

Canberra 2013 – Planning and Urban Development Challenges at the Centenary of the National Capital

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Abstract:

This paper starts from the premise that during the entire 20th century, mainstream ideal concepts of Western planning have been echoed in a way often 'larger than life' in Canberra (Fischer 1984). It was particularly the type of modernist planning between the 1950s and 1970s which developed Canberra into an open air museum of planning models. It comes to the surprising conclusion that a similar kind of perfectionism as that applied to build the modernist city of strong central regulation and of (eventually unaffordable) public expenditure could be observed when Australia's version of Thatcherism began to dismantle the body of planning control, corporate memory and planning expertise and replaced it by an econocratic frame of reference (Fischer 2004, Pusey 1991). In the years following the introduction of self-government in 1988, Canberra became an exemplar of "planning in post-modern times", supplying classic case study material for the study of neo-liberal politics (Fischer 2013: xi). The division of planning responsibilities between the two levels of government and the disjunction between the associated plans have created a range of urban development dilemmas.

However, since the turn of the millennium and in particular since the centenary, there has been a partial redirection of attention on the significant planning history of the city and the need for a two-level planning system that works. This paper focuses on the struggle to reach this point, most notably in the proliferation of inquiries, plans and reviews since the OECD 'urban renaissance' study of 2002. It is positioned within a larger critique of 'urban renaissance' as a planning concept in the context of post-modernism. The paper seeks to capture salient developments in Canberra's planning through a combination of document analysis and oral history.

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Over a period of three decades from the 1950s to the 1980s, planning and development in Australia's National Capital was considered exemplary, a model for other cities in the management of urban growth and change at every scale from strategic planning to neighbourhood design (Stretton 1970:101, Fischer 1984, 1988, 2004, 2013:viii). Thus Canberra became influential as "an exemplar for many decentralized Australian cities" (Lansdown 1971) and "an exceptional open air museum of modernist planning, architecture, and landscape architecture" (Freestone 2009:1). The "Canberra Method of New Town Development" (NCDC 1970) found its diffusion through the UN into the international sphere, and planning consultants were even sent out from Canberra to other capitals including Dodoma, Tanzania in an advisory role (UNCHS 1987).

As in most cities which underwent expansion and transformation in the period of post-war modernism, many of the planning decisions taken at the peak of modernist automobile orientation in the years following World War II have come to be seen in a different light, and even through the 1960s and 1970s, went through significant changes. But at each point in time, what could be seen as "state of the art" planning based on international models was implemented with a high degree of perfectionism (Fischer 1984, 2004, 2013:ix).

This was possible as a consequence of a combination of exceptionally favourable conditions associated with the national capital role of Canberra. These conditions included the creation of the National Capital Development Commission as an exceptionally powerful organization for planning and developing the capital, which enjoyed a high degree of control on the basis of public ownership of land, political support and generous finance over long periods of time.

Public ownership of land was based on a system of leasing the land. Leasehold would avoid speculation in undeveloped land; capital gains through land value increases would remain in the public purse. The “leasehold system” also gave public planning a high degree of control over land use and many features associated with this through lease purpose clauses. Last but not least it was the absence of a genuine democratic representation of the citizens – beyond token advisory bodies – which allowed the professional planners of the NCDC to act as benevolent dictators until their New Town model was firmly on the ground.

Between 1958 and 1988, the population of Canberra increased from 39.000 (1957) to 270.000 (1988). Annual growth rates exceeding 10 per cent were accommodated without any major hiccup in the development process. Government employment centres burgeoned. Lake Burley Griffin was created. A notable new Parliament House was designed and constructed.

Beyond these descriptive observations, closer analysis reveals that by 1988, planned development had created something like a national laboratory for urban development modern and also post-modern planning (Fischer 1984, Freestone 2009). In the process, Canberra became much more than what Peter Hall described as ‘the world’s biggest Garden City’ (Hall 1988:196). In fact, there is no other city in which the Garden City principles of Ebenezer Howard – updated in the light of late 20th century ideal planning concepts – have been implemented in a similarly complete manner; ranging from a (moderately) revenue-producing leasehold system to a set of near-autonomous, “self-contained satellites” connected to a “central city” with its green core. These principles were enshrined in an urban development plan in the form of a linear city split into two branches at its northern end in the form of a Y, which was hence termed the “Y Plan”. Canberra of the NCDC became the perfect manifestation of planners’ ideal concepts in the era of high modernism. Designed for growth up to the one million population level, the NCDC vision for Canberra could be characterised as “the perfectionist Garden City Metropolis”. The merits and issues of this approach have been critically analysed in Karl Fischer’s “Canberra – Myths and Models” (Fischer 1984).

