

FIVE YEAR ACT HERITAGE STRATEGY 2016-2021

Submission from the Walter Burley Griffin Society Inc., Canberra Chapter

Established in 1988 in Sydney, the Society commemorates the lives and works of Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin and promotes the design, environmental and community ideals they fostered in Australia. A major objective is to promote a better understanding and the preservation and conservation of works designed by or having an association with the Griffins.

Walter himself supported one of the first campaigns for heritage protection in New South Wales in the 1932 campaign to save the Hyde Park Barracks. Defending Greenway's Macquarie era building then required foresight and courage. Such campaigns highlight the larger role of **heritage conservation** in the stream of culture and the development of **sustainable cities**.

The Society, including its Sydney base, other national membership particularly in Melbourne, Perth and Leeton, and the Walter Burley Griffin Society in the United States, together with their respective professional and academic networks, retains a keen interest in the legacy of Griffin's winning Plan for the national capital. The Canberra Chapter has been highly active over the past ten years responding constructively to proposed changes to the National Capital and Territory Plans and in promoting Griffin's vision of an 'ideal city.' In our view Canberra can and should become *a great city and national capital*.

Canberra Chapter members appreciated the opportunities for comprehensive and informal discussions at the February consultation sessions. In our submission below we address the eight listed Discussion Topics, more or less in sequence.

Re-imagining heritage in the ACT

The people of Canberra are evidently in an evolutionary process of increasing awareness of heritage, expressing stronger heritage values and generating more history and stories relevant to heritage protection. The 2013 Centenary celebrations gave a boost to this process, although the phenomenon can be traced back some years.

Whilst many of these trends revolve around perspectives of particular buildings or localities, or family histories, there is a strong undercurrent of interest in metropolitan Canberra and its unique features. The heritage of metropolitan Canberra is layered, with several themes, evidenced in the **Garden City** (2002) and the 1963 completion of **Lake Burley Griffin**. The Lake and its foreshores impacted on metropolitan Canberra, its community and on Canberra's heritage significance. The impacts of **NCDC's Y-Plan** created the next layer in the heritage of metropolitan Canberra.

Re-imagining heritage in the ACT, coupling the city's pride in being a planned city with its potential as the nation's capital, should encompass metropolitan Canberra, impacts on the central national area and both metropolitan and national heritage elements in **Canberra as a whole**.

In his Canberra Day Oration this year Emeritus Prof. John Warhurst emphasised the strength of Canberra's unique identity and referred to the *mystery and magic in Canberra's past, present and future*. He described Canberra as '**a true Federation city**' with a rich history associated with

Australia's high aspirations across political, economic, cultural, scientific and environmental sectors. It has often been advocated as a 'model city' (Stephen Dovers, 2012) and as a '**city as a work of art**' (Tony Powell, 2001).

Overseas town planners have represented Canberra as 'one of the treasures not only of Australia but of the entire urban world' (John Reys (1995) and of representing successively through its history layers of the best (contemporary) practice in urban planning (Friedhelm Fischer, 1984, 2015).

In 2006-7 the entire ACT was imagined as an international UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. The ACT Legislative Assembly Standing Committee on Planning and Environment recommended in October 2007, on the basis of extensive public forums and submissions, that the ACT Government should proceed with a nomination of the ACT as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. Participants in the Committee's Inquiry (chaired by Mick Gentleman MLA, Deputy Chair Zed Seselja MLA) demonstrated how a heritage listing can consolidate resource assets and enhance development opportunities through setting higher aspirations and standards.

Yet private sector organisations and government bureaucrats persist in objecting to any form of National or Commonwealth Heritage listing for metropolitan or even Central National Area Canberra. Their resistance is primarily due to a lack of imagination and failure to perceive opportunities, even in tourism let alone quality of life for future generations of Canberra residents. The **integration** of economic, environment, heritage and cultural factors in development proposals and asset management policies represents **progressive sustainability values**.

The progressive sustainability approach, given preconditions of information and consultation discussed below, is a dynamic framework which allows for re-interpretation and creative adaptation of heritage asset management.

The WBGS recommends accordingly that the ACT Heritage Council:-

- (1) support the extant nominations for Canberra to be placed on the National Heritage List;
- (2) advocate an integrated sustainability approach to the formation of development proposals and management policies; and
- (3) enlarge the Heritage Strategy to include re-imagined 'whole of Canberra' heritage criteria on the basis of central Canberra's fundamental DNA in the enduring vision, plans, principles and values provided by Walter Burley Griffin. Reference can be made to outstanding vistas, outcropping hills, the natural landscape, Lake Burley Griffin its foreshores and the magnificent three-dimensional spatial planning, NCDC district plans and landscape architecture, as well as significant public and domestic architecture. Other 'whole-of-Canberra' candidates for the Heritage Strategy would be City Hill, West Basin, Pialligo Estate, Majura Valley rural farm buildings, Hall and Tharwa Villages, Weston and Pryor tree stands and parks, Canberra Nature Park and most starkly, the Manuka precinct.

The national capital perspective is of vital importance to the ongoing relevance of Canberra in the global environment as well as the national context. There are overlapping and close links between Commonwealth and Canberra City/Territory heritage assets.

Regrettably, the dual planning and impact assessment system is regressive and constrains Canberra heritage outcomes, as well as its developmental and symbolic potential. Witness the degradation of Old Canberra House. Moreover, the need for a big picture perspective becomes especially important in the context of diminishing Commonwealth responsibility for national capital elements of Canberra.

