The Canberra Plan: A Candidate for World Heritage

Introduction

When the Commonwealth of Australia came into being in 1901, the Constitution provided for the establishment of a federal capital city on a new site. Canberra, which resulted from this political process, is unique internationally as a city in the landscape. Its conception and choice of site prompted the Minister for Home Affairs, King O'Malley, in 1910 to proclaim “This must be the finest Capital City in the World - the Pride of Time” (Harrison 1995, p.6).

Underlying its inception at the beginning of this century lay two basic visions. The first was that a vigorous Australian national identity existed, that this was related to the ideal of the Australian landscape itself, and that it could be symbolized in the layout of a capital city. The second was that city planning could create a better society. Historically they were encapsulated by John Gale in his 1927 book Canberra: History and Legends. Recalling the day in 1855 when he first viewed the prospect from Capital Hill that would later be the site for the capital, Gale referred to it as “A Prophetic Inspiration .. I was enamoured with the landscape outstretching east and west and: south, hungrily [feasted] my eyes upon its varying charms ..... evoking the mental if not vocal, exclamation: ‘What a magnificent site for one of Australia’s future cities!’ - little thought I ..... that the day would come ..... when that inspired thought would be materialized in the first beginnings of Australia’s Federal Capital”.

Landscape and National Identity

An enduring theme in forging an Australian national identity from early colonial days has been - and continues to be, the Australian landscape, and its representation in writing and painting (Smith 1985; Taylor 1994). Identity, like landscape itself, is a cultural construct. Both are composed of various signs and symbols - what Roland Barthes (1977 p.27, quoted in Hunt 1991) calls ‘signifiers’ which can be read within a cultural context. They signify place and identity with place. In the Australian context Anne-Marie Willis (1993, p.64) links landscape and identity with the proposition that ‘landscape as a foundation for national identity promises an essence grounded in place, a revealed truth’. Picturing the landscape in both words and paintings has been central to forming a sense of ‘Australian-ness’ as a revealed truth. Canberra is the physical manifestation of this.

In 1909 Charles Scrivener, a New South Wales District Surveyor, was given the task of finding a site for the capital city. The instructions given to Scrivener by the Minister for Home Affairs, H. McMahon, to recommend a specific site were explicit, and also noteworthy in their implications. They reflected the manifest destiny of nationalism and emerging sense of identity based on images of landscape in Australia:

the Federal Capital should be a beautiful city, occupying a commanding position, with extensive views and embracing distinctive features which will blend themselves into a design worthy of the object, not only for the present but for all time.
The instructions to Scrivener further stipulated that the site should be chosen 'with a view to securing picturesqueness, and also with the object of beautification and expansion'. In dismissing Sydney or Melbourne for the capital, King O'Malley proposed that 'We must consider the millions of people yet unborn who will inhabit this great southern dominion. Suppose for a moment that Washington had never been built ... the United States people would not have had today the most beautiful city on earth'.

In the lead-up to the announcement of an international competition for the design of the capital in 1911, and coincidental with idealism of landscape images and nationalism, was the growing interest in town planning as an art and a science. Central to this interest was the notion that building better cities would in turn assist in building a healthier society. The key to a healthier society in cities was cleanliness and fresh air. Healthy town dwellers meant economic efficiency and higher moral and social standards. Progressive thinkers saw 'the city as the microcosm of the nation, where all the evils they decried were found' (Petrov 1993, p.96). The federal capital was to remedy these evils.

John Sulman, an English architect who settled in Australia, was highly influential in shaping Australian ideas on town planning as an instrument of social reform in the years leading to the inception of Canberra. Later, he was Chairman of the Federal Capital Advisory Committee, which directed development in Canberra 1921-24, after Walter Burley Griffin's departure. In 1909, Sulman wrote of the need in a capital city for parkways, playgrounds, vistas, a hierarchy of streets, and the advisability of incorporating these into a diagrammatic spiderweb radial plan with radiating avenues with Parliament at the centre. This presaged the winning 1912 competition entry for the design of Canberra by Walter Burley Griffin and his wife Marion Mahoney. He had previously worked in the USA as part of the Prairie School Movement with Frank Lloyd Wright, Jens Jensen and Louis Sullivan. The experience enabled Griffin to empathize with an Australian landscape's genius loci. He used this with flair in the Canberra plan and notably referred to himself as Landscape Architect in the submission.

