

ArchivesACT Research Guide



NATIONAL CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION

220 NORTHBOURNE AVENUE, CANBERRA, A.C.T., 2601

P.O. Box 373, Canberra City. Telegrams: "Comdev" Canberra. Telephone: 480111

IN REPLY PLEASE QUOTE:

PLANNING A NATIONAL CAPITAL

If Canberra differs from other cities in its growth rate and social structure, it differs also in its functions and its design.

Canberra is the national capital, the Seat of Government, the home of the Commonwealth Departments, of Legislative, Administrative and Judicial Institutions, of national and international headquarters.

It is a focal point for national pride, a symbol of federation and a place for the communications and interchange of ideas.

Canberra is more than a collection of roads and bridges and buildings; it is an idea and an ideal, an expression of the national ethos and Australia's doorway to the world.

It is also the home of more than 100,000 Australians and by 1980 it will accommodate 250,000. They will require all the services and buildings of a normal city.

The dual functions of Canberra have been reflected in the city plan from the beginning and the plan is perhaps the city's most distinctive feature.

Canberra is a city of the twentieth century. This distinguishes its design from other Australian cities, most of which were built to plans drawn from surveyors-general in the 19th Century.

They usually saw their task as the design of a village. They drew up a small rectangular grid of streets and divided the blocks into building lots, the best of which were kept for public buildings and the rest offered to the public at auctions.

ArchivesACT Research Guide

Page 2

Few surveyors saw the possibility of large scale growth, few tried to fit their plans into the landscape and few drew up any programme for development.

At first the settlers were free to do what they liked with their land. There was no land-use zoning and few health and building regulations.

Canberra was luckier than other cities. It was an idea conceived at the time of federation when there was a world-wide revival of interest in town planning.

In Chicago the 1893 World Fair focused attention on the "City Beautiful" as an ideal for the 20th Century.

In Washington, people were trying to rescue and revise the "L'enfant" plan. In Brazil there was talk of a new inland capital. In Spain, Arturo Sota was laying down ideals for the new century's city, and in England, Ebenezer Howard was advocating garden cities.

When the Chicago architect, Walter Burley Griffin, won the competition for the design of Canberra in 1912 he was working in an atmosphere of new ideas and their influence can be seen in his original plan.

The site was a valley set between 3 hills, and the topography suggested the design.

In his grand formal landscape, Parliament and the Administration were placed in the valley on the southern shore of an artificial lake to be formed by damming the Molonglo River.

The central area was contained within a large formal triangle reminiscent of the axis and radiating avenues of Washington. On either side of the formal centre there were residential districts planned on garden-city lines.

Griffin's plan had many vicissitudes before it was given statutory recognition in 1925 and it had more in the next 35 years of slow growth.

ArchivesACT Research Guide

Page 3

Griffin planned a city for 25,000 people which could be extended to accommodate 75,000. At the end of World War II only 13,000 people lived in it and it was often referred to as "seven suburbs in search of a city".

In the next decade, growth accelerated and by the mid 1950's it became evident to the Government that some form of co-ordination development would be necessary.

As a result of recommendations made by a Senate Select Committee which investigated the growth of the city, the National Capital Development Commission was established in 1957 and began operations in 1958.

One of the Commission's first tasks was to review the planning of Canberra and to formulate policies for its expansion. An outline of the plans for the period 1964-1980 has been published in "The Future Canberra". (Angus & Robertson).

The plan provided for the completion of the original city of 75,000 and its extension by building a series of urban districts or satellite cities around it. The first of these, Belconnen, to the north-west of Canberra City is now taking shape.

The aim of the plan would be to build a series of cities which would not become unwieldy in size nor be choked by the traffic which concentrated on only one or two employment centres. The traffic, instead, would be dispersed by dispersing many centres of employment throughout the city.

The districts would be built in adjoining valleys and the intervening hilltops and ridges would be preserved in their natural state. This would give almost every resident of Canberra a view of tree-clad hills.

