Canberra

Beyond the Boundaries
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Cover images: unopened competition box, international competition to design ‘the Federal Capital City of the Commonwealth of Australia’.

Image above: central section of ‘View from Summit of Mt Ainslie’, part of entry #29 submitted by Walter Burley Griffin (and Marion Mahony Griffin) in international design competition.

Image opposite: central section of ‘City and Environs’, part of entry #29.
Canberra

Beyond the Boundaries

Canberra’s Extraordinary International Design Competition, 1911–12

David Headon

A publication of the Chief Minister and Treasury Directorate, ACT Government – to commemorate the Centenary of Canberra, 1913–2013
The Big Picture

In late March 1912, four men stood purposefully on Capital Hill, Canberra, amidst a range of surveying equipment. The three older men, judges for the international competition to design ’the Federal Capital City of the Commonwealth of Australia’, were in the new capital to assess the short-listed competition entries, on site. They had with them photographs of all 46, to study dutifully against the prominent landscape features surrounding them.

The fourth man, younger and more dapper in a light, well-cut suit, appears all business in the group photograph that captured the significant historical moment for posterity. He has his hands on hips, looking intently at the camera. This was Conway Inglis Clark, architect son of Andrew Inglis Clark, the primary draftsman of the Australian Constitution and a committed republican. Conway Clark had only been back in Australia for a few years, having spent the period from 1905 to 1908 in the north-east of the United States. There, he had absorbed the very latest in global architecture and town planning ideas. As Secretary to the judging panel, Clark’s knowledge of contemporary design techniques – and their innovative practitioners – would prove an invaluable asset to those formally tasked with making the final decision.

In the weeks that followed the day of the photograph, as the short list was reduced to eight amidst intense debate, the judges would split. Despite this, and with the benefit of one hundred years of hindsight, we can say that those who made the ultimate decision got it dead right. The contentious process did allow the cream to find its way to the top. According to its two Chicagoan creators, Walter Burley Griffin (1876–1937) and Marion Mahony Griffin (1871–1961), Australia’s competition-winning design proposed ‘an ideal city’, a city meeting their ‘ideal of the city of the future’. It was a precious gift to a nation only now – in this the Centenary year of the milestone competition announcement – beginning to appreciate its real and lasting value. Architect Peter Corrigan has provocatively described Canberra as ‘the greatest artwork undertaken in this country’s history’.

Sydney town endured its first Botany Bay decades burdened by Old World slurs, labels such as the ’sink of wickedness’, ’thiefland’ and ’the pickpocket quarter of the globe’. Canberra, in stark contrast, was conceived from the start in design terms that embraced a New World vocabulary of aspiration, optimism and visionary intent. The story needs telling.
Historic gathering in Melbourne, 23 May 1912, of those men involved, directly or indirectly, in the judging of the international design competition, 1911-12. Minister for Home Affairs, the ‘legendary’ King O’Malley, typically dominates the photograph. The three competition judges (Coane, Smith and Kirkpatrick) are at left, with Secretary Clark at back left. Colonel David Miller (right) and Percy Owen (at back, right of table) would soon have controversial roles in the development of Canberra. Keith Murdoch, from the *Age* newspaper (at back, centre), Rupert Murdoch’s father, stands with other journalists, ready to provide media coverage of this highly significant event.

Minister O’Malley made certain that the announcement had its share of drama. The Governor-General’s Deputy, Walter Bingle (seated at back, centre), was theatrically invited to inspect the package containing the names of the prize-winning designers, with its impressive red seal, to ensure it had not been tampered with—to ensure, as O’Malley put it with characteristic flair, that no ‘liberal jerry-wobblers’ could complain about a lack of due process and rigour. ‘Mr Bingle, do your duty,’ O’Malley commanded at the climactic moment.
The Competition – A Snapshot History

Over a two-week period (6–17 May 1901), spanning the formal opening of the Commonwealth Parliament, the Congress of Engineers, Architects, Surveyors and Others Interested in the Building of the Federal Capital of Australia takes place in Collins Street, Melbourne. At the conference, a number of Australian design professionals respond in particular to the second of two Congress resolutions: ‘that the Federal Capital should be laid out in the most perfect manner possible ...’ Sydney architect George Sydney Jones delivers a paper advocating a capital city with ‘the commonsense 20th century spirit of the Australian’. Importantly, he also suggests that ‘in order to obtain the best conceivable, or jointly conceivable [national capital] plan, it seems to me that the best method is, that designs be called in competition, shewing [sic] how the city should be laid out ...’

In 1906, Prime Minister Alfred Deakin sends Joseph Davis, Under-Secretary of the NSW Department of Public Works, on an overseas fact-finding mission to ‘obtain such particulars, plans and documents as in your opinion will be of assistance in connection with the founding of the Federal City’. Davis returns with information on Washington DC, Ottawa, London and Paris.

Austin Chapman, Minister for Trade and Customs (and the first federal member for the seat of Eden-Monaro), delivers a speech in the Commonwealth Parliament, on 26 October 1908, stating that: ‘The Capital cannot be dumped down in a day like a tent. First, the laying out of a great city – a city not for tomorrow, or for next year, but for all time; a city unique in its beauty and utility, with broad avenues intersecting its regular squares, with frequent reservations of grass, flowers, and fountains, with its trees and parks, substantial business houses, and sightly dwellings, its schools, universities, galleries and museums, its monuments and public buildings, its noble rivers and picturesque landscape, its rugged mountains and fertile plains, with Kosciusko in the distance piercing the sky, and lifting itself like a heavenly dome. These, and many other natural advantages, will offer a noble panorama, and a more inspiring contemplation than can possibly be afforded by any other city in the world’.
In his preliminary report on the ‘Yass-Canberra’ site, submitted on 25 February 1909, District Surveyor Charles Scrivener writes: ‘A city could be located at Canberra that would be visible on approach for many miles, streets with easy gradients would be readily designed, while prominent hills of moderate altitude present suitable sites for the principal buildings. The capital would probably lie in an amphitheatre of hills ...’

