

LOST IN SPACE: OUT AMONGST THE PLANETTES AND SATELLITES (The myths and reality of planning and architecture in Canberra)

A talk for the Beyond the Face conference of 24 April 1989

Introductory remarks, thanks, expression of support for the Atelier.

I am asked to give some context for the design atelier for the design of a building here in Canberra by saying something of the nature of Canberra. For this talk I have a theme: that Canberra is a city of myths, where the image has largely supplanted the fact for the rest of Australia. That Canberra is more known by myth than by reality is not new, indeed the gulf between image and reality was well explored in a book by Karl Fischer entitled *Canberra: Myths and Models*.

But by examining some of these myths I hope to show that two things should be borne in mind when designing something for Canberra. The first is that Canberra is not a city in any urban or urbane sense. It is suburban almost in its entirety, which makes it the quintessential Australian city, though not for the reasons that the city fathers would claim for it. It manifests this suburbanity through the city being devolved into satellite towns.

Secondly, the most distorted myth is that the city, or rather the satellite town arrangement is an example of desirable and innovative thinking and planning. On the contrary I have found its planning limited, compromised, ordinary, banal, and morosely repetitive. It has no grand vision, only a planned re-hash of what is built everywhere else in the suburban outer fringe of Australian cities where there is no grand public control and planning mechanism. Its limited planning may be called a planette in the same way that a cramped kitchen becomes a kitchenette.

However much one might deplore Canberra's planning it is here now as a city of a quarter of a million people and it is probably impossible to re-dress the lost opportunities by virtue of a continuation of the planning process. The repairs will have to come from the architecture that will be built, hopefully as infill architecture, over the next 25 to 50 years. This opportunity seems ripe with the disbanding of the former autocratic planning body, the N.C.D.C. and the recent (although incomplete) election of a local government.

So in inviting you to participate in the design of a seminal work for this new government in this new democratic age of Canberra I should like to offer a few cautionary tales that I hope will influence your deliberations about architecture in this suburbia over the next two days. I will attempt to examine a few myths and images of Canberra in order to set an agenda for architectural design, although I am not seeking to circumscribe or limit the debate. Only to say that there are grand issues involved, fundamental issues of architecture even in the most humble addition to the city's architecture.

My first move is to dispense with maps. You'll see no plans here. If you live and work in Canberra you will very quickly see how the planning debate is ruled with maps. And a curse they are too as most planners have used them as a substitute for the real Canberra out there. So I will show some images of the real suburban Canberra to accompany the de-mythologising. Not always pretty but an important first step in coming to grips with what the architectural setting is, not what the planners would have us believe.

The myth of Canberra as a Capital for Australia.

The myth started very early with the selection of the site. It was supposed to be halfway between Sydney and Melbourne to be equally distant from the influences of the existing cities. In fact a beautiful valley was found very close to Sydney. There was much wrangling over where Canberra would be sited exactly with King O'Malley taking a very strong stand on deciding where a capital would be built for the new young nation. But as most of the public administration came from Melbourne, this city has had the most influence in the development of the city.

The myth of Walter Burley Griffin being the designer of Canberra

Having established a site, a competition was held and it is now one of Canberra's great myths that Walter Burley Griffin designed the city. It is a myth that is invoked by successive administrations since the founding of Canberra.

Walter Burley Griffin had very little to do with the Canberra that now exists and in fact almost nothing. He designed no buildings that sit in the city. He organised only one piece of planting, Haig Park, and although it is one of the most beautiful plantings, it is not the generator of a landscape form of Canberra. He and his wife, Marion Mahoney, did design a layout for the city, however, only the vague following of his triangular plan and the laying down of some roads (now as expressways) over his original plan remain as testament to their ideas.

Successive planning commissions, starting with the Federal Capital Commission and following right through until the National Capital Development Commission have invoked Griffin's name in the construction of Canberra, although they have never relinquished from driving nails through the coffin of his design.

It is almost shameful the way in which people describe it as Burley Griffin's Canberra, for he had so little to do with what now stands that the invoking of his name obscures the real production of a city, a newly designed, satellite suburb city, which holds values vastly different from those which Griffin brought to the competition.

And they could not even name the lake properly, for his name was Walter Griffin, not Burley Griffin. Perhaps this is somehow appropriate since the lake's form is dictated by the surveyor Scrivenor, who raised the height of the dam wall and changed the entire outline of the lake. Even the very name of the lake is a myth.

The myth of Canberra being a city of Politicians

Firstly, Canberra was a city founded by and for politicians. Mungo MacCallum, the political commentator, when asked to describe politicians, said that they were "a notch under child molestor". Politicians do form a part of Canberra's city, but they are not the essence of the city. In fact, most people who live in Canberra regard the politicians as a minor irritant.

