

The Problem of Planned Cities: Canberra in Context*

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We are used to hearing that our national capital is special, and it is. But it is also only one of the more recent, and is the most sustained, of the attempts to build a 'new town'. History is simply full of them. Some of the oldest towns of which we have records started like Canberra, in an empty or almost empty space, and with a plan.

Let me offer you Mohenjo-daro, in the Indus Plain, a site that has been claimed as the oldest planned city in the world. It is not at all the oldest 'city' or permanent settlement, which may be Jericho, which is 11 000 years old. It is worth remembering that human life in permanent settlements is not any older than Jericho, and what human beings have achieved since they first began to stay in one place, grow crops and herd animals, is simply astonishing. Mohenjo-daro was built about five thousand years ago, and was one of the cities of what is called today the 'Indus civilisation', about which we know very little. It was quite a sophisticated place, all things considered, with a drainage system, a rectangular grid layout, separate dwellings protected for privacy and against noise, public buildings and a central marketplace, a lot of infrastructure to ensure a good water supply from the Indus River, on whose banks it stood, and high levels of sanitation. It even had what is called 'the great bath', and though that might have been a municipal swimming pool, it was probably a place for religious observance. We can guess from all this that the city, which housed about 35 000 people, had what we would recognise as a system of government.

All that remains are its ruins, and most of them are still under the sand, because exposing the ruins leads quickly to erosion. What happened to the city? We don't really know. It was rebuilt several times on the wreckage of the past, perhaps because of floods, and finally abandoned about a thousand years after it had been begun. The story of Mohenjo-daro is a familiar one. For reasons often lost to us, a society decides to build a new town or city. It starts with a plan, and the plan is likely to include defence, water, sanitation, easy communication within the walls, a marketplace and public granary, public buildings, temples and the rest. Something then happens, perhaps a flood or earthquake, or invasion, or a plague—but the outcome is that the city loses its purpose, and a lot, or all, of its people. Those remaining cannot maintain it, and its buildings and infrastructure fail and crumble. The Romans, for example,

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were splendid town planners, but their knowledge and skills did not survive the collapse of the Roman Empire.

Not all cities have begun like Mohenjo-daro. Some, at river crossings, like Oxford, or close to river junctions, like Babylon, or at obvious intersections in trading routes, like Istanbul, or at good ports, like New York, began as people simply took advantage of the site, and just grew. No doubt someone had a plan at some stage, and you can see bits of planning in all large cities, but such cities just grew in an ad hoc and relatively unplanned way. The lack of planning has very expensive consequences over time, for it requires retrofitting if the city grows. The building of Bangkok's freeways and rapid transit railway systems provides a good contemporary example: there the dominance of individually owned motor vehicles makes it almost impossible for the bus system to work, and puts the building of railways systems at a disadvantage because of the lack of land, so much of it already given to roads. Going underground in Bangkok is difficult because of the waterlogged soil on which the city is built.

Over the last ten thousand years there seem to have been two separate and conflicting building sentiments throughout the history of towns and cities. One is the desire to start again, for a variety of reasons: an earthquake or a tidal wave may have demolished the settlement, or fire destroyed it, or the new city marks a new political beginning. The other can be likened to the effect of a magnet: established settlements attract people, who tend to come whether or not there is any planning for their arrival. The clash between these two sentiments is evident in every established city unless its development has been almost completely accidental or is lost in history. Incidentally, many settlements have been planned from the beginning but, for a variety of reasons, no settlement followed the plan. A good example is Currowan, on the Clyde River in New South Wales, which was surveyed in the second half of the 19th century, in expectation that people would come to establish agriculture and a small port. But no one came. Most country towns in New South Wales started with an original survey, whose grid lines are still there today in the pattern of the original streets.

But cities are different. Their growth can proceed so quickly that the original plan becomes inadequate, and the planners are unable to cope. Sydney grew in a rather random way until the arrival of Governor Macquarie, who reorganised the streets of the port and renamed them. By the 1830s the City of Sydney as we know it today had been defined, and so had the tip of Pyrmont—the developers were moving in! It was not until 1948 that there was any sort of plan to cover the whole city, and that plan ordained a green belt around the city, rather like Colonel Light's parklands in Adelaide, though much larger. But the rapid growth of the city after the war meant that the green belt had gone within little more than a decade. Nothing much has changed: continued rapid growth and the topographical difficulty of the area make

Sydney a continuing planning nightmare, and that leads to a diminished quality of life for many of its residents.

