

Committee Secretary
Joint standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories
Department of the House of Representatives
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

INQUIRY INTO THE ROLE OF THE NATIONAL CAPITAL AUTHORITY Supplementary Submission to Senate Inquiry

As a long time resident of Canberra and a former planner with the National Capital Development Commission from its commencement in 1958 to 1988, I welcome Federal Parliament's National Capital Committee inquiry into the role of the National Capital Authority (NCA) in the planning, development and promotion of the national capital Canberra.

It is now twenty years since the proclamation of the *ACT (Planning and Land Management Act)*, which set up the arrangements for the National Capital and Territorial planning authorities for the purpose "*to ensure that Canberra and the Territory are planned and developed in accordance with their national significance*". This inquiry into the role of the NCA and the adequacy of the ACT dual planning regime is timely. I'm hopeful that the inquiry will be wide ranging and enable the new Commonwealth Government to bring about a resurgence of good urban planning, design and policy commitment to conserve and enhance the character and role of Canberra as the nation's capital.

There are a number of laudable objectives in the NCA's submission, which would be widely supported, firstly in its statement that it is in the national interest:

- *For the Australian Parliament to retain its right the vision for Canberra and the Territory through the National Capital Plan on behalf of all Australians.*
- *For the Commonwealth to take responsibility for the detailed planning, design and quality of areas that are of special national importance.*
- *The Statutory object of the National Capital Plan is that Canberra and Territory be planned and developed in accordance with their national significance.*

And, secondly, in the statement that matter of National Significance in the planning and development of Canberra and the Territory are described in the National Capital Plan and include:

- *The pre-eminence of the role of Canberra and the Territory as the National Capital.*

- *Preservation and enhancement of the landscape feature which give the national capital its character and setting.*
- *Respect for the key elements of Walter Burley Griffin's formally adopted plans for Canberra.*
- *Creation, preservation and enhancement of fitting sites, approaches and backdrops for national institutions and ceremonies as well as National Capital Uses.*
- *Development of a city which both respects environment values and reflects national concerns with the sustainability of Australia's urban areas.*

NCA has proposal to the Senate Committee to reduce the Designated Areas of the existing national capital Plan provided that the Commonwealth retains strategic planning through the National Capital Plan, and rename Designated Areas as to Areas of Special National Importance to be gazetted as National Land.

The Senate Committee should be concern about NCA's proposal to reduce existing Designated Areas and not included the following as Areas of Special National Concern:

- *City Hill Precinct in and around London Circuit*
- *Main Avenues and Approach Roads*
- *West Basin*
- *Barton, particularly government employment areas fronting Kings Avenue and State Circle fronting Parliament House*
- *Lake Burley Griffin foreshore areas at Weston Park, Black Mountain Peninsula, Yarralumla Bay, Lennox Gardens and the land fronting Commonwealth Avenue including the Canberra Hotel and Albert Hall heritage precinct*
- *Key Inner Hills, ridges of Black Mt, Ainslie – Majura, Red Hill - Mt Mugga and Mt Stromlo and Dairy Flat Hill which terminate long views down West Lake and are the sites of the new arboretum and Stromlo Forest Park.*

As a general observation it seems that NCA's proposals for the National Capital Plan the planning documents have been made to satisfy statutory requirements and administration procedures laid down by governments rather than as document likely to win widespread public support for future detailed planning and urban design which would strengthen the quality and symbolism of the National Capital and metropolitan Canberra.

Considering all the effort that had gone into the planning and design since the 1957 Senate Select Committee (Chairman Senator John McCallum) and the Government's decisive steps to ensure that the recommendations were carried out one cannot help wondering if it was possible the statutory planning controls proposed by NCA and supported by ACTPLA, would meet the functional needs of the National Capital over the next fifty years and contribute to its visual and symbolic importance.

It does however seem necessary for the **Commonwealth 's planning authority to have reserve powers and more discretion to be able to respond to, and if necessary, veto inappropriate developments** (both government and private enterprise) which are poorly

designed or adversely impact on the quality of the Central National Capital Area and surrounding areas and are outside the scope of the approved statutory plan.

Its seems imperative that the Commonwealth should not abrogate its planning responsibilities by removing the current Designated Areas listed above and not retaining them as part of Areas area of Special National Capital Importance.