On the day in which Canberra elected its own politicians for the first time on March 4, 1989, Allan Ramsay, a well known Canberra journalist, wrote an article about the nature of politicians and Canberra. He said "you think of Canberra as a city of politicians. We think of Canberra as a city without them. The politicians are yours, not ours: we live here, they don't. They are transients, arriving and leaving each week, like contract migrant workers. To Canberra, politicians have always been people who appear on Monday and are gone by Friday. They belong to you, not us."

The fact that the city is built around politicians is really only evident in the National Triangle and, of course, it is particularly evident now that the large edifice has been built on the hill. However, if you look for evidence of politicians outside of the national triangle, in fact, outside of the parliamentary triangle south of Lake Walt Griffin, you will find very little. There are embassies certainly, and some diplomatic missions in some of the suburbs always clustered in close to the Prime Minister's Lodge. A building of no little interest for this atelier.

Another is the Governor General's residence. This is a house that the public cannot see, but which enjoys a strong relationship to the lake. Dallas and Bill must sit on the terrace wondering why it is that Australia's capital has such a lonely and isolated relationship to the water when every other city of Australia has such a strong relationship to it. Indeed their house is one of only three buildings that (so far) front the lake. The others by the way are the N.C.D.C.'s planning exhibition building and the original power-house in Kingston.

The myth that Canberra is a city

Canberra is not a single city. There is, as yet, no one place that is its centre, that defines its place. If Gertrude Stein had visited she most certainly would have said of Canberra "When you get there, there is no there, there". Canberra is a number of satellite cities. The satellites have been orchestrated and built long before the city has filled up the area that it originally started in. There are still building sites available in the old parts of Canberra and moreover there are still vast amounts of space in the original parts of Canberra that could accommodate suburbs. Why is it then that, first in the 1960's, Woden and Weston Creek, a sort of double satellite city, was established and why was it then that following Woden/Weston Creek, Belconnen was established and built largely through the '70's and now in the 1980's, at the other end of the city, Tuggeranong, a new satellite city, is being built.

In each case, the satellite city was designed by planners. The organisation of the National Capital Development Commission who have overseen the organisation of Canberra largely reflect this.

* Insert chart from the NCDC Report

Most of the NCDC was made up of planners and engineers, but we as architects tend to think of the NCDC only in terms of its architectural work. Its major work, however, was in planning and engineering and making these suburbs. However, the planning was largely done two-dimensions across the flat page. It was a spatial separation, a zoning and a pulling apart of the interactions that really make a city into an urbane place.

Because of the predominance of road engineers, the road pattern became all important and so these new towns are cut and swathed by expressways and freeways, on their periphery and also through their centre. Then on either side of these freeways are set aside large areas of land as visual zones, as separation and of course as noise distancing for the houses that are near these freeways. Then set apart from these freeways are the city centres, the

large centres of Woden and Belconnon are largely isolated from the surrounding suburban areas because of the greenbelt infill that runs around the edge of those city centres.

Within the city centres, each part is pulled apart and separated out so that none of the light industrial or quasi-industrial and retail and wholesale areas can mingle with the main retail areas or that the taverns or bars can be mingled with where people work. It is a strange sight which many of you no doubt experienced last night to actually go on a pub crawl in a largely industrial area while the main body of the city sleeps with its eyes closed in a large concrete bunker further down the hill. This isolation and separation of various parts of Canberra means that each of the individual sections of Canberra cannot be related one to the other.

The myth of the Y plan

The overall planning of cities is, of course, something to which much thought has been given for the last 2000 years. Canberra has a structure - it is called the Y structure. The Y-plan, because of its particular shape, having a central arm of the old part of Canberra at the centre of the Y, with one arm indicating Belconnen and the other arm at the top indicating Gungahlin, a yet to be developed satellite city, and the long arm stretching south being Woden and the Tuggeranong Valley, is once again a myth. The real shape of Canberra is however an X, and should have been called the X plan or perhaps X marks the spot.

Queanbeyan, a town of now over 20,000 people, is located just across the border. It has a vital relationship with Canberra but one that has never been acknowledged. Locally and colloquially it is often called "struggle town". It has absorbed some of the housing types and some of the development that Canberra has shunned. Often the workers' housing, in close flat developments, allied to a street which has shops along it with carparks at the rear, like a traditional country town, have provided many people with a sense of the real world, the developments of most of Australia in comparison to the pre-planned and rather disinfected Canberra.