In 1909, John (later Sir John) Sulman, arguably Australia’s best-known planner during the early Federation years, writes a series of seven articles for Sydney’s *Daily Telegraph* entitled ‘The Federal Capital’. In the first article, Sulman notes: ‘A city on virgin soil, the capital and centre of an island continent, forming a fifth division of the world, laid out in an age of sanitary reform, in the full tide of mechanical progress, should be an imperishable monument to the designers’. In the final article he advocates the hiring of an internationally renowned planner to design the new capital city: ‘To obtain such an expert we must, I fear, look beyond the boundaries of the Commonwealth to those countries which have had experience in city planning’.

Sulman then promotes the substance of the *Telegraph* articles with purpose: in an article in the same year for the prestigious journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA); at a symposium in Sydney, ‘The Federal Capital – What Next?’ (summarised in George Taylor’s *Building* journal on 11 September); and, most significantly, in the *Transactions* of RIBA’s Town Planning Conference (held in London, 10–15 October 1910), the first genuinely international gathering of the world’s most distinguished planners.

**At the September symposium in Sydney**, Sulman expresses more confidence in the Australian response to a ‘world-wide competition’: ‘It would give Australians a chance to reveal a genius, and they would have the inestimable advantage of knowledge of local conditions and the possibility of careful study of the site’.

**At the same symposium, Walter Liberty Vernon**, the NSW Government Architect, supports Sulman’s sentiments. An international design competition will expose Australia to ‘the world’s best ideas’: ‘It is a grand opportunity, this establishing of a Federal City in a young country, with all the world’s examples before it. It is an opportunity that would hardly occur in the world again; hence it is hoped that the results will be worthy of its importance’.

On 13 December 1909, *Building* publishes an article by the Minister for Home Affairs George Fuller, entitled ‘The Federal City. What Are We Going To Do About It’, in which he states: ‘Personally, I consider it will be advisable to invite world-wide competition for the prize we intend to offer’. In his conclusion, Fuller strikes a visionary note typical of the lofty ambition of the era: ‘We do not for one moment forget that we are not building this city for our own time, but to leave as a heritage to posterity. We feel we hold a unique opportunity which shall never occur again in the history of the world … As the newest of nations, we have the experience of ages to guide us, and it should be our noblest desire to make ourselves worthy of this great opportunity’.
On 4 January 1910, the Secretary of the Department of Home Affairs, the intimidating Colonel David Miller, sends a long and detailed document to Minister Fuller with a range of recommendations: among them, that lithographic copies of the capital site’s contour survey be prepared; that photographs of the site be taken; that these items be, in his abbreviated phrasing, ‘ready competitive design for the Federal Capital City be invited throughout the world’; that such designs be submitted to a Board of Assessors, comprising the Director-General of Public Works, an architect and a surveyor; that premiums be given for first, second and third; and that these prize-winning designs become the ‘property of the Commonwealth’.

In the same month of January, RIBA announces its intention to hold an international planning conference in London in October 1910, focusing on strategies to improve the (re)design and living conditions of cities across the world.

In April 1910, the (second) Government of Labor Prime Minister Andrew Fisher is elected (with a historic first majority since Federation in both Houses). New Minister for Home Affairs, the controversial King O’Malley, hitherto ambivalent about the Canberra site, soon becomes an outspoken advocate. In answer to a question in the House of Representatives (7 July 1910), about the Government’s intentions for the new federal city, O’Malley answers: ‘I propose to invite throughout the world competitive designs for laying out the city and subsequently for Parliament House, and probably some of the other more important buildings’.

In the House the next day, O’Malley warms to his task: ‘I have to ask the honourable members to endeavour to regard [the Federal Capital] not as little Australians, but as big Australians … we desire to have a city that will be the Gotham of Australia … I slept there in a tent last June, and felt in the morning that I had awakened to a new world’.

In one 1910 House speech O’Malley makes it crystal clear, in his flamboyant style, that the competition will play no favourites, will bend to no prejudices: ‘If an Australian can produce a design, it will be accepted; but we require the best we can get, whether it comes from Swede or Dane, from Quaker, Shaker, or Holy Roller’.

In the coming months, O’Malley’s pronouncements generate keen interest, across Australia and internationally. A number of Australia’s leading design professionals – architects, engineers and surveyors – express their enthusiasm for the initiative.

In response to the passing of the Town Planning Act (1909) in Great Britain, RIBA hosts the Town Planning Conference in London in October 1910. It attracts a number of the world’s best-known planners, among them, Daniel Burnham, Raymond Unwin, Patrick
Geddes, Thomas Mawson, Ebenezer Howard, Eugene Henard, Joseph Stubben, Louis Bonner, Rud. Eberstadt and Australia’s John Sulman. The published Transactions of the Conference comprise an astonishing 812 pages, a ‘rich record of papers, reports and speeches, defining the state of the art of the fledgling town planning movement’ (according to Australian planning scholar Robert Freestone). For Australia’s looming capital city design competition, the timing could hardly be better. The London conference will exert a direct influence on the Australian competition.

On 3 November 1910, Department Secretary, Colonel David Miller, writes to Minister O’Malley to seek authority to conduct a worldwide competition to design the Canberra site. Prizes of £1500, £1000 and £500 will be offered for first, second and third places – those designs immediately becoming the property of the Commonwealth Government. Inadvertently signalling the international furore to follow, Miller also writes: ‘In my opinion it is more than probable that no design will be adopted in its entirety, but that features or ideas from perhaps each of the three accepted designs may be utilised to evolve what will eventually be the design for the city’. He adds that it is ‘necessary to stipulate that the city will be laid out by the Officers of this Department’. Miller then suggests a judging panel consisting of those public officials with whom he has for years worked closely: Director-General of Commonwealth Public Works, Percy Owen; NSW Government Architect, Walter Vernon; and (by then) Commonwealth Director of Lands and Surveys, Charles Scrivener. In defiance of the competition being international, Miller clearly aims at ‘in-house’ administration and construction of the new city, post-competition, regardless of the result.

In December 1910, a Board consisting of Miller, Owen, Vernon and Scrivener writes the competition brief, which adheres closely to the draft conditions proposed by Miller in his January 1910 Departmental document – except for the recommendation on judging. This issue will become a hot one.

On 30 April 1911, the Department of Home Affairs announces a competition to design ‘the Federal Capital City of the Commonwealth of Australia’. The closing date for entries will be 31 January 1912, and prizes for first, second and third will be £1750, £750 and £500.
In May 1911, competition kits begin to circulate across Australia and throughout the world, courtesy of many hundreds of metre-long wooden boxes containing virtually everything a prospective entrant might need. Over 170 kits alone are distributed by the British Embassy in Washington, and even more are allocated by the Australian High Commission in London. Some 725 kits are produced for circulation.