Origin of the Policy for Areas of Special National Importance

By Decision No.223 of the 13th May 1964, Cabinet endorsed in principle the proposal that the Central Areas of Canberra, the main Avenues and the open spaces be planned as *'areas of special national concern'*. Also included in this category were hilltops, ridges and planned open spaces between and around the major residential districts and lands along the rivers and lake foreshores.

This was elaborated further in 'Tomorrow's Canberra', NCDC & ANU Press 1970

In October 1977 NCDC published the report: 'An Open Space System for Canberra' by Professor George Seddon, which provided an independent review of the symbolic function of the Griffin Plan and the landscape setting of the national capital. In this he stated that national capitals tend to be monumental. Canberra is unique in that the natural setting has become the primary monument, especially the grey-green hills rising above the inland plains that were chosen for its site. The way in which inner Canberra is focused on its hills and water are a direct outcome of the Griffin plan. It is, was and is a striking plan, with many rewards.

May 1973 Richard Gray (Holford's office, London) prepared a review of 'Areas of Special National Concern' He pointed out that *'national concern'' in the context of scenic control now extends to the whole of the ACT'*. He suggested that prestige planning and scenic control areas are separate aspects of *'Areas of Special National Concern'*

The enduring and unifying elements of the Canberra Plan, deriving from Griffin, but traceable back to the work of Olmsted and Burnham on the 1905 McMillan Plan for Washington, which connected the city to the open lands along the Potomac and the Anacosta Rivers. These ideas would not only have influenced Griffin but also the Government of the day in wanting Australia's National Capital National Capital to have unique and distinguished visual qualities from its landscape setting. This proposal was an extension of NCDC's 'Areas of Special National Concern', which the Commonwealth Government in May 1964 endorsed "as requiring close supervision and special design

attention to maintain the setting of the National Capital". This recognised that some parts of the ACT are more important than others in determining the visual character of the Nation's Capital.

National Capital Plan

NCA's responsibility for preparing and administer a National Capital Plan together with its other tasks is very demanding and require willing experienced staff with high level planning, design and negotiation skills for a relatively small organisation. It has to dealings some 14 Commonwealth agencies responsible for commissioning capital works and managing assets on National Land. Its work involves close access with both levels of government and private enterprise developers, *while ensuring that the interests of the people of Canberra are both fully represented and protected.*

Concerns about NCA's performance that have lead to this inquiry are more a reflection of NCA and ACTPLA each focusing effort too narrowly on their immediate areas of land responsibility without having an agreed whole of city approach to the shaping of the longer term structure, form and character of Canberra as the National Capital and a metropolitan city.

This particular deficiency of Canberra's planning following the demise of the NCDC in 1988 and urban design control was strongly criticised in the public lecture delivered by John Mant, Chairman of the *'Prime Minister's Committee of Inquiry into Urban Design in Australia, 1994'*. He said that Canberra's planning, design and urban management

were based on a “*guild structure*” and that today Canberra is a place, which represents the sum total of the “*minimum standards of diligent standard keepers. There is no single authority or person that can be held accountable for final urban design outcomes*”. Unfortunately this is still seems to be the case.

There is an urgent need for greater Commonwealth Government oversight and commitment to the planning and development of Canberra as the nation’s capital and seat of government requiring a whole of city approach to the future planning, design and development of Canberra and a longer term vision and commitment of its future growth.

This is required to guide any reshaping the physical form character of the city leading to an improved urban structure and better design outcomes. In addition to guiding future physical form and character of the city, a whole of city approach to future planning could enable closer monitoring economic, social and environmental outcomes and thereby facilitating the decision-making and actions of both levels of governments responsible for development and management of Canberra.

A National Capital Planning Committee

A National Capital Planning Committee was established under Section 25 of the National Capital Development Commission Act. The NCDC over a period of thirty years recorded its appreciation of the services of this widely based and highly skilled committee of eight professional people, including two persons with special knowledge and experience in artistic and cultural matters, whose interest, experience and enthusiasm meant so much to the development of Canberra as the national capital.

The important role of the Committee was providing a sounding board for major NCDC's projects prior to the Authority making its final decision. NCA need a similar National

Capital Planning Committee to advise on major projects prior to the authority's final approval and before advising the Minister.

