper-based images or forms which are applied directly to hard (urban) surfaces and affixed using a home-made glue or paste.