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Place of a Nation? Canberra's Central National Area in its Second Century

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In its earliest imaginings by politicians and bureaucrats, Canberra was imagined as a city — and a national capital — in a landscape. It was pictured using the graphic conventions of the time, as a place of remarkable formal harmony, and as a place to unify the perceived dichotomies in Australia between ‘the bush’ and the city, the uninhabitable and the habitable. This was to be a city in the form of a landscaped park complete with lake, classical pavilions for its national buildings, and a woodland setting. In such images, form and scale provided the compositional medium, derived from the City Beautiful and Garden City movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries in North America and Great Britain. This was to be a capital city for the people of Australia to be proud of; a place where civic and national ideals were made tangible. Strangely, however, people have remained largely absent from evolving visions of Canberra’s heart, in what is now known as the Central National Area. In successive plans, how Australia’s citizens — from Canberra and elsewhere — were to actually inhabit and use this landscape, apart from attending occasional national ceremonies or visiting national institutions, has remained largely undefined. Its heart has become a still life. It remains unpeopled, a place where the realities of day-to-day existence seem always beyond the frame.

How has this phenomenon persisted over Canberra's first 100 years? Why are there such tensions between its role as national symbol and a landscape of everyday life? After a review of narratives about how people have used this landscape through its first 100 years and what visitors have thought about it, it is argued that until the polarised images of symbolic, experimental and mythical canvas and lived reality are reconciled, Canberra will remain a place where life is imagined, rather than lived — largely unrecognisable to most Australians. This is despite the fact that this landscape belongs to all Australians. Such reconciliation presents a cultural challenge for the capital's second century as a city as it moves beyond a conceptualised experiment to a place that in its maturity combines the symbolic aspects of national civic life with the realities of the everyday.

Describing the landscape of central Canberra as 'this area of special national concern', the chief executive of the National Capital Authority, Gary Rake, drew attention in 2010 to an inherent tension in the way that the central landscape of Canberra is conceptualised.¹ His comments were part of a debate about what activities should occur and which structures should be allowed in the Central National Area. As described by the National Capital Plan, this includes 'the parliamentary zone and its setting', judicial, administrative, university, diplomatic and cultural buildings, as well as Lake Burley Griffin and its foreshores, as the symbolic place of the nation.² It has been set aside not only for the nation's national institutions, but for major ceremonies, events and rituals, all of which are set in a spectacular and picturesque park-like landscape setting, one that has taken a century to create and great care to maintain.³

At the heart of this debate was a hamburger van, much loved by the locals as much for its irreverent appearance and its mixed clientele as for its excellent hamburgers. People would reportedly queue for over an hour for a hamburger; its

popularity grew with the efforts of the National Capital Authority to shut it down.

Rake acknowledged what all of us implicitly recognise, that a city is 'read' or revealed by what happens in its open spaces and its public domain, where life is made visible and tangible to visitors and locals alike. A central tenet of Canberra's planning and design thinking, however, especially in the Central National Area, is that the civic life of the *nation* should be manifest and visible, rather than that of the city alone.⁴ That is why it has been so carefully controlled over the decades. The intention is to create a place with meaning for all Australians, not just locals.

For visitors to the Central National Area, meaning is created through their experiences as tourists, as participants in the rituals and ceremonies or as visitors to institutions like the National Gallery of Australia, the National Museum of Australia, the Australian War Memorial, and monuments on Anzac Avenue, the shores of Lake Burley Griffin and the land axis leading to Parliament House. Meaning is also created through many images in media and advertisements that portray national significance, enticing citizens from other parts of Australia to visit and experience the national capital for themselves. Photographic imagery is, and always has been, an important part of Canberra's constructed sense of place. It is a city that was, after all, conceived, born and grown in the photographic age, envisaged as a perfect picture by its civic fathers and its designers. Early images of the city, especially the Central National Area, remain as compelling today as they did initially because of the harmonious relationship between the vegetated hills of the surrounding landscape setting, the quality of the built form within that setting, and the central landscape feature of the lake. These images are repeatedly referred to as 'park-like' and present a place where the landscape in all its beauty always dominates.⁵

Rather than the formal composition alone, however, it is what happens within that Central National Area landscape and what is said about it that is the focus here. This chapter suggests that the purpose of the landscape of the Central National Area has become confused through time and in its management, which now focuses more on the form of the space (especially as Rake put it, its 'architectural design'), than its meaning as a place, meaning created by engagement and association. While the discourse about this landscape reveals the Central National Area as a subject of continuing tensions and debate, I argue that through analysis of that discourse a way forward can be defined that reconciles two visions. The first vision is that of a place respected as spectacular picture of formal, even 'serene' perfection, an awe-inspiring symbol of democratic nationhood, unpeopled and somewhat remote from the lived experience of its broader national constituency. The second is of a place understood and loved as place that is 'of the people'.⁶