Each kit box contains: a five-part set of instructions, Information, Conditions and Particulars for Guidance in the Preparation of Competitive Designs for the Federal Capital City of the Commonwealth of Australia; a map of the preliminary contour survey of the Yass–Canberra area; two copies of the map of the contour survey of the actual city site; a topographical map of the Federal (in 1938, the Australian) Capital Territory, which had been established formally only months earlier, on 1 January 1911; a map of NSW; a map of the south-eastern part of NSW; a geological map of the city site; a map indicating both rainfall and temperature statistics for the capital site and region; a report by the Commonwealth Meteorologist on climate in the Yass–Canberra district; and two superb cyclorama reproductions (by Charles Coulter) sketching 360 degrees of the city site landscape – one drawn at what is now City Hill and the other from what is now Capital Hill. [The five-part set of instructions is explored in detail in the following section, The Brief Enlarged.]

Kits are despatched to: Wellington, Ottawa, Pretoria and Cape Town, London, Paris, Berlin, Washington DC, New York and Chicago – and to the Public Works Departments of each Australian state. They are routinely made available, as well, at the Department of Home Affairs office in Melbourne.

Controversy stirs within weeks because the judges in the competition are not named (Section 12 of the ‘Conditions’ simply states that the assessment Board will consist of an engineer, an architect and a licensed surveyor). More alarmingly for design professionals worldwide and nationally, especially the members of the Royal Institute of British Architects: the ‘Minister will adjudicate upon the Designs admitted to competition, after they have been submitted to the Board, and such adjudication will be final and without appeal’. King O’Malley, the American-born Minister for Home Affairs, no favourite of his own Prime Minister, reserves the right to have the final say on the winners.

Alarmed by the response of the prestigious and influential RIBA, Secretary Miller attempts to persuade his Minister to name the judges, to invite the RIBA to nominate one of the judges, and to allow the Board’s decision to be the final one. O’Malley gives
some ground, stating in answer to a specific question that he is ‘not going to be the artistic judge’, that ‘the three gentlemen whom I intend to appoint will judge the designs’, and that the appointed Board will consist of ‘an Australian architect, an Australian engineer, and an Australian surveyor, all members of Australian institutes’.

O’Malley’s newly adopted stance fails to placate either the RIBA or the many Australian professionals for whom the RIBA is the peak architectural/planning body in the world. Intense criticism of O’Malley’s position, and that of his Government, in Australian and overseas journals and newspapers, fails to weaken the Minister’s resolve. The RIBA, together with its aligned institutes in NSW, Victoria and Tasmania, thus boycotts the competition.

*Building* publishes an article by NSW Government Architect Walter Liberty Vernon, in the November issue of the journal, in which (the just retired) Vernon notes the reasons for the controversy, but encourages his colleagues to embrace the competition as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. He exhorts Australian architects to compete in what is the first national competition of this young land of ours’.

In spite of ongoing controversy, entries flood in. The closing date is changed to the last day of February 1912, in response to the enormous interest – which prompts a delighted and vindicated O’Malley to trumpet with delight: ‘It’s marvellous! It’s marvellous!’ The South Australian Register reports that the ‘volatile’ Minister has been transported into ‘the highest pitch of ecstasy’.

While it will be widely reported by Australian newspapers and the Minister, from mid-March 1912, that there are over 200 entries (and, according to one report, some 400), a total of 137 entries from 15 different countries are logged (anonymously) by the Department. For eminent architectural historian John Reps, in his monumental study of the competition and its results, *Canberra 1912. Plans and Planners of the Australian Competition* (1997), this astonishing collection of ‘designs and the mass of related documentary material’ represents ‘a remarkable cross-section of unrivalled depth and variety of planning theory and practice in the early twentieth century’.
The competition also attracts a cross-section of community talent as well, no doubt to the satisfaction of the Labor Government of the day. As expected, many entrants are town planners, architects, landscape architects, engineers and surveyors. But they are joined by a clerk, a farmer, a wool sorter, a teacher, an accountant, a draper, a stockbroker, a salesman, a miner and a mine manager, a journalist, a French polisher, a butcher, a gardener, a chemist and one ambitious astronomer, used to reaching for the stars (and this list does not account for as many as 60 mostly hand-written entries apparently vetoed on sight).

After seeking advice from his counterpart in the previous Deakin Government, George Fuller, on 2 March 1912 Minister O’Malley names his judging panel: Melbourne civil engineer and surveyor, John Montgomery Coane, as chair; Melbourne mechanical engineer James Alexander Smith; and (at Fuller’s suggestion) Sydney architect John Kirkpatrick. Secretary to the panel is Conway Inglis Clark, a Tasmanian architect, whose knowledge of the latest in contemporary design and planning practice will prove invaluable.

It is an intimidating task, since the 137 entries include more than 500 individual drawings.

The judging commences on 4 March. For each plan, the judges ask a series of questions: Does the plan meet the listed requirements? Does it take account of stormwater and drainage? Does it give sufficient area to parks and gardens, and allow for ornamental waters? Are residential areas separated from heavy traffic and industry? Does it suggest grandeur? Does it effectively symbolise a national capital? Attention to these questions leads, in the words of the Board members, 'to the elision of the less meritorious plans'.

It is obvious, because of the timing of the competition and the vigorous, global emergence of the 'science of town planning' at the turn of the century, that both 'City Beautiful' and 'Garden City' ideas will influence the entries of many competitors.

By late March 1912, the 137 entries have been reduced to 46, (eleven were not considered because of violations of the competition conditions). Each is photographed (70 x 70 cms) in Melbourne, for the judges to take to Canberra, to allow close, on-site study. Thirty-eight of these original photographs survive in the collection of the National Archives of Australia, along with lithographic images of the remaining eight.

After the Canberra visit in the last week of March, the field of 46 is reduced to eleven. More elimination rounds occur over several days, but it becomes clear that the three judges cannot agree on the winners.
A 15-page Commonwealth Government pamphlet, the *Report of the Board*, clarifies the disagreement. It reproduces a letter from the Board members to Minister O’Malley, dated 14 May 1912, in which they briefly sketch the process that led to consideration, finally, of just six entries (in fact it was eight): ‘Further reduction has not been found practicable. The Board remains divided in its judgement’.