Stakeholder engagement

The Planning & Development (Project Facilitation) legislation 2014 continued the trends to streamline project evaluation processes and limit opportunities for stakeholder participation. It is more important than ever to ensure that informed and interested citizens and community organisations are engaged early in the formation of planning and development proposals.

One measure to render heritage representations more effective would be to open to the public meetings of the ACT Heritage Council. There are good examples of how such a measure can be routinely exercised to engage stakeholders in constructive ways. They include inviting the public to place matters on the Council's agenda. Council's membership could be expanded to include more community representation.

Public notification of DAs has become restricted to online searching, including nominated and listed heritage houses. Even minor works have the potential to adversely affect the character of a heritage precinct or heritage houses, so warrant transparency and public scrutiny. An open invitation for written public comment on issues of concern could be included on the Heritage Council's agenda, whether for DAs or listing proposals. The rotation of Council membership allows for access to individuals with expertise on different heritage aspects and disciplines.

Interpreting our stories

The commendable Heritage Festivals engage the public on a wide range of subjects and stories. Their focus has tended to be on pre-Federation times and rural rather than urban subjects. They could be expanded to include more aboriginal and natural environment heritage and topics from Canberra's post-Second World War period. Widespread community celebrations of 50 year anniversaries in recent times, by suburban associations and sporting clubs, are building a greater awareness of Canberra's identity, resource base and development potential.

More and more stories are becoming available through the Canberra & District Historical Society Inc. and other sources. Canberra is well served by resident authors, poets, composers, artists, dramatists, cartoonists, publishers and venue managers who provide many ways of interpreting Canberra's stories. The Canberra Tracks project has been a marvellous medium.

Constitutional and statutory governance

A Heritage Strategy should include reference to the Burra Charter. It also should fit well with the recently released Australian Heritage Strategy.

The 2014 Amendments to the ACT Heritage Act maintained the independence of the Heritage Council. The Government has also maintained the Heritage Unit as secretariat to the Council.

Adequate resourcing and expertise is essential to avoid mounting backlogs and respond to new demands. High standards can always be improved.

The Heritage Advisory Service provides an external service to the Heritage Unit; when also an architectural practice, it needs to be aware of conflict of interest. Assessment shortcomings can entail undesirable time preparing for ACAT.

Whilst these provisions are important, their respective roles within the ACT Administration need to be more fully integrated; that is, heritage assessments should be made at the earliest stages of policy development, planning and project formulation.

Heritage standing and influence throughout these processes are particularly important from the Griffin Plan perspective given Canberra's dual planning system when nowadays the federal responsibility and collaboration is diminishing. This declining role is in part due to the reduction of NCA funding and resources but more significantly due to the shift in constitutional arrangements. More powers and lands are being devolved by the Commonwealth to the ACT. More recently the ACT Government has been actively assuming national capital development activities.

The Commonwealth has also shown no readiness or capacity to monitor the implementation of conditions attached to heritage and environmental approvals. The ANU has effectively ignored most of Minister Garrett's fifteen Old Canberra House conditions and the LGA similarly the conditions attached to the Molonglo suburbs/Molonglo River.

To facilitate the integration of planning and development evaluation with heritage assessment in a prompt and routine process, the data and interpretation base needs to be constantly expanded and accessible. This is becoming a greater task with the proliferation of sources of data on heritage assets and expression of social values pertaining to heritage assets.

Long-term vision for the ACT Heritage Register

As a mainstay of the statutory controls and the data base employed by the Heritage administration, the Heritage Register must be enriched and as up-to-date as possible. It is most desirable to have regular reviews of the Register to identify over- and under-representation.

The ACT Heritage Register is sectioned by Place and Object. The strength of the Register resides in its abundance and rich detail. Cutting back on the number and volume would not be supported.

As mentioned above, there are problems with having three (and more) Register: National, Commonwealth, ACT and National Trust. There should be a way of connecting them.

Opportunities for growth, development and adaptive use

Canberra is assured of a long run path of growth and development, the big questions being:

- will it realise its full potential?
- can it attain high standards of heritage adaptation?
- and can it prevent destruction of its core, highest value heritage assets.

In this last category, the Society refers to the remaining elements of **the Griffin legacy**, but not to the so-called Griffin Legacy Amendments of 2007 to the National Capital Plan. The latter have already tended to compromise elements of both the heritage and the development/sustainability potential of Canberra.

The answers to the above questions must affirm the larger role of heritage conservation in the stream of culture and development of a sustainable city.

There are many examples of well managed adaptations of heritage in Canberra and the ACT: Ainslie Infants School, ANU School of Art, Kingston Arts Precinct, Kingston Bus Depot Markets, Tuggeranong and Strathnairn homesteads, Manuka Mothercraft Centre, Yarralumla Brickworks redevelopment the Albert Hall and the Melbourne and Sydney Buildings.

Conclusion

The Walter Burley Griffin Society supports the formulation of the Five Year ACT Heritage Strategy and the positive and forward-looking approach to heritage issues indicated by the Discussion Paper.

Among the main points canvassed in this submission the following are re-emphasised:

- The Walter Burley Griffin Society believes that a big picture view of ‘whole of Canberra’ significant heritage is warranted
- Reference should be made in the Strategy to the Australian Heritage Strategy, December 2015
- Walter Burley Griffin responded to the idealism of the Australian brief for the design competition for the nation’s capital with an ‘Ideal City’ with the potential to capture the imagination of the world.

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On behalf of the Walter Burley Griffin Society Inc.

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