Such tensions are encapsulated in an article by the writer and critic about urban issues and design, Elizabeth Farrelly, who posed (and answered) a riddle in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in April 2001:⁷

What kind of place constructs a vast, expansive empty paddock as its symbolic city? Don't get me wrong. I like Canberra. I like its leafiness, its crisp, sweet air, its lawny monumentality. I like its absurdities, its vast, illegible, lunatic symbolism. I even like its emptiness.... Canberra is interesting because it's about something. Paradoxically, though ... you'd be hard put to divine just what it's about from the ground.... Most of our cities anywhere, while lacking the formal idea, are easier to read in the flesh.⁸

Farrelly goes on to quote internationally recognised travel writer, Bill Bryson, who described Canberra as 'just a scattering of government buildings in a man-made wilderness'. While Bryson's pithy criticism is the more stinging, under-

pinned as it is by vast experience at analysing of what makes places work, Farrelly's analysis is perhaps the more interesting, exploring the contradictions inherent in the beauty of Canberra's urban landscape as an image and an experience in more depth. As many other professional designers have done before and since, Farrelly observes the difference between the more urban ideals inherent in Burley Griffin's original City Beautiful designs and the picturesque perfection of what actually occurs on the ground today, questioning the process that has created it.

In summary, the tensions in Canberra's landscape revolve around the idea of a city as a park and the idea of a city as an urban experience. As Farrelly says:

Canberra's single most obvious characteristic ... the thing that overwhelms all other impressions, is its vast, verdant openness ... So distant is the nearest solid object (not counting trees and blades of grass) that you can't actually walk anywhere ... But a city?

Farrelly argues that a federal capital is exactly the kind of city where you expect (and should get) 'intensity, intrigue, excitement, conflict'. However, neither these qualities nor the people of the city can really be experienced in the parts of Canberra that most Australians and international guests visit and, most obviously, at its heart. The experience is rather of the trees, water and grass and the reflective abstractions of curated exhibitions, public artworks, rituals and ceremonies. The everyday life of the people of the place and the daily tensions of their work and lives are absent. The life of the city remains invisible, as do its people. Yet tourists love to visit the places where the locals are and have difficulty relating to a place where the only people they meet are other tourists. In the effort to make the Central National Area a meaningful manifestation of an abstract ideal, that of the 'Australian citizen', an important dimension of urban experience, or the experience of any urban park, has been forgotten — the

presence of local people at work and at play, living their lives. The space of the capital's central landscape, its heart, has become a retreat from local life, rather than a place of engagement with it.

Observe how this contrasts with the great spaces and places of other Australian cities, where all aspects of urban life resonate immediately and concurrently. In Sydney Cove the grand rituals and spectacles of the city coexist with everyday life and a dramatic landscape setting, making it one of the great cities of the modern world. The high culture of the Opera House and Museum of Modern Art coexist with busking and promenades on the quayside. The pleasures of fine dining coexist with the simpler pleasures of takeaway fish and chips. Not only is the harbour a place for ferries and everyday commuting, but also pleasure boats, grand liners, working craft and racing yachts. In central Melbourne, Federation Square, the Arts Precinct and South Bank combine in one precinct to provide a multiplicity of experiences. Here one can stroll, promenade or simply walk daily to work. One can witness parades on Swanston Street, Princes Bridge and St Kilda Road to celebrate local, national and international events, or be part of the throng. High art in the galleries and forecourts coexists with the popular art and performance on the streets.

The same can be said of Brisbane, where the parklands at South Bank and the nearby cultural precinct offer that same welcoming mix of spectacle and major event, art and the everyday. One can enjoy a fine meal, an ice-cream or a barbecue, the most sophisticated theatre or opera, or more simply a playground, a swim or sunbake. Everyone is there — longstanding locals, new residents, visitors, the rich, the poor and the in-between. This part of the city is for everyone. Everyone feels welcome, part of something bigger, part of the city's life and specific culture. In each case, the special quality of the place and the experience of sharing that place with others is orchestrated carefully to create civic meaning.

These places have been carefully and consciously created and are managed to foster public life — with all the tensions that such a management responsibility brings.

People and public life are also essential to the promoted images of these Australian cities as well — the streets of Melbourne, the harbour-front in Sydney, the riverside in Brisbane. Sydney has its sparkling harbour water and blue skies, its bridge and opera house, its streets, promenades and buildings; Melbourne has Swanston Street, Federation Square and South Bank with their grand buildings, bridges, monuments and avenues. Brisbane has its parklands and cultural precinct with their subtropical gardens, pools, bridges, plazas, promenades and river. While these are landscapes, they are urban landscapes, places for people — lots of people — with things for people to do, locals and visitors alike. Their images ricochet around the nation and the world and invite others to visit and become part of their life.

