

Amendment 59 – City Hill Project

Introduction

- 3.1 Amendment 59 sets out a framework of land uses, planning and urban design policies to guide future development of the City Hill Precinct ‘ensuring it takes its place as the symbolic and geographical centre of Canberra Central.’
- 3.2 The NCA comments that City Hill Precinct is central to the implementation of *The Griffin Legacy*. In particular, the NCA states that ‘City Hill Precinct will be reclaimed as Griffin’s symbolic and geographical centre for Civic – a corner completing the National Triangle as a gateway to the Central National Area and a hub connecting significant main avenues and vistas.’¹
- 3.3 This chapter outlines the key objectives of Amendment 59 and details the key issues raised in the roundtable public hearing.

Key features of Amendment 59

- 3.4 The NCA reported that upon coming into effect, ‘Draft Amendment 59 would provide an urban design framework to guide the design of buildings and infrastructure (roads) and the character of the public domain. A series of planning and urban design principles will be incorporated into the Plan. These relate to:

1 National Capital Authority, Amendment 59 – City Hill Precinct, p. 1.

- reinforcing the City Hill Park surrounded by diverse activity within an urban built form;
- encouraging a mix of land uses;
- extending avenue connections of Constitution Avenue and Edinburgh Avenue to Vernon Circle for local traffic and pedestrians and reducing the reliance on Northbourne and Commonwealth Avenues as the main north-south arterial route;
- modifying Vernon Circle to become a low-speed urban street giving greater priority to pedestrians and providing access to City Hill Park;
- modifying London Circuit to become an urban boulevard operating as the main public transport circuit for Canberra Central and as the bypass to City Hill Park;
- allowing medium rise buildings and landmark buildings at key points to reinforce Griffin's geometric plan structure;
- continuing to implement the peripheral parkways and Civic Centre bypass roads and giving greater priority to pedestrians;
- providing on-street parking and 24 hour access to parking structures in a manner that does not dominate the public domain;
- giving priority to public transport and providing for light rail and/or bus lanes on London Circuit;
- retaining existing laneways and creating new laneways (encouraging active frontages) to provide a permeable urban fabric and create service access; and
- providing clear and legible pedestrian links to facilitate pedestrian connectivity within and between City Hill Park and Canberra Central.

3.5 During the roundtable hearing, the NCA explained the detailed analyses that it undertook in preparing the amendment:

In order to consider how the draft amendment would be framed, we undertook a series of detailed analyses, using consultants in many cases. These were used to establish the economic feasibility, the engineering feasibility, we assessed the traffic, we undertook studies of transport, we looked at various inner-city transport options, we undertook land valuations, infrastructure valuations and we assessed the capacity of the infrastructure that exists in the city. The ACT Planning and Land Authority undertook a number of these studies, including the last one, the pedestrian movement

study. So all of the work that underpinned the way in which this draft amendment was developed was prepared as a comprehensive process prior to the release of the amendment.²

- 3.6 The NCA advised that the area affected by the amendment would have a development capacity of approximately 500 000 square metres which is up from the current capacity of 450 000 square metres.³
- 3.7 In this amendment:
- *City Hill Precinct* refers to the area within and inclusive of London Circuit reservation, including City Hill Park;
 - *City Hill Park* refers to the area within Vernon Circle currently open space; and
 - *Canberra Central* refers to the general area of civic currently open space immediately surrounding City Hill Precinct.⁴
- 3.8 In relation to **City Hill Park**, the amendment states that ‘City Hill Park should be retained and enhanced as an enclosed central park serving a functional role within an urban built form.’ In particular, the amendment states that ‘any buildings located on City Hill Park must be ancillary to this purpose and be designed, sited and of a scale, that complements the landscape character.’⁵ The NCA commented that City Hill Park ‘is essentially a high-speed roundabout in its current form, with Vernon Circle linking Commonwealth Avenue and Northbourne Avenue.’⁶
- 3.9 In relation to **land use**, the amendment states that ‘mixed land uses should be encouraged throughout the City Hill Precinct while allowing flexibility to respond to market demand.’ The NCA assumed at this stage ‘that approximately 50 per cent will be office type use, 30 per cent residential and 20 per cent in the ‘other’ category.’⁷
- 3.10 The amendment will result in changes to **traffic flows and vistas**. In particular, ‘Southbound traffic should be discouraged from using Northbourne Avenue along its length to reduce reliance on Northbourne and Commonwealth Avenues as the main north south arterial route.’⁸ In particular, the ‘intersection of Commonwealth Avenue and London Circuit