In analytical terms, the significance of Canberra lies to an extent in its exemplary character as a modernist city in which it was possible to implement the ideal concepts of successive generations of plans and planners with almost no deviation from the original intentions.

Self-government: governance and finance in neo-liberal times

The essence of the Canberra experience resides in its artificiality. The city was conceived and constructed as a compromise between the rival claims of Sydney and Melbourne to be the capital of

the Commonwealth of Australia, newly created in 1901 (Pegrum 1983). In this context, Canberra has long been associated with artificial capitals of the the modern era, such as Washington, D.C., New Delhi and Brasília (Hall 1988; Rykwert 2000). However, in the long history of human settlement, Canberra can be seen as a twentieth century manifestation of a distinctive settlement type – the ‘disembedded capital’ – a type already apparent in Egypt of the Eighteenth Dynasty with the creation of the new capital of Armana on a desert plateau between Memphis and Thebes by the ‘heretic king’ Akhenaten, over three thousand years ago. In a cross-cultural study of disembedded capitals, Joffe (1998: 245) defines them as:

Urban sites founded *de novo* and designed to supplant existing patterns of authority and administration Disembedded capitals were typically founded by new elites, either usurpers or reformers, as part of innovations designed to simultaneously undercut competing factions and create new patterns of allegiance and authority.

Typically the new capital would be disconnected from the local economic matrix. Its characteristics would include a lack of manufacturing or trading components, evidence of centralised administrative activities, the presence of military equipment and personnel, and a non-organic urban pattern in which residential sectors, administrative precincts and the supreme power centre were rigidly planned and segregated (Joffe 1998: 550-551).

A three thousand year perspective helps explain the peculiar character of Canberra as a political landscape, isolated from the major population centres of Australia, disconnected from the regional economy of its inland location, dominated by public administration and associated tertiary sector activities, with a strong military presence – all arrayed in an abstract urban pattern. The latter comprises a monumental centre, a powerful axial order, extensive green space and dispersed functional zones built around an artificial lake, the centrepiece of the city site in its broad inland valley.

Prior to ACT self-government, construction of this idealised administrative centre was an eighty year project of the Commonwealth public service, a new elite in the early years of the twentieth century who were both “usurpers” and reformers of the established civil service structures of the British colonies in Australia, which had federated in 1901 to form the new nation. The bureaucrats and planners of Canberra responded at times to directives from key politicians – but in the history of the city, interventions by ministers and prime ministers in the planning and design of the capital were intermittent at best. Persistent interest in Canberra as a project came from the public service. Canberra as a place came to express the expectations and agenda of Australia’s administrative elite in the nation-building era - ordered, rational, expansive and expensive. Then in the neo-liberal era this notion was effectively abandoned. Self-government was introduced against the objections of its citizens and the building of the city was relegated to a divided, diminished planning regime in the embrace of managerialism and market forces.

As the population passed the quarter of a million mark, it became more than obvious that governance without democratic representation of the local population – and wholesale financing by the central government – could not be continued indefinitely (ACT Land Development Agency 2007:15). Self-government had to come. A way had to be found of separating national capital responsibilities from municipal responsibilities at the “city-state” level of the Australian Capital Territory (ACT Government Reform Advisory Group 1995:25).

The particular solution chosen in 1988 in terms of urban politics and economics, however, created major problems for the city and its development. One lay in the nature of the new two-level governance structure (national/municipal), the other in the way of financing the capital. Begun in Australia’s heyday of neo-liberalism, the new start in 1988-1989 marked the beginning of a long phase of turbulent political reforms and confused administrative arrangements. The conditions of planning in Canberra were subject to dramatic changes in the context of neo-liberalism, small government, ‘small town’ politics, de-skilling and austerity (Pusey 1991).