If the landscape of the Central Area is a place whose agenda is to create meaning for all Australia's citizens, to actually manifest the idea of an egalitarian democracy and democratic government in Australia as Paul Reid argued with his six design principles,⁹ then the next creative challenge is to look beyond the formal perfection and consider how engagement and experience can really occur here. This place needs not only to be a park-like front yard for the nation, where life is experienced as something special and formal, but also a back yard, where life is lived, and guests are invited. It must be both.¹⁰

Canberra's custodians have the responsibility for creating greater relevance for the Central National Area, and thereby greater meaning.¹¹ As its critics continue to observe, something in Canberra is missing and that something, as put by Don Dunstan back in 1989, is the feeling of *being* Australian in an Australian place (my emphasis).¹²

Professionals have argued that that 'something' can and should be created by populating the edges of the central

landscape with more dense residential and working activity. Such density will in turn, they say, populate the spaces. It is also argued that use will follow naturally as the population of the city grows and there are more working buildings within the Central National Area. However, while more residential development in the form of townhouses and apartment blocks has been encouraged over the last decade, overall population growth remains slow in Canberra. At the beginning of 2011, there were only 358,222 residents, hardly the numbers to populate such vast spaces and landscapes without conscious programming, especially since most Canberrans live in the outer suburbs. Such propositions hardly confront the central issue of how to make this place more relevant and accessible, in turn encouraging use.

Paradoxically, most arguments about the future of the Central National Area are debated in terms of impacts on form and whether the kinds of forms that suit local life are really appropriate for the place where the ideals of a nation are manifest. This conundrum is reflected not only in Rake's dilemma over the hamburger van, but in successive decisions made by the authorities responsible for the tacit acceptance and survival over nearly four decades of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in its key location on the land axis fronting Old Parliament House. Quite simply, in such a splendid and carefully managed landscape setting that has taken many decades to achieve, they argue that such things look inappropriate. 'Ramshackle' is the word used to describe the cluster of tents at the Aboriginal Embassy,¹³ and in defending the National Capital Authority position, Rake argued that objections to the van were 'simply' on the basis of aesthetics. The aesthetics of the van did not comply with requirements of the National Capital Plan. To Rake at least, while the chatting, play and games of the local customers that come with the van do apparently 'comply', the illegally parked vehicles and camping that accompanies the Tent Embassy are considered inappropriate in a place of such serenity.

A critic of a newly constructed restaurant facility on the waterfront of Lake Burley Griffin in the centre of the Parliamentary Triangle observed that somehow:

Canberra designers have managed to keep this popular rollerblading, running, walking and cycling area just as soulless as before ... it's as though they consider a congregation of people too messy for Burley Griffin's original grand plan.¹⁴

The writer then went on to surmise that 'I'm sure he [Burley Griffin] wanted people here, though', implying that the challenge in experiencing this particular landscape lies not with the presence of ordinary people, but in the way that form and activity are dealt with by the authorities, authorities who seem somehow to discourage ordinary use by ordinary people.

So, the challenge for next decades of its development revolves around how to make the Central National Area a place of greater relevance and meaning to Australians and international visitors alike — beyond abstract notions of nationhood — by encouraging appropriate use within appropriately sited and designed landscape settings. Can this spectacular park-like setting accommodate not only more people, but people carrying out the activities of everyday life? Should it? While design theorists and practitioners extol the value of major rituals such as annual Anzac Day ceremony and the opening of the Vietnam War Memorial as encapsulating ideas of 'Australian-ness', these do not populate the vast spaces of the central landscape with ordinary life on a daily basis as happens in other cities in Australia and other national capitals such as Paris, Rome and London.

In its second century, the landscape of the Central National Area should be actively and creatively adapted. As well as being a grand park whose primary purpose is to accommodate the ceremonies, spectacles and rituals that manifest national ideals and aspirations, its landscape should be enriched by a variety of new activity programs and settings that overtly welcome not

only more local people but visitors from other parts of Australia and elsewhere. A sense of the local and of the everyday can and should coexist and enrich the experience of the sense of the national already established during its first century of development. And that sense of the local and everyday should be celebrated consciously, not only in an added range of activities (or, in the terminology of planners and designers, of 'programs') in the landscape of the Central National Area, but in the adaptation and enhancement of its form and its imagery. This is the central challenge for its next decades.