2 Mr Graham Scott-Bohanna, Managing Director Design, NCA, *Transcript*, p. 23.

3 Mr Graham Scott-Bohanna, Managing Director Design, NCA, *Transcript*, p. 24.

4 National Capital Authority, Report on Consultation, Draft Amendment 59, p. 3.

5 National Capital Authority, Amendment 59 – City Hill Precinct, p. 4.

6 Mr Graham Scott-Bohanna, Managing Director Design, NCA, *Transcript*, p. 24.

7 Mr Graham Scott-Bohanna, Managing Director Design, NCA, *Transcript*, p. 24.

8 National Capital Authority, Amendment 59 – City Hill Precinct, p. 6.

should be redesigned to encourage the diversion of northbound traffic onto London Circuit and improve pedestrian access and safety.⁹

- 3.11 **Vernon Circle** will become a 'low-speed urban street with a careful blend of through and local traffic, giving priority to pedestrians and providing access to City Hill Park.'¹⁰ **London Circuit** 'should become an urban boulevard operating as the main public transport circuit for Canberra Central. In particular, London Circuit should serve as the main connector between Northbourne and Commonwealth Avenues, but should be discouraged as a through route.'
- 3.12 In relation to vistas, the amendment states that 'view corridors must be retained from radiating avenues to City Hill Park - no buildings should bridge these avenues.'
- 3.13 The amendment specifically comments on **building form, height and landmark buildings**. The amendment states:

Tall **landmark buildings** up to RL 617 (**generally 14-18 storeys**) are restricted to the corners of the main avenues intersecting with London Circuit.

Buildings above 25 metres in height are to be the subject of wind testing, including down draught conditions and turbulence, to ensure development does not have adverse impacts on building entrances and the public domain.

Building heights up to 25 metres (generally six to eight storeys) above adjacent kerb levels of London Circuit, Vernon Circle and Northbourne, Edinburgh, Constitution and Commonwealth Avenues are permissible in all areas of City Hill Precinct with a minimum of 16 metres (equivalent to four storeys) desirable fronting Vernon Circle to create a sense of enclosure around City Hill Park.

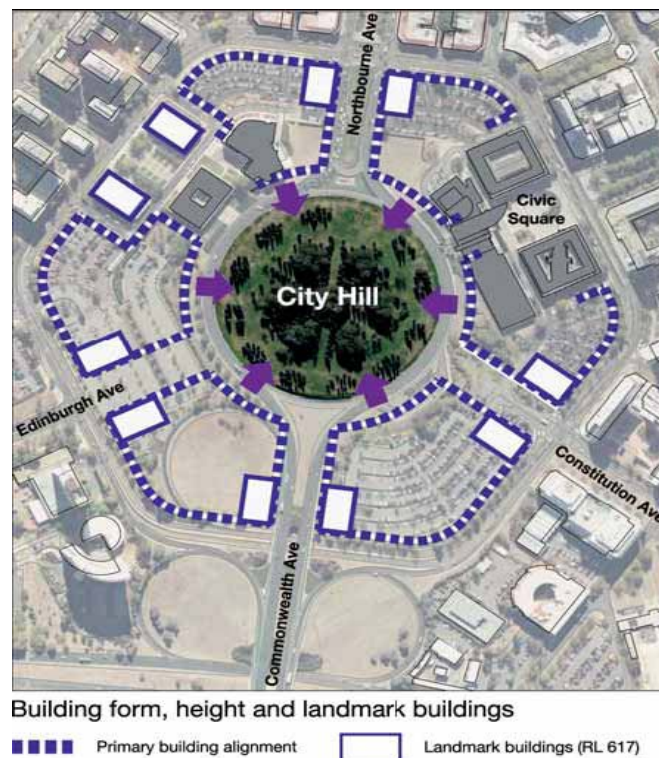
Minor building elements that extend building height above 25 metres will be considered where this enhances the architectural quality of the building and fosters energy efficiency, indoor amenity and appropriate urban scale.¹¹