The population of each district would be about 100,000 people. Although physically separated, they would be strongly linked to the original city and to each other.

Each would have its own district centre and its own employment centres. Research and similar institutions would be located between the districts to provide additional local job opportunities.

ArchivesACT Research Guide

Page 4

However, the districts would not be self-contained employment units. There would be a constant flux of travel between districts and into the region around the city as workers availed themselves of the range of employment offered by a region that supplied all the facilities and resources required by a great metropolis.

A traffic system would be designed to give free movement and easy access to all employment centres.

Each district would be comprised of suburbs containing about 4,000 people and centering on a primary school and small shopping centre. These would be within walking distance of every house.

Larger shopping centres would serve groups of three or four suburbs and a high school would be provided for groups of about the same size.

In its plan, the Commission defined the central areas of the city. These include the 450-acre Parliamentary Triangle defined by roads between City, Russell and Capital Hills and bisected by a $2\frac{1}{4}$ -mile land axis from Capital Hill to Mount Ainslie; they also include the Australian National University campus, the city centre, Lake Burley Griffin's foreshores, Anzac Park, the Russell Offices and the Royal Military College.

The central point of these areas was to be the Parliamentary Triangle which was divided into 3 zones. The first, the Parliamentary zone, would contain the new Parliament House, proposed for the southern foreshore of Lake Burley Griffin and Parkes Place, a formal ceremonial square. These would be flanked by the National Library and the High Court.

Behind this area would be a conference zone about Camp Hill, embracing the old Houses of Parliament and a series of halls, secretariats and hospitality facilities.

The third zone of the Triangle would centre on Capital Hill where an art gallery, two museums, an exhibition hall and a national monument would be built.

ArchivesACT Research Guide

The land axis from Capital Hill to Mount Ainslie would be defined by the construction of Anzac Parade, a ceremonial processional way, and by the construction of two portal buildings at its south-western end.

At the north-eastern corner of the Triangle would be an office complex built for the use of the armed forces. This was to be one of the many employment centres scattered throughout the city in an effort to decentralise employment and to prevent heavy concentrations of traffic in any areas.

At the third corner of the Triangle would be the hexagonally-shaped city centre containing the main shops, commercial offices, cultural recreational and civic institutions. It would be the largest employment area in Canberra covering 300 acres and needing parking facilities for 12,000 vehicles by 1980.

The public buildings would be grouped around City Hill; the buildings around the outside of London Circuit would include retail, office and recreational blocks; beyond this would be a ring of parking stations and the perimeter would be a series of office blocks set in landscaped areas.

The whole area would be enclosed by a ring road built below ground level and bridged for pedestrians. A second traffic ring would be built inside the ring road to give access to the parking stations and a third ring would provide circulation for pedestrians.

The Commission's plan was not only to make Canberra a functional city but also to make it a beautiful one. In most cities, beauty is a transient quality which changes as the buildings change.

But the beauty of Canberra will prove to be more enduring because it lies firstly in the splendour of the landscape. Mount Ainslie, Mount Majura, Black Mountain and Lake Burley Griffin are an integral part of the city. They tower over it or penetrate into it in every part.

ArchivesACT Research Guide

Page 6

If the Canberra plan has any virtues apart from the usually pragmatic ones that planners aim for, they lie in the preservation of the natural beauty of the landscape.

To sum up, the Commission's outline plan provides for a city of 250,000 accommodated in a series of clearly defined districts, each of which is relatively self-contained but which jointly support the central areas, the city centres and the special institutional or functional zones.

Transport will be by way of buses and cars using a network of major roads located within the parkland system to provide easy cross-city movement with a minimum of interference to the other activities within the area.

Within the plan is the conception of a new category of lands defined as special areas and which include the important central areas, the hills and ridges and the system of parklands extending into the western mountains.

The Commission believes that its plan will provide a distinguished and efficient centre for the legislature and national institutions, that it will cater efficiently for the city's commercial and service needs and that it will retain the human qualities within its residential areas and provide the people with a ready access to the countryside.

May, 1968.