

Re: The Inquiry into the Role of the National Capital Authority

In Griffin's plan for Canberra the national, municipal and commercial functions of the city were linked in an equilateral triangle by wide avenues a mile long. From its conception both the National and Municipal character of Canberra were recognized and structured into the plan.

Canberra needs an independent, over-arching planning body which is responsible to distinguish the National and Municipal functions of the ACT in planning terms and to recognize their interdependence. Its leadership needs to include professionals of planning and administrative distinction so as to merit the confidence of the National and Territory Governments, professional peers and tax paying citizens.

Ideas about the planning of a place – and one of such national importance as the Australian Capital Territory, the seat of Canberra, the National Capital –should emanate from as unitary a source as possible, preferably a single planning body. There is need to attract the world's best practitioners in the service of a comprehensive idea, the National Capital and Territory plan.

Outlining a structure in the broadest terms, the over-arching planning body needs to assume responsibility and public accountability for the National Capital and Territory Plan. As an independent body it would advise both Federal and Territory Governments on national concerns in the plan.

An autonomous, publicly accountable arm of that body should operate to administer the municipal development functions within the requirements of the National Capital and Territory Plan. It would propose and collaborate on amendments to the plan. As an autonomous body it would advise the Federal and Territory Government on municipal urban and non urban issues in the plan.

To address the terms of reference of the inquiry:

a) The administration of the National Capital Plan with particular emphasis on the reduction of red tape and duplication of municipal and local planning functions, the jurisdiction of ACT spatial policy and harmonization of planning systems.

I have not personal experience of undue red tape in planning in Canberra so this point is 'theoretical'. Red tape designed to protect and advance the powers within and of planning organs for their own sake is highly undesirable and should be abolished.

For fairness and the maintenance of standards it has always been necessary to establish planning controls. They need to be publicly accessible, easily interpreted and not liable to misinterpretation – and by and large I believe this has been achieved by ACTPLA, achieving a better climate of certainty than the NCA. However this is not to say that ACTPLA are producing good results and I would stress that controls alone do not produce good results. We are currently experiencing a rash of bad development in Civic and City West which points to unskilled professional leadership.

Many of the problems of harmonization and duplication inherent in the present two separate planning bodies system would be reduced by an overarching planning body of world class planners with an autonomous arm for the administration of municipal development within a national planning framework. Only high standards and idealism will attract such people.

b) Whether the governance arrangements for the NCA provide a sufficient balance between the independence of the Authority's planning decisions and its accountability for its operations.

I can refer to the 'spin' in the NCA use of the term 'the Griffin Legacy'. Quietly and unostentatiously the NCA began an exciting program of research into what elements of Griffin's plan exist in Canberra and what elements still have potential for development realization. The results of this research were never exposed to peer professionals or the public. Suddenly the public was presented with a glossy book called 'The Griffin Legacy' and a serious model of the NCA proposals on public display at Regatta Point. Somewhere along the way the NCA were ambushed and persuaded to drop any idealism in favour of a purely commercial set of proposals with political overtones in the construction of a vast ASIO complex on Constitution Avenue. This work of the NCA was not logically supported in the arguments put forward in the book, nor was it supported by proper planning controls and procedures. Over 30 years of professional familiarity with the Griffin plan and the past two years of full time intensive study of the plan give me authority to say that this 'Griffin

Legacy' was in fact actively detrimental to Griffin's plan and to all his ideas for Canberra. More pertinently it was actively detrimental to what we have left, on the ground, of Griffin's plan.

In my opinion, the term 'Griffin Legacy' is so sullied that it should not be used again. I also believe that it would serve Canberra well, both locally and nationally, to drop all vestiges of these proposals and to begin again with a proper analysis of Griffin's plan. We should look at why we have failed to provide the living heart for Canberra which lies in Griffin's plan. Then, understanding this, we may be able to make Canberra a vital, beautiful city to engage all visitors and Canberrans alike.

c) The appropriate level of oversight required to achieve the highest standards in design for areas of national significance.

One of the difficulties of managing an intelligent and intelligible concept, which the design and future growth of a city must be, unless it is completely left to market forces, is that managers create dividing lines to break down and restructure concepts into manageable parts. Someone needs to keep the integrity of the whole vision intact. In Canberra this will include both the national and the municipal functions.

Competition under well considered conditions could be a means of obtaining a high standard of design. A minimum standard for nationally significant areas should require the restriction of the work to registered professionals, whose reputation will be engaged.

d) Opportunities to ensure cooperation with the ACT planning authority and increase engagement with the Canberra community.

The power of the development dollar is perhaps the most difficult force to control in the growth of present day Canberra. Griffin believed that the leasehold system of land tenure was the best antidote to greed and he wrote to King O'Malley in 1913:

'freed from land speculative selfish interest, the natural instincts of the community will guarantee higher artistic and social standards'

The encouragement of citizen pride in the development of their city is also a curb on adverse development. Had the NCA communicated their research on the Griffin plan to the public and fostered an interest on the benefits Griffin offered Canberra, and where and why Canberra is different, real issues would have been raised for public discourse. There is a high level of education and sophistication in the Canberra community. Such discourse may even have



spread to enlighten the nation and increase national pride in Canberra. The best way to ensure cooperation with a planning authority is to promote public understanding and pride in the plan.

e) The effective national promotion of the National Capital and the roles of the NCA and ACT Government in advocacy for new infrastructure projects including responsibility for events and developing the distinctive character of the national Capital.

Griffin saw the National Capital as a place where Democracy, as the best system of governance and the best way of living, enabled human life to coexist with all life on the planet. He was the first environmentalist in the planning field in Australia. He built this character into Canberra, believing, at first, that it reflected the national character and then hoping that this would be the way the national character of Australia would grow. He also believed in an urban environment and in facilities for recreation and pleasure, built that into its heart. He designed the parks studded with recreational, sporting and cultural facilities on the north side of the lake and the midway gardens with the casino – restaurants and sculpture gardens – with the city all around. He believed in the provision of appropriate infrastructure.

We could learn something from this approach to a ‘living city’. But it must be understood that Griffin didn’t ‘spot develop’ his ideas; they were composed into a design which bestowed mutual benefits on the functions employed and the site conditions over which the city design was planned. Some of those mutual benefits from Griffin’s plan still remain and some need to be developed. This, I believe, will be the best way to take the next step to promote the National Capital.

Rosemarie Willett, architect.