Such a vision is driven by the recognition that while many other parts of Canberra are primarily for locals, the Central National Area seeks to engage all Australians, including the people of Canberra. Rather than being primarily a place for tourists and visitors, they too need to be welcomed and, just as importantly, be there to welcome others.

On a recent visit, it was apparent that some first, very tentative steps towards inclusion of local everyday activities have been made. On a warm summer day, a few local students and cyclists lazed on the grass outside the National Gallery near the lake. Two or three local families took advantage of a solitary picnic and barbecue shelter near the National Library of Australia for a pre-Christmas get-together, their children playing on their bikes and scooters noisily in the nearby car park. These few locals complemented the cyclists and joggers using the lake's edge in a picturesque landscape notable, again, for its emptiness. A few tourists also wandered across the vast unpeopled spaces between the elegant national monuments, endeavouring to experience the idea of 'Australian-ness' said to be embodied there.

Life must be breathed into the heart of the national capital, a landscape that should become an urban landscape, a place of interaction and exchange between all kinds of people. This can and should occur within its park-like landscape setting, which must be adapted for that purpose rather than

remaining a picture, perfect for visitors alone. Nothing in Burley Griffin's planning or design suggests that the heart of the city should be empty, or that its centre should or would be eschewed by its local community.¹⁵ By layering the landscape to create an urban park central to the urban life of the city, as an active campus rather than a retreat, a place that more truly represents all Australians can be created. Such a landscape requires many and varied activities and settings, and all of these need to be designed with respect for the grandeur of the established landscape structure. If this is done sensitively, there is plenty of space to accommodate both the existing structure and the new layers that such spaces and settings require. Such sensitivity will inevitably test the capital's maturity as a city that can manage the complexity and challenges that accompany such an agenda.

Such an approach requires first, a review of the potential activity program. What, in local life, could and should happen here? What do Canberrans love to do and to celebrate that could be accommodated with sensitive adaptation and where? What activities and events can occur — large, small, frequent, infrequent? Rather than as in the past, starting such enquiries with an analysis of existing form and space, such an enquiry should start with an analysis of local life — as lived and as aspired to — and the potential types of local, national and international engagement possible here. First and foremost, this should start with a cultural rather than formal enquiry into contemporary life, into the way that life is lived in Australia in its broadest sense and particularly in Canberra and how, ultimately, that life can be part of the experience of the place. Its findings can then inform the subsequent processes of formal review, using design studies of the landscape and urban settings within the Central National Area to define the most appropriate activity programs and their potential to fit within an enriched and adapted landscape framework. Some programmed activities may require no adaptation of space,

others just a little, others much more. Others again may even challenge existing planning controls, requiring them to be rethought and redefined. There may also be activities that are rejected as ultimately unsuitable even for a Central National Area in an adapted form. There will be implications not only for spaces, buildings and infrastructure, but also for management, planning and design. The underlying goal of such a wide-ranging exploration must be to enrich this area of special concern over the coming decades, adapting its landscape to create more relevance for both locals and visitors. All must understand it as a place where they not only reflect on life's larger meanings, but through shared activity, on the immediate realities of local life as well.

This is a challenge for the culture of the nation's capital as well as a challenge for its planning and design. Yes, this is a place of symbolism, but to fulfill its charter it must also be a place of true relevance — beyond mere abstract ideals of nationhood. In a complex and egalitarian culture like that of contemporary Australia this place must respect and value the everyday life of its citizens, giving that life expression and place. The great landscape of central Canberra, established during its first century as a picturesque park-like framework, remains to be enriched in its second — by its people and for its people.

Endnotes

- 1 C Kennan, 'Canberra's burger battle: taste buds versus town planners', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 April 2010, p. 8.
- 2 National Capital Authority, *Consolidated National Capital Plan*, Commonwealth of Australia, December 2011, p. 24.
- 3 K Taylor, *Canberra: City in the Landscape*. Halstead Press, Sydney, 2006.
- 4 D Headon, *The symbolic role of the national capital: from colonial argument to 21st century ideals*, National Capital Authority, 2003, ch 11.
- 5 Taylor, op. cit., ch 7.
- 6 Taylor, op. cit., p. 139.
- 7 E Farrelly, 'Review of the documentary 'City of Dreams' screened on ABC television', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 April 2011, p. 8.
- 8 Headon, op. cit., p. 172.

- 9 Headon quoting Neilson, *op. cit.*, p. 178.
- 10 Headon quoting Weirick, *op. cit.*, p. 173 and p. 182.
- 11 Headon, *op. cit.*, p. 196.
- 12 L Martin, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 January, 1999.
- 13 M Evans, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 December, 2002, p. 11.
- 14 KF Fischer, *Canberra myths and models. Forces at work in the formation of the Australian capital*, Asian Institute of Affairs, 1984, p. 153.

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