Public Consultation

The NCA has a poor record on community consultation. Recent examples include the debacle of:

- Amendments of the Griffin Legacy documents No 56, 59, 60 and 61;
- York Park Development Plan (heritage listed oak tree plantation) planning;
- Proposal for the National Library;
- Draft Amendment 53 for the Albert Hall Precinct; and
- Development Control Plan (DCP) 171/06/003 for Adelaide Avenue, in which the NCA revised its planning control to accommodate a developer-initiated proposal for intensive residential development from four to seven storeys on the Embassy Motel site in Deakin .

Rethinking of the role and importance of public consultation is needed to help build community understand and support. ACTPLA has a similar problem very evident in their Planning System Reform Project.

KW Storey
Monday 28 April 08

See also the relevant attachments emailed with my submission:

[Submission to NCA Draft Amendment 50 - Main Avenues and Approach Routes](#)

Mr James Larmour-Reid
Managing Director
Planning and Urban Design
National Capital Authority
GPO Box 373

National Capital Plan Draft Amendment 50 Main Avenues and Approach Routes

Dear Mr Larmour-Reid

I am writing to you in my capacity as a member of ACT for Trees, an organization concerned about the importance of trees and place in the character of Canberra as the nation's capital. I am also a Deakin resident and a member of the Deakin Residents' Association.

I welcome the opportunity provided by the NCA to attend public meetings and to comment on the Draft Amendment (DA50). My comments on DA50 are as follows.

1. Purpose of the Amendment

DA50 of the National Capital Plan has been prepared to provide principles and policies for Main Avenues and Approach Routes outside the Central National Capital Area. The document provides urban design guidelines, to enable ACTPLA to administer NCA's land alongside the subject Avenues for special purposes consistent with the Land Use Policies of the Territory Plan. ACTPLA would give final building approval without further reference to NCA.

As you would know, residents at the public meeting arranged by NCA on Monday 23 May were almost unanimous in their agreement that NCA should not abrogate its responsibilities for the Avenues. I concur with this sentiment.

The guidelines of Draft Amendment 50, as it now stands, are unlikely to assist ACTPLA in undertaking the NCA's responsibility and fail to put forward a coherent urban design strategy for future development along Main Avenues as part of the design strategy of Canberra Central. In a period of renewed urban growth within Central Canberra, concern about revitalisation of Centre City, a Task Force for Canberra Central and changes to the territory's planning regime, NCA's proposal to abrogate its responsibilities for Avenues is not acceptable given its charter responsibilities to keep close control over the planning of the national capital. If the NCA is to comply with its own charter, it must continue to be actively involved in the conceptual planning for urban design control of the Main Avenues and Approach Routes within the context an urban design strategy for Central Canberra.

2. Special Requirements

The document removes the Special Requirements and the need for Development Control Plans (DCPs) to be prepared, and presumably need for any community consultation on individual projects. The aim to reduce "red tape" and speed up building approvals will have unacceptable consequences given the way the policy document is now drafted.

There are no requirements in DA50 for ACTPLA to produce its own DCPs or concept plans and drawings for the different parts of avenue corridors or **to** provide a design context to guide future design and siting decisions for new development. In my view, if ACTPLA is taking over NCA's responsibilities ACTPLA should be producing these plans. There would be better collaboration between the two Authorities if these plans were prepared jointly, after setting priorities and responsibilities for the task. It would also assist in better uses of available professional staff. These DCPs or concept plans would have the other purpose of informing landowners, other developers and the public about proposals and what is required for the Avenues and Approach Routes.

3. Urban Design Role of NCA

DA50 (page 10) includes a statement of the Cabinet Decision of May 1964 that "high standards of planning and development must be applied to the main city avenues. Land-use must recognise the intention to develop these avenues as Ceremonial and Processional Ways on State occasions and/or important traffic routes. Special care will be required in the grouping of buildings and in their external design to achieve dignity and harmony. The emphasis will be on light coloured, maintenance free materials of good quality, and adequate on site parking and ample landscaping will be required"

This clearly places upon the NCA a prime role in controlling the built-form character and treatment of the avenue frontage. **It** involves the three dimensional design of the Avenues, with the objective of achieving compatibility in form and relationship between buildings, landscape and scenic vistas from the Avenues in conveying visual interest and a specific image of Canberra as the National Capital.