New governance structures

The National Capital Development Commission – the all-powerful planning authority that had guided the city’s growth for decades – was abolished. Under the new governance structure, it was replaced by a two-level planning system composed of a Territory body (: ACT Planning Authority) and a Federal body specifically responsible for the areas of national importance in the capital (NCPA: National Capital Planning Authority). Beyond the Parliamentary Zone, these areas included the inner hills and ridges, the buffer zones between the New Towns and other landscape features safeguarding the character of the capital. They were inscribed in a National Capital Plan. A complementary Territory Plan was to ensure, “in a manner not inconsistent with the National Capital Plan, the planning and development of the ACT.” At both levels, a significant quality of planning expertise was required.

But the neo-liberal aversion to planning meant that there were too many ‘P’s in the recipe. At the ACT level, planning became subservient to economic development. At the Federal level, planning virtually disappeared. The NCPA had the ‘P’ removed from its acronym. As the “National Capital Authority” it was principally occupied in designing ceremonial places, erecting memorials, and cutting the lawns of the Parliamentary Zone.

In an era of reduced power and influence, the NCA’s planning competences atrophied – not only through reduction in budget allocations but also reduction in staff, culminating in the abolition of the post of National Capital Plan Director in 2003. Dissatisfaction with the dysfunctional division of responsibilities between the national and territory governments led to a series of parliamentary inquiries and high-powered ministerial reviews at national and territory levels. These reviews sought to realign powers and responsibilities with the territory government assuming strategic metropolitan planning control as well as development control in the satellites and the NCA concentrating on a

smaller area in the national triangle. This process is still in train and its practical resolution is still to be determined.

Financing the capital: unsustainable strategies

In practice, the fundamental changes towards the direction of a neo-liberal agenda had begun well before self-government. As early as 1972, the leasehold system had been mutilated by eliminating the yearly rentals and transforming landholdings into what from an economic point has to be seen as virtual freehold. While the high level of planning control was not immediately affected, the foundations were laid for a new way of financing the capital (Uhlmann 2006:253; Hughes and Albon 1996; Halligan and Wettenhall 2002).

Since the introduction of self-government, a substantial part of municipal revenue including infrastructure investment (Sansom 2009:11) was financed out of selling the limited land once acquired for the foundation of Canberra (Bourassa et al. 1996: 58). This approach is not only unsustainable. What had once been conceived as a sustainable method of supplying building land at equitable cost for the homes of average citizens and of channelling land value increases into the public purse was turned into its opposite. Land policy now focused on maximising land values. By 2004, the head of the Office of Assets Managements declared that it took pride in the fact that land prices in Canberra had left those of (suburban) Sydney behind (Interview with J. McKinnon, Executive Director, Land and Assets Management 2 March 2002). With the cost of land soaring, affordable housing, even if it would have been constructed as tents, became a difficult issue.

Equally important, the time pressure resulting from the necessity of raising revenue for the day-to-day requirements of the municipal household changes the balance between the options of rapidly developing greenfield sites vs. considering the relative importance of the long-term consequences. It also weakens the government's negotiation power with developers.

Competence and Incompetence – a recurring theme: the 1990s

The principles pursued at the territory level swung round to a market-centered approach at the expense of long-term concerns of spatial planning. In order to maximise development opportunities and to reduce capital costs of urban development, suburban projects were packaged and handed over to builders, who were given the opportunity to develop substantial estates in a deregulated environment (Fischer 2004, Interviews with Dorte Ekelund, Claire Middleton 29 March 2002). In many cases, suburban street patterns and site plans were no longer designed by planners, but by builders and their draftspersons; building control was thinned down in a manner that became instantly visible in a shocking drop of standards. In other cases, planners and consultants found themselves entangled in growing spiders' webs of red tape – seemingly the opposite of deregulation (cf. Fischer 2004).

Fatal accidents, notably the derailed attempt at imploding Canberra's historic hospital, and the devastation of the 2003 bushfire disaster proved to be manifestations of neoliberal practices which carried the principle of de-professionalisation and outsourcing to a point where little in-house knowledge and experience was left to address critical responsibilities. More than one Coroners' inquiry attested to a wide-spread loss of competence. The decline in professional capacity after self-government has left irreparable traces. These can be seen in the early suburbs of Gungahlin New Town (built to minimal standards by local developers), the over-development of Civic, and a motorway construction program that exacerbates the traffic problems of the city.