James Smith and John Kirkpatrick confirm their ‘Majority Recommendation’ order of merit as: first, Walter Burley Griffin, of Chicago, USA; second, Eliel Saarinen, of Helsingfors, Finland; and third, D Alfred Agache, of Paris, France. Smith and Kirkpatrick also give honourable mentions to Harold Van Buren Magonigle, of New York; and Schanfelberg, Rees and Gummer, of London. Board Chair, James Coane, confirms his ‘Minority Recommendation’ order as: first, W Scott Griffiths, Robert Charles Gibbon Coulter and Charles Henry Caswell, of Sydney; second, Arthur C Comey, of Cambridge (Harvard), Massachusetts; and third, Nils Gellerstedt, of Stockholm, Sweden (and his collaborators, Ivan Lindgren and the Australian Hugo Du Rietz).

The pamphlet includes Minister O’Malley’s response, in which he writes that ‘after careful consideration’ he opts for the order of the ‘Majority’ Board members, in favour of Griffin, Saarinen and Agache, and, as he puts it, ‘I adjudicate accordingly’.

On 23 May 1912, at a ‘very solemn function’ in his Home Affairs office, according to the Argus newspaper, O’Malley announces the winners of the competition. The decision is made soon after to award Coane’s first choice – the Griffiths, Coulter and Caswell design – a fourth prize. This plan will assume a mischievous significance in the early evolution of Canberra as the national capital.

Minister O’Malley responds: ‘I am satisfied the best design has been selected. It is a wonderful design and shall make the Federal City the finest in the world … What we wanted was the best the world can give us and we have got it’.

O’Malley sends a curiously lean telegram to Griffin:

‘Your design awarded first premium. Minister Home Affairs’.

Griffin replies in kind:


The exchange is perhaps a portent of the protracted struggle ahead for the winning designer – an epic clash, as Paul Reid accurately observes, ‘of Australian pragmatism and Chicago idealism’.

In an interview in the New York Times, on 2 June 1912, Griffin states, ‘I have planned a city not like any other city in the world. I have planned it not in a way that I expected any government authorities in the world would accept. I have planned an ideal city – a city that meets my ideal of the city of the future’.

In a note to the Minister, dated 7 June 1912, the Secretary of the Department of Home Affairs, David Miller, writes: ‘It now becomes necessary for the Design for the lay-out of the City to be adopted; such a Design should satisfy the requirements and comply with your instructions that the federal capital should be a Model City designed in accordance with the most modern ideas of town planning, embracing those distinctive features which are requisite to place this – the Capital City of the Commonwealth of Australia – in the fore-front of all Cities’.
Photos of the 46 short-listed entries in the international design competition, which were taken to Canberra by the judging panel in late March 1912 to facilitate expert analysis on-site.
The Brief Enlarged

The contents of the competition kit box that raced around Australia and the world in the latter part of 1911 comprised a brief at once comprehensive and meticulous – a timely and potent catalyst for a design profession already energised by the sheer weight of activity within the challenging, new ‘science of town planning’.

The bulk of the town planning discourse at the time of Federation concentrated on cities already built – ageing, old and ancient. The talk was necessarily of refurbishment and renewal. The Australian capital, however, was different. It was a blank canvas, a stimulus to the enquiring, fertile mind. All options on the table. As the Sydney Daily Telegraph summed up with barely concealed exuberance in March 1909: ‘They are to build their city on virgin ground – a clean page whereon they may write what they will’.

Australia represented a unique opportunity to create afresh in a country that was grabbing global attention for all the right reasons. In the decade after Federation, leading up to the Federal Capital City design competition, the infant Australian democracy had established an enviable reputation as the social laboratory of the world. By 1910, an impressive range of social welfare initiatives had passed into law. When the second Government of Labor Prime Minister Andrew Fisher came to power in April 1910, it was handed an unprecedented gift. As the first administration since 1901 to enjoy a majority in both houses of parliament, committed legislative action to broaden the social experiment in Australia was certain.

Fisher made his position known in a long campaign speech he delivered in Gympie, Queensland, on 30 March 1909 (during his first administration), implying that if he was ever able to achieve the requisite numbers in the parliament, and he could legislate unfettered, he would forge a new social contract with the people of Australia.

The Gympie speech, nearly three hours in length, steadily articulated a future ‘nation building’ program that included the establishment of an Australian navy, a transcontinental railway, a national currency, a people’s bank and a land tax. When in power for the second time, 1910–13, Fisher turned intent into concrete action and achievement.

But the Fisher program was not only about bricks and mortar, military preparedness, sleepers into the continental wilderness, good policy and selective pragmatism. He also took an avid interest in the question of national identity. Home-grown symbols, he knew in his heart, were essential for a nation so young. The fragile cultural fabric needed connections, some stitching. It needed some genuine leadership.

Among other initiatives, Fisher had the Australian Coat of Arms (designed by the College of Arms in England) remodelled to give it a more Australian flavour (the Coat of Arms we have today); he established the Historic Memorials Committee and the Commonwealth Arts Advisory Board; and he had the foresight to negotiate the purchase, by the Australian Government, of some 16,500 books and documents from Edward Petherick – still one of the most important components of the National Library of Australia’s many collections.

However, it was arguably Fisher’s role in the founding of the national capital that encapsulated the sense of mission he shared with his Labor Government colleagues.

After the option known as ‘Yass–Canberra’ was finally selected in late 1908 as the site of the national capital, following an exhausting ‘Battle of the Sites’, Fisher told the parliament that, while he remained a Dalgety man (the southern NSW Snowy River town which had its own short-lived Seat of Government Act in 1904), the Commonwealth Government had an obligation, a binding responsibility to the nation, to get on with the job.
Selection of the sixteen renderings produced by Marion Mahony Griffin and her small team in Chicago for Australia’s international design competition. The extraordinary visual quality of the Griffin entry was undoubtedly a key factor in entry #29 being declared the winner.
The parliament’s recent decision, however contentious it might be, must be honoured. A timely juxtaposition of creative cultural context, a progressive, ambitious Government and a highly motivated design and planning profession, proved irresistible.