4. Urban Design Strategy

The principles and policies of DA50 should **have a greater focus** on urban design criteria for coordinating relationships between buildings, landscaping and other matters that can help achieve better frontage definition and visual interest along the Avenues. However this must also be part of an overall urban design strategy for Central Canberra. The object should be to create and maintain a coherent visual character for the Avenues seen from the roadways as "critical to our perception and understanding of the City given that the motor car or bus is the principal means from which we view the city ". (Urban Design Policies for

Canberra by John Andrews International Pty Limited for the Interim Territory Planning Authority, April 1990)

Section 7.2 and 7.3 of the National Capital Plan, December 1990 provide principles, policies and standards for an urban design strategy for Central Canberra and Avenues. Section 7.3 outlines the following height control strategy: *' "buildings in Central Canberra should be of a height generally not greater than the height of the mature tree canopy (typically 3-4 storeys), with the exception of the buildings in the Parliamentary Zone, Civic Centre, Russell, Campbell Park, the Kingston-Griffith Redevelopment Area and on sites adjoining Northbourne Avenue and Constitution Avenue"*. This established the current height policy as "predominantly three storeys and a maximum of four storeys in height" which was included in NCA's Development Control Plan No.171 for Adelaide Ave which was approved in August 2002 and as reflected in recent building approvals along Canberra Ave.

These existing policies from the NCP were not included in DA50. Was this an omission or are they no longer valid? If no longer valid, NCA has not explained why and given their significance should certainly do so.

5. Lack of Visual Assessments of the Avenues

Each Avenue is different in character and the character of each Avenue changes over its length as viewed from the Avenue corridor. Planning and design assessments of Avenues have not been included in DA50. These assessments would reveal existing conditions, identify issues and future opportunities. There is no evidence that any design assessments were carried out before the principles and policies of DA50 were formulated. This is unsatisfactory.

Views out from the Avenues to the national symbols, the lake, inner hills and mountains are important. These should be identified as part of the design assessment of the Avenues and guideline policies formulated to ensure these are not screened or closed off by the placement and height of the buildings or landscaping and other development works.

6. Trees and Landscape

Policies and guidelines in DA50 should provide for a consistent approach to landscaping and tree planting along the Avenues and within the building setback. There should be provisions for the retention of remnant trees and important tree groups within the Avenues and adjoining building sites and also for tree and landscape management .

Heritage tree plantation along or adjoining Avenues and Approach road reservations must be retained. Any new road or public works along or adjoining Approach Routes should be required to submit a tree assessment prepared by an experienced arborist to determine their significance.

7. Other Design Matters

DA50 is difficult for the lay person to read and comprehend. It is hard to synthesise all the elements of design guidelines for any single development proposal. Because it is difficult to describe design in words alone, the document would be greatly enhanced by the addition of drawings and photographs to illustrate the design concepts, principles and acceptable design solutions for different site conditions with good and bad design examples to show what is expected.

Other cities have prepared illustrated design guideline document (see Central Sydney Strategy, 1988, Brisbane City Design Guidelines, 1990).

8. Policies Part 2 (page 10-11)

Although, in general, I support the statements of the significance and importance of the Avenues and Approach Routes in DA50, some amendments and clarifications are required as follows.

It would be misleading to imply that Main Avenues will not continue to be major traffic routes as the city grows and with more employment in the Central Area. One must accept that traffic movement, noise of vehicles and difficulty for pedestrians crossing wide carriageways is of the very nature of boulevards, even in cities where there is good public transport. This is certainly the case in the boulevard cities of Paris and Barcelona.

While traffic is an important consideration, it shouldn't prevent Canberra's Main Avenues being well planned and designed both as traffic routes and boulevards but a different approach is required for each Avenue. Only Adelaide Avenue has been planned not as a boulevard but as a major traffic route with grade separation and no direct part in cutting and part in embankment.

9. Principles of Planning and Design (page 12-14)

With the exception of Adelaide Ave and State Circle, I support the general concept for the Avenues, that is that they be progressively realised as multi-use boulevards of higher density mixed-use, public transport, broad tree-line footpaths for walking or promenading. However I have reservations about outdoor dining, given traffic noise and in Canberra's winter climate and cool summer evenings. A better option would be courtyards adjacent to the Avenues with a choice of indoor or outdoor seating. There is no mention in the policy of whether this would allow for other associated facilities or take-away fast foods. For such facilities and associated activities to be viable, they would need to be in small groupings and widely spaced along the Avenues. The alternative of course is the traditional drag strip along the Approach roads leading to town.