Another example, perhaps more optimistic, is that of Adelaide. Colonel Light provided the new city with an admirable plan and, in part because the city initially grew slowly, its shape and surrounding parklands became accepted (although the early settlers cut down all the trees, so Adelaide's parklands did not always look as they are today). But in the 20th century there seemed no thought of continuing to build the city according to some adaptation of Colonel Light's plan, and it simply grew outwards along the main arterial roads. Suburbs developed, railways were introduced, and infrastructure like a water supply was provided. But urban planning as such seems hardly to have been thought of outside a suburban context. The Elizabeth area, developed after the Second World War, is distinctively different, because of its neighbourhoods, built around small shopping centres, and of the general absence of the grid. Of course, there is now a plan for the whole of the city of Adelaide, but in that concept the planned city of 1839 has become the 'CBD'. Greater Adelaide now has a large footprint, stretching 20 kilometres east to west and nearly 100 kilometres from north to south.

The story of Adelaide provides powerful lessons about planning cities. The three great ingredients for a successful venture are 'Vision', 'Plan' and 'Will'. The vision comes first, and it has to come first, because a great deal of energy and money will be expended in developing the new city project. The vision has to capture the imagination, and provide attractive possibilities for those who are to live in the result. The plan sets out the basic geometry of the city, its public places, how people are to get from one place to another, where they will buy food, and—at least in times past—its defences. 'Will' is the underlying support base of both the vision and the plan, and it has to be there from the beginning, because from the very start of every plan there are objectors, who will include those who didn't get the job of drawing up the plan, those who see some other use for the land, those who don't want to go there anyway, and others who just like objecting. I've mentioned Colonel Light's Adelaide: you need to know that he had in mind one thousand blocks of one acre each in the main town. That's not what happened. And even if he had been longer lived—and more powerful—time, other pressures and growth would have disturbed his plan, as they were quickly to do. But his basic shape for the city survived, and has given the centre of Adelaide a quality and attractiveness matched by no other state capital city.

Vision and Plan can only be guessed for the older cities—London, Paris, and Madrid, for example. Paris is very old—there has been a settlement there for at least 6000 years and its shape has been determined in part by the River Seine, and in part by the edicts of France's rulers. But the great boulevards we admire today are relatively new,

and were constructed to prevent any more barricades being created by the rebellious population; that work was carried out in the middle 19th century. The earlier Paris had been in part a maze of narrow streets and alleyways. But you can imagine that the work was not only highly expensive, but caused great distress among the half a million or so residents whose houses were simply razed, and whose neighbourhoods disappeared. What is done cannot usually be undone, especially when buildings are torn down.

But things that are half done can be left half done, and this is what happened in St Petersburg. Peter the Great envisioned a new capital city for Russia, and he wanted it near the sea. He first built a fortress at the site, in 1703, then a church. Nine years later, when random development was in full swing, he moved the capital from Moscow to St Petersburg, and four years later still developed a plan, with an Italian designer, whereby the city centre was to be on an island, with a series of canals defining the city. While that plan was never finished, enough of it was done to shape the modern city. Peter the Great died in 1725, not long after he had founded the Academy of Science, the university and the Academic Gymnasium, a high school for proficient students. The pace of change and of building, not to mention the speed of his other reforms, caused such opposition that, once his great will was gone, the capital was moved back to Moscow for a few years. It did return, work on St Petersburg resumed, and the city then remained the capital of Russia until the Bolshevik Revolution. It moved then back to Moscow partly for reasons of defence—St Petersburg was too close to German forces in Estonia.

Will and Plan are important in another way. While the plan almost immediately attracts opposition, it also is a magnet for people who see opportunities for them in the new environment. As Peter the Great discovered, people were in the new city before he really wanted them. The same thing happened when Brasilia was built. That city has an almost gigantic shape, and its basic infrastructure, with its vast vistas, was built in less than four years. But people came much faster than had been planned, and both Brasilia and its satellite cities grew for a decade or two in a helter-skelter fashion.