The outbreak of bubonic plague in Sydney in 1901 was a catalyst for reform ideas and underpinned the Australian town-planning movement for healthy cities. The 1908-1909 Royal Commission for the Improvement of the City of Sydney and its Suburbs was set up to enquire into the remodeling of Sydney. Ideas submitted to the Commission undoubtedly influenced current notions of what a capital city should be. John Sulman was a prominent contributor. Grand ideas included plans to remodel Sydney with broad, straight, tree-lined avenues and monumental buildings in the City Beautiful style. Inspiration came from Haussmann's plan for Paris, L'Enfant's Washington, the World Columbian Exposition of 1893 (Chicago) and Daniel H. Burnham's comprehensive city plan for Chicago, with its emphasis on civic design, a system of highways and avenues, public transport and great park system. The City Beautiful movement would 'in every citizen, even the slum dweller, [create] a feeling of aesthetic appreciation and thereby civic pride, which would motivate him to recognize and fulfill his role as a useful member of society' (Fischer 1984, p.10).
The English Garden City movement of Ebenezer Howard was also influential in planning thought, particularly for Sulman with his English background. Howard in 1898 advocated the building of new towns where the advantages of town and country would coalesce and engender a 'better and nobler' society (Howard 1898). In practice the garden city ideal became linked to the notion of residential areas with tree lined avenues, public open space, playgrounds and each dwelling having its own garden. The movement was enthusiastically embraced in Australia in the early years of this century, preferably with the ideal of detached dwellings.

**A City Not Like Any Other**

So the utopian ideal of new cities and redevelopment of selected parts of existing cities as a way to social reform and realizing landscape idealism was energetically bubbling away in Australia. In entering the winning design in the Federal Capital Competition in 1911 Griffin declared:

> I have planned a city not like any other city in the world. I have planned it not in a way that I expected any government authorities in the world would accept. I have planned the ideal city - a city that meets my ideal of the future.

That Griffin’s city met the ideals current in Australia was no accident. The competition and the Griffin scheme were the culminating pinnacle of the utopian visions for a new Australian city that would lead the world. In short the Griffin plan - so exquisitely illustrated by Marion Mahoney’s watercolour prospects - was beautiful in design conception and physical presentation. It was the City Beautiful with Garden City overtones par excellence, and matched Australian visions of the ideal city. Here the inspiration for the creation of a grand capital, that grasped the idea of landscape as the structure for a city where social reform through healthy living, was integral to the structure and life of the city.

From the outset Canberra was envisaged as a city in the landscape and of the landscape. The Griffin design admirably suited the natural amphitheatre qualities of the site where ‘the setting [was used] as a theatrical whole’ to give a design that ‘was rich in symbolism’ (Freestone 1986) by its use of radiating avenues with the hills as focal points, and the use of dramatic views out of the city to the magnificent hill-landscape surrounds. Its geometrical major and minor axes created impressive vistas. Of equal significance was Charles Weston who, from 1913 to 1926, laid down the innovative and visionary landscape planning framework for the city with his tree planting schemes. He set up experimental nurseries to raise the necessary tree stock. Some indication of Weston’s achievement can be seen from the fact that between 1921 to 1924, 1,162,942 trees were planted.

Notwithstanding Sulman’s support for the Griffin plan, it was he as Chairman of the Federal Capital Advisory Committee 1921-24 (FCAC) who instituted changes to it. The main change was in proposals for residential areas. The Griffin plan had substantial areas of terraced rows of housing, some forming rectangular blocks enclosing communal rear open space - similar to Frank Lloyd Wright schemes -
others were terraces with back-lane access. The FCAC reflected Sulman’s influential ideas as a leading town planner and educator, in particular his advocacy of the garden city and garden suburb. The FCAC therefore declared that in the first stage Canberra was to be ‘a garden town, with simple, pleasing, but unpretentious buildings’. It saw houses as single-storey cottages standing in their own garden. Sulman in 1910 had suggested that Australians preferred the single-storey house. Evidence from various developments in Australian cities pointed to this phenomenon (Sulman 1921). The Federal Capital Commission (FCC) under John Butters continued the garden city concept in residential areas, domestic FCC style of architecture unique to Canberra and public buildings like Old Parliament House.