10. Detailed Conditions (page 14-15)

These are general statements of objectives rather than policies which I generally support.

11. Specific Policies for Northbourne Avenue

Policies in **DA50** for this important Avenue are so general one must question their usefulness as guidelines for ACTPLA. They propose a consistent building line, generally of the order of 10 metres, but nothing about height. Landmark nodes are proposed at major intersections but without details.

12. Specific Policies for Canberra Avenue

There is no mention about the existing design character of Canberra Avenue or the symbolic significance **of this character**. There is no mention of the three landmark churches: St Andrews, St Christopher's and St Paul's along the Avenue or of St Edmunds School, Manuka Centre, the office development, the hotels and tourist accommodation or Kingston-Griffith heritage housing area. This is one of the more interesting Avenues with regard to mixed-uses. It has good frontage definition over most of its length and building diversity. It would be quite wrong to destroy its character and diversity by allowing more than the maximum of four storey development along its length, other than in the office area between State Circle and National Circuit, and perhaps a landmark node at Hume Circle. With regard to the adverse effect on the residents at the rear of the four storey redevelopment on the **Canberra Avenue** part of Section 26 it would be irresponsible of the NCA to even contemplate "offering opportunities for higher mixed use" along the Avenue near Manuka as suggested in the document (page 4).

13. Specific Policies for Adelaide Ave

The policies are largely derived from DCP171, which was prepared by NCA in 2002. DCP171 showed a more thorough understanding of the character of the Avenue and focussed more on design policy and building conditions than DA50. This is the only Avenue where DA50 provides that "buildings should not generally be higher than 3 to 4 storeys". While this wording is similar to the DCP171, DA50 it adds the rider "generally" to allow for flexibility in decision-making and provides a let out clause which states that "consideration may also be given to developments that create landmarks by virtue of the quality and composition of their design and height". One must ask why the rush to change DCP171 at this time.

SUMMARY

NCA has and should retain its control over conceptual planning and urban design strategy for the national capital to ensure compatibility in built-form and relationship between buildings, landscape and open space so as to create a coherent character and a specific image of Canberra as the National Capital.

If NCA's urban design responsibility for Avenues and Approach Routes are passed to ACTPLA there should be provision in DA50 for ACTPLA to keep **the** NCA fully informed about current development proposals, changes of lease purpose and building approvals. Provision should provide for NCA to maintain effective control over the urban design outcomes and for the dissemination of adequate public information about proposed development along the Avenues in advance of approval processes to ensure effective public consultation process.

DA50 makes no attempt to define or describe building and landscape design qualities and relationships it would like to ACTPLA to achieve when considering changes of lease purpose and building applications for new building projects. This is surely a critical requirement of NCA 's design guidelines

We are concerned that future development of the Avenues and Approach Routes might be controlled by minimum standards rather than quality and best design practices. That may be an appropriate mechanism to prevent the very worst kind of development but the "minimum standards" approach does little to contribute to better environments. As Paul Keating said at a Sydney Design Forum "no priority is given to good design" of streetscapes and the built environment.

Planning authorities must be made answerable to the community at large for urban and landscaping design outcomes. They need to articulate their rationale for good design, to inform the community, politicians, developers and objectors. Not only must they spell out the design qualities that are acceptable, but they must also negotiate directly with developers to achieve a better-built environment. To do this, an authority requires people with both design and negotiation skills. Much unnecessary argument and abortive work can be avoided if there is more focus on design solutions and outcomes.

This particular deficiency of Canberra's planning and design control was strongly criticised in the public lecture delivered on 16 September 1994 by John Mant, Chairman of the Prime Minister's Committee of Inquiry into Urban Design in Australia. He pointed out that Canberra's planning, design and urban management is based on a "guild structure" and today Canberra is a place which represents the sum total of the minimum standards of diligent standard keepers. There is no single authority or any person that can be held accountable for final urban design outcomes.

Keith Storey
On behalf of ACT for Trees
30 May 2005