We are firmly in the domain of national capitals now, and I would like to make a couple of comments about Ottawa and Washington before I move finally to Canberra. All three, plus Brasilia, are federal capitals, and in each case they represent the nation. Each is an example of the conjunction of Vision, Plan and Will. Each has had its difficulties, and the name of each has become shorthand, often in a pejorative fashion, for the federal government of the nation. Each was placed where it is for a reason. Washington and Ottawa were placed close to the main divisions of their countries: between the French speakers and the English speakers, in the case of Canada, and between the North and the South, in the case of the USA. Brasilia was placed inland

so that it could be near to the geographic centre of the country, and the Australian Constitution ordained that the national capital territory of Australia had to be more than 100 miles from Sydney but somewhere in the state of New South Wales.

Ottawa's site was not only on the border of French and English Canada, but it was distant from the USA (with which Canada had been at war in the early 19th century) and accessible by water and by rail to both Toronto and Quebec. It was already a logging town, and essentially what occurred was the transfer of the parliament and the government to an industrial town. Whereas Washington started with a plan, Ottawa did not, and until the end of the 19th century it just grew. It was not until the middle of the 20th century that the Canadian Government decided that something had to be done to make the whole city, not just the parliament buildings, exemplify the national capital. But it is hard to retrofit cities, especially national capitals, and progress there is slow. It happens that the site, and the civic character of those who have lived in Ottawa, has saved it from the slums that disfigure Washington—a plan isn't everything. And contemporary Ottawa is a fine city, though away from the parliament buildings there is much less immediate sense of its being the national capital than is the case in either Washington or Canberra.

And so to our own national capital, which is in many respects the greatest triumph of the conjunction of Vision, Plan and Will, and it is, to repeat, the longest surviving planned city of the modern era that has kept its plan and its character, though nearly a hundred years old. The history of the design and building of Canberra is well known, and today I will focus on only a few aspects of it. One is the sculptural quality of the city in its setting: Walter Burley Griffin recognised the power of the setting, and argued that the built form must not try to surpass it, but rather to blend in with it. Successive generations have accepted that initial perspective, which explains why today's Canberra, though very much larger than Griffin's original conception, still keeps the spirit of its designer's creation. The city has what architect and historian James Birrell has called 'a soft, gentle touch', and that is something that visitors notice and wonder at. It doesn't look like what they think of as a city. But once they live here for eighteen months or so, they adopt its special character with great enthusiasm.

A second is the continuation of the original ownership of the national capital. As we have seen, most new towns start with a plan and an authority that insists that the plan be followed. But it is often not long before the plan, or the authority, or both, lose their force. Other things get in the way. For example, rapid growth can quickly exceed the bounds of any plan, and result in ad hoc adaptations that can destroy it, as happened in Sydney in the 1950s. Factors that greatly affected all development in Australia included a sequence of economic depressions and world wars, all between

1890 and 1945. Very little of a positive, confident and developmental kind occurred in that time. Visions, plans and will were put aside. In Canberra development stopped in 1914, resumed in the early 1920s, stopped again in 1930, and resumed during the Second World War when the plan was pushed aside to allow the construction of scores of temporary buildings. It resumed properly in the mid-1950s, with a new plan that was based very much on Griffin's in 1911, modified by new understandings of how people lived, worked and moved. Paradoxically, the slow development of the national capital in its first fifty years at least saved it from the curse of rapid development, and allowed the plan to bed down.

The Commonwealth has been the main influence on the development of the national capital for two reasons. The first is that the Constitution made the Commonwealth Government its creator and developer. Even when the initial vision was gone, and Griffin was long since dead, the plan and its successors were still present, as was the will to protect the plan. The second is that the Commonwealth owns all the land within the ACT, so that all development other than that by the government has required some kind of permission. And the permissions granted have been generally in harmony with the plan. Opinions will differ, but mine is that were Griffin magically restored to us, and asked to give his views on the Canberra of 2011, he would be generally impressed. Of course, he would need a week or two to get used to other aspects of contemporary life, like air travel, the computer, television and the omnipresent motor vehicle, which mightn't impress him greatly. I would ask him after the shock of the first week.

In 1988 there came the first real change in the development of the national capital. Canberra had grown large enough to warrant a qualified form of self-government. One outcome was the creation of the National Capital Plan and the associated Territory Plan. The two plans divide responsibility for the development of the national capital, with the Commonwealth retaining control of the 'national capital' element, and the ACT Government given responsibility for what might be called the 'suburban and municipal' elements. This division has worked well, though from time to time there are disagreements and overlap. But because the Territory Plan is subordinate to the National Capital Plan, the Commonwealth's view tends to win through when there are arguments.