Queanbeyan has also been forgotten in terms of its relationship to the development of Canberra. It is just across the border, across a railway line significantly enough, but it has failed to really touch the Canberra consciousness until of course the rugby league team made the grand finals in Sydney two years ago. Then they wanted to claim the Canberra Raiders as their own, although of course they'd always played, trained and were based in Queanbeyan. The local member even made an attempt to try and get the team to be relocated over into Canberra to try to bring them home as it were.

The myth that there is diversity within Canberra's suburbs

Outside of the national triangle, and outside of the four major city centres, one at Civic, one at Woden, one at Belconnen, and the newly developed one at Tuggeranong, you will find that the vast area of Canberra is suburbia - a monotonous, relentless, yellow orange brick and grey tile suburbia. It is the suburbia which Nicolas Pevsner, the well known English critic, once described as the monotony of diversity.

In these suburbs, every house is notionally different. Most owners take the opportunity to have a house which is marginally or stylistically different from the one nextdoor. However, it is a difference within very limited margins. It is as if, as the New Zealand critic David Mitchell once said, "people see their own house in technicolour and every other house in the street in black and white".

The dissection of the planning of central Canberra into distinct zones continues on out into the suburbs. Here separate parcels of land are set aside for medium density housing and for "standard housing", as the signs are wont to put it. So that every suburb has the same layout and the same mixture, every suburb no matter whether it is close to the city centre or far away has its portion of medium density housing and low density housing and it also has its school, its primary school, its high school and it also has its local shops. Every suburb from the 1960's onwards in Woden has largely resembled the same pattern of providing this set of services to that one suburb.

The myth that Canberra has been planned for this place.

Why do we have these suburbs made up of detached houses sitting on their quarter-acre block of land, and why do we have houses sitting isolated in a charming, but terribly wasteful landscape of mown lawns and Melaleuca and Mannifera maculosa eucalypt trees? We have this city because Walter Griffin's original idea for a cosmopolitan city was overthrown in the very early days. It was largely overthrown even before Griffin even arrived in Australia, when the politicians sought to amalgamate his ideas with the great ideal of a detached house sitting on its own block of land for everyone. And is this form and style of housing directly related to the nature of a "bush capital"?

You will of course recall that Canberra was constructed not long after Federation, not long after the development of the Federation suburb, particularly in Sydney and Melbourne. Here a series of factors, not least of which being the

freeing up of the banking system to offer individual mortgages and the desire of local councils to improve the quality of their areas, led to detached titles with larger blocks of land being designed by councils and being sold off by real estate agents to workers wishing to have their own house rather than to live in a terrace.

Canberra was born at a time when this architecture and this form of planning was in vogue. It is of course quite acceptable to Australians to have their own house on their own block of land - more than acceptable, it is desirable. It is the *sine qua non* of living in the suburbs. In fact, in Australia such a vast proportion of houses, well over 80 per cent, are detached bungalows, that we now think of all housing as being that kind except in the inner city. For a long time it was only architects who regard mass housing as being a worthy alternative to the single house.

So Canberra is a city of suburbs filled with these detached houses and successive planners have sought to uphold that. The Federal Capital Commission built houses as small English cottages dotted about the streets in a picturesque but nevertheless English landscape. There were such anglophile desires in the establishment of Canberra, perhaps because of its climate, but probably moreover because of the desire for the very conservative planners to retain their links with the now receding England, that it might well have been a small corner of Surrey if you look carefully and longingly down some of the streets of Braddon or Kingston.

The idea of it being an anglophile city has certainly run right through its history. In the 1950's Lord Holford was employed to kickstart the design of Canberra after the second world war. Indeed, most of Canberra may be said to be Holford's city. Holford invoked the English "New Town" methodology (out of Garden city by Planning Bureaucracy). Everybody was to have their own house on their own block of land, discrete and separate from the other functions of the suburb.

Canberra has not evolved out of its place. Its English to its foundations and it has imported its style from the beginning. Indeed the N.C.D.C. consciously pursued a policy of importing architects from all over Australia to build in Canberra. They were in a bind: they were chosen for their work of a particular style in another city so they usually brought that style with them and gave it to what is now a multi-cultural city. Or perhaps that should be a multi-cities culture. In any event it does not have an architecture that speaks of place.

That the detached bungalow is the right form of housing for Canberra.

This brings me to the problem of the lack of house form variation, indeed, there is a lack of appreciation of the fundamental form in Australian housing. We seem to be more concerned with style applied to an accepted form rather than questioning the actual form itself. Canberra, of course, is made up of detached bungalows as the only form. It's an analogy to the isolation to the lack of real community that our houses are all made of this form. So much of work in Canberra has been based around the idea of this isolated bungalow that most people have failed to question any other way of building houses if possible.

