



STATEMENT  
FOR MEMBERS OF THE PARLIAMENTARY JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE  
ON THE NATIONAL CAPITAL & EXTERNAL TERRITORIES

**Roundtable Public Hearing  
Griffin Legacy Amendments 56, 59, 60 and 61 to the National Capital Plan**

**Parliament House, Canberra  
23 February 2007**

**Executive Summary**

The 'Griffin Legacy' Amendments to the National Capital Plan propose the most significant, far-reaching and irreversible changes to Central Canberra since the creation of Lake Burley Griffin and associated works by the NCDC in the early 1960s.

These changes are based on the premise that Canberra lacks an 'urban' quality in terms of the vitality, diversity, intensity of everyday life; the integration of public activities and public institutions; and the creation of high density urban districts.

The analysis presented in this review concludes that the NCA proposals are based on an unacceptable, cavalier approach to the principles of sustainable city planning, city building and community consultation. The Walter Burley Griffin Society is concerned that Griffin's name has been used to advance a mediocre outcome that will compromise Canberra forever.

**Amendment 56: The Griffin Legacy – Principles and Policies**

*The Griffin Legacy* is a 2004 NCA publication, which undertook historical analysis of Griffin's plan and advanced a series of propositions and strategic initiatives that claim to extend the relevance of Griffin's ideas. The latter are essentially a series of 'City Beautiful' artist's impressions.

The transition from *The Griffin Legacy* to the Griffin Legacy Amendments to the National Capital Plan has occurred without the preparation of an adequate 'Implementation Plan' that addresses a wide range of core issues in terms of sustainability and environmental

impacts, heritage issues, traffic and transport implications, the land use reality of the scheme, demographic implications, market viability, the cost and funding of the proposals, the pattern of land ownership, economic viability, timing, phasing etc. The major changes entailed in the Amendments are unsupported by planning data and statistical information of any kind.

The Amendments are also unsupported by a Development Control Plan and site controls with any statutory force.

These shortcomings make a mockery of the claim that the Griffin Legacy Amendments are based on 'Principles and Policies' derived from the work of Walter Burley Griffin.

Canberra is a living city facing complex environmental, social and economic challenges, which demand an alternative vision to the low-density, car-based city created by the NCDC. At the same time, the landscape character of the city must be conserved in its ecological, aesthetic and cultural dimensions. Reconciling these imperatives requires more than a selective reading of Griffin's ideas to justify property development, it requires a commitment to social, environmental and economic sustainability.

### **Amendment 59: City Hill Precinct**

This Amendment sets out principles, policies and land uses, together with schematic Master Plan provisions, to guide redevelopment of City Hill in accordance with general statements by the NCA and objectives determined by the Canberra Central Taskforce (CCT). It incorporates statements and objectives that are in conflict.

The City Hill Precinct has been seen from these different perspectives as three different types of heart – commercial, symbolic, municipal. In November 2005, the CCT evaluated the push to make the City Hill Precinct the pre-eminent commercial heart of Metropolitan Canberra. However, the CCT financial analysis revealed that the numbers don't work – the costs of development would not be covered by revenue.

The City Hill Precinct makes no sense as the commercial heart of Canberra, as the CCT financial analysis makes clear. Nor was this outcome ever Griffin's intention – he always saw this site as the Civic Centre.

In summary, there is no commercial, economic, heritage or amenity justification for proposing that City Hill be turned into Canberra's pre-eminent commercial heart with a mass of intrusive buildings. Instead, this part of Canberra should maintain the civic role Griffin intended as the symbolic and municipal heart of the city.

The crown of City Hill should remain green open space and continue in its role as the green landmark element in the larger landscape, preserving the landscape vistas to and from City Hill Park.

All that is needed at City Hill is the correct siting and design of a new and permanent building for the ACT Legislative Assembly. Planning for City Hill must return to the Griffin principle of a clear distinction between Federal and Municipal government, with the Assembly Building the terminating element of Constitution Avenue – Griffin's Municipal Axis – sited in strong relationship to Parliament House and the everyday life of the city centre; and located on a civic square of real human interest and human scale.

## **Amendment 60: Constitution Avenue**

Amendment 60 proposes a scale of development along Constitution Avenue that will impact on the aesthetic and historic significance of the Lake, the Central Canberra Parklands and the vistas from Parliament House. Amendment 60 has been put forward without reference to the heritage values of Lake Burley Griffin, the Central Parklands and views from Parliamentary House and the Parliamentary Triangle. This is unacceptable planning practice by any standard.

The proposal is based on development of the extensive tract of land between Parkes Way and Constitution Avenue, within the area Griffin planned as Public Gardens. This was to be 'the place of the people,' – the 'central park' of the city and the site for national cultural institutions. It is therefore a radical departure from the Griffin Plan, and should not be advanced in Griffin's name, or claimed to be part of the 'Griffin Legacy' in any way.

Under the Amendment, Parkes Way will be downgraded from a motorway to a 'boulevard addressed with prestigious buildings', but it will remain a car-dominated space, with no active frontages and no human scale. The Amendment will introduce a new grid of local streets, major new grade-separated intersections at Commonwealth Avenue and Kings Avenue; removal of the Commonwealth Avenue cloverleaf and, presumably, major upgrade to the urban arterials through North Canberra. It promises the worst of both worlds – an urban arterial engineered as a city street, working as neither.

The Society contends that either Parkes Way should be abolished to establish the great park and cultural institutions Griffin intended or it should be reconstructed as 'Capital Terrace', thereby establishing the base of the National Triangle as an active, vibrant people space.