At the nadir of purposeful planning in the National Capital, the neo-liberal agenda produced a positive outcome when the ACT Government turned to the OECD with an invitation to undertake one of its "city competitiveness and urban renaissance" studies in Canberra - similar to contemporary OECD studies of urban governance and urban innovation in Belfast, Glasgow etc. - which placed the ACT situation in the broader context of the "urban renaissance" movement at the beginning of the 21st century (OECD 2002).

Urban Renaissance?

So let us briefly survey the origins and meanings of the term of "Urban Renaissance". Common planning school knowledge recognizes that the term was popularized by Sir Richard Rogers and Urban Task Force in 1999 as part of a British government programme.

The term had, however been coined a decade earlier in the context of a "European Campaign for Urban Renaissance" undertaken by the European Council (Council of Europe 1980, 1982b). It had emerged as a campaign directed against the crude manifestations of a kind of modernist planning which was seen as sacrificing not only historic buildings but urban structures as well as the overall quality of life in cities to mega-structures and to the underlying principles of maximising development profit. It was part of the turnaround in planning which had begun with the work of Jane Jacobs and the parallel movements in many countries (Fischer & Altrock 2014). The reactions against the mainstream form of modernist planning and development were, however, uncoordinated and characterized by a collection of "different tactics", as Jane Jacobs herself had pointed out (Jacobs 1961: 319). The concept of urban renaissance as a strategy to counteract "the death of cities" aimed at uniting these strategies and tactics under a new umbrella and to turn them into a vision for planning and urban design.

Under the heading of "A better life in towns", the European urban renaissance initiative was made up of "national and international programmes of conferences, seminar and exhibitions, [...] publications and material for schools, and [...] close links with non-governmental organisations and the media" (Council of Europe, 1980: 4). Its first brochure (Council of Europe, 1980) provided a wide selection of case studies from local practice including 58 British case studies ranging from Covent Garden to an environmental campaign in Manchester (Council of Europe, 1982b: 55–60). It focused on six themes

including environmental quality, the rehabilitation of old buildings and districts, supplying the population with social and cultural facilities, adequate transportation and employment, participation and the role of local councils (Urban Task Force 1999: 25).

The more government policy oriented Urban Task Force recommendations provided an emphasis shift towards design excellence, economic strengthening and governance in a way which clearly made it more attractive to the market economy than the European Council model had been. Preservation of the Urban heritage was now under-represented – as a consequence of New Labour's aversion to heritage, as Punter has argued (Punter 2010a:340), while its pro-urban principles were very much in line with those of New Urbanism – to the extent that Peter Hall has even identified them as two sides of the same coin (Hall 2000). Taken altogether, these changes made the concept most attractive in the context of neo-liberal policies.

As Carmona has pointed out, the idea of urban renaissance is a complex one and one that defies simple definition (Carmona 2001:171). We are confronted with contradictory conclusions: On the one hand, the British urban renaissance programme was a “major success in physical regeneration” (Couch et al. 2011: 36) in terms of the growth of centres, the re-channelling of retail from the suburban big-box centres into the historic cores, the increased housing production and the re-use of brownfield areas (Punter 2010b:29–31, 327–331). It has even been judged as a “distinctive and comprehensive a vision as any of the ‘good city’” by critical thinkers as Ash Amin (Amin et al. 2000: vii).

On the other hand the urban renaissance project is connected with “the reinvestment of capital at the urban centre, which is designed to produce space for a more affluent class of people than currently occupies that space” (Smith 2000: 294). In Britain, it has been seen as “a reflection of the contradictions of New Labour's Third Way political project” (Holden & Iveson 2003:57). It can thus “be interpreted both as an attempt to deal with, and address, the adverse impacts of neoliberal political and economic restructuring on the inner city, whilst also being part and parcel of the neoliberal urban project” (quoted in Colomb 2007:17). A core question in this context is thus “Whose Urban Renaissance” (Porter & Shaw 2009).