Most architects that have been concerned with the style of the bungalow, what might be applied to it, rather than the actual form of the building itself.

The house form of Canberra is the isolated house. It's the detached bungalow sitting isolated on its block of land and looking out in all four directions. The set-back criteria provided by the NCDCC ensured that all houses were well set back from the side boundaries, thus distancing one from the other, creating the isolation of the individual building. This gives rise to problems whereby houses are close enough to be invading each other's aural privacy and visual privacy in a way that does not occur when the houses are in fact closer sharing a party wall. This contradiction means that the desirability is to move the houses further apart in order to achieve privacy when, in fact, the reverse would achieve just as much privacy by moving the houses closer together.

The detached house, with its windows like eyes in all four sides of it looking out, is really quite detached from the ground around it. It has no logical sequence of entering the landscape, looking out as it does on all four sides equally, and there is very little difference between any of the four facades of the building. Most houses in tract developments are built with the principal windows of the lounge and dining areas facing the street. The service areas of the kitchen and laundry face out to the backyard with a thin strip of concrete leading to the inevitable Hills hoist.

Although the machinery and the technology has changed, the house siting and the house form has little changed. Living areas on one side of the house, sleeping areas on the other, principal public rooms towards the street, more private or service rooms towards the back, largely in a rectangle or in an L-shape, it's the house form that predominates, not only in Canberra, but in all of the suburbs that have been developed in Australian cities in the last 25 to 30 years. It's a house that is in its isolation not capable of relating to the climate, relating to its orientation, relating to prospect. It relates only to the roadway and to the fact that there must be space around the building in which the 2.2 children play, in which the 1.8 motorcars and 1.1 boats are parked.

This house form has never seriously been questioned by the NCDC, nor why should they, since it has always met with popular appeal by the public. It is the most common form of house and it has obviously proven itself in the market place. However, it comes at a devastating price for the usage of land.

The great holy grail for Medium Density Housing in Canberra.

Medium density housing in Canberra is another issue about which there are great myths. Attempts at medium density housing by the National Capital Development Commission have been sporadic. There have been detached blocks of flats - the Bega and Allawah flats - built close to the city, but they resemble none so much as the kind of council flats from England.

Medium Density housing was revived in the late 60's on a hill called Swinger Hill - how appropriate a name. Unfortunately, the National Capital Development Commission was ahead of its time at this point in terms of the reactionary and conservative views that most people in Canberra held when they came here. They expected suburbia, they demanded suburbia and they got it.

Swinger Hill, however, was a marvellous construction of houses linked together on small blocks of land. Designed by Ian MacKay, every detail was considered, every planting, every wall, every courtyard. The small motorcar courts were safe for children, and the areas around the houses contained a number of courtyards with different uses. The quality of the development on Swinger Hill has never been matched by all the subsequent developments which are still filling in this Hill almost twenty years later. Most of those which have been done on the developer's initiative have been much poorer.

Apart from the medium density housing at Swinger Hill, most of the housing built at greater densities has followed previous examples from other cities. In the late 1970's, as Canberra started to grow again, there were a number of developers' initiatives one of which I was involved with was a development called Argyle Square. Here the large open space through the centre of it was designed as a gathering place, however, the zoning restrictions prevented Canberra from having a mixed use on one block of land. So even here, where we had an open area that all the houses looked onto, we were prevented, by planning regulations, from providing facilities for the people who lived in the houses. I would not be deterred. On every plan I drew a shop, and every time the planners at the NCDC said that we could not have one and asked us to remove it.

With the force of the developer, and the conviction that this was the only way that an open space would actually work, we continued to draw and write a cafe/shop on every drawing. Well the NCDC who by this stage had largely gained the reputation for NCDC was not so much for the National Capital Development Commission but as the no-can-do club finally relented and there is now a shop in Argyle Square. It's twee, its architecture is not particularly contemporary and in fact, the main square itself would certainly not win any architectural design competitions for its aesthetics. However, it is one of the most pleasant spaces and one of the few spacings where housing has a shop right close by as a local shop.

The consequence of the detached mentality.

As a result of all these considerations, Canberra's density of population is the lowest of any city in Australia. It is the most inefficient city because of this very low density. It means that the public transport systems have to run over much larger areas collecting people from much lower densities and it makes of course for an entirely inefficient system.

Furthermore, the space itself must be maintained and of course with such a huge area and such a low population, even despite the supposed large amounts of money available, Canberra cannot be maintained. Huge pieces of land are turned into wasteland areas, covered in grass and trees. From a distance they appear to be quite picturesque - up close, we find it nothing but weeds tangled together, broken open dirt and stumpy trees, ill-cared for, little maintained and only of scenic value at a distance.

