

Inquiry into the Role of the National Capital Authority

Submission by Ian Morison, formerly traffic engineer and transport planner with the NCDC, and a member of its team that formulated the so-called “Y” Plan adopted by the Commission in 1970. The land-use and transport concepts embodied in that plan remained the basis of the Commission’s Metropolitan Plan of 1984, and the National Capital Planning Authority’s General Policy Plan of 1990.

This submission relates to Terms of Reference 3, 4 and 5 of the present inquiry.

The most important role of the NCA is one that seems to have been forgotten in the past decade - namely the safeguarding of the National Capital against the unwanted effects of congestion that come with continuing population growth. The National Capital Development Commission gave special attention to finding ways of planning Canberra’s metropolitan growth so as to give some protection to its formal central area from the traffic and parking problems [and consequent chaos of unforeseen responses] that are the unhappy lot of most cities.

The NCDC pursued a strategy of balanced growth, consisting of a system of towns, each with its own strong centres of service and employment. In 1990 that strategy was embraced by the National Capital Planning Authority in its General Policy Plan for Metropolitan Canberra. Despite the addition of planned development in the Lower Molonglo, this town-based structure is still relevant. However the NCA has failed to look ahead and use it effectively. If it had done so we would have witnessed strategic thinking at a metropolitan level to help safeguard against rapidly worsening transport and parking problems – those for example around Civic and along the approaches to the airport.

Huge programs of development at Civic and the airport were clearly going to put great pressure on transport infrastructure, and should have alerted the NCA to argue strongly against the pace and scale of City and airport office projects, with a view to preserving a degree of metropolitan balance. Not having met that objective, its logical fall-back position was to give high priority to relieving the impact of consequent imbalance, especially around the airport where it is now affecting the reputation of the National Capital. The prospect of serious imbalance, with major employment growth in the east, away from urban growth corridors, called for major improvements to Morshead Drive and the extension northward of the Monaro Highway. But it is only now, after congestion has become a political issue, that anything is being done. It is a situation that has not helped the NCA to “engage with the Canberra community” or “promote the National Capital”.

Around the Parliamentary Triangle, the NCA’s thoughts on planning seem to have relied on the idea that it should return to the design legacy of Griffin. To that end it has tried to deal with local issues, like through traffic on King Edward Terrace, by promising to remove much of what was done by the NCDC to enable Griffin’s layout to function in a twentieth century city.

Attachment A provides further comment on the broader legacy to which the NCA ought to refer, as its guide to planning for the parliamentary triangle.

Attachment B is concerned with the future infrastructure requirements of the Albert Hall, and shows that what was done in the 1960s is well-suited to serving foreseeable needs.

This submission refers to what appears to have been, at least in recent years, an unfortunately limited view of the NCA's responsibilities for looking after the interests of the National Capital. The removal of "Planning" from its title has led to the disappearance of that essential capability, with the kinds of consequences referred to here. Canberra's metropolitan planning legacy, largely ignored in recent years, must be picked up and applied once more, to cope with the pressures of continuing growth. And NCA ought to be a major player in that process. As things stand however, the NCA is not performing an appropriate level of oversight [T of R 3], is not engaging with issues of concern to the Canberra community [T of R 4], and has an inadequate perception of its role as an advocate for new infrastructure projects [T of R 5].

Ian Morison, MIEAust, FAPI
April 2008

Attachment A

Canberra's Legacy: Griffin, Holford, Harrison, et al

The Griffin Legacy¹ is being promoted by the National Capital Authority to make room for large development projects in Canberra's Central Area. In effect Griffin is being employed as a talisman or icon, to ward off concerns about the impact of these projects, and the infrastructure changes they entail.

Such reliance on Griffin alone, without reference to other significant contributions to Canberra's legacy, is rather strange because they are well known.

- After a quarter of a century of neglect, the adoption of William Holford's plan of 1957 put the lake back into the central area and reconciled Griffin's plan with the realities of Canberra as a mid-twentieth century city by introducing Parkes Way. His plan of 1963² showed the associated interchange links to give convenient access to the Parliamentary Area in the form of landscaped loops [classed as wasteful roadspace on NCA plans].
- The National Capital Development Commission shaped Central Canberra as a consciously designed environment, unified visually by carefully structured landscaping. Earthworks and tree planting were planned by designers Richard Gray and Richard Clough, for the surrounds to the lake, Commonwealth Gardens, the land axis. Their landscaping gave definition to the sites of the National Library and other national institutions. They also had a hand in the commissioning of sculptures and the siting of the Carillon and Captain Cook jet. This internal landscape, complementing the external one featured in Griffin's plan, remains the most coherent and unifying feature of the Central Area.
- The NCDC's chief planner, Peter Harrison, biographer of Griffin and a supporter of his more sensible design ideas for Canberra, master-minded a metropolitan structure to safeguard Canberra's Central Area from over-development and consequent excessive roadworks for private transport. This concept led to the NCDC building towns with strong centres of employment, which have been highly successful in serving the people and providing an alternative to over-centralised development.

To ignore such contributions to the creation of today's Central Area, and seek to guide future developments by reference to Griffin alone, smacks of a personality cult and is clearly inadequate. He himself made many changes to his original plan. The main features have been realised, and important new ones added, by others. There is much in Griffin's layout that the NCA finds unacceptable as a guide to the future [eg roads along the lake edge], so any promotion of his 'legacy' has to be highly selective.

The legacy items to be taken into account, when deciding what to keep and what to change in Canberra's Central Area, should refer to all of the major contributions including the following:

- Griffin's framework, and later additions [Parkes Way, Flynn Drive, Bowen Drive]
- The shaping of the Central Area landscape
- A metropolitan structure to limit congestion in Central Canberra.

Ian Morison, March 2007

¹ NCA, *The Griffin Legacy, Blueprint for the future development of the central national areas*, 2006

² See p75,76 of NCA *Parliamentary Zone Review*, March 2000.

Albert Hall: Future Access and Parking

These notes were prepared for the report by Friends of the Albert Hall on its future use and development as a community facility.

Bearing in mind the limited amount of space around the Albert Hall, and that increased future use will create a need for ancillary buildings [for storage of production equipment etc], careful attention must be given to ensuring there is adequate land area within a dedicated site, and that convenient access arrangements are maintained, for services to the Hall and for its formal occasions.

To meet those priority needs, questions of access and parking for the general people attending its functions must be met as a quite separate issue, off-site. Previous objections made by the Friends to the NCA's plans to remove existing roads that give access to and from the Parliamentary Triangle and Commonwealth Bridge, need to be reiterated to ensure there is an acceptable answer to both access and parking.

Somewhat fortuitously, works that were carried out in the 1960s to serve the Parliamentary area, are well-suited to meeting increased activity at the Albert Hall. The existing road system, with a bus stop on Commonwealth Avenue and extensive ground level parking in the Triangle opposite the Hall, both served by an underpass to ensure safe pedestrian movements, are capable of effectively servicing both large and small attendances generated by future public functions at the Hall. However they do need to be properly maintained, with provision for fully informative signposting of access to Hall functions via public and private transport.

Ian Morison