Beyond these contextual contradictions, we can observe that urban renaissance is debated and implemented at two different levels: That of governance and that of the spatial dimension, which mainly means “urban design” but also urban structure in the sense of a re-focusing of urban activities into the city centre.

Back to Canberra

Following an election campaign in which environmental sustainability and the parlous state urban planning had been a central theme, a change in government at the ACT level in 2001 led to an ambitious programme that incorporated many of the ideal concepts of the “urban renaissance”

movement. The OECD's Urban Renaissance report had criticised the absence of a strategic plan for Canberra.

Now, social inclusion, increased sustainability through higher usage of public transport and innovative ways to engage the different actors in new patterns of public-private partnership arrangements were announced to be pursued by three integrated plans: a social plan, an economic plan, and, a spatial plan, which were to be developed in a consultative process between government and the community. They added up to a kind of strategic development plan for orientation and action that had not existed in Canberra since the all-encompassing modernist development plans of the NCDC – not as a simple repetition, however, but as something we might call 'modernism re-loaded' (Fischer 2007). Similar to the historic approach of the NCDC, this catalogue of themes addressed by the ACT government – incorporated within a Social Plan, an Economic Plan and a Spatial Plan - looked as if it had been compiled from a planning text book.

Another promising initiative emerged in the form of a study which projected a re-discovery and renaissance of Griffin's City Beautiful concepts with a view to exploiting their potential for the re-urbanisation of Canberra. This project was initiated at the Federal level by the NCA along the lines of the Washington, DC "Extending the Legacy" study of the L'Enfant and McMillan Plans (NCPC 1997). It combined an historical analysis the Griffin Plan with a kind of New Urbanist vision for the central area. In 2004, a lavishly produced publication with suggestive watercolour renderings presented the ideas of the "Griffin Legacy" to the public (NCA 2004). The concept promised to boost the city centre; to re-instate the Griffin vision of a boulevard city of cosmopolitan splendour; and in the process, transform the vast empty lawns north of the lake into prime real estate of immense value.

Certainly at this stage, the beautiful renderings should have been based on a thorough analyses of the engineering and transport perspectives, heritage items, property values and other financial implications, consequences for employment, commerce and community facilities and the whole host of studies which form the basis of an urban development strategy including the phasing and timing of land release and infrastructure provision. But this did not happen.

Instead, amendments to the National Capital Plan were approved in 2006, which bestowed upon the study the qualities of "a blueprint ...directing public and private investment in core areas of the capital" (NCA 2006: 1). The assumption was obviously that this would lead to immediate investment without lengthy ground work and public involvement. A combination of factors including the NCA's lack of land use control over lands in question, and lack of funding for the necessary infrastructure, combined with community resistance to the fast tracking of development projects and the loss of heritage values, led to a collapse in the legitimacy of the so-called "Griffin Legacy" project.

The spatial plan: A partial return to 1961?

But this was not the only contentious issue. A closer look at the Spatial Plan of the ACT Government revealed that it was highly problematic. In essence, it was an expression of a continuing radical market-orientation at the expense of those long-term considerations which had informed the Y Plan. Ignoring the lessons of the transportation studies of the 1960s, it rejected the linear plan with its strong principles of decentralisation and proposed a new urban growth structure. Reacting to market developments which emerged after the wave of airport privatisations in Australia since the 1996, it accepted the growth of a kind of edge city with factory outlets and offices around the airport in the east. In addition, it proposed a new, mainly residential satellite to the west of the city. While the new satellite embraced principles of sustainable design, and the buildings at the airport boasted high standards of energy efficiency, the consequences for transportation were highly problematic. Rejecting the principle of strong functional decentralisation, the city centre was now to be built up as a conventional CBD. What thus emerged was a radial-concentric element similar to that of the first post-war development plan. Among the consequences is a traffic tsunami breaking its way along the lake shore from the new residential district in the west, past the CBD and the Russell defence offices to the 'airport city' with its competing interests of passengers, office workers and factory outlet visitors. Trying to make a virtue out of this, transportation planners proclaimed that the Y plan had now changed into an H plan, with the pair of east-west roads cutting through the symbolic heart of Canberra forming the bar of the H (Canberra Airport Pty Ltd 2009: 41-43). The problems were exacerbated by the construction of a huge building block for the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation on this route. The sheer bulk of this complex sits in the urban fabric of the Griffin network like an embolism; far too big in terms of block size and outright deadly for urban life in terms of its security requirements. All of this is continuing to tear the Griffin concept, as a manifestation of good urban form, to pieces.