A third consequence of having this large area of open space, apart from the transportation problems and the maintenance of the open space, is the sheer distance of travel that most people in Canberra have to make. While the idea of a satellite city with things concentrated in the centre might have been fine as a myth, in reality, people often work in another satellite city.

The Government departments, which are to a large extent the main employer of people in Canberra, are housed in different satellite cities, which means that one department, say, the Department of Health, may be located in Woden, while another department, the Department of Statistics, may be located over in Belconnon. These two government departments would obviously have to discuss things with each other, but they are separated by a gulf of some 20

kilometres. It means that should you be working for the Department of Health and live close by in Woden, but then be transferred or upgraded to the Department of Administrative Services in Belconnon, you would have to make a daily journey through 25 kilometres of bushland in order to reach your new job. As a result, Canberra has become a car-based city.

The bus is not an effective means of transport because of this low density, and so the car has become reigning all supreme. Like a self-fulfilling prophesy, the NDCDC says that the car is going to be the transport of the future and we must design larger roads, the larger roads take up more space, the extra space drives the things further apart, it makes the city less dense, it makes the public transport system less viable and the thing is like a large circular argument that keeps feeding on itself to push things further apart.

The myth that Canberra is a cold place

Another major myth in Canberra is the myth that it is a cold place. While certainly it has the coldest winter time temperatures of any major city, and certainly any of the capitals in Australia, it is not in fact a particularly bleak or cold place. In fact, in winter the days are clear and have a brilliant deep blue sky which is not often found in winter skies in Sydney or particularly in Melbourne. There is plenty of sunshine and there are plenty of possibilities to make up for the cold air temperatures with high solar radiation if it can be trapped in buildings. But moreover, the winter is relatively short, it is not the long deep snowbound winter of northern Europe and northern America. True, snow does occasionally fall in Canberra, but it is mostly a chilled north-westerly wind that blows down for about three to four months of the year that provides a sense of hibernation, a sense that the middle of the year is the time for going indoors and getting work done.

But this myth of the very cold conditions obscures the other three seasons. Spring and autumn in Canberra are utterly delightful. At this time, in autumn, when the leaves are turning, the colours are vibrant, the air is extraordinarily fresh, the skies particularly clear, the weather particularly dry and it is as if the perfect conditions had been dialled up day after day. As each night gets successively a little bit colder, one senses the changes of seasons more strongly than one does in Sydney, Brisbane or Melbourne.

In spring, as the trees regrow, this sense of seasonal change is also strong and the weather once again has a particularly pleasant number of days throughout the onset of summer. But summer in Canberra can be particularly fierce. It is a dry heat, quite often over 40 degrees and quite often at odds with the myth that this is a cold city.

Buildings in Canberra should really be designed as much for excessive summer heat as they should be for winter cool. If we assume that the ideal temperature inside a building is around 16 to 18 degrees, then we have as many days that are in excess of that with temperatures reaching 40 degrees, as we do have days when it is down below that temperature. Often the winter nights are very cold and the summer nights with night time radiation may bring the temperatures down, but for the bulk of buildings used during the day, summer considerations would be as warranted as winter.

But looking at the architecture of Canberra, one would be unable to discern that this is in fact a very hot dry place as well as being a very cold place in winter. The architecture doesn't exhibit the kind of deep verandahs on the west and southern sides of the building that might speak of a very hot dry climate. They do not have the thermal mass exposed to the sun which might prevent heat gain to the building but provide possibilities for night sky radiation. It does not have the sleepouts or roof sleeping rooms that might be found in this hot climate. Most of the public buildings are oriented towards the fashionable construction of facade rather than the organisation of shading devices and arrangements of verandahs, loggias, colonnades, and arcades which would provide protection from the sun whilst enjoying the wonderful ambient conditions.

This lack of recognition of spring, summer and autumn seems to be to the poverty of Canberra. It brings a kind of singlemindedness, and once again brings a kind of monotony to the architecture that exists. One only has to look at Civic to see that it has been made as a city isolated from its climate. It seems more appropriate for Tappiola in Finland than it does for this warm sunny climate and these wonderful outdoor conditions.

Is there a Canberra style of architecture?

The next myth is one that Canberra actually has a style of architecture which may be said to be of its own. True, at one particular time as the capital got underway in the 1920's and '30's, a certain Federal capital style developed and there were a number of notable examples of these kinds of buildings. As I remarked before Canberra was defined at the time when the last remnants of the Victorian age were put asunder with the burying of the terrace house and the burying of the Victorian finery and the emergence of a Queen Anne style house in red brick and red tile to replace it. It was Australia's first identifiably Australian style. Often the houses themselves were decorated with strong motifs drawn from Australia, the flora and the fauna - kangaroos as finials at the ends of rooves, decorative waratahs for

the timber underlining to verandahs.