**Contemporary city and World Heritage candidacy**

The idea of Canberra as a city in the landscape continued in the post-Second World War era during the period of the NCDC (National Capital Development Commission) 1958 to 1988. Some of Griffin’s early ideas were altered or not achieved; but the framework of his plan stayed in place. His National Triangle as the symbolic centre of the heart of the nation remains mainly as a vast, serene landscape space housing fewer buildings than Griffin envisaged. Parliament House is on the site preferred by Griffin for his people’s Capitol [sic] building, but its design allows people to walk up to it and over it, thereby symbolizing an ideal relationship between citizens and politicians. The panoramic prospect of surrounding landscape visually and physically interpenetrating the city envisaged in the Griffin plan survives. The legacy of Charles Weston’s innovative landscape planning endures.

National spaces and buildings are there to remind residents and visitors of Canberra’s evocation of a national vision and raison d’etre. 1.6 million visitors each year come to look. Landscape as the city’s determining element flows through residential areas creating a linked system of open space symbolizing nature in the city par excellence. Internationally the achievement of the city offers a role model to various Asian countries - including Malaysia and Japan - for proposed administrative centres. Landscape, because it is not simply a physical component but is a function of the imagination, ‘defined by our vision but interpreted by our minds’ (Meinig 1979, p.2), remains an enduring, fundamental theme with its ability to appeal across cultures.

In Griffin’s National Triangle a recent review by the National Capital Authority has confirmed the idea of the national zone as maintaining a landscape theme, but with a People’s Place by the edge of Lake Burley Griffin on the land axis. It will accommodate a pedestrian plaza and buildings including eating places and display areas within a change of level, so that the buildings will not intrude on the axial view. It should act as a welcome reference and orientation point in the vast landscape stage setting.

Within the planned setting of Canberra the central part of the city is significant as a record of the formative years of planning, following the Griffin initial plan and its
subsequent amendments. The central part of the city is a series of layers over time and is critical to an understanding of the symbolism and meaning of the National Capital. It reflects the essence of the Griffin plan, subsequent changes introduced by John Sulman and the FCAC (1921-24), followed by FCC planning (1925-29), and Thomas Weston’s innovative contribution, and post-Second World War planning that has seen the development of the lake and infrastructure of the symbolic heart of the nation. The central precinct is the hub of historic Canberra and the focus for the city’s international recognition as a planned community with City Beautiful and Garden City planning ideals. It contains and emphasizes the major natural landscape elements of Black Mountain, Mt Ainslie, Mt Pleasant, and City Hill, all of which were central to the Griffins’ landscape setting for the city.

The historic heart of Canberra meets the following criteria of outstanding universal value for the inclusion of cultural properties in the World Heritage List:

(i) represents a masterpiece of human creative genius,
(ii) exhibits an important interchange of human values, over a span of time, on developments in town planning and landscape design,
(iii) is an outstanding example of a type of architectural ensemble and landscape which illustrates
   (a) a significant stage in human history and
   (b) meets the test of authenticity in design and setting.

Additionally the precinct meets the description of the following category of cultural landscapes adopted by the World Heritage Committee:
Clearly defined landscape designed and created intentionally by man.

The exact boundary for a proposal needs further investigation together with critical amplification of analytical material and documentation. Whether it should extend beyond the National Triangle and Anzac Parade to include the lake and early garden city layouts is a matter for informed debate. In any event, it is my contention that Canberra deserves serious consideration for World Heritage status as a major twentieth century town planning achievement, with its associated meanings and statement of values as an Australian icon. This sentiment was aptly summarized seventy years ago by the historian W K Hancock in his book Australia (p.277):

Canberra is interesting, both as a document of Australian life, and in itself its story is worth telling at length.
Endnotes


2. Commonwealth of Australia Parliamentary Debates, 8:10241

References


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