Revival of Planning at the Centennial?

For a while this seemed to be the end of the story. But then, in 2012, and, as it appears, just in time for the centennial celebrations, a series of new planning studies were published. They culminated in the new "Planning Strategy" for metropolitan Canberra and the ACT, a new plan for the city centre ("City Plan") and a planning exercise for extending the city centre to the lake. The ACT Planning Strategy had been under preparation for several years and was based on a number of studies and consultation exercises, which provided thorough explorations of alternatives of urban form, designs and densities (ACTPLA, 2009; 2012). They were flanked by a plan for "Transport for Canberra", which certainly made improvements for bicycle riding, and supported by the results of a consultation process for a new city plan, called "Time to Talk: Canberra 2030" (ACT Government 2010).

None of these exercises did anything to change the return to the radial-concentric urban form and to the H-Plan with its problematic traffic implications. The new plan is now based on higher densities along the transportation corridors (transit-oriented development) and major avenues, often not unlike the principles of the Griffin plan. The "City Plan" can, to an extent, be seen as a remedial exercise to test the validity of the new controls which had emerged from the 2006 Griffin Legacy amendments to

the national capital plan, and which had failed to provide the comprehensive planning study which would have been required to justify development of such scale in the centre. In this instance, the national government's contribution has been in the form of financial support for the exercise that should have been done in the first place. This process is underway while the larger issue of divided planning responsibility is still being determined in the aftermath of the min reviews. For all the positive aspects the City plan is somewhat ad hoc in its structure and still in the state of an interim exercise.

What lifts it out of the norm of endless studies is the centenary setting; it is also the way in which it has been promoted as a city vision in the time of preparation which gives it an impetus which previous plans lacked. The centennial was celebrated with a year-long series of events and by a wide range of cultural activities including lectures, exhibitions and research into the early history of Canberra. This research focused especially on the political background around 1900 and the site selection process. Among the highlights were impressive exhibitions of the Griffin plan, but – hard to believe – not one mention of the work of the NCDC, which had in fact carried out most of the city's physical development.

The sidelining of the NCDC phase in planning history is part of the larger shift in Australian policy in the neoliberal era away from the idea of Canberra as model of urban development in terms of state activism and decentralisation. Even at the annual conference of the Planning Institute of Australia in Canberra, the local organizing committee was faced with considerable reluctance to admit the theme of Canberra in the first place. In the end, at least one of the 19 concurrent sessions and one keynote lecture was devoted to Canberra.

The current realities of Australian planning are such that Canberra today is considered to be more a world its own rather than an exemplar of urban patterns and processes. This may change in the next phase if a bid to give Canberra national heritage significance (Wensing 2013) leads to successful nomination for UNESCO world heritage listing as a planned city of universal value based on its founding ideals, which emerged in concert with the fundamental principles of the planning movement a century ago.

Summary / Conclusions

Canberra is not only an excellent case study for studying the transformations in the ideal concepts of planning between the periods of early modernism through to the phases of high modernism of the 1950s into the 1980s. The same can be said about the following periods. With a certain ironic logic, the same basic approach of following the dominant international mainstream trends of planning politics took Canberra into the phase where neo-liberalism resulted in the dismantling of planning. The result was a city which was in certain parts literally falling into pieces; but one might say, in significant ways. De-professionalisation, uncontrolled outsourcing and loss of corporate, public and professional memory through myopic market-orientation, all resulting in catastrophic consequences are sad features to be observed all around the world. From the turn of the millennium on, there were also

indications that it could develop into an exemplar of a city in search of the new paradigms of planning, which include sustainability (understood as more than a fig leaf) and the restoration of professionalism in its proper place in planning. In this context, the forms of crass neo-liberal planning, which found its worst expression in what might be termed catastrophic post-modernism, diversified - not least through the introduction of planning in the mode of urban renaissance. Various modes of post-modern planning co-existed side by side in a hybrid form, to which the developments around Canberra's centennial have added new features.

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