Some of these stylistic developments were taken up in Canberra. The early houses, built some 30 years after the Federation houses in Sydney, were usually on a red base with white walls, smaller windows with a small porch using the chimney as a very strong design element, usually on the street side of the building. With wide overhangs often lined with white timber boards, the deep eaves throwing a strong shadow on the white pebble-finished walls, with red roofs often at a very steep angle, with of course large red brick chimneys showing through them, it was a particularly picturesque and a very strong symbol. The suburbs of Kingston, Barton, Reid and Braddon which were built at this time gave a certain homogeneity to the town.

The style was particularly evident on into a number of larger public buildings. The Sydney and Melbourne buildings, although based on the designs by Filippo Brunelleschi for the founding hospital in Florence in 1420, nevertheless adopted some of the principles that might be evidenced for the design of architecture in a similar climate. It had originally verandahs around all four sides on the upper levels with a deep loggia around the base, and it was finished in a very light colour, although not painted white as this is a very strong and difficult colour to cope with in such a sunny climate with such deep blue skies as Canberra has.

The former Canberra hotel, now the Canberra Hyatt, equally had a strong sense of this Federation architecture. A red base with a white building over the top with a red roof, strongly modelled in its windows, and in this case, having courtyards protected from the north-westerly winds that provided an oasis away from the cool winter winds and provided an arcaded court to walk and stroll in during the summer evenings.

The original Parliament House too conformed to this style with deep eaves and red brick base with the white building above. There is even industrial architecture, indeed, the first substantial building in Canberra was the Power House. One might make an ill informed pun on the current Parliament House having replaced this former Power House. But the original building with its grey pebble-dashed walls, its red tiled roof, and its very strong massing over its three to four storeys provided a continuity of architecture between industrial, commercial, retail and public buildings in Canberra. It is strange to think that the public buildings owe more to an adaptation to the climate than the houses, although this may well have been because of the strictures placed on the funds available to the Federal Capital Commission for the development of these houses.

After the second world war, however, when Canberra's development got underway again with the NCDC, this sense of style, this sense of location in place, this nascent genius loci was left unattended and unloved and Canberra failed to get the kind of architecture which might be rooted in its place. It could have been one designed to fit the long flat valleys looking out at the deep green hills, it could have been one adapted to the climate of a very deep, crisp cool winter and those long hot dry summer days, it could have been one adapted to the cosmopolitan air that is required when a small town needs to club together as a community against the vast isolation set aside in the large area around Canberra.

But it was none of these. It adopted imported ideas from the English new towns, it imported ideas of the development of satellite cities from Europe, which was recovering from the devastation of war and sought a complete alternative, a complete rejection to the kind of density and built-up areas which had largely been regarded as slums at the centres of the European cities. We turned instead to America as an ideal and we built what is virtually the Pasaadena of the south, or if you like, the San Fernando Valley. We are in fact the Valley boys and girls dislocated into the 51st state. If you travel in Los Angeles with its huge freeways, you will recognise some of these things in Canberra - the kind of dislocation between the means of travel and where people live.

That the N.C.D.C. was an innovative and creative planning body

As the '50's and '60's rolled on, so this desire to make mass suburbia which would be popular gained ever more momentum. The degree to which the NCDC became slaves of public opinion rather than as a planning authority with some vision is evidenced by the degree of popularity and public adulation that was sought. It undertook a massive public relations campaign, it built and maintained and, as has continued to be maintained by the NCPA, an exhibition area on Regatta Point, it published a large number of publications on all facets of its work, most of them aimed at convincing people that this was a popular and community-consulted condition. It did not attempt to try any innovative work for which it might not get public acceptance in the short term.

The degree to which it became obsessed about getting popular appeal was evidenced by its former Commissioner, Mr Tony Powell, appearing monthly on talkback programmes on the ABC where he answered questions. It was significant that most of the time when he answered these questions they were about the positioning of lights, the reorganisation of roundabouts, and the provision of better parks and gardens for the populace. At no time in any of these talks I have heard over several years did the issue of the major development of Canberra ever be taken up.

It is not something that one would expect the populace at large to be interested in, or able to comprehend. It is quite rightly the area of planners, who I believe should take an innovative approach as well as paying heed to what the population at large want. The NCDC would maintain that it tried to keep an evenhanded approach but it never really took hold of trying to make a dense built-up, medium density area which I believe would have been, and would continue to be, not only successful in terms of its answering the planning problems of providing sufficient people to make an urban or suburban centre work, but would have met with popular acceptance. One can see from the new infill work that it does gain political and popular acceptance and that if it had started some 20 to 25 years ago, this programme would not be quite so disruptive as it is now.