9 National Capital Authority, Amendment 59 – City Hill Precinct, p. 6.

10 National Capital Authority, Amendment 59 – City Hill Precinct, p. 7.

11 National Capital Authority, Amendment 59 – City Hill Precinct, p. 9.

Figure 3.1 Indicative Building Form, Height and Landmark Buildings



Source *National Capital Authority, Amendment 59 – City Hill, p. 9.*

- 3.14 In relation to **height controls**, the amendment states that these ‘will be determined on a site-by-site basis to achieve performance objects such as:
- maintaining sunlight access to City Hill Park and major pedestrian areas;
 - achieving landmark public buildings, whether through height, siting, form or setting; and
 - addressing the heritage values of the Sydney and Melbourne buildings.¹²
- 3.15 The NCA advised that ‘we assessed building heights and setbacks and looked at the prospect of having taller buildings helping to define the geometry of the main avenues as they join up with City Hill.’¹³
- 3.16 The amendment notes that ‘**new buildings** are encouraged to be delivered through **design competitions** in order to encourage innovation and design excellence.’¹⁴

12 National Capital Authority, Amendment 59 – City Hill Precinct, p. 9.

13 Mr Graham Scott-Bohanna, Managing Director Design, NCA, *Transcript*, p. 24.

14 National Capital Authority, Amendment 59 – City Hill Precinct, p. 9.

- 3.17 Provision for car parking is dealt with by the amendment. The amendment comments that ‘public car parking that is available at all hours must be provided on street as well as in appropriately designed structures that do not dominate the public domain.’ In addition, ‘car parking for new development is to be accommodated in basements or in above ground structures that do not dominate the public domain.’¹⁵

Figure 3.2 City Hill Park looking towards the National Triangle



Source *National Capital Authority, Amendment 59 – City Hill, p. 16.*

1992 Draft Amendment 5: Master Plan Study for City Hill

- 3.18 In 1992 the then Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories conducted a review of Draft Amendment 5: Master Plan Study for City Hill. The then committee’s review and report is relevant to the committee’s current review of Amendment 59.
- 3.19 It is important to note that the then committee had significant concerns with DA5 and it was subsequently withdrawn.
- 3.20 In 1993 the committee stated:

In its vision for City Hill, the NCPA is seeking to promote the precinct as an active, vital urban space at the heart of Civic. Vernon Circle becomes a city street instead of a busy arterial. Quality six storey buildings festooned with balconies, colonnades, and porte

15 *National Capital Authority, Amendment 59 – City Hill Precinct, p. 10.*

cocheres face the Hill. The Hill beckons pedestrians from pocket parks along landscaped pathways. Perhaps light rail vehicles will one day run around a dedicated public transport lane.¹⁶

- 3.21 The committee examined heritage values, traffic, pedestrian access, buildings and heights, and other issues.

Traffic

- 3.22 There are differences between DA 5 and Amendment 59. In particular, a concern raised as part of the review of DA5 was significant concerns with traffic constraints. For example, in 1993, Mr Roger Pegrum stated:

The new layout of Vernon Circle...is guaranteed to turn the Circle into a slow moving and dangerous road, half roundabout and half highway...The combination of drop-off zones and an active frontage will turn Vernon Circle into a nightmare.¹⁷

- 3.23 The then committee concluded that it 'is of the opinion that the plan for the proposed new traffic arrangements for Vernon Circle was completed without sufficient consideration of all the implications.'¹⁸

Building height

- 3.24 The principal reason for DA5 was to change the building height from **three storeys to six storeys** on Vernon Circle. In addition, the '**gateway buildings** on Northbourne would be **eight to nine storeys**. It was proposed that 'lower buildings front London Circuit and taller buildings are located on Vernon Circle, massing the buildings up toward City Hill.'¹⁹ In 1993 there were a range of views for and against the increase in building height.

- 3.25 The then committee commented that 'several respondents considered the eight storey gateway buildings on Northbourne Avenue were not appropriate and **the Committee opposes eight storey gateways**.'²⁰ The then committee stated:

16 Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories, *City Hill: Review of the Draft Master Plan*, June 1993, p. 9.

17 Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories, *City Hill: Review of the Draft Master Plan*, June 1993, p. 23.

18 Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories, *City Hill: Review of the Draft Master Plan*, June 1993, p. 27.

19 National Capital Planning Authority, Draft Amendment No. 5, October 1992, p. 5.

20 Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories, *City Hill: Review of the Draft Master Plan*, June 1993, p. 34.

