

## DESIGNING FOR CANBERRA

National Archives of Australia Speakers Corner

14 November 2010, Canberra

This occasion was a fascinating discussion with Aldo Giurgola, Hal Guida and Pamille Berg about the challenges and opportunities of integrating the design of Australia's Parliament House with Walter Burley Griffin's original vision for the national capital.

The three architectural colleagues provided a wealth of candid reflection on their planning of Parliament House. Tony Powell, former NCDC Commissioner, was moderator. He highlighted the main people and incidents in Canberra's urban planning history, including the crucial role of the Parliamentary Joint Standing Committee in establishing the need and political support for the new House. He asked *How did the miracle of the new Parliament House happen?* He later asked the panel *Has Griffin's vision been realised?* which led to strong criticism of the planning and development of the Central National Area.

The architects firstly paid tribute to the 'magnificent' Brief for the international design competition. There were ample criteria (24 volumes) on functional needs but most welcome were the two main volumes that covered the national and public interest needs and the aspiration of reflecting Australian identity. The architects thus worked hard to understand Australia, its democratic processes and cultural values.

Architectural form and design would follow later. The firm's first and second presentations to the assessors were sketchy with the emphasis being on the purposes and client's aspirations.

They focussed on the land and landscape, the visual relationship of buildings with the hills, as Griffin did. Romaldo said his 'adoration' of Griffin goes back 70 years and an image of the 1912 winning design has been with him ever since. He recalled a competition around 1976 for a memorial to Griffin on the top of Mt Ainslie, to which he had given some thought, so the Parliament House Brief of 1979 found him ready. The concept of a new Parliament House was rare and exciting, but a challenge lay in that Griffin did not build on top of a hill.

Romaldo emphasised that Griffin came from a commitment to humanity and strong perceptions of the relationships of his Plan and buildings to the people and the nation. The architects concluded that the Parliament building should not be triumphal or imposing like a monumental dome.

Hal Guida said that architecture students in the USA always study Griffin – 'We all know Griffin.' The Parliament House team studied Griffin intensively. They saw Griffin's Plan as a whole, organised entity in a wide landscape setting extending to the Brindabellas. Capital Hill is actually quite small, just a 'moment' in a much bigger space. The land is paramount. Later Romaldo stressed the importance of the wide green spaces between Central Canberra, Belconnen and Woden.

They had been impressed by the Australian War Memorial, particularly its two parallel walls which seem to 'penetrate' the Land Axis, not just indicate a corridor. There was also a circle [presumably around Capital Hill, but also possibly the Lakeshore and the Mt Ainslie- Mt Pleasant arcs]. Griffin's Triangle was a related challenge, providing an apex in Capital Hill. Romaldo carried a comparable image of Thomas Jefferson's Library in the University of Virginia which has a circle and two walls in

harmonious and open space relationships. Hence the curved walls of Parliament House to resolve this mixed geometry harmoniously.

Symmetry was not absolute. Another challenge was to achieve checks and balances within Parliament House where both Parliament and the Executive Government were accommodated. Order and symmetry were joint aims.

Pam Berg spoke of their sense of humility and responsibility. She believed that Griffin did not expect his Plan to be approved for implementation. 'My one and only competition entry' for an ideal city. His plan was for an ideal city in which all the people could live the good life. In question time later she said: *If Walter and Marion were with us today* they would not be nice but poke us in the ribs. Urban planning is about a good place to live where people take a fair share of the earth's resources. Canberrans need to reduce their environmental footprint by 75%. They would have advocated a sense of fair measure and seen the boundaries of environmental and global reality.

'Good lives for everyone', simplicity, modesty, support for human activity, choices for rich experience and the dignity of free people were fundamental ideas of the design team. Romaldo listed order, simplicity, human relationships, humanity, symbolism and the natural environment as objectives. He aimed for the health and wellbeing of the people and not Texas-style 'vibrancy' and above all **not ad hoc planning**. He abhors 'conversations' that never end, instead of genuine community engagement based on **leadership vision**, public interest criteria and model demonstration. This long term visionary and design approach has given way in Canberra to timid government reaction to developers.

He believes Canberra has reached a critical point where urban planning has become ad hoc and default. To keep its character alive, Canberra must take a knowledgeable, intelligent, regional and community wellbeing approach.

Hal Guida said that the Central National Area had been the subject of numerous reports which have not been successful because basic long run legitimate needs have not been formulated. Memorials have accumulated ad hoc without overall design or agreed need. By contrast, Griffin's Plan was a whole composition with a sense of meaning. 'You can learn from the past' he said.

Parliament House was seen as an opportunity to exploit Australia's materials, values, skills and arts. The Brief had contained no reference to artwork. The team had seen Griffin's vision as exemplifying and promoting excellence in cultural design. Consistent with the democratic process, the team referred back to Parliament for a set of briefs to enable the artwork, furniture design and crafts strategies drawing on Australian-wide resources and talents, mostly hitherto untapped.

Asked why they became Australian citizens and continue to live in Canberra, all three said it is a wonderful place to live and Australia is a country where you can do things. Asked what can be done about public transport, they pointed out that Griffin provided multiple modes of transport and suitable street and circulation patterns. Rail and tram are never financially viable, they just need to be installed and they serve democracy not privilege. Pam recommended visionary champions to lead public discussions and debate about new directions and institutions.

Notes by Brett Odgers 14. 11.1 0