If implemented in its present form Amendment 60 will cause serious damage to the landscape of Central Canberra by proposing a wall of new buildings, 8-storeys high, along Constitution Avenue and Parkes Way, rising above the tree canopy of the 'Bush Capital'. The most effective way to overcome the negative impact of Amendment 60 on the visual quality of Canberra will be to limit the height of the proposed building wall to 4 storeys (16 m) along the full length of Parkes Way and Constitution Avenue.

## **Amendment 61: West Basin**

Amendment 61 proposes extensive engineering works and intensive waterfront development on land reclaimed from the West Basin of Lake Burley Griffin. The scale of development on the West Basin foreshore will impact on the aesthetic and historic significance of the Lake and significant views from Parliament House.

As with Amendment 60, this proposal has been put forward without reference to the heritage values of Lake Burley Griffin and the views from Parliament House. Again, this is unacceptable planning practice.

The Walter Burley Griffin Society does not support the scale of the proposal and rejects the proposition that this foreshore reclamation can be justified because it replicates the circular geometry of Griffin's scheme for West Basin. To carry out a fragment of the Griffin Plan on the city side of West Basin is no more than a self-serving appropriation of Griffin's design language to create more property development opportunities.

The Society notes with concern that the NCA scheme for West Basin has grown significantly in scale, intensity and extent of intrusion on the waterfront between the release of the 2004 *Griffin Legacy* study in 2004 and the preparation of Amendment 61 in 2006. Underpinning the manipulation of imagery in the NCA promotional material, there is a serious and unacceptable planning move to introduce large-scale commercial structures at the very water's edge..

The foreshore is not protected by a continuous zone of 'open space/waterfront promenade' permitting construction of a large convention centre and associated hotel on the foreshore of the Acton peninsula. In terms of 'Griffin Legacy' planning principles, a hotel/convention centre in this location at Acton does not activate the city with a vibrant mix of uses, but perpetuates the Canberra syndrome of isolated buildings in the landscape, located hundreds of metres from anything else.

One of the clearest, most consistent principles of Walter Burley Griffin's life and work was his commitment to continuous public access to the foreshore. This was a distinguishing characteristic of the Canberra Plan and the Castlecrag venture. The foreshore of Lake Burley Griffin must be protected by a continuous zone of open space.

The key to achieving this outcome is to zone the foreshore 'Open Space/Waterfront Promenade' all the way around West Basin. This requires removing the convention centre/hotel proposal from contention and returning this section of the West Basin scheme to the 'green' condition shown in the 2004 NCA *Griffin Legacy* document. The West Basin scheme also needs installation of the foreshore promenade before any land release - complete with the full five rows of avenue trees indicated in Amendment 61.

The proposal for 2-storey pavilions on the lake side of the waterfront promenade is most undesirable - as any heritage assessment of the lake would establish. Eight storey buildings (16 m) are also permitted immediately behind the buildings facing the promenade, and along Commonwealth Avenue, with the possibility of buildings up to 25 m, or indeed 'above 25 m'. The effect of a gaggle of buildings crowding the landscape of the Central National Area can already be seen with the recent tower developments in the Civic West precinct.

The proposals incorporated into Amendments 60 and 61 need to be understood in the context of a small city with a current population of 320,000, a declining growth rate for the past 15 years and an estimated population of 480,000 - at best - by 2033 and most likely 380,000.

Given the demographic profile and character of Canberra, the city should take the low-rise high density route, limit the height of continuous urban fabric to no more than 4-storeys, and maintain the human scale, solar access and 'garden city' attributes of a beautiful, distinctive place set within the canopy of one of the most magnificent urban forests in the world.

### **The Public Consultation Process**

At this defining moment in the history of Canberra Amendments 56, 59, 60 and 61 to the National Capital Plan have been approved by the Minister for Local Government, Territories & Roads - yet they are demonstrably inadequate and unacceptable as a planning and design proposal for the city, and as a response to the historical component of the 2004 *Griffin Legacy* study. The process by which Ministerial approval was granted prior to review by the Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital & External Territories calls into question the adequacy of the public consultation process.

The manner in which public consultation was conducted by the NCA requires substantial amendment. While public comment was invited in August 2006 and some 350 written submissions were received, the NCA then invoked the *Privacy Act* on the basis that submissions had been called without the option of a privacy waiver. As a consequence, the original written submissions were not available for public review and the authors of the submissions were not identified.

The NCA asserted that the responses were overwhelmingly favourable and a senior officer stated: 'the conflicts that have been identified have been of a remarkably trivial nature'. The Walter Burley Griffin Society contends that nothing could be further from the truth.

We submit that the public consultation provisions of the Commonwealth *Australian Capital Territory (Planning and Land Management) Act 1988* and the ACT *Land (Planning & Environment) Act 1991* should be standardised to establish the same procedures throughout the Australian Capital Territory, based on transparency and the public interest.

## **Conclusion**

The scale and complexity of the changes to the symbolic centre of Canberra proposed by the National Capital Authority, and the cavalier manner with which they have been advanced, must be a matter of grave concern to all Australians

The Walter Burley Griffin Society calls for Amendments 56, 59, 60 & 61 to the National Capital Plan to be withdrawn and reworked to substantially reduce the scale of proposed development and to establish a rigorous planning basis for the scheme. At the very least, this should include an Implementation Plan and Development Control Plan, demonstrating full consideration of environmental impact, heritage impact, traffic engineering, demographic profile, market viability, land ownership, timing, phasing etc.; full resolution of the statutory controls needed to guarantee design quality in the Central National Area; and clear sustainability criteria to evaluate proposals over time.

Anything less will indeed compromise Canberra forever.

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The main Statement to the Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital & External Territories was prepared by Professor James Weirick, President of the Walter Burley Griffin Society Inc., in association with Brett Odgers, Chairman of the Canberra Chapter, Walter Burley Griffin Society Inc. and other members of the Society.

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