On the contrary, the NCDC put aside all controversial work and continued on building its large, tract land developments. It continued to put in standard housing as it called it throughout the area of Canberra, leaving certain sites set aside for medium density housing. One particular case that illustrates this point is Shackleton Hill in Mawson, an area which had a number of areas of medium density housing built close to the city centre, one a most unfortunate private development which was nicknamed the Great Wall of Mawson.

Behind that stood a very lovely hill covered in trees which had always been designated for medium density housing. However, it was largely surrounded with large, and because they were near the top of the hill, quite expensive houses. You will understand that the nature of the value of housing in Canberra is determined by height - the higher up the slopes you are, the more valuable the house. There are no houses that are able to get very near the lake so the proximity to water which governs the value of houses in every other capital in Australia is not at issue here in Canberra yet.

On Shackleton Hill, the area became used as a local residents' park. As the residents' park became more and more popular, so the chances for the NCDC to put medium density housing or to sell it to any developer to use for medium density housing, became more and more difficult. When in the end it did choose to develop it some 10 to 12 years after the main standard housing development, it was faced with serious opposition from the local residents' group. But they really had no leg to stand on. That they had always known that the area was going to be medium density housing did not stop them waging a bitter battle in the newspapers and on radio and TV against the rapacious NCDC.

Through the mismanagement of their policies and the misorganisation of the staging of their suburbs, they made a rod for their own backs and quite frankly I think they got everything they deserved for their inability to programme their works. Because, of course, the lake becomes sacrosanct, because the idea of having an idyllic garden setting has taken hold, it is virtually impossible to build anything close to the lake.

When they first attempted to build buildings close to Lake Ginninderra in the new town of Belconnen, the locals resisted vociferously. Never mind that the major shopping centre had been completely dislocated from its original site and moved down close to the lake but had been built with a four-storey carpark completely obliterating the view of the lake meaning that anybody on the lake was looking back at a town centre that was more defined by its carpark than by any activity of people or of shopping or of the retail areas or commercial areas. Never mind that the lake had been so badly treated this way, and could in fact have had a better relationship to the town centre had additional buildings been infilled between these carparks and the lake.

The residents protested. It caused a quite unnecessary bout and tussle, and only at the building of the third lake in Tuggeranong, did the NCDC learn its lesson by building the buildings first and then flooding the lake up to them. And so the two buildings which most attach to the lakes in Canberra are in fact two high schools, the Tuggeranong College on Tuggeranong Lake and Belconnon High school at Belconnon.

The myth that Canberra is a great place to raise children.

Another of the myths that has grown up in Canberra is that it is a terrific place for children to grow up. It depends what age of children we are talking about. If they are very young, and their parents are struggling to buy a house, earning in their first or second jobs and trying to raise a young family, quite often they can only afford just the house, or perhaps the house and one car. It leaves the mother usually at home, isolated in the suburbs with her babies. The father requires the car to go to work because it is usually quite dislocated from where they live. Because they seek cheaper housing, they are usually on the peripheral of the city because there is no cheaper medium-density housing close to the city as there is in many other cities in Australia. The medium density housing has been left to the wealthy.

Thus the children grow up with their mother looking out over long green hills but isolated from one another, with child minding being the major topic in any street in suburban Canberra. As the children grow up, certainly they are provided with schools - well-endowed schools - and in fact a major programme of experimentation was undertaken in Canberra with open plan and highly structured schools being built throughout the '70's and into the '80's. Indeed much of the

architecture that has been published in the last four or five years in Architecture Australia has been of these schools with notable examples by Darryl Jackson, Ken Marr, Lawrence Neild and Edwards, Madigan, Torzillo and Briggs.

These schools provide a very high standard of provision of services, there is a quite well thought out system of education which is starting to gain high praise for its segregation of primary, high school and college, and of course they are located centrally to the suburbs, often with the cycle paths leading through the parks underneath the major roadways to the schools. If you are able to provide your children with bicycles, they are able to get to school and to get to the shops and get around the suburbs with a great degree of mobility.

But you can only enjoy riding around green grass on cycle paths for just so long. By the time you reach 13 or 14, you have had enough of this endless greenery and you look for more excitement, and where do you find it? Well, there are no streets to hang out on, there are little clubs and there is no possibility of establishing a youth club in an area where the density of people is so far spread out as it is in Canberra. And so the shopping centre becomes the de facto youth minding centre. The bane of Lend Lease who operates so many of the shopping centres in Canberra is the disaffected youth in their early teens taking refuge in the Monaro Mall, in the Woden Plaza and in the Belconnon Mall and in the Tuggeranong Hyperdome (what a name!).

