



SUBMISSION BY THE ROYAL AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF ARCHITECTS
on
INQUIRY INTO THE ROLE NATIONAL CAPITAL AUTHORITY
by
THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE NATIONAL CAPITAL AND EXTERNAL TERRITORIES.

The Royal Australian Institute of Architects [hereafter RAIA] welcomes this opportunity to make a submission to the National Capital Authority Inquiry being undertaken by the Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories.

The RAIA is a national peak body with 8500 member architects residing in all Australian states and territories as well as a number of countries around the world. The RAIA has membership of other Institutes of Architecture including being a council member of the International Union of Architects [UIA] which coordinates and promotes standards of architecture professionalism globally.

The general objects of the association are for the advancement of architecture and to maintain the integrity of the profession through the Code of Professional Conduct. The RAIA through its Urban Design Policy 'affirms the responsibility of the architectural profession to contribute to the quality and sustainability of the natural and environment and the health, safety and welfare of the general public. The formation of public space and its interface with built form through urban design is regarded as a particular responsibility of the architectural profession' The matters before the inquiry are therefore important to us as they are to the community.

The response to the Inquiry's four terms of reference in what follows is from the viewpoint of the architectural profession locally and nationally, a profession whose members have everyday dealings with planning authorities and whose members have made major contributions to the planning and design of the capital.

The RAIA readily acknowledges the national accomplishment represented in the planning, design and building of Canberra, our largest inland city, now almost a century old. The institute's members are concerned to preserve the special significance of Canberra as the Australian national capital. Knowing that its unique character and special reputation is largely derived from its form - including its site, the original Griffin plan and the many infrastructural, architectural and landscape

developments that have occurred under the auspices of the Commonwealth Government – the RAIA stresses the importance of the Commonwealth continuing to show leadership in the planning and development of the capital. In an important sense Canberra will never be “finished” if that were to mean the Commonwealth can step back and leave the capital to other agencies. Continuous involvement and commitment on the part of the Commonwealth Government is required to maintain the design integrity of all that has been built to date and to monitor what is to be built in the future.

The origins of the Commonwealth's central role go back to some of the first legislation enacted by the nascent Commonwealth in the early years of last century specifically the Seat of Government Act [1911] which determined that there would be a Federal seat of government in distinction to the existing state capitals and that it be located in a place geographically separate to them. From this time until ACT self-government in 1989, the Commonwealth shouldered sole responsibility for the planning and development of the capital. It did so in a unique way combining Australian values about land and space with trans-national notions about architecture and urbanism. The mix of these ingredients has resulted in the distinctive outcome of a “bush” capital. No other place in Australia has been created in this way, and the consistency with which it has been done is widely admired nationally and internationally.

At the outset of ACT self-government the Commonwealth mandated a shared responsibility for the planning and development of Canberra and thereby recognised the regional centre that had grown up alongside the original seat of government idea. The relevant legislation [and agencies] soon followed to provide for a National Capital Plan and the National Capital Authority reflecting the Commonwealth interest in Canberra and for a Territory Plan and Urban Services/PALM to administer the regional aspects of Canberra. The National Capital Authority operates under the provisions of the Australian Capital Territory Act [1988]. Under Section 6 of this Act the Authority is required to: prepare a National Capital Plan, administer it and keep it under constant review; recommend

works to the Minister that are desirable to maintain and enhance the character of the national capital; foster an awareness of Canberra as the national capital; and manage national land for the purposes of Canberra as the national capital. Under Section 25 of the Act there is also provision for a Territory Plan which is required to carry out the planning and development of the territory in a manner that not inconsistent with the National Capital Plan.

In theory, there may be no apparent reason why this bi-polar legislative and management arrangement should not work. In practice the overlapping of sites which are subject to both national and territory constraints, the rivalry of the two separate planning agencies and the frequent politicisation of major decisions, particularly when different political parties hold power in the two jurisdictions, can make professional architecture and planning difficult. However the RAIA is of the view that this difficulty is no greater than that routinely encountered in the various state capitals around Australia, and on its own is an insufficient reason to alter the present governing arrangements.

In terms of quality outcomes in architecture and urban design – a matter the RAIA rates highly – it is notable that works on designated land subject to either sole NCA [or joint NCA/PALM] scrutiny have collected a majority of the design awards given in the decade and a half since self government. Recent works in the Parliamentary Zone, at the Australian National University and CSIRO are good examples. Indeed, informed, responsive planning authorities are an important factor in achieving quality design and planning outcomes and the NCA have a demonstrable track record in this regard. The NCA is well resourced with professional staff and efficiently organised to make such a contribution.

By comparison, until quite recently the Territory government beset with financial constraints and with a much wider range of responsibilities, has been uninterested or unable to foster such a high level of design awareness. In view of this the RAIA is of the view that it is unrealistic to expect PALM to take on any part or whole of the NCA's current role. Firstly, it is questionable that they have the people

or the institutional practices to do so and secondly, to do so could amount to a disenfranchising of the other states and territories. If it doesn't have the expertise, what besides geographic proximity does PALM have? In fact the required expertise is probably more readily available in the NSW Government Architects office or the Victorian Department of Public Works. If one of these organisations assumed the role of representing the Commonwealth's interests in the planning and design of the capital, would the other states then be disenfranchised? Wouldn't this problem also occur if the ACT assumed the responsibility? For that matter would it represent true "separation of planning powers" for any of the states or territories, or combination thereof to assume responsibility for the Commonwealth's planning and design interests in its own capital?

Given all of this the RAIA believes the situation of Commonwealth and Territory governments both contributing to the planning and development of Canberra is a functional one which high quality projects and their professional proponents have no difficulty particularly compared to other planning and design jurisdictions in Australia as has been argued. Indeed some of the criticism of both planning authorities seems to come from disgruntled applicants who may have under-invested in professional design and seek to blame the referee as a way forward.

The RAIA considers it of paramount importance for the Commonwealth government to maintain its key presence – even right of veto – in the planning and design of its seat of government. To do otherwise would be to seriously diminish the admirable stature and special character of the capital that has been built up over a period of time.

The institute is concerned though about the adversarial environment that sometimes exists between the NCA and PALM. Our members have personal experience of this and regard it as counter-productive. Communication, consultation and liaison between the two are sometimes dysfunctional over key projects especially when pending decisions are politicised. The RAIA regards some amelioration of this condition as being one of the potential benefits that could flow