The resulting competition brief – international competition brief – was one directed at the informed planner. Minister for Home Affairs, King O’Malley, would say, post-competition, that what he wanted was the best the world could produce.

So what was it that teased and titillated practising and would-be planners in Australia and overseas, a century ago, to enter this competition despite the ongoing controversy? The five-part *Information, Conditions and Particulars for Guidance in the Preparation of Competitive Designs for the Federal Capital City of the Commonwealth of Australia* provides us with a number of embedded clues.
Firstly, in the History and Introductory section, prospective entrants were invited to contemplate the Commonwealth Government’s elevated vision and aims for the Canberra site, articulated memorably by the Minister for Home Affairs (in December 1908) in his instructions to District Surveyor, Charles Scrivener, at the start of the site’s preliminary survey:

‘… the Surveyor will bear in mind that the Federal Capital should be a beautiful city, occupying a commanding position, with extensive views, and embracing distinctive features which will lend themselves to the evolution of a design worthy of the object, not only for the present, but for all time …’

So many of the members of the Commonwealth Parliament at the time, including Hugh Mahon and Andrew Fisher, had spent their childhood years in the northern hemisphere immersed in poverty. Their newly adopted country, and its national capital, gave them a chance to dream. Their new capital would be a showpiece for the world.

Mahon’s instructions linked directly to the lively global town planning context of the previous 15 years. The World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, in 1893, produced astonishing images of what the ‘City Beautiful’ could look like. The world was transfixed. Australia, too. At the Melbourne Congress of Engineers, Architects and Surveyors in 1901, all the talk was directed towards realising the City Beautiful in Australia. Minister Mahon and his department were simply tapping in to the zeitgeist, the spirit of the times.

Secondly, the three-page Description of the site, together with Charles Coulter’s two cyclorama paintings, made it clear that the new creation must be truly a ‘city in the landscape’. The metropolis to come, this ‘Gotham of Australia’ to use O’Malley’s ebullient phrase, had to be artistically placed within a special ‘bush’ environment – with its ‘willow-bordered’ Molonglo River intersecting the city site, ‘sombre-toned eucalypt-covered slopes of Mount Ainslie
and Black Mountain’, scattered homesteads and farms, background of ‘forest-clad ranges’, snow-covered ‘mountain chains’ and ‘undulating pasture land’. This site would test the informed planner’s imagination as well as his professional expertise.

**Thirdly**, the ‘city in the landscape’ must also boast a ‘Garden City’ appearance. Throughout the kit document, emphasis is placed on the seamless incorporation of ‘Parks and Gardens’ and ‘Ornamental Water’. The City Beautiful and Garden City were, according to the educated intent of the Federation founders, inextricably interwoven.

**Fourthly**, with the first section of the Requirements section stating unequivocally that the ‘city will ... be primarily the official and social centre of Australia’, and Mahon’s instructions emphasising the ‘evolution of a design worthy of the object’, prospective entrants were challenged to produce a design commensurate with the aims and ambitions of this raw-boned democratic nation. How to grasp such a democratic design?

**Finally**, lest anyone planning to enter the competition was tempted to do so without doing the necessary homework, the sixteenth and last section of the Requirements section, headed ‘Town Planning’, stated:

*The occasion for the Design of the Federal Capital City of the Commonwealth of Australia is unique in recent times, and it is expected that competitors will embody in their Designs all recent developments in the science of town planning. The Conference held under the auspices of the Royal Institute of British Architects in October last, at which many authorities on the subject of town planning were present, must have a marked influence upon city Design from the utilitarian, the architectural, the scientific, and the artistic stand-points.*
In other words, the very latest in town planning theory and practice ‘must have a marked influence’ on Canberra’s design. With the benchmark London Conference occurring only six months earlier, the successful designer would have to produce a state-of-the-art plan, a plan cognisant of, and reflective of, all recent planning developments, both philosophical and practical. To give just one example of many in the information kit: Mahon’s reprinted instructions to Scrivener state that ‘the site provides for a perfect system of sanitation’. By implication, the winning design was expected to demonstrate a capacity to accommodate just such a perfect system – and much else besides.

In a booklet on Canberra’s Centenary history entitled Crystal Palace to Golden Trowels (2009), I argue that ‘Canberra’s first building blocks were ideas, big visionary ideas’. A hundred years ago, such ideas were freely and vigorously circulating. Australian Federation and the new nation’s ‘Federal Capital City’ competition placed Australians in a special position to take maximum advantage of this rich global conversation. Canberra emerged as a direct result of the two-way exchange of the best of overseas thought and Australian initiative.

The roots of this conversation are deep. It is our good fortune today to be experiencing a series of Canberra Centenary celebrations. We have our own opportunity to reclaim and revitalise this seminal narrative of the nation’s past. For one thing is certain: when the Government of the Commonwealth of Australia first advertised its capital city competition on 30 April 1911, it did so in a brief that had built into it the best of town planning scholarship, past and present.
City Beautiful

... (H)ere a city may arise where those responsible for the government of this country in the future may seek and find inspiration in its noble buildings, its broad avenues, its shaded parks, and sheltered gardens – a city bearing perhaps some resemblance to the city beautiful of our dreams.

Lord Denman, Governor-General of Australia, 12 March 1913

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, after well over one hundred years of rampant and uncontrolled industrialism, many of the world’s largest cities were choking from the waste generated by the new technologies. Working-class families, in particular, forced to live close to the burgeoning factories for work and low-grade housing, fell victim to the revolution in industry.

One result of this social pattern was a dramatic increase in the number of published works advocating social reform and social justice. The American Henry George’s monumental treatise, *Progress and Poverty* (1879), epitomised a trend which was as influential in the Australian colonies as anywhere in the world. George noted that, over the previous century, widespread progress had undeniably occurred and yet poverty had increased.

Rapid industrial expansion necessitated answers to a whole new set of problems. One such response came from design professionals worldwide with the establishment of the ‘science’ (as it was called) of town planning. The first generation of accredited practitioners in this new field sought to improve the design of, and living conditions in, cities and towns through the public articulation of citizen-friendly philosophies, codes, rules, regulations and resounding catch-phrases.
No phrase more trenchantly captured the mood of a late nineteenth-century generation of urban professionals desperate for improvements in their cities and towns than the ‘City Beautiful’, with its inherent aesthetic imperative. While we know that the phrase was first used by New York’s artists and art critics in the early years of the twentieth century, it was quickly adopted by aspirational town planners keen to promote their new vocation. The majority were architects, though many engineers and surveyors also moved into town planning, tempted by the fresh challenges of the large-scale schemes necessary for the design of entire community living areas.