The Committee found the heritage and aesthetic arguments in favour of retaining three storey buildings on Vernon Circle convincing. It was mindful of the lengthy review process which established the current height limit of three storeys. The fact that the development of Vernon Circle is a long term project and implications of a decision to change the maximum permitted building height is significant. **The Committee does not consider there is any urgency at present in locking into a height limit that might be considered a serious mistake in years to come.**²¹

3.26 It is important to note that the proposed building heights that were rejected by the then committee in 1993 are significantly lower than the heights proposed under **Amendment 59 which provides for:**

- **14-18 storey 'landmark buildings'** which are restricted to the corners of main avenues intersecting with London Circuit; and
- buildings, generally **six to eight storeys**, above adjacent kerb levels of London Circuit, Vernon Circle and Northbourne, Edinburgh, Constitution and Commonwealth Avenues are permissible in all areas of City Hill **with a minimum, equivalent to four storeys desirable** fronting Vernon Circle to create a sense of enclosure around City Hill Park.²²

3.27 In relation to the similarities or otherwise between DA 5 and Amendment 59, the NCA commented that the principle of access to City Hill was very much the same. However, the NCA stated:

DA 59 is a far more sensitive piece of work. It looks far more closely at the access points at the extensions of the avenues. I do not think the extensions of the avenues were taken into account in the earlier model. It looks at the laneway connections and it talks about the quality of the space and the design rather than simply being an exchange of scale.²³

Discussion

3.28 The Walter Burley Griffin Society (WBGS) commented that the amendment was too generally written. For example, the WBGS drew attention to a

21 Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories, *City Hill: Review of the Draft Master Plan*, June 1993, p. 35.

22 National Capital Authority, Amendment 59 – City Hill Precinct, p. 9.

23 Ms Annabelle Pegrum, Chief Executive, National Capital Authority, *Transcript*, p. 30.

finding by the Canberra Central Taskforce which stated that ‘the preliminary financial modelling undertaken by the Taskforce has shown that there would be significant costs in the development, and these costs would most likely not be fully covered by revenues, even in the longer term.’²⁴

- 3.29 In response to the objective of making City Hill Park a ‘people space’, the WBGS stated:

This visual and symbolic role for City Hill Park is sufficient, without the extensive re-structuring of arterial roads, overdevelopment of London Circuit, and extensive landscape works necessary to turn the park into a ‘people space’.

We do not support modification of the topography ‘to create an urban park, accommodate pedestrian desire lines, and integrate with Vernon Circle – in other words, flattening the hill.’²⁵

- 3.30 CB Richard Ellis warned of the pressures upon retail trading if additional retail floor space was added to Canberra’s economy. CB Richard Ellis advised that we ‘need to pause and allow the community’s spending power to catch up before we build another centre.’²⁶ CBRE stated:

We need to allow time for the retail core of Civic to consolidate, and not allow any substantial retailing in the new parts of City Hill, Constitution Avenue or, for that matter, the lake—I think the City Hill amendment areas are more pertinent.²⁷

- 3.31 The ACT Planning and Land Authority (ACTPLA) noted that as result of the leasehold system, the territory government has a major stake in the marketplace in the ACT. ACTPLA commented that ‘we have the ability to manipulate the product that comes out, whether that be commercial, retail or residential, by the way in which we release land and the nature of uses or activities that we allow on each lease.’²⁸

- 3.32 In relation to public funding, ACTPLA commented that the delivery of infrastructure will be the responsibility of the territory government. ACTPLA acknowledged the financial issues raised by the WBGS that one of the key issues for the ACT Government will be ‘its capacity to leverage sufficient funds through its release of land to pay for much of the

24 Professor James Weirick, President, Walter Burley Griffin Society, *Transcript*, p. 28.

25 Walter Burley Griffin Society, *Submission 1*, p. 12.

26 Mr Tony Adams, Senior Director, CB Richard Ellis, *Transcript*, p. 26.

27 Mr Tony Adams, Senior Director, CB Richard Ellis, *Transcript*, p. 26.

28 Mr Neil Savery, Chief Planning Executive, ACT Planning and Land Authority, *Transcript*, p. 39.

infrastructure required to support the development of the city.²⁹ ACTPLA stated:

Bear in mind that, as was said previously, if we do nothing the city will develop anyway and the territory will be required to provide level of infrastructure. If we do nothing – and I know that no-one is sitting here advocating that we do nothing – we could have a scenario in which a city develops in the absence of a broader planning framework and a territory government that finds it difficult to provide the infrastructure required to sustain that development, and some of the worst scenarios that people were talking about, such as traffic congestion, will materialise anyway.³⁰

3.33 ACTPLA indicated that it was also working on identifying and locating a future site for a new legislative assembly and a future Supreme Court.³¹ The WBS commented that ‘all that is needed at City Hill is the correct siting and design of a new and permanent building for the ACT Legislative Assembly.’³²

3.34 The NCA advised that there seemed to be a misconception that ‘if the Griffin Legacy amendments were not there, nothing would happen and the market would somehow be miraculously controlled.’³³ The NCA stated:

City Hill is currently a development site. What the Griffin Legacy does, in fact, is introduce a layer of flexibility that can respond to the market, because it is far less prescriptive about what those buildings on the hill might be. It is true that it does not say, ‘This is a house and this is an office and this a shop;’ it allows for the market to respond to the needs of the day. In addition to that, the retail hierarchy within the National Capital Plan protects some of the pressures that are brought to bear on the percentage of retail associated with any one area, and there is additional flexibility from the Territory, who are the administrators of all of the land on City Hill, to look at whether or not they exclude certain provisions through their lease clauses.³⁴

3.35 The other key issues raised during the roundtable public hearing included:

29 Mr Neil Savery, Chief Planning Executive, ACT Planning and Land Authority, *Transcript*, p. 39.

30 Mr Neil Savery, Chief Planning Executive, ACT Planning and Land Authority, *Transcript*, p. 39.

31 Mr Neil Savery, Chief Planning Executive, ACT Planning and Land Authority, *Transcript*, p. 40.

32 Walter Burley Griffin Society, *Submission 1*, p. 16.

33 Ms Annabelle Pegrum, Chief Executive, National Capital Authority, *Transcript*, p. 29.

34 Ms Annabelle Pegrum, Chief Executive, National Capital Authority, *Transcript*, p. 29.

- transport and traffic;
- retention of open space and vistas; and
- shadows and building height.

Transport and traffic

3.36 A number of individuals and groups raised concerns that there could be disruptions to traffic flow as a result of the proposed changes. Mr Shibu Dutta commented that ‘you have to take the through traffic out of City Hill straight to Commonwealth Avenue or to Constitution Avenue.’³⁵ Mr Dutta observed that the dual carriage way for London Circuit will not provide a solution.

3.37 Mr Greg Wolfe raised concerns about the volume of north-south traffic which is predominantly thoroughfare traffic which uses Vernon Circle to commute and the second type is internal city movement. Mr Wolfe stated:

My understanding, and I may be wrong, is that there may be around 60,000 car movements a day through Vernon Circle. Most of those would be thoroughfare traffic, as I said earlier. I am interested in what happens when we merge thoroughfare traffic with local city traffic. What do you get? I would suggest that you would probably get a bottleneck or a gridlock. If somebody is coming from Gungahlin and having to go to Woden or Barton, why would we go to the effort of forcing them through perhaps six sets of additional traffic lights to go through London Circuit just so that somebody can walk across the road safely at Vernon Circle to have a sandwich? We have inconvenienced 60,000 commuters just so that you can safely get across and have your sandwich on City Hill. I am not against using City Hill—it is a magnificent place. What I am asking for is that we find a balance and understand that there is and will be a growing demand of commuters through that area.³⁶

3.38 It was pointed out that ‘Northbourne Avenue, Vernon Circle and Commonwealth Avenue are vital arterial connections and approximately 70 per cent of its traffic was not destined for or exiting from Civic.’³⁷

3.39 The NCA responded that ‘the retention of Vernon Circle as a freeway route for arterial traffic restricts safe access for pedestrians to City Hill

35 Mr Shiva Dutta, *Transcript*, p. 31.

36 Mr Greg Wolfe, *Transcript*, p. 33.

37 National Capital Authority, Report on Consultation, Draft Amendment 59, p. 8.

Park and is contrary to its role as a central park for Civic.³⁸ In addition, the NCA stated:

Implementation of increased east/west connections, and a fine grain network of paths and streets, is necessary to enhance City Hill as a destination and to reduce the predominance of north/south through traffic. There is capacity on London Circuit, if developed as a main avenue in accordance with the DA, to divert a significant share of arterial vehicular through traffic around the City Hill Precinct. The DA proposes an increase in width of London Circuit to 40 m except adjacent to the North and South Buildings and the Reserve Bank and AFP Building and associated squares where the width is retained at 30 metres. It is a sufficient width to create a dignified and boulevard-like city avenue, and improve the legibility of Civic's hierarchy of streets.³⁹

- 3.40 During the roundtable hearing, the NCA advised that more use will have to be made of major connector roads like Limestone Avenue and Clunies Ross Street which 'will all play their part in a broad process of how the city changes and copes with traffic.'⁴⁰ The NCA also suggested that 'there is a need for us to begin a process by which we discourage people who are going north-south or south-north from going through the city.'⁴¹
- 3.41 Mr Colin Stewart of Colin Stewart Architects noted that 'the NCA have made it clear and the Griffin Legacy document has received appropriate accolades as a planning document but I see a lot more work to be done before there is a wonderful detailed design solution.'⁴² As part of his contribution, he particularly commented on the structure of city avenues. Mr Stewart stated:

At the moment the fundamental flaw that has confronted every reputable planner and designer in Australia and overseas for the last 30 years has been how to resolve the problem of the meeting of the avenues at London Circuit. I believe the solution is to widen London Circuit so that it is an avenue and not a narrow street. I live in a street which is – as are most streets in inner Canberra – the same width as London Circuit. Avenues are 60 metres wide, which is double that width. If we are serious about providing an urban framework, it is a unique time in the national capital's history, and

38 National Capital Authority, Report on Consultation, Draft Amendment 59, p. 8.

39 National Capital Authority, Report on Consultation, Draft Amendment 59, p. 8.

40 Mr Graham Scott-Bohanna, Managing Director Design, NCA, *Transcript*, p. 33.

41 Mr Graham Scott-Bohanna, Managing Director Design, NCA, *Transcript*, p. 33.

42 Mr Colin Stewart, Colin Stewart Architects, *Transcript*, p. 37.

of critical importance, that the future of London Circuit be addressed and examined for every opportunity to make it the size of an avenue, not as a 20-lane road but as an avenue of the quality of the other avenues and of, say, Adelaide’s North Terrace, which is half-landscaped and half-traffic, with a grand character.⁴³

3.42 Mr Stewart also commented on the nature of City Hill and its links with other parks. He concluded that ‘a fantastic planning framework has been set up but it needs a lot more work in the detailed design aspects of both the public domain and the private sector.’⁴⁴

3.43 The NCA indicated that it agreed with comments made about the value of avenues and the quality of public infrastructure. The NCA indicated that it had looked at the challenges of widening London Circuit. The major concern is the four buildings that have been built, two of which are on the ACT Heritage List. The NCA acknowledged that there is a barrier to widening the road through its length.⁴⁵ The NCA stated:

The amendment does not prevent that happening and certainly has been on the agenda for discussion between us and the ACT for some time. By using the detailed design documents we produce for sites, as they become available to the market, in order to facilitate it we can also maintain an appropriate width by the setbacks for those buildings on the inside of London Circuit.⁴⁶

3.44 ACTPLA commented that it is ‘planning for London Circuit to be widened in the future, but not to the point where it simply replicates the problems that we see now with Vernon Circle, where we simply move the through-traffic network onto London Circuit only to see it become overly congested, with difficulty of pedestrian movement from one side of London Circuit to the other and then into the inner circle of Vernon Circle.’⁴⁷

Retention of open space, vistas and provision for trees

3.45 A large number of submissions sought the continuation of open space, and the continuation of City Park as it is. Professor Ken Taylor commented that City Hill has magnificent views, and the ‘very idea of blocking those

43 Mr Colin Stewart, Colin Stewart Architects, *Transcript*, p. 37.

44 Mr Colin Stewart, Colin Stewart Architects, *Transcript*, p. 37.

45 Mr Graham Scott-Bohanna, Managing Director Design, NCA, *Transcript*, p. 38.

46 Mr Graham Scott-Bohanna, Managing Director Design, NCA, *Transcript*, p. 38.

47 Mr Neil Savery, Chief Planning Executive, ACT Planning and Land Authority, *Transcript*, p. 39.

views, even if it is like this shown here, is just antithetical to the whole idea of this great city and it should not go ahead.’ Professor Taylor stated:

Within amendment 59, I would like to see more attention paid to open space, to the different volumes of space between buildings, connecting to the central space. I have ambivalent views as to whether Vernon Circle should be maintained, even with traffic lights. Traffic lights and cars stopping and starting around an urban park of the scale of City Hill is not appropriate, in my view, neither is surrounding a city park by tall buildings. It is contrary to the amenity of park users.⁴⁸

3.46 The AILA noted their approval that ‘this amendment now allows City Hill to remain as a park.’⁴⁹ However, the AILA raised other concerns:

Where we do have concerns is that the proposal could easily turn City Hill into an oasis rather than a hill and that those views out from City Hill will not be protected by a 40-metre avenue. You only have to look from the terrace of our building along the land axis to see the way that the views, the vistas, are constrained by tree massings, and certainly they will be by building massings. However, this can be addressed through good form studies and picking up how these vistas can be presented.⁵⁰