This division is now a permanent fact, as is the reluctance of the Commonwealth to fund the future development of the national capital in the comprehensive fashion of the 1960s and 1970s. At present Canberra is growing quickly, more quickly indeed than the country as a whole, and the need for infrastructure expenditure is great. It seems likely, moreover, that the growth will continue, if only as part of the trend toward urbanisation that is occurring everywhere in the world. The national capital is

likely to have half a million inhabitants before very long (the present population of Canberra and Queanbeyan combined is a little over 400 000), and it will pass one million inhabitants before the end of the century, if present trends continue.

Now you will encounter the view that the national capital as a place is simply a necessary evil, a consequence of Federation, and ought now to be ignored, since the building of it is done, in two senses. First, that the Commonwealth has been established, is more than 100 years old and is a success; and second, that the national capital itself is finished anyway, because the permanent Parliament House has been built and occupied, the ACT is self-governing, and its government can look after the city from now on.

That is not a silly position for people to take, but it overlooks two important points, each directly connected to Vision, Plan and Will. The first is that Griffin's vision was not simply of a national capital of great buildings of representation and government, law and collections, but of a human settlement set in a landscape. And aspects of Griffin's ideal have spread all over Australia, where some two-thirds of the housing stock has been built since 1960, and where outer suburbs everywhere have something of the look of Canberra's suburbs—the avoidance of the grid, a focus on people-friendly roads and layouts, neighbourhood schools and shopping centres, and so on. Griffin's vision is with us still. With respect to the national capital that means, in my view, that the Commonwealth has entered on an experiment, a hundred years old now, to build a city that shows what human thought, creativity and planning can do in providing an environment for human beings that is beautiful, effective and efficient, and in which creativity flourishes. It follows that the Commonwealth would not want to see parts of its national capital descend into squalor, as has occurred in parts of Washington.

I have not mentioned the slums of Washington DC because I dislike the city. On the contrary, I like it a great deal, and respond to the energy there and the sense of national purpose. I like capital cities, wherever they are, especially ours. But I worry, all the time, that indifference and inattention could lead to the development of very poor living conditions in our own national capital—without anyone ever intending such an outcome. So I think it important that the Commonwealth continue to have an overriding interest, not just in what you can see from Parliament House, but also in the quality of living in the capital. I can feel the slow slide towards assumptions that, for example, only the lake and the parliamentary vista are really important; the rest is simply local and should be planned and managed locally. This kind of argument occurs at some point, in different contexts of course, in the development of every new town. It is another moment where Vision, Plan and Will get pushed aside.

The ACT Government is not funded to care for the national capital, and could not do so easily even if it were. The two spheres of government properly have different interests and different priorities. What is done in the national capital has to be of high quality, and all of Canberra has to look the part. If you drive here, or come by train, or by air, there should be a feeling of ‘arrival’. As I have to remind Canberra residents occasionally, the national capital belongs to every Australian. All Australians need to feel proud of its quality when they come here, because it represents themselves and their nation. It is the embodiment of the shared history, ideals and spirit of the Commonwealth of Australia. Overseas visitors also need to feel that ‘these people certainly know what they are doing’, and in my experience many overseas visitors are bowled over by the beauty and subtlety of the national capital. As one national leader said to me, having looked at the city from the top of Mount Ainslie, ‘That you people have done all this in only a hundred years is simply wonderful’.

It seems to me that for the next hundred years, we will need a renewal of the Vision, a renewed Plan and continuing Will. There are endemic problems—parochialism and jealousies are ever present in federations, and these sentiments can give rise to a feeling that ‘those people in Canberra’ shouldn’t have anything that one’s own constituency doesn’t have, though those who express such feelings are unaware that Canberra residents pay very high rates. The national capital is not finished, and while the Commonwealth owns every square metre of it, and the city continues to grow, it will never be finished. In order to build properly we will need a partnership between the Commonwealth and the ACT Government, a partnership built on shared values, and on a recognition that Australia’s national capital is already an outstanding success, and it should be no less so in a century’s time than it is now.