When seeking instructive precedents, the design professionals sourced Pope Sixtus V’s spacious concept for the new Rome, Pierre L’Enfant’s plan for Washington DC formulated soon after the American Revolution, Louis XIV’s Versailles and Baron Haussmann’s game-changing redesign of Paris during the 1850s under Napoleon III. Paris’ Ecole des Beaux Arts at the turn of the century confirmed a reputation as the world’s most influential City Beautiful teaching hub. A number of its graduates gained global reputations, the institution’s international stature in turn attracting many more students who, as Robert Freestone points out in *Designing Australian Cities* (2007), ’acquired the requisite design skills of composition, regularity, rectilinearity and symmetry to visually express unity, order, power and control’. A Beaux Arts global diaspora took root.

Significant developments in the technology of photography and the medium of print in the second half of the nineteenth century meant that an appreciation of Cities Beautiful such as Paris, Versailles and Vienna was not restricted to the mobile aristocratic and affluent middle classes. Newspapers and magazines, with their mass circulations, made certain that City Beautiful images encouraged a much wider appreciation. This new social development was magnified in the global publicity for the biggest trade, technological and cultural exhibition of the nineteenth century: the World’s Columbian Exposition, held in the ultra-progressive city of Chicago from 1 May–31 October 1893 and showcasing to the world the Daniel Burnham team’s spectacular ‘White City’. Almost 28 million people went through the turnstiles over a six-month period, including almost a million on Chicago Day alone.
With its imposing neo-classical buildings, generous pedestrian walkways, water features, promenades, island oases, piazzas, boutique bridges and striking statuary, this was a City Beautiful expanse indeed, destined to be fixed in just about every ambitious planner’s imagination and vocabulary for many years to come. Young Chicagoans Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony, we know, embraced the visual and spatial splendour of this grand show in their own home town. In 1914, recalling the impact of the Columbian Exposition, Griffin noted that ‘the thing that appealed to everybody, the thing that made that exhibition last for twenty years in the minds of all people, was that it provided a place for everything and had everything in its place’. And he went further, in his Australian competition entry text, maintaining that the vast scale and single, uncompromising design around a formal, enclosed court ‘produced an impression outliving those of all subsequent experiments, or of perhaps any architectural ensemble of modern times’. The commitment that both Walter and Marion would have, in the future, to the idea of the Australian capital city in the landscape was certain to integrate City Beautiful design features.
Freestone has observed that, around the time of the 1911–12 Canberra competition, ‘Australians were still quite removed from global advances in planning theory and practice’. While this statement might have validity when applied to individual Australian planners going about their daily work in the distant southern continent in relative isolation, it is impossible to justify when applied to the seminal Congress of Engineers, Architects, Surveyors and Others Interested in the Building of the Federal Capital of Australia, held in Collins Street, Melbourne, from 6–17 May 1901.

No doubt timed to maximise a national impact, the Congress spanned the formal opening of the first Commonwealth Parliament on 9 May. The spectre of Chicago’s White City, and City Beautiful thinking more generally, featured prominently at the Melbourne gathering in a variety of ways: the second and most substantive of three resolutions adopted by the Congress maintained that Australia’s new capital ‘should be laid out in the most perfect manner possible … [removing] all obstructions that would in any way prevent the addition of the most perfect design’; George Higgins, who delivered the ‘Inaugural Address’, previewed the series of papers to follow on the theme of what he labelled ‘ideal cities’, emphasising the unprecedented ‘opportunity of building a model city’ about to be given to his fellow Australians; most of the conference papers outlined particular techniques and symbolic ideas which might make the Australian capital city, as architect George Sydney Jones put it, ‘the most beautiful of the modern world’; and Mr A Evans, in a paper entitled ‘A Waterside Capital’, made the novel assertion that ‘the Queen City of the South … the finest city on earth’ might be situated on Lake George (dry as a bone in 1901!), just north of Canberra – a ‘new Venice’ boasting sumptuous waterways, with the surrounding architecture replicating the ‘magnificent effect of the Chicago Exhibition Buildings’.

In the first ten years of nationhood, as towns across NSW were locked in a titanic struggle – the so-called ‘Battle of the Sites’ – to determine which would host Australia’s capital city, the politicians and community leaders were regularly exposed to City Beautiful promotion. This was why the Minister for Home Affairs, in his instructions to the Commonwealth Government’s surveyor, insisted on a site that would produce ‘a beautiful city … not only for the present, but for all time’ and, significantly, it was why likeable Governor-General Lord Thomas Denman, in his memorable speech on 12 March 1913, conjured for his attentive audience a mighty vision of the Australian capital city of the future. He imagined nothing less than ‘the city beautiful of our dreams’.
Nature, Landscape, City

Whilst the abstract question occupies your intellect, nature brings it in the concrete to be solved by your hands.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, ‘Nature’ (1836)

The art of landscape architecture is a specialty which, in its exercise, peculiarly requires a forecast of the future.

Frederick Law Olmsted (1886)

When design #29, submitted by Chicagoans Walter Burley Griffin and his wife and professional partner Marion Mahony Griffin won Australia’s capital city design competition in May 1912, Canberra’s foundation narrative was enhanced by much more than the stimulus of City Beautiful concepts. The Griffins (and a number of the other 22 Americans who entered the competition) were also immersed in a distinctly American tradition of nature philosophy and nature writing.

The evidence for this is everywhere apparent. Although the Griffins were not familiar with the Monaro site first-hand when participating in the competition, they made sure that their entry of 16 renderings was carefully explained in an accompanying 29 pages of prose, which included a description of ‘site characteristics’ (mountains, hills, Molonglo River and two irregular lakes) that enhanced the ‘stage setting’ for the city within the landscape. Once Walter had spent an initial three months in Australia, visiting Canberra regularly from August to November 1913, knowledge of the site enabled him to compose a glistening paragraph in the new Report Explanatory of the Preliminary General Plan (October 1913):

Taken altogether, the site may be considered as an irregular amphitheatre – with [Mount] Ainslie at the north-east, in the rear; flanked on either side by Black Mountain and [Mount] Pleasant Hill, all forming the top galleries; with the slopes to the water, the auditorium; with the waterway and flood basin, the arena; with the southern slopes reflected in the basin, the terraced stage and setting of monumental Government structures sharply defined rising tier on tier to the culminating highest internal forested hill of the Capitol; and with Mugga Mugga, Red Hill, and the blue distant mountain ranges, sun reflecting, forming the back scene of the theatrical whole.