3.47 The NCA noted that City Hill was not the only open space in this area and referred to Commonwealth Park. In relation to views through the areas from City Hill, the NCA commented that ‘the other attraction as to the way in which City Hill would work is that you would actually create really strong view corridors by the way in which development around the city would occur.’⁵¹ The NCA further commented that ‘there will be a series of buildings with spaces between the buildings and those spaces can be made to work to create and facilitate those view corridors.’⁵²

3.48 In relation to building height and views, the NCA commented that ‘even at three storeys you could have a ring of buildings around Vernon Circle that would block off views potentially to City Hill park.’⁵³ The NCA stated:

So the extensions of Constitution and Edinburgh avenues actually open vistas through to the park. There are streetscape controls built

48 Professor Ken Taylor, *Transcript*, pp. 31-32.

49 Dr Dianne Firth, Australian Institute of Landscape Architects, *Transcript*, p. 35.

50 Dr Dianne Firth, Australian Institute of Landscape Architects, *Transcript*, p. 35.

51 Mr Graham Scott-Bohanna, Managing Director Design, NCA, *Transcript*, p. 34.

52 Mr Graham Scott-Bohanna, Managing Director Design, NCA, *Transcript*, p. 34.

53 Ms Annabelle Pegrum, Chief Executive, National Capital Authority, *Transcript*, p. 34.

into the amendment. In addition to that we have broadened the vista from City Hill park down along Commonwealth Avenue towards the parliamentary area.⁵⁴

- 3.49 Professor Taylor in response noted that ‘of course three-storey buildings could have a similar effect’ on vistas, but his main point of concern was the space between buildings, and ‘it is critical in this area.’⁵⁵ Professor Taylor stated:

I believe all along that the key to developing the City Hill area – and I reiterate, I strongly welcome keeping City Hill as a park – is the connection of the spaces between the buildings that are, in my view, even more important than the buildings themselves, although I still feel that the idea of 16- to 18-storey buildings is just an anathema and contrary to the whole idea of this precinct.⁵⁶

Building height

- 3.50 Building height was the most contentious issue in relation to Amendment 59. Professor Ken Taylor was opposed to the proposal to have 16 to 18 storey landmark buildings. He could not see any rationale for increasing the current three storeys to four storeys.⁵⁷ He argued against filling this precinct in with buildings that could ruin the nature of the area.
- 3.51 The WBGS commented that ‘although precedents have been established for towers built to the RL617 limit in the City West precinct, they are not precedents worthy of emulation as works of architecture or as urban design gestures.’ The WBGS concluded that it ‘opposes the location of visually dominant structures in the vicinity of City Hill, and emphasises that Griffin explicitly called for horizontal development in Canberra.’⁵⁸
- 3.52 The NCA drew attention to drawings by Walter Burley Griffin which ‘showed a very fine-grain density right around City Hill, right along Northbourne Avenue and right along Constitution Avenue.’⁵⁹ The NCA stated:

The way you make Constitution Avenue, Vernon Circle and Northbourne Avenue come to life is you make them populated, and the way you populate them is you put density along them.

54 Ms Annabelle Pegrum, Chief Executive, National Capital Authority, *Transcript*, p. 34.

55 Professor Ken Taylor, *Transcript*, p. 38.

56 Professor Ken Taylor, *Transcript*, p. 39.

57 Professor Ken Taylor, *Transcript*, p. 31.

58 Walter Burley Griffin Society, *Submission 1*, p. 14.

59 Mr Graham Scott-Bohanna, Managing Director Design, NCA, *Transcript*, p. 33.

You do not build your blocks of apartments in the middle of suburbs; you build them on the main avenues. You develop the density as a mechanism by which you then make public transport, riding bikes and all those things much more viable.⁶⁰

3.53 In relation to concerns about building height, the NCA stated:

The scale of development is appropriate to achieve the objective for City Hill Precinct as a diverse mixed land use precinct and a vibrant heart to the city. The DA allows for buildings up to 25m (6-8 storeys) fronting City Hill. The Magistrates Court is a comparable scale (20m height) to what is proposed for building height and its setback is identical. This provides for enclosure of City Hill as intended by Griffin's plan, and will not overshadow City Hill Park. The 6-8 storey buildings will be set back approximately 30 metres from the park and there is no evidence that buildings of this scale will have significant negative wind impacts on the park. The DA should be amended in relation to the 25 metre building height to allow minor building elements above 25 metres where this enhances architectural quality and environmental performance to ensure consistency with DA60 and DA61.