Question — I show visitors from overseas that vista from the War Memorial, which is unmatched in my view. I see in recent correspondence and articles in the *Canberra Times* that the National Capital Authority (NCA) has taken a right bollocking for its involvement in the monstrosities of the war memorials at Rond Terrace. To my mind the NCA got it very wrong indeed. Would you like to rebut or confirm?

Don Aitkin — My views, and those of my colleagues at the Authority, are irrelevant. The process used that resulted in those models in my view was a valid one. If we were doing it today we would go down a different path because in the last three years we have changed a great deal of the way the NCA operates and particularly in its engagement with the community. We have also proposed that the National Memorials

Committee be constructed in a different way and that it be serviced by us. We are now the secretariat for the National Memorials Committee. What occurred in the past (and none of us who are presently on the Authority was there) was valid. If we were doing it again today I wouldn't do it that way. That's the best answer I can give you.

Question — Back in the mid-1960s the then Department of the Interior was preparing against the day when a future government might decide that the ACT should have self-government and a report prepared then suggested that whatever form of self-government the ACT was ultimately to receive, it would be desirable if all planning remained with the federal government through whatever statutory authority was proposed. Would it have been better if that particular recommendation had been adopted or do you really believe we can make our bifurcated planning system work better than it works today?

Don Aitkin — It actually doesn't work too badly today and one reason is that the people in the ACT Planning and Land Authority (ACTPLA) share the same aesthetic and historic values that the people in the NCA have. When you get a problem it is something like the Gungahlin Drive extension, where you get two governments with a different sense of the right outcome. In that case the Commonwealth will always win because the Commonwealth's plan is superior to the Territory's plan. In practice our staff at the NCA work very well with the ACTPLA staff. There is very little disagreement. The problems that we face are the obvious ones. The Territory is poorly funded. It is very much today like the colonies were in the nineteenth century after the gold rushes. The colonies had then two forms of making money to provide service: one was to sell land and the other was to impose customs duties. Well Katy Gallagher's government can't impose customs duties so all they have got really is our rates and selling land. So for them, any time they can make some money out of selling some land, that enables them to build another baby health centre or whatever. That's the way they see it and they are operating in a very small vista of time.

For whatever reason I operate in very long vistas of time. I do see and think twenty, thirty, forty, fifty years ahead. I do think we can have a bifurcated planning system that does work well especially if we get the community to understand that that's what we are doing. So much of what is done now is knee-jerk reaction because you don't hear about it early enough to be able to set it in context. If you think that we've got the present footprint of the city (there's maybe five to ten per cent extra footprint) if there's a million people here there will be three people living where there is one now. How can we do that well? That's the problem.

Question — Canberra bashing is still alive and well in the interstate capitals. What would be your opinion on the ways Australians look at their capital compared to the North Americans?

Don Aitkin — It is very similar. There is one difference and that is the American President is seen within the United States as being so powerful. It is part of your job as a father and mother to take your kids to Washington to see the White House and see where the President lives. We've got a bit of that. Probably we've got more of it than the Canadians have. The closer you are to the source of power the more confident you feel about the way the power is used; the further away you are the less knowledge you have and the less comfort you have with what is being done. So I think the Canadians like Ottawa less than Australians like Canberra, but there wouldn't be much in it.

Question — I think Canberra is now a less attractive city than it was thirty years ago. I think it is an excellent idea that Canberra needs to have money from the Australian taxpayer but that money needs to be wisely spent and it needs to be spent with a view to the capital itself. Internal items should be dealt with by the local government; they are not built for the nation as a whole. We need to seriously look at the future of Canberra. We need to say, 'what are we here for?' It is only a service centre. It doesn't produce anything. We need far better transport options. Otherwise the green space will be turned into car parks. It's a less lovely city that it was and maybe we need to make it a more lovely city again.

Don Aitkin — It is precisely to hear that kind of perspective and to hear it argued out and responded to that I would like to see the future of Canberra debated constantly. I don't have a particular response to what you've said. The cars are choking the city although nothing comparable to Sydney. It was lovely to hear good old mercantilism being used: that the whole population of Australia rests at the moment on the three per cent of the population who produce agriculture and pastoral products and the one per cent of the population who produce mining products. The rest of us are all paper pushers, really, and I don't think Canberra is any more or less that than Sydney or Melbourne or anywhere else is. It is not the country it was a hundred years ago.