Here, Griffin detailed the organic connection between Canberra city and its site, the axial lines of the Plan seamlessly connecting urban scheme with natural setting, while holding fast to the pre-eminence of the landscape.

Peter Harrison, influential Chief Planner with Canberra’s National Capital Development Commission from 1959 to 1967, put it succinctly when he wrote that Canberra is not ‘an architectural composition but a landscape composition’. Australia’s new capital city would take its character not from the distinctive shapes and sizes of buildings, like most cities of the world, but from the land and landmarks.
In the two decades following the competition, the Griffins made Australia their home. Both were enchanted by the Australian landscape, particularly the abundance of eucalypts. Walter lamented the fact that, for Australians, these most poetic of trees were routinely referred to as ‘gums’. Naming was important to him, so when he was tasked with providing appropriate nomenclature for some of Canberra’s first streets, Griffin opted for the names of species of local flora.

The impact of the Australian environment deepened Griffin’s understanding of the natural world about him. An unpublished essay he wrote in the late 1920s, entitled ‘Nature and Ourselves’, begins with a succession of uncompromising statements: ‘The roots of society lie in nature – nature is the living god, the exemplification of the organic unity of life, the demonstration of the universal mind and the basis of our common relation to the universal mind in our religion and our art. Our harmonious relationship with nature is expressed in ethics and art …’

In 1938, when Marion recalled her partner’s profound design legacy in a radio address in Australia shortly after Walter’s sudden death in Lucknow, India, she made use of a philosophical context for explaining that special legacy which drew on the inspirational sources for the original plan as well as the wisdom gained subsequently – by both of them – through a more intimate understanding of the Australian continent:

City planning, as founded by Mr Griffin, was not a mechanical drafting board affair, imposing on the earth, destroying whatever got in the way … Such architecture does its share not towards keeping the earth alive, but towards killing it – this seems to be the only way in which human egos express themselves … In planning Canberra, every detail of the natural conditions was studied … to preserve them … so that the city could be a living, healthy and growing thing.

Passion for nature had clearly evolved into a profound empathy for the planet, a stance destined to gain more widespread public acceptance, in Australia and overseas, in the last decades of the twentieth century. The Griffins were far ahead of their times.
But what were the primary sources that created in the Griffins, during their formative years, this heightened awareness of nature? They are to be found in a line of writers and thinkers stretching from American Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–82) – the acknowledged founder of a distinctively American intellectual tradition – to the founder of ‘landscape architecture’, Frederick Law Olmsted (1822–1903), to Louis Sullivan (1856–1924), and finally, the Prairie School architects who gathered at Steinway Hall, Chicago, at the turn of the century. The Prairie School comprised a loose group of highly talented, young and progressive architects working in one building, in a single city, and Walter and Marion numbered among them.

In June 1900, when Walter was 22 and still a year away from sitting the Illinois architects’ state licensing exam, he attended the second Architectural League of America conference in his home city. Sessions were held over three days, with a conference banquet taking place in the glamorous Auditorium Building on Michigan Avenue in downtown Chicago. The banquet’s after-dinner speech, entitled ‘The Young Man in Architecture’, delivered by the iconoclastic if elusive Louis Sullivan, appropriately in his own building, was soon a national talking point. In time, the lecture would be regarded as a moment of high significance in the history of American architecture, arguably the symbolic beginning of an identifiably American architectural tradition.

Unashamedly directed at ‘the rising generation’ of young American architects whom Sullivan regarded as the sole hope for ‘the advancement of our art’, the talk was greeted rapturously by his exuberant live audience. We know that it had an impact on Frank Lloyd Wright, who in a later conference paper referred to Sullivan as ‘the master’, and he as ‘the disciple’; but, more importantly for the Canberra story, the talk was quite literally life-changing for Walter Burley Griffin, who would later recall:

\[ I \text{ went through the mill, and I would have probably followed the lines others had if I had not had the advantage of contact with an independent thinker in Chicago, Mr Louis H Sullivan, certainly a deep thinker, and one who has had opportunity not only to exercise his independence in his own work, and in his own way, but through his pupils to express the validity of his ideas. } \]

In his intentionally abrasive Auditorium speech, Sullivan consciously invoked the ideas, and even the syntax, of New England Transcendentalist Emerson. To understand the deeper beliefs of Sullivan, Wright and an emerging generation of American architects and landscape architects – to understand fully the cultural context that produced the Griffins – a brief overview of the basic tenets of Emersonian philosophy is needed.

The substance of Emerson’s contribution to American cultural and intellectual development rests primarily on five works and speeches: the foundation essay, ‘Nature’ (1836); the ‘American Scholar’ oration to the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Harvard University on 31 August 1837; the ‘Address Delivered Before the Senior Class in Divinity College, Harvard University’ on 15 July 1838; the Essays, First Series (1841); and the Essays, Second Series (1844). Emerson challenged his rising generation of Americans in the 1830s and ’40s with a raft of fresh ideas which began with the combative statement he made towards the
end of the ‘American Scholar’ lecture, a statement at once uncompromising, democratic and potentially liberating: ‘We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe’. The time had come to put an end to American cultural conservatism and derivative writing. Americans needed to reject imitation of Old World models and thinking, and that included the feted European works of literature and philosophy. ‘Our reading is mendicant and sycophantic’, Emerson boldly proclaimed in the classic essay, ‘Self Reliance’. Individual action was essential:

_There is a time in everyman’s education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better for worse as his portion; that though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given to him to till._

For Emerson, the inescapable fact remained that America had produced ‘no genius’, no stellar talent of its own. He considered it his national duty to publicise the main reasons for this absence, and to engage in a single-minded search to find answers to the dilemma, based exclusively in and on the local. America would only discover its true voice when based on the many voices of local writers exploring American cultural criteria and the uniqueness of an American landscape.