It is likely that public buildings fronting City Hill Park (eg. new Supreme Court and Legislative Assembly buildings) will be lower rise buildings. Tall landmark buildings up to RL 617 (generally 14-18 storeys) are restricted to the corners of main avenues intersecting with London Circuit. This location reinforces the geometry of Griffin's plan and ensures no overshadowing of City Hill Park. These taller buildings will be set back more than 100m from City Hill Park.⁶¹

3.54 In relation to the preservation of key vistas, the NCA commented that 'comprehensive views to surrounding landscape are difficult to maintain within a city centre, but are provided for along the main avenues.'⁶² In relation to the vista to Parliament House, the NCA commented that this 'is significant and it would be appropriate to increase the width of Commonwealth Avenue between Vernon Circle and London Circuit from 40 meters to 60 metres to respond to this vista.'⁶³

60 Mr Graham Scott-Bohanna, Managing Director Design, NCA, *Transcript*, p. 34.

61 National Capital Authority, Report on Consultation, Draft Amendment 59, p. 12.

62 National Capital Authority, Report on Consultation, Draft Amendment 59, p. 10.

63 National Capital Authority, Report on Consultation, Draft Amendment 59, p. 10.

- 3.55 The WBGS commented that ‘no ground level and heritage vista studies are supplied to support the ‘landmark tower’ proposition, i.e. to establish whether the towers will indeed ‘read’ as meaningful landmarks and markers of Griffin’s geometry at ground level within the city or from significant vantage points in the National Capital.’⁶⁴

Conclusions

- 3.56 The roundtable public hearing examination of Amendment 59 revealed concerns about the level of detail, issues about public funding and specific concerns about serious disruptions to traffic and excess building heights and loss of vistas. Again, it is disappointing for the committee that these concerns remain or have not been adequately addressed during the NCA’s consultation process.
- 3.57 In relation to costs, the Walter Burley Griffin Society drew attention to a finding by the Canberra Central Taskforce that preliminary financial modelling has shown that there would be significant costs in the development, and these costs would most likely not be fully covered by revenues, even in the longer term. The ACT Planning and Land Authority acknowledged that one of the key issues for the ACT Government will be its capacity to leverage sufficient funds through its release of land to pay for much for much of the infrastructure required to support the development of the city. The committee accepts the point that funding for infrastructure is going to be a challenge no matter what planning solution is embraced.
- 3.58 At a more detailed level, there were significant concerns about disruptions to traffic flows through effectively removing Vernon Circle as the main north-south thoroughfare. Notwithstanding this point, there seemed to be widespread support for improving pedestrian access to City Park. However, the committee was not convinced that enough work had been done on delivering real solutions to the traffic disruptions that could occur as a result of Amendment 59.
- 3.59 Amendment 59 states that London Circuit should serve as the main connector between Northbourne and Commonwealth Avenues, but should be *discouraged* as a through route. The obvious concern is that London Circuit would merely become another Vernon Circle. ACTPLA recognised this when it commented that it is planning for London Circuit to be

64 Walter Burley Griffin Society, *Submission 1*, p. 14.

widened in the future, but not to the point where it simply replicates the problems that we now see with Vernon Circle. This is one area that needs to be worked through carefully to ensure that the desired results are achieved.

- 3.60 Building height around City Hill Park and possible *enclosure* of this area was another point of concern. The amendment states that it is desirable if buildings equivalent to four storeys front Vernon Circle creating a sense of enclosure around City Hill Park. Professor Taylor, for example, was opposed to the idea of encircling City Hill Park with buildings.
- 3.61 In relation to building heights proposed in Amendments 59, 60 and 61, the committee is not convinced that there is widespread grassroots support for the level of high rise proposed in these amendments.
- 3.62 In 1993 the then Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories reviewed Draft Amendment 5, City Hill and also dealt with the issue of building height in relation to City Hill Park. That committee questioned the need for the increase in building heights. The then committee stated that 'it does not consider there is an urgency at present in locking into a height limit that might be considered a serious mistake in years to come.' The views of our predecessor committee remain cogent and persuasive and should not be ignored.
- 3.63 Amendment 59 will, if not disallowed, provide approval for landmark buildings between 14-18 storeys on the corners of the main avenues intersecting with London Circuit. Building heights between six to eight storeys will be permissible on London Circuit, Vernon Circle and Northbourne, Edinburgh, Constitution and Commonwealth Avenues. The amendment states that buildings equivalent to four storeys be desirable fronting Vernon Circle. The committee, like its predecessor, rejects the need for buildings of this height. Like other groups at the roundtable hearing, we are also concerned about the possible loss of vistas.
- 3.64 The committee has, in recommendation 3, proposed that the Minister move that Amendment 59 be disallowed.