Here the children use the internal mall streets which are, as Lend Lease continually points out, privately owned as if it was a public street, as if it was the local shopping centre in any suburban area in Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Brisbane, or Perth. On these streets in the other cities you have a mixture of cars, passing life, passing people and the shops and thus you become in your early teens involved in what is the civic life of Australia. That it is such a poor civic life really I think belongs to its origins as a suburbia rather than an urban tradition.

However, whatever difficulties the suburban tradition in these other capital cities may have, it is further exacerbated by its sanitised and isolated version that occurs in these Canberra suburbs. And so the shopping centre becomes the large child minding centre with a continual tug-of-war going on between the security officers and the young children and teenagers who wish to ride their skateboards, ride their bicycles and just hangout around the donut parlour.

The myth that Canberrans live in Canberra.

One last almost ridiculous myth. Canberrans don't seem to like living in Canberra. They leave at the slightest opportunity. They've even created suburbs that don't appear on the maps. Batemans Bay, for instance, the town at the coast which has been taken over by the city of Canberra. Batemans Bay is an extension of Canberra - it's the place where they go at the weekend to escape this monotony of diversity. One only has to drive through Batemans Bay on any weekend to see how many white and blue numbered plated cars there are parked up along the main street. But Batemans Bay is of course part of New South Wales and Batemans Bay, therefore, is subject to different planning laws. It is part of the other world and it is part of that world landscape of water, sand, trees and the rough headlands that many Australians would identify as being the appropriate setting for a city. And so people escape out of this kind of large flat plain of what has once been described as good sheep paddocks gone to waste and they escape down to a more vibrant location and a more vibrant suburbia.

In summary, one can see that Canberra is a city made up of a number of myths. With the establishment of the elected government for Canberra, 17 people being elected by a most contorted system, democracy of a form has finally come to Canberra. But it is unlikely that it will be able to change the planning layout of Canberra. Indeed, the imprint is so strong that the area of the city would sustain in Australian terms up to 1 million people inside its current boundaries, and overseas, a city of perhaps 2 to 3 times that number. The only real change that the elected body can reek upon the planning is to call a halt to any further peripheral development and undertake a massive infill campaign along the lines that, say, the Krier brothers have advocated for some European cities.

In order to operate at an efficient level the city would have to have a density two to three times that which it currently does. Unfortunately, this is probably beyond the political will and probably beyond any level of public acceptance for the city will change so radically. And so with the arrival of this new body we see that Canberra will probably continue on, it will muddle on much the same. Many of the people who have been elected are vehemently opposed to the idea of self-government and it is likely that the new self government will fall apart in anarchy of a form and bickering and, I guess in five years time, it will be totally indistinguishable to the kind of lack-lustre politics that seems to infest local councils right the way throughout Australia. But it could be different.

I would liken it to a child who has grown up being fed lollies. The child says it loves them, as the populace loved the detached house, but it's not that good for them. It smacks of paternalism in one sense to tell people what they can and can't have. But that is what I believe a planning body should have done. Like the dietician advocating a healthier intake than sweets so we should have advocated a different planning strategy. It's not too late. The patient hasn't had a heart attack. (that will come if there is a massive escalation in the costs of private motoring). But the patient is not

at all well. He has pimples, he's overweight and a better diet is in order. We'll set the menu with a serving of the Chief minister's residence.

What possibilities are there then for the Chief Minister who will preside over this new government. What should the housing of that Chief Minister reflect about Canberra. Should it reflect its suburban nature, should it make an ironic comment upon the nature of the town, should it be using architecture to reflect the status and the current condition of architecture, should it be using a sort of post-structural analysis of the city to reflect back upon itself. Or could it be set up as an opposition to the nature of the city. Could it be that the Chief Minister should not be isolated down on the lake, should not be in a privileged position but should be relocated to an area where the sheer density and the organisation of this particular site might give rise to an example for the way in which Canberra might develop in the future rather than reflecting on the way in which Canberra has developed in the past. That is a task now up to you.

Tone Wheeler
Biographical details.

1. Resident of Canberra for almost ten years.
2. An architect in Canberra for those ten years working for the Department of Construction as a consultant to the NCDC and later in private practice. Designer of the 7000 series Government houses which won the C.S. Daley Medal, a R.A.I.A. award. When in private practice Tone designed a number of private houses and a major medium density housing development, Argyle Square, in Canberra.
3. Established radio programmes dealing with alternative technologies and alternative planning on Community Radio 2XX and later was an architecture commentator on the local ABC radio station.
4. Winner of the Housing Industry Association's Innovative Housing Competition for 1987.