Emerson located his source of true illumination in nature. The last paragraphs of the masterful ‘Nature’ essay assert that profound questions – of a cultural, social and philosophical kind – can only be solved by the individual in communion with the natural world. Only with harmony between man and nature can what he terms ‘higher thought’ occur and ‘higher law’ be understood. In this way, Americans might at last realise the potential that living afresh in a democracy had uniquely bestowed upon them:
So shall we come to look at the world with new eyes ... Know ... that the world exists for you ... Adam called his house, heaven and earth; Caesar called his house, Rome; you perhaps call yours, a cobbler's trade; a hundred acres of ploughed land; or a scholar's garret. Yet line for line and point for point your dominion is as great as theirs, though without fine names. Build therefore your own world. As fast as you can conform your life to the pure idea in your mind, that will unfold its great proportions.

Americans would only be reborn through the power of nature and the individual's capacity to make productive use of intuition and imagination.

Cultural liberation of this kind had clear implications. As 'trustees' of a new democracy, and fortified with 'Faith and Hope', individual Americans had to accept certain personal responsibilities. They must be advocates:

*What is a man born for but to be a reformer, a Re-maker of what man has made; a renouncer of lies; a restorer of truth and good, imitating that great Nature which embosoms us all, and which sleeps no moment on an old past, but every hour repairs herself, yielding us every morning a new day, and with every pulsation a new life? Let him renounce everything which is not true to him, and put all his practices back on their first thoughts, and do nothing for which he has not the whole world for his reason.*

Perhaps it was this very section of the 'Man the Reformer' essay that inspired a new generation of American architects at the end of the nineteenth century to ask crucial questions of their craft. Emerson, of course, had articulated a specific challenge for them in 'Self-Reliance':

*And why need we copy the Doric or the Gothic model? Beauty, convenience, grandeur of thought and quaint expression are as near to us as to any, and if the American artist will study with hope and love the precise thing to be done by him, considering the climate, the soil, the length of the day, the wants of the people, the habit and form of the government, he will create a house in which all these will find themselves fitted, and taste and sentiment will be satisfied also ... Insist on yourself; never imitate.*

Emerson insisted that a functioning democracy must be made up of individual, participating democrats.

In his address to America's young architects in Chicago at the turn of the century, Louis Sullivan channelled Emerson throughout: his young audience, too, had to 'keep closely in touch with nature'; they, too, needed to resist 'the depressing, stultifying, paralysing influence of an unfortunate education' steeped in classicism and Old World sources, and seek to educate themselves; and they, too, needed to promote 'the ideal of Democracy that the individual man should stand self-centred, self-governing – an individual sovereign, and individual god'. The Auditorium banquet speech concluded in full-blown Emersonian mode, with Sullivan doing his utmost to inspire his own audience of young 'American Scholars':

*A great opportunity is yours. The occasion confronts you. The future is in your hands – will you accept the responsibility or will you evade it?*  

... I ask only that you consider this:

*Do you intend, or do you not intend, do you wish or do you not wish, to become architects in whose care an unfolding democracy may entrust the interpretation of its material wants, its psychic aspirations?*

*In due time doubtless you will answer in your own way. But I warn you the time left for an answer in the right way is acutely brief.*  

*For young as you are, you are not as young as you were yesterday – And tomorrow? Tomorrow!*
This was no after-dinner speech; it was nothing less than an American architectural call-to-arms.

In perhaps his best-known prose work, *Kindergarten Chats* (1918), Sullivan expanded on his core themes, continuing to select and embellish key parts of Emersonian doctrine as they applied to what he labelled ‘the American malpractice of the architectural art’, a toxic profession ‘composed, in the hundred, of ninety parts aberration, eight parts indifference, one part poverty and one part Little Lord Fauntleroy’. The way forward for a liberated American architecture lay in an insistence on ‘Intuition and Imagination’ going ‘forth to illuminate and search the hearts of the people’, and the establishment of a deep and harmonious relationship with nature.

For the rest of his long and eventful life, Frank Lloyd Wright would act on Sullivan’s demand for the dutiful study of nature. Walter Burley Griffin too would respond a decade later, in far more panoramic fashion as he applied the refrain on a grand scale: nothing less than the spacious design of a new democratic nation’s capital city placed within a natural ‘amphitheatre’ of hills and mountain ranges.

When Griffin entered the competition for Australia’s ‘Federal Capital City’ at the end of 1911, he, like five other American entrants, described himself as a ‘landscape architect’ (as he understood it, an architect of the landscape). There is little doubt that all were, at least in part, influenced in their choice of vocation by Frederick Law Olmsted, American social reformer, journalist, landscape architect and, as the *Boston Sunday Globe* characterised him only a few years ago, ‘the father figure of the greening of American cities’.

Olmsted is best known today for his design (with partner Calvert Vaux) of New York’s Central Park, as well as the selection of the site, along with the elegant Lagoon and Wooded Island designs for the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago (1893), and campus landscape designs at a number of elite American universities such as Stanford, Yale, Cornell and Michigan State. During his lifetime he was often cited as the landscape artist who took Emerson’s ideas (which he regarded as the work of a ‘real prophet’ conveying ‘an immense amount of deep truth’) out of the study and into the field, from principle to practical application. Olmsted had utmost admiration for Emerson’s ‘Nature’ tract and most of the early visionary writings.

The recent, national-award winning *The Griffin Legacy* (2004) neatly summarised the Olmsted effect on Griffin and his contemporaries this way: ‘Griffin was impressed with the ideal of a holistically designed urban environment. He would adopt the Olmsted belief that intimate contact with nature represented a civilising urban requisite for psychological and social well-being’. With the senses alert, and intuition, imagination and intellect all actively engaged, then nature, landscape and city could be inextricably interwoven. The city of the future could be imagined, and articulated.
In early 1899 a ‘Secret’ Premiers’ Conference took place in Melbourne that gathered together all six Australian colonial Premiers in an attempt to gain agreement on amendments to the Commonwealth Bill, which might then be passed by Australian voters in a second referendum to create a Federation of States.

At the meeting, Premier George Reid put it to his colleagues that if his own colony, the so-called ‘mother colony’ of NSW, was not confirmed as the host of the Commonwealth’s capital city, then NSW was unlikely to vote ‘yes’ to progressing the Federation idea. The other Premiers reluctