The capital city conundrum: an exploration of Canberra as Australia’s national capital

Matthew L. James
Science, Technology, Environment and Resources Section

Executive summary

• Canberra rarely rates highly in the national or international consciousness as a capital city ‘par excellence’. Easily dismissed by politicians, relatively few tourists come to see it and many people overseas have never heard of it. Yet this totally planned city provides an enviable standard of urban living for its inhabitants, notwithstanding some identified problems. The conundrum is then: why such an excellent and carefully planned city is so little known overseas and so little loved within Australia. Can Canberra be an even better national capital – or will it remain as a second-ranked city?

• There is renewed Federal interest in Australia’s cities with the creation of a new Urban Policy Forum to foster sustainable and liveable cities. The Federal Government is pursuing a policy agenda titled ‘Our Cities, Our Future—A National Urban Policy for a productive, sustainable and liveable future’. Curiously though, the policy initiatives focus on the state capitals with little attention given to the national capital.

• To mark the Centenary of Canberra’s foundation in 2013, this Background Note examines how planning of the national capital can facilitate better living outcomes for the city and its growing population. The note considers how Canberra compares to other world capitals and why it deserves a higher profile. It contends that improved urban design has the potential to raise the image of this planned city. It provides an examination of the various issues around Australia’s national capital that we should reflect on as the city moves towards its centenary.
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Preamble: Canberra as the Capital

Canberra’s planning on the national agenda

To mark the Centenary of Canberra’s foundation in 2013, this Background Note examines how planning of the national capital can facilitate better living outcomes for the city and its growing population. It also considers how Canberra compares with other world capitals and why it needs to raise its profile. The paper contends that improved urban design has the potential to raise the image of this fine city and coincides with a recent Federal Government National Urban Policy initiative.

The conundrum for Canberra is why such an excellent and carefully planned city is so little known overseas and so little loved within Australia. Can it improve itself as a national capital – or will it remain as a second-ranked city with a poor image? It should seize on its strengths.

Canberra City was Australia’s top-ranking place for building and population growth in 2010–2011, with $131.7 million of residential building work approved and a population growth rate of nearly 40 per cent.1 As well, it has recently topped the nation’s living standards.2 The ACT and region supports over 400,000 people and a recent review of capital city planning systems found that Canberra rated rather well in comparison with other state capitals around Australia:

The COAG Reform Council’s Review, released today by the COAG Reform Council, rated Canberra as fully or largely consistent with seven of the nine criteria: capital city networks, planning for future growth, urban design and architecture, integration, nationally significant infrastructure and policy issues, and its planning hierarchy.3

The pressures of urban development, combined with an infrastructure legacy needing upgrading, mean that it is time to act now to improve the city as we approach the centenary of the capital:

Canberra has a “tired and dirty” look and as part of a fresh coat of paint ACT taxpayers should pay for a new Lodge for the Prime Minister in return for federal help in funding a bigger convention centre. In a draft policy report to the ACT government, the Canberra Business Council said the nation’s capital lacked tourism infrastructure, including facilities for major international conferences. … Next year’s Centenary of Canberra should be more than just a

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series of local community events, and the territory government’s plans to rebrand the city would ring hollow unless there was a new convention centre.4

As an example, new supposedly ‘sustainable’ suburbs are appearing in the Molonglo region, previously devastated by the 2003 bushfires, to represent best practice development that may showcase the capital’s urban design. A focus on energy and sustainability is crucial as Canberra is spread out in a cool and dry weather zone where energy and water costs can be significant.

Canberra, unlike most other Australian major cities, is relatively far from the sea, but sits well in a scenic mountain area. Its relatively cold winter climate deters some, but attracts others; and it does not suffer from the stifling summer humidity of Australia’s northern cities. By comparison with other national capitals such as Brasilia, Ottawa or Washington, its annual climate is comparatively mild.

Canberra’s large suburban distances and dependence on individual vehicular transport also impose mobility costs on its population. The ACT Government has recently promulgated a new planning strategy and a ‘Transport for Canberra 2012–2031’ policy document on these themes.5 Public transport accessibility has been the focus of regular public concern and frequent media comment:

From its location to its purpose and layout, an overwhelming sense of dissatisfaction dominates many discussions about Canberra...Commentary is fixated on only a few negative aspects of the city, namely, a sense of artificiality, a lack of vibrancy, a lack of corresponding amenities such as public transport and an overall unclear and under-utilized urban form.6

This assessment emerges despite the fact that local average income levels are relatively high, living standards on the whole are good, and many indicators of wellbeing rank higher than elsewhere in Australia.7 Housing and energy costs are relatively high in Canberra, usually second only to Sydney.

Local planner Quirk notes that Canberra faces issues similar to other Australian cities.8 But Canberra the city can be perceived to be and act differently to the rest of the nation, as this paper explores. It examines planning arrangements here and the city’s evolution, before comparing Canberra with

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overseas national capitals and their inherent symbolisms. The paper suggests some themes in urban design and development for the city to pursue, in order to better stand proud into the new century.

**National capital planning practice**

The rest of this preamble section briefly looks at planning administration in the capital. The current complex arrangements for planning in the Territory are explained by the National Capital Authority (NCA) website fact sheets that provide a potted history on early local development and its rationale. The NCA’s Headon provides a history of the characters and issues involved. The NCA summary on ‘Building Canberra from 1958–1988’ by David Wright gives an overview of the period of greatest development and the creation of four surrounding suburban New Towns linked by parkways. The 1984 Metropolitan Policy Plan, itself based on a review of earlier metropolitan plans, including the 1967 plan (the ‘Y-Plan’) layout of the city, has been broadly adopted. The current Canberra Plan has Canberra growing north into Gungahlin, west into the Molonglo Valley and east into the Kowen Plateau, which represents a departure from the original ‘Y Plan’ concept.

The Federal Department of Regional Australia, Regional Development and Local Government provides the Government with strategic policy advice in relation to the Commonwealth’s interests in the self-governing ACT. The Department manages the Commonwealth’s residual responsibilities for the ACT, and advises on governance and planning responsibilities in the ACT and in planning by the NCA. While the Minister for Regional Australia, Regional Development and Local Government has special powers to approve amendments to the National Capital Plan, either House of Parliament may disallow amendments to the Plan, and the Parliament Act 1974 requires that any work undertaken in the Parliamentary Zone must have approval by both Houses of Parliament. The Parliamentary (National) Triangle is formed by Constitution, King and Commonwealth Avenues. The Parliamentary Zone is the area within that lies south of Lake Burley Griffin including State Circle (see Figure 1. over).

The complexity of current planning arrangements is evidenced by the legislative regime involved. The creation of the National Capital Plan and an associated Territory Plan divided responsibility for development of the ACT between the Commonwealth Government and the ACT Government. The current metropolitan strategic plans include The Canberra Spatial Plan (2004) and The National Capital Plan (2009) which is under review. Primary legislation and supporting regulations under the ACT Government are the *Planning and Development Act 2007* and the *Planning and Development Regulation 2008*. For the Commonwealth they are the *Australian Capital Territory (Planning and Land Management) Act 1988* and the Australian Capital Territory (Planning and Land Management) Act 1988.

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Figure 1: National land managed by the National Capital Authority

Administration of National Land. Prior to Self Government in 1989 the Commonwealth managed all land in the ACT. The ACT Government now manages all land in the Territory except those areas gazetted as National Land, which the Commonwealth retained for its own use. National Land areas are administered by the National Capital Authority or the Department of Finance and Administration.
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on behalf of the Commonwealth. The areas of National Land areas administered by the Authority include the Parliamentary Zone, Lake Burley Griffin and parts of the foreshore, Anzac Parade and Diplomatic Estates in Yarralumla, Deakin and O’Malley. These areas have been declared for the special purpose of Canberra as the National Capital.14

On 2 March 2011 the Minister for Regional Australia, Regional Development and Local Government, Simon Crean, announced that Dr Allan Hawke AC had been asked to examine the recent reviews of the NCA and to make recommendations on its future role.15 The resulting report’s recommendations included simplification of the planning system, in conjunction with the ACT Government, along with operational aspects. The Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories (JSCNCET) is also empowered to inquire into the NCA. The Australian Government tabled its response to the JSCNCET report on the role of the NCA in late 2008; noting:

The Commonwealth has an enduring interest and commitment to the future of Canberra as a planned national capital on behalf of all Australians. The ACT is vested in the Commonwealth by virtue of section 125 of the Constitution for establishing the Seat of Government. Canberra is the home of our democratic institutions such as the Parliament of Australia and the High Court. Canberra is a unique capital city. It is one of only four capital cities in the world that has been planned as a capital city from its inception.

... The Government intends to simplify complexities and ambiguities, particularly relating to definitions, used in both the National Capital Plan and the Territory Plan. The Government recognises that the development of a single integrated framework and the simplification of terms and guidelines has positive benefits for individuals and businesses seeking to develop areas of land in the ACT. The Government will work closely with the ACT Government to establish the best ways to implement this recommendation. This will be achieved through the options prepared by the inter-governmental committee for simplification of planning and land management responsibilities.16

Critics invited consideration of the wider issues:

For Tony Powell, who headed the NCA’s predecessor, the National Capital Development Commission, (NCDC) for 11 years in the 1970s and ‘80s, the Golden Age of Canberra lasted from 1957 to 1989 in other words, the years when the NCDC lifted Canberra out of the doldrums brought on by two world wars and the Great Depression. That “golden age” ended with self-government, and the consequent abolishment of the commission.

... “Over 20 years, it’s been shown that the territory government cannot carry out land use planning, and so in 20 years, the territory plan has been reduced from a metropolitan plan to a system of development control,” Powell says.

The only hope, then, is to provide the NCA with the necessary funds and staff to review the National Capital Plan, and turn it into an effective metropolitan plan that covers the whole of the territory. 17

Aspects of designated areas (where planning and approval of development is the responsibility of the NCA), heritage requirements and NCA operations have also come under scrutiny. 18 NCA chair Don Aitken, in his May and July 2011 addresses to Parliamentarians, noted that:

In 1988 there came the first real change in the development of the National Capital. Canberra had grown large enough to warrant a qualified form of self-government. One outcome was the creation of the National Capital Plan and the associated Territory Plan. The two plans divide responsibility for the development of the national capital, with the Commonwealth retaining control of the ‘national capital’ element, and the ACT Government given responsibility for what might be called the ‘suburban and municipal’ elements. This division has worked well, though from time to time there are disagreements and overlap. But because the Territory Plan is subordinate to the National Capital Plan, the Commonwealth’s view tends to win through when there are arguments. 19

The NCA has had to cope with reduced funding and efficiency dividend cuts in recent years:

Until the NCA receives sufficient funding to carry out required work in areas for which it has responsibility it has to balance the need to maintain the beauty and orderliness of the National Capital with the need to ensure it is a safe environment for residents and visitors. 20

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So we have a century-old capital that has planning responsibilities divided between governments and which is partly managed by a Federal agency that has had to cope with a limited budget. The rationalisation of these arrangements and institution of appropriate budgets seems warranted.

‘To-day [sic], Canberra [sic] problems offer scope for constructive review of what has happened in the past, so that the future may be fuller in achievement by administration and people working in harmony to count their progress not in buildings or in numbers, but in balance and harmony of city growth’. The Canberra Times²¹

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Introduction: Canberra the city

Contemporary Canberra

The unique heritage value of Canberra is well articulated by the NCA in commentary on the establishment and nature of the planned capital and the issues it faces:

We are used to hearing that our National Capital is special, and it is. But it is also only one of the more recent, and is the most sustained, of the attempts to build a ‘new town’. History is simply full of them. Some of the oldest towns of which we have records started like Canberra, in an empty or almost empty space, and with a plan

... And so to our own National Capital, which is in many respects the greatest triumph of the conjunction of Vision, Plan and Will, and it is, to repeat, the longest-surviving planned city that has kept its plan and its character, though nearly a hundred years old. The history of the design and building of Canberra is well known, and today I will focus on only a few aspects of it. One is the sculptural quality of the city in its setting: Walter Burley Griffin recognised the power of the setting, and argued that the built form must not try to surpass it, but rather to blend in with it. Successive generations have accepted that initial perspective, which explains why today’s Canberra, though very much larger than Griffin’s original conception, still keeps the spirit of its designer’s creation. The city has what architect and historian James Birrell has called ‘a soft, gentle touch’, and that is something that visitors notice and wonder at. It doesn’t look like what they think of as a city. But once they live here for eighteen months or so, they adopt its special character with great enthusiasm. [emphasis added] 22

Canberra is not often appreciated as a successful planned city with a high quality of life. That is, it is not generally recognised for its success or its ‘uniqueness’. Despite its successes, Canberra is rarely mentioned in global city planning literature. So why then does Canberra so rarely rate highly in the national or international consciousness as a capital city ‘par excellence’? The NCA suggests in its Griffin Legacy Outlook planning document that:

Canberra has not realised its full potential. The landscapes and monuments are not matched by a cosmopolitan lifestyle expected of such an important national and international centre. Parts of the city give a glimpse of the grand civic design envisaged by Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin - of parks and boulevards, public buildings and monuments - but others are an anticlimax. Urban development pressures and traffic threaten to diminish the capital’s special qualities, to encroach on its leafy garden suburbs and erode its celebrated landscape setting. 23

The impressions of a lacklustre lifestyle accord with the perception that the city does not match stereotypes found elsewhere—skyscrapers, neon advertising, traffic, a social buzz and large crowds. Although there are many and varied restaurants, nightlife in the capital is often labelled as dull and insipid.24 Being a new city, Canberra does lack heritage building stock and the ambience that it can create, but on the other hand, this provides an opportunity to provide innovative urban design.

Beyond the city centre and Parliamentary Triangle zone, Canberra is dispersed around a series of district town centres: Woden, Tuggeranong, Belconnen and Gungahlin. Each has satellite suburbs and comes with a major shopping centre, schools and community facilities, along with smaller discrete suburban shopping centres and local schools. Consultant architect Stewart observes that:

The challenge in the future planning for most existing urban areas, not only in Canberra, but in most cities faced with the reality of global warming, is to optimise density by providing maximum opportunity for people to live close to existing development, to promote walking trips, thereby decreasing reliance on the private car for commuter trips. At the same time, the wholesale redevelopment of existing low density suburban neighbourhoods is unacceptable due to the massive disruption resulting from such ‘blanket’ approach to change.25

Another, different, issue is that it is not known to be the capital. Its role has a low profile, as well as a specific nature. Relatively few tourists come to see it and many have never heard of it. Indeed, the author contends that few people overseas know that Canberra is Australia’s federal capital, with many mistakenly believing that Sydney is. Critics scornfully label it as a city of politicians and of civil servants reliant on taxes:

Despite efforts to diversify the economy, the level of employment growth and migration to the territory remains strongly influenced by the level of federal government activity. Given this susceptibility, planning in the Territory has to be able to respond to variable rates of growth.26

However, Canberra’s design is unique and carefully planned, with a heritage based on overseas garden city paradigms but given a local flavour here. The next section introduces this rationale.

‘I know about Canberra, beautiful, desolate, inspiring Erewhon, where one can feel “I have awakened to the future of the world”; freer because it is unfinished and all its components not yet joined’. Christina Stead.27

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27. B Rooney, ‘Christina Stead’ in N Birns and R McNeer, A companion to Australian literatures since 1900, Camden House, New York, 2007, p. 244, viewed 23 January 2012, [http://books.google.com.au/books?id=3PhyjHfQ38gC&pg=PA244&lpg=PA244&dq=christina+stead+%22freer+because+it+is+unfinished+and+all+its+components+not+yet+joined%22&source=bl&ots=JpfVGji0v8&sig=092f01-Z6BwiAm5FPFcPtc2oZRw&hl=en&sa=X&ei=tZUcT8yI9GGQjQfZ34fZCw&ved]
Canberra the garden city

Canberra is not perceived as a normal city because its very genesis was based on the concept of a planned garden city, a paradigm that continues to influence its further development today. Responding to the industrial chaos of Victorian Britain, garden cities were conceived by their advocates as planned, self-contained communities surrounded by greenbelts, containing proportionate areas of residences, industry, and agriculture. As a city, Canberra incorporates large areas of natural vegetation that have earned it the title of the ‘bush capital’.

American architects Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin were proponents of the ‘garden city’ aesthetic and after designing the central national capital of Canberra, they produced a number of garden suburb estates around Melbourne. Later, the Y-Plan for the greater Canberra grew out of a 1967 American study placing a series of new towns, each in valleys along three corridors radiating from the centre, and beyond these, broad-acre sites for institutions:

The Y-Plan (so named as the series of towns form the pattern of a ‘Y’) envisaged that the population capacity of the towns within the ACT and Queanbeyan would be in the order of 650,000 ... Each of the towns was provided with extensive infrastructure, much of which related to the size and characteristics of the population. This includes physical infrastructure such as water, sewerage, stormwater, open space, roads, bridges, public transport, cycleway and pedestrian networks, and social infrastructure including housing, sport and recreation facilities, libraries, child care, health facilities, youth and senior citizen centres and places of worship. The changing demography of the established towns has generally resulted in the lower utilisation of such infrastructure, which was provided in order to meet the needs of younger and higher town populations. This is well illustrated in relation to schools and local shops.

However, Proudfoot asserts that the Griffins’ initial design embraced wider precincts and ideals:

The extension of the Land Axis of the initial Canberra plan to Bimberi Peak in the Brindabella ranges, some twenty five kilometres from Capital Hill, together with the strict geometrical structure of the central area stemming from the Vesica, indicates that Marion and Walter Griffin’s objectives exceeded the contemporary concerns of the City Beautiful and Garden City movements.

More recently, the term ‘garden city’ was adopted by Canberra’s planners in a different way. In 2008, the earlier 2003 ‘garden city’ provisions of the Territory Plan were evaluated and refined into a new planning system. A March 2008 report Garden City Values and Principles from the then ACT Planning and Land Authority (ACTPLA), chronicled the garden city heritage:

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30. Quirk, op. cit., p. 43.
Canberra’s inner north and south suburbs were set out at time when the planners and architects for the new Australian Capital considered it important to establish an aesthetic of balance, light and space – an aesthetic that evoked a desirable lifestyle. To create this, they turned to the design theory current at the time and that was guiding the new town developments in America and Europe – the Garden City Movement...The result of this early planning is that today, Canberra’s older suburbs are prized for the residential amenity they offer with their wide, tree-lined verges, mature gardens and proximity to Civic. Of course, it is precisely because of this amenity, that they are subject to the pressure of redevelopment and a fresh set of challenges arising from our aging population, differing lifestyle choices and climate change.32

The report identifies that the key values underpinning the Garden City may be summarised as:

Country lifestyle: Appreciation of the beauty of nature and a high level of residential amenity.

Commerce and trade: Access to services, facilities and commerce.

Town lifestyle: Access to safe, pleasant housing as well as the opportunity for social interaction and the opportunity to participate in the community.33

The report goes on to say that with respect to ‘Garden City Values—Contemporary Significance’:

The values that underpinned Ebenezer Howard’s Garden City model are still as relevant to our community as they were over 100 years ago. Access to light and fresh air, to land for growing plants, keeping animals and for recreation are still significant. Similarly, it is still important in our contemporary society, that individuals can enjoy a level of prosperity, have access to healthy, safe housing, to services and employment and have a variety of opportunities for socialising and participating in the community. Because these values are fundamental to an egalitarian society, they have remained at the ‘core’ of planning policy and strategies and have continued to influence the structure and layout of Canberra’s urban environment. What have changed over time are people’s aspirations and the exponential development of new technologies.34

Garden city design principles also influenced the planning of other colonial and post-colonial capitals during the early part of the 20th century, but it is perhaps with other new national capital cities that Canberra will henceforth be compared when its effectiveness as a garden city capital is evaluated.

33. Ibid., p. 3.
‘So Canberra achieves the difficult feat of being one of the last Cities Beautiful, and also the world’s biggest Garden City’. Sir Peter Hall\textsuperscript{35}

Capital city design

Capital city comparisons

To put Canberra in context, it is instructive to consider some other recent planned national capitals. Planned capital city visions can suffer from being too closely associated with monumental egos, especially those of political figures or famous architects, or of association with political movements. This was and sometimes still is the case in some capital cities that feature enormous edifices, grand plans, huge statues of ‘great leaders’, or streets named for propaganda purposes.

For the national capital of Nigeria, Abuja, its Millennium Tower—designed by Italian architect Manfredi Nicoletti—is currently under construction, and will dominate the city along with a large cultural centre development at its base. Similar international involvement occurred in the Kazak national capital Astana. Its original layout was conceived by Japanese architect Kisho Kurokawa, and has incorporated varied architecture of gargantuan proportions. Whether these designs for capital cities will ultimately prove successful will remain to be seen.

Brazil’s capital Brasilia has long fostered global interest with its innovative architecture. Despite some urban social problems and millions of inhabitants, in a relatively short period it has achieved World Heritage listing. In his history of Canberra, Sparke observes that:

Brasilia made its great surge forward almost concurrently with Canberra, raising spectacular architecture on the high central plateau of Brazil with an admirable mixture of panache and patriotism. But its apartment buildings, the giant superquadras, accommodate only the well-to-do. Most of the people live in the favelas, slums on the city outskirts. In the Australian tradition, Canberra housed its people first, the national buildings came later.

Comparisons inevitably arise between Canberra and Brasilia—and for that matter Brazil and Australia—but the economic and socio-cultural histories of each state and its cities are manifestly distinct. Thus, while both ‘bush’ cities may be viewed as monumental but sterile, one cannot help but distinguish the fortunes of their local communities. Canberra reflects the comfortable suburban satisfaction of its many public servants, while Brazil is a country with wide income disparity. There is a comfortable affluent class in Brazil, but also great poverty. On this account it is unsurprising that their respective architecture and design traditions are quite different. For instance, Brasilia has an extensive metro system, unlike Canberra which has yet to have a single tram line.

Brazil, like Australia, was initially settled at the coastal margins and along rivers, and the largest cities today (Sao Paolo, Rio de Janeiro, Salvador, Fortaleza) remain near the water. The exception is Brasilia which, like Canberra, is its nation’s largest inland city. Unlike Canberra, however, Brasilia has achieved a far greater absolute size, and has an international airport that is a major hub and the third busiest in the country, albeit with only a handful of international connections. We should note

that although Brasilia’s population of 2.5 million is more than five times greater than Canberra’s, its size in relation to the population of the country as a whole is slightly smaller than Canberra’s.

Some may argue that both Canberra and Brasilia suffer from the brutalism of their architectural style. No mention of Brazilian architecture is complete without including the designer of its national capital buildings, Oscar Niemeyer, who is still working today at the grand age of 104. However, on Brasilia’s 50th anniversary, he lamented the perverse way it has turned out and the inherent social divisions in the city.\textsuperscript{37}

While the new Brazilian capital was hewn out of the extant remote areas, Canberra seems to have taken completely the opposite approach in aiming towards minimal disruption to the local landscape, with some deference to suburban sustainability. Sparke notes this bow to nature:

> It was an American, Edmund Bacon, a leading urban planner with an international reputation, who described Canberra as a statement of world culture which belonged ‘among the greatest creations of man’. He knew of no other work of architecture so undersold. ‘Here is a network of sweeping vistas, vast gulps of fresh air, superbly exciting and dynamic interactions between the peaks of the hills and mountains and the movements of people’.\textsuperscript{38}

Contrasting Canberra’s emergence out of the landscape to Ottawa, Canada’s add-on development, Gordon emphasises that building a new city from scratch needs greater resources:

> It took all five elements – politics, finance, planning, administration and a champion to get rapid implementation of a capital plan. The Canadian and Australian cities saw significant development in the 1950s, when these factors were all in place.

> ... The Ottawa and Canberra cases demonstrate that it is difficult to choose a capital in a federation with strong states and a weak central government. It appears to be even more difficult to implement construction of a capital. Ottawa had a jump-start, since the bill that requested that the Queen arbitrate the issue also committed the government to spend a substantial sum on construction of the parliament buildings (Knight 1991).

> ... It takes a great deal of time and money to develop a new town. A national capital has additional costs to construct the key government buildings, monuments and public spaces to a standard that inspires national pride. The infrastructure, which has no political benefits, has to be built first. Canberra had the double disadvantage of needing both types of investment. The lengthy construction period needed for infrastructure and major public buildings like a Parliament House require stable financing over periods exceeding the typical four-year political mandate.\textsuperscript{39}

\textsuperscript{37} A Gamboa, ‘Anniversary for Brasilia leaves architect ‘sad’’, AFP, 20 April 2010, Google news website, viewed 1 July 2011, \url{http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5gXJIB3bWskWiziZgr8-CFzY9U390U4A}

\textsuperscript{38} Sparke, op. cit., p. 348.

Comparing Canberra to Washington, D.C., USA, while the latter’s inner urban area follows a grid plan quite unlike that of the former, each city has some shared elements. As a young student, Walter Burley Griffin’s visits in 1893 to the World Columbian Exposition in Chicago were inspirational for him, and he was motivated to become a landscape architect. 40 That Exposition also influenced Washington’s architectural development. Rose expands on the origins of the 1901 plan for D.C.:

The first explicit attempt to utilize the vaguely classical Beaux-Arts architectural style, which emerged from the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893, for the explicit intent of beautification and social amelioration was the Senate Park Commission’s redesign of the monumental core of Washington D.C. to commemorate the city’s centennial ... The original plans of Pierre L’Enfant had been largely unrealized in the growth of the city, and with the country’s growing prominence in the international arena, Congress decided that Washington D.C. should be brought to the magnificence decreed in L’Enfant’s plan.

... Using their experience at the World’s Fair as a jumping-off point, the commissioners sought to accomplish a number of goals: to obtain a sense of cultural parity with Europe; to establish themselves as cultural and societal leaders in the rapidly growing professional class; to revitalize Washington D.C.’s “monumental core” as an expression of continuity with the “founding fathers” as well as an expression of governmental legitimacy in a changing and confusing era of expansion; and finally, to utilize the beauty of the monumental center as a means of social control and civic amelioration. The means to these ends was the 1901 plan.

... The plan itself was a reworking of L’Enfant’s plan, creating a monumental core, a great public Mall, and a series of public gardens. The focus of the plan, however, was on the Mall itself. The 1901 Plan was the first real expression of the City Beautiful movement in America, believing in the power of beauty in the urban center to not only increase business and property prices, but to induce civic pride and its attendant moral and economic reforms. 41

Parkways are a feature of both Washington and Canberra, which is the only local city with a parkway network. Figure 2 shows Canberra’s wider suburban layout linkages and designated areas in the National Capital Plan. Construction commences soon on the Majura Parkway past the airport on the capital’s east side. 42 The growth of parkways as a means to facilitate suburban development and regional movement grew out of planning for suburban communities around New York. 43 Their use in Canberra does contribute to its dispersed nature and a dependence on motor vehicular transport.

“For many people the advantage of living in Canberra is that their relatives are interstate”. (attributed to) Alan Fitzgerald.

Figure 2: Designated Areas

Capital city symbolism

One symbolic architectural feature noted in many other cities but conspicuously lacking in Canberra is a monumental spiritual temple. For instance, Islamabad (Pakistan) has a huge national mosque, as does Abuja (Nigeria) and Putrajaya (Malaysia) while Naypyidaw (Myanmar) has its Uppatasanti or ‘Peace Pagoda’. Astana in Kazakhstan tries to cover all faiths and beliefs with its huge ‘Palace of Peace and Reconciliation’ (also known as the ‘pyramid of peace’) conceived and designed by the British architect Sir Norman Foster.

Canberra is perhaps an overtly secular national capital with few prominent places of worship. Some may argue that the Australian War Memorial was designed to fulfil this function in some respects. The Parliamentary Zone does house the Centre for Christianity and Culture on the Barton side. It is perhaps the egalitarian and secular Australian traditions that prevail over more visible symbols of public religious devotion.45 Or else, Canberra deigns to be a more humble and self-fulfilled city. Beer notes that there may be changes ahead:

The second key driver of change likely to impact on the future planning for religious organisations in Canberra is the emergence of so-called mega-places of worship which act as multi-purpose facilities for their congregations and even the wider community. This is an increasingly global trend evident across a range of religious groups. ‘Mega-churches’ are usually defined in the literature as churches with weekly attendances of over 2000 persons, and usually with associated large-scale accommodation ... While there are no individual churches in Canberra with congregations of mega-church size, aspects of the phenomenon can nonetheless be observed locally, in terms of organisational linkages, style of religious practice and accommodation aspirations ... Beyond these examples, other groups have similarly expressed plans to build in this manner, whilst for the moment making do with school halls, lecture theatres and converted office spaces around the city. If experience elsewhere is a guide, while many will come to nothing, at least some groups will likely eventually seek to make their distinct mark on the built environment.46

Reference should also be made here to the notion that the whole layout of the inner city accords with some ancient cosmic symbolism, whether or not its inhabitants overtly recognise it. One proponent, Proudfoot, contends that there is an underlying spiritualism to our capital city:

The Griffins’ original design stems from ancient religious orders and their understanding of geomancy, an ancient science placing man in harmony with the earth. It is common to both Eastern and Western cultures ... Canberra cannot be understood simply in terms of the late nineteenth century City Beautiful model, derived from Baroque vista planning where parkland is brought into the city centre, or from the Garden City principles of Ebenezer Howard, where

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landscaping dominates suburban residential development...The initial plan for Canberra expresses the continuity of the cosmic symbolism between Europe and Asia.47

The lack of a specific monument or site that clearly represents the city is possibly a failing for Canberra. The Telstra Tower on Black Mountain has over the years been a de-facto symbol of Canberra, given that it is the only architectural landmark visible from most parts of the greater urban area. Parliament House also serves as an instantly identifiable Canberra landmark, but it does not necessarily symbolise the city per se. Rather, it represents the national government and, as discussed already, the land it is on is managed by the Commonwealth and not the ACT government. Gordon comments on the importance of symbolism as follows:

Since a capital takes many years to build, an effective agency manages the symbolic content of its project to meet the political need to demonstrate results. Canberra and Ottawa both used war memorials as important early elements in their plans. Placing giant illuminated flagpoles at key intersections of the Canberra plan was another useful idea.48

In this regard, forlorn Civic Hill, with its single flagpole has become an isolated and forgotten focus of the commercial heart of the city, completely overshadowed by the taller commercial buildings that surround it, despite Griffin’s intentions. Civic Hill could become a symbolic gateway to the city, with the installation of an appropriate symbol or treatment. In this respect, some ideas come to mind, such as a Ziggurat, a mini Parisian Arc de Triomphe, or Munich’s Triumphal Arch now a memorial of peace in the Bavarian capital. Vocal Canberrans also have concerns, about planning proposals that affect the capital’s design layout that focus on the adjacent lakeside precinct, such as this one:

The ACT Government is embarking on another major redevelopment scheme in the heart of the capital, with the potential to significantly compromise its nationally significant character and sense of repose. The ACT is calling tenders for urban/traffic-engineering designs to link the city to Lake Burley Griffin and Commonwealth Park, mainly for commercial reasons. Griffin envisaged spacious lakeside parkland along a north shore studded with national and other institutions visually relating to the Parliamentary Zone across a slender Central Basin. Constitution Avenue was his main east-west road. The ACT Government sees land dollars, similar to City Hill, which was rezoned for commercial use against expert advice...Dense development with hotels, flats, a large convention centre, and a stadium are envisaged. Despite today’s commercial imperatives, the ACT Government and the NCA need to be extremely careful with this issue.49


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In this view, despite attempts and such plans to better link City Hill to the city, it remains a neglected area. This might be symptomatic of wider issues in the planning process, as Aitken has argued:

The three great ingredients for a successful city are ‘Vision’, ‘Plan’ and ‘Will’. The Vision comes first, and it has to come first, because a great deal of energy and money will be expended in developing the new city project. The Vision has to capture the imagination, and provide attractive possibilities for those who are to live in the result. The Plan sets out the basic geometry of the city, its public places, how people are to get from one place to another, where they will buy food, and — at least in times past — its defences. ‘Will’ is the underlying support base of both the Vision and the Plan, and it has to be there from the beginning, because from the very start of every Plan there are objectors, those who didn’t get the job of drawing up the Plan, joined with those who see some other use for the land, those who don’t want to go there anyway, and others who just like objecting ... It happens that the site, and the civic character of those who have lived in Ottawa, have saved it from the slums that disfigure Washington — a plan isn’t everything. And contemporary Ottawa is a fine city, though away from the Parliament buildings there is much less immediate sense of its being the national capital than is the case in either Washington or Canberra.

This dispersed legacy now largely defines our capital’s planning area for its near 500,000 inhabitants. In speaking to Parliament, Aitken says that our National Capital Authority also has grand plans:

We are planning to present to parliament in 10 years time a 50-year-forward look for the national capital ... Canada has decided to do this. In fact, the National Capital Commission in Canada has taken the view that it should actually look forward 50 years.

So being a capital city ‘par exemplar’, Canberra needs to find its own best way towards the future. In the closing ‘Perceptions’ section of a tome on planning, Canberra 1954-1980, Sparke, says:

Few cities have been perceived in such differing ways as Canberra. Primarily it is the national capital, seat of government and centre of Commonwealth administration. Beyond that it has been regarded from the beginning as a symbol for the nation, reflecting the spirit of Australia and Australians and as a focus for national sentiment. Other concepts have it as a town-planning exemplar, social laboratory, garden city, cultural leader and a centre of learning, a statement of world culture and a work or art. To Canberrans, whatever else it may be, it’s a fine place to live.

‘[Canberra] will soon rank with Washington as one of the world’s great monumental capitals, an eloquent testimony to the wisdom of making haste slowly’. Sir Peter Hall.

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51. Aitken, op. cit.
54. P G Hall, Cities of tomorrow, op. cit.
City urban planning

Capital urban design

A recent intervention of Commonwealth policy into urban affairs has raised the profile of city planning. The Australian Government committed to a national intervention into urban and city planning through both funding of necessary infrastructure and encouragement of proper planning procedures. The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreed that by 1 January 2012 all States will have plans in place that meet defined criteria for the future strategic planning of Australia’s capital cities, and that federal government decisions on infrastructure funding will be linked to meeting these criteria. Meanwhile, there has been a push for creation of a Minister for Cities. For example, in March 2011 the Shadow Minister for Climate Action, Environment and Heritage, The Hon Greg Hunt MP called for the creation of an Integrated Planning Commission:

He said each of the capital cities needed a bipartisan integrated planning commission, made up of the three tiers of government and drawing on planning, social and business sectors to develop 30-year plans for open spaces, city boundaries, rail and road arteries, future water supplies, potential economic hubs and future port and transport terminals. To free the commission from controversy, its recommendations to state and local authorities should not be binding, but cities would be held to account by federal performance targets under a national liveability index.

However, note that none of the important Commonwealth policy announcements had specific reference to Canberra, save for a budgetary provision to enable the upgrade of Constitution Avenue for the Centenary of Canberra. Indeed there was some dispute as to whether that was itself merely a re-allocation of already committed funds. More recently, the Government announced the formation of a new Urban Policy Forum to advise on the implementation of the National Urban Policy. However, the list of initial Forum members does not include any Canberran.

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In assessing Canberra’s planning status it may be worthwhile to consider the impacts of possible multidisciplinary integrated planning commissions along with associated trends in urban design. This discipline involves a newly evolving combination of urban planning, landscape architecture and spatial design to improve the arrangement, appearance and function of city areas and public spaces. Urban design is defined by the Planning Institute of Australia in the following terms:

Urban design aims at the creation of useful, attractive, safe, environmentally sustainable, economically successful and socially equitable places. Good urban design pursues local identity and sense of place, cultural responsiveness and purposeful environmental innovation. It achieves a high level of quality, comfort, safety, equity, beauty and cohesion in the overall, physical outcome of all the development, planning, engineering, architectural and landscape design decisions that contribute to urban change.62

In South Australia and Queensland, there have already been moves towards formalising urban design. In South Australia a new Integrated Design Commission SA is operational:

The Commission is working with State and local Government, the design, planning and development sector - and the wider community - to transform urban environment and enhance quality of life through a multi-disciplinary, design led approach. Since the Integrated Design Commission SA was established in July 2010, numerous projects have commenced that are already having an impact on major developments and policy decisions. These activities are also generating awareness of the principles and values of integrated design and planning … The Commission is a multi-disciplinary team led by Government Architect, Ben Hewett. To ensure effective communication across Government, the Commission sits within the Department of the Premier and Cabinet.63

In Queensland, the State Government has created a Board for Urban Places to pursue urban design:

Deputy Premier and Minister for Local Government and Planning Paul Lucas said the Board for Urban Places, created by the State Government in August 2009, was ensuring Queensland grew gracefully. “The Board was established to provide general and project-specific advice on urban design, planning, architecture, landscape architecture, sustainability and built environment issues,” Mr Lucas said … The Board is a non-statutory body and is intended solely as an advisory body with no formal decision-making role. It is chaired by the Queensland Government architect and officially meets every two months, with a number of sub-committees of smaller groups of board members formed in relation to most projects which meet more regularly. Membership rotates on a project-by-project basis taking into consideration the issues to be discussed, and experience and skill sets required.64

The Australian Institute of Landscape Architects has sought to synthesise a view of urban design:

Contemporary research and policy for cities now points to the need for an integrated approach that incorporates all aspects of design to be considered alongside the traditional planning and development issues. One such new model, the South Australian Integrated Design Commission, is now being established ... The key objective of an integrated design commission would be to advocate for the value of design and to advise on processes to achieve design excellence in the built environment across all our settlements, metropolitan, suburban or rural, through an intelligent investment approach. 65

Canberra has had no such multidisciplinary board or integrated commission on urban design. Indeed, competition between the federal aspirations of the NCA and the local role of the former ACT Planning and Land Authority has led to some conflicts and controversies at times. 66 An editorial in The Canberra Times dated 5 June 2010 asserted that:

The grand, visionary plans continue to be unveiled, but the reality is that planning in the ACT has become something of a free-for-all, with commercial concerns trumping community and civic goals more often than not. Plans to improve traffic flow, public transport links and urban amenity tend to languish. New suburbs in Molonglo are being developed with little apparent consideration for how existing arterial roads will handle the additional traffic. We are on our own, more or less, and we have to cut our cloth accordingly. If ACT governments are to build on the legacies of Griffin and Menzies instead of letting them run down or selling them off to the highest bidder, our political leaders need a fresh perspective on planning issues. The appointment of a city architect/planner with a brief to develop and implement policy would be a considerable fillip for town planning in the ACT, and a timely reaffirmation of Griffin’s intention that Canberra should be “an ideal city”. 67

Nonetheless, both the local and federal agencies will claim that they foster urban design. According to the NCA’s guide ‘Design Quality in the Capital’:

Urban design excellence is a defining factor of great cities. As the national capital, Canberra has a special role of showcasing urban environments and landscapes that are not only uniquely Australian but also exemplify international best practise in urban design ... Good urban design will ensure such qualities are enhanced and protected and that Australia’s capital will continue to be planned and developed in accordance with its national significance. 68

It seems timely for a new ‘city-architect-cum-urban-designer’ for Canberra. On 16 June 2011 the Australian Senate passed a motion noting the ‘Centenary of the Choice of a Design for the National

Capital’ which highlighted the fact that the initial vision of the city was first sought 100 years ago. In response to the push for better urban design, a part-time ACT Government Architect has been sponsored by the University of Canberra as part of its contribution to the Centenary of Canberra. The Architect resides with the Environment and Sustainable Development Directorate and has an initial focus on city centre design and land use directions along with design quality excellence.

There have also been moves towards a National Heritage listing and even World Heritage listing for Canberra. The first stemmed from a nomination apparently planned by the NCA, and may mean that any developments that could have a significant impact on the city’s heritage values would have to be approved by the federal environment minister. The second came from a push to preserve Lake Burley Griffin’s ‘outstanding heritage’ in the face of various development proposals. The backers said overdevelopment of the lake’s foreshore would jeopardise a proposed UNESCO World Heritage listing for Canberra based on its origins as ‘a Garden City of world importance’. The Australian National University’s cultural heritage research centre director Professor Ken Taylor said in an article that insensitive planning is ‘squandering Canberra’s sense of identity as a city in the landscape’.

Professor Taylor argues Canberra is in danger of “becoming a greatly diminished city” if the Griffin legacy – the spacious vistas, open spaces, and view lines to surrounding mountains is jettisoned in favour of “production line development”. “I love this place, I’ve lived here for a long time and it’s been hard watching Canberra go downhill in recent years. It’s not the planners’ fault; it’s coming from an area of the Government that is using development at all costs to raise revenue. And as a result, the things that give Canberra its identity are being eroded, slowly eaten away. “I see the city suffering, losing its visual integrity and symbolism.”

The promotion of urban design, a city architect and heritage listing could be good for Canberra. There are some moves in this direction, which can tie in with new urban planning paradigms.

‘Look around you—these are the things they believed in’. ‘We shape our buildings and afterwards our buildings shape us’. Winston Churchill.
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Designing urban Canberra

This conclusion looks to the future of ACT planning and offers some suggestions. It seems that there is a plethora of ideas and approaches to improving our cities, starting from the ground up, with an abundance of vested interests and agendas to contend with, not just in the nation’s capital. In its response to the JSCNCEC inquiry report into the NCA, it is noted that:

The Government considers that the United Nations Environmental Program [Melbourne Principles for Sustainable Cities](http://www.unep.org/envprogram) provide a comprehensive and integrated understanding of sustainable development principles for cities which should inform any changes to the simplification of the planning system in ACT.

Perhaps a key to all of this is the institution of cohesive urban design principles. There now appear to be moves in that direction. In a meeting on 6 October 2011, Australia’s Council of Capital City Lord Mayors agreed on the key issues facing their cities that they felt would most benefit from Federal Government engagement. The issues were:

- tackling transport congestion – integrated, reliable transport systems are needed, incorporating freight and passenger movements across modes; road, rail, bus, air and port, walking and cycling.

- promoting sustainability – improving the energy efficiency performance of buildings, especially existing buildings, and accelerating the supply of low emission and renewable energy.

- improving housing affordability – reigning in living costs associated with housing by enhancing the supply of a variety of dwelling types in appropriate locations, to match demand for housing. 76

On 30 November 2011, in an address to the 5th State of Australian Cities Conference, the Minister for Infrastructure and Transport, Anthony Albanese, discussed the National Urban Policy, liveable cities, the state of Australian cities in 2011 and various progress reports. He also introduced the new Australian Urban Design Protocol called [Creating Places for People – An Urban Design Protocol for Australian Cities](http://www.infrastructure.gov.au/infrastructure/mcu/urbandesign/index.aspx), to encourage world-class urban design and architecture. When complete, it is to be accompanied by best practice guidelines, design concepts and case studies. 77 It is a direct response to the call by leaders at COAG for a higher standard of urban design and architecture in our cities.

As early as on 16 November 1994, a Report to the Prime Minister’s Urban Design Task Force, ‘Urban Design in Australia’ had already raised the importance of urban design at a national level, suggesting some policy initiatives and practical case studies. Alas, the matter lapsed with a change of


76. Council of Capital City Lord Mayors (CCCLM), [Congestion, emissions and poor affordability are the biggest issues facing Australia’s cities](http://www.lordmayors.org/Home/tabid/36/ctl/Details/mid/490/ItemID/73/Default.aspx), media release, 6 October 2011, viewed 23 March 2011.

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New urbanism is an attempt to address some of the crucial problems facing suburbia through the provision of liveable, higher density, ‘sustainable’ multiple-activity city developments, as distinct from the traditional, separated, single zone low-density suburban estates of the past. Some Australian suburbs have tended to follow an old garden city style in the manner of the British Milton Keynes new town stereotype. The new urbanism encourages active street frontages, walking, interactions and community lifestyles, with a focus on compact urban form through regulatory changes, multi-use zonal redevelopments, public transport and building infill:

There was a vogue in the 1960s and 1970s to abandon grid patterns for streets and build suburbs with sinuous crescents and many cul-de-sacs. The idea was to create quiet, private streets that had no dangerous through-traffic and where children could play safely. Unfortunately, the outcomes often were physically and socially disconnected streets, little shared sense of community and long indirect routes from home to nearby (as the crow flies) common destinations such as shops, schools and bus routes. As a consequence, residents used cars for relatively short journeys and the resulting absence of people and interest on the streets further discouraged incidental walking and socializing ... We also know that the same built form can have very different impacts in different places, for example...the public housing high-rise estates in inner Sydney and many parts of Europe and the USA often created ghettos of disadvantage, while high rise buildings on the foreshores of Sydney and adjacent to Central Park, New York, are highly desirable and people living there have some of the best health outcomes.

On the other hand, attempts to revive urban areas with infill developments also create controversy. The matter of urban consolidation versus garden city design has led to some disputes in the capital. Yet Stewart observes that there may still be scope to increase the urban density of central Canberra:

The national area (specifically Commonwealth Avenue, Kings Avenue and the State Circle) offer significant opportunities for infill development, including development on existing parking lots, to achieve the quality boulevards originally envisaged and deserving of this great capital city. The combination of the urban consolidation projects described above could conceivably add 15,000 to 20,000 residents to take the total population of the inner south from about 30,000

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to close to 50,000 residents. This significant increase in density can be achieved with minimal disruption to most residential areas. 81

A text on international urban design, by University of New South Wales academic Jon Lang, makes special mention of capital city urban design, though amazingly, the work omits Canberra completely:

Custom-built capital cities are much shaped by the motivation to make them symbols of their country or state. This necessity is particularly strongly felt and displayed in the design of their government presenters as is clear in the case of Washington, colonial New Delhi, Brasilia, Chandigarh, Islamabad, and more recently Abuja and Belmopan.

... Brasilia is the only one that is really a total urban design and then only in the formal area.

... Brasilia is the exemplar of a total urban design guided by strong political and architectural ideologies. Its urban design process was quite autocratic in nature. 82

Even older capitals such as Paris show the application of urban design principles in practice:

In the late 90s, the French government announced a visionary consultation inviting ten multi-disciplinary teams, led by architects, to completely re-imagine Paris as a sustainable 21st century metropolis. But the issues that the teams looked at — such as transport, identity, green space, social equality and the environment — are common to all cities. The teams’ responses to the challenges confronting Paris were creative and inspiring and relevant to everyone either involved in making cities or who live in one. So there has been an international trend towards emulating such forward thinking consultation about the future of cities. 83

The NCA claims that it already supports appropriate urban design for the areas that it oversees:

The NCA undertakes development of Urban Design Guidelines and other related materials to influence the quality of development in the National Capital as required by the Plan. The Urban Design Guidelines provide guidance to land managers and site developers on application of the Plan at a detailed site or precinct scale. 84

While perhaps Australia does not wish to see Canberra emulate any autocratic aspects of Brasilia, or of Paris, the apparent absence of a coherent urban design strategy and administrations here appear to be aspects requiring remediation. This paper has therefore suggested some focus for the future.

It proposes the establishment of a multidisciplinary board or integrated commission on urban design for Canberra. A related recommendation is the permanent appointment a city architect/planner with a brief to develop and implement urban design policy, rather than just interim arrangements.

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There is a need to resolve any planning impasses and complexities existing between the NCA and ACT Government agencies. In this regard, the 2012–13 Federal Budget contained an $11.9 million injection for the National Capital Authority, along with an expectation of the resolution of planning roles and responsibilities shared between it and the relevant ACT Government agencies.\(^85\) \(^86\)

There are some more specific matters also require action. These include a sympathetic reinvigoration of City Hill, with a gateway structure and treatment symbolic of the city that links to the lakeside location. The consideration of heritage values is important, given recent local planning controversies that have arisen.

Combined with this is the need to review local, national and international transport connections for and within Canberra to overcome its sense of and the cost of isolation from the rest of the Commonwealth. The urban fabric itself would benefit from design attention and provision for alternative travel modes, as with innovative solutions to address housing sprawl, energy and water use and social amenity.

By taking such bold steps, Canberra can resolve its planning conundrum to become an even better national capital and move with pride into the future.

‘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 governmental authorities in the world would accept. I have planned an ideal city—a city that meets my ideal of the city of the future’. Walter Burley Griffin\(^87\)

‘Why talk of Athens, Rome, Paris or London? Comb the world’s Metropolises far and wide. You make no blooming error. You’ll never beat Canberra, For Beauty, Virtue, Wealth and Civic Pride. Well did the ancient poet cry, ‘Go to Canberra, stranger, see it and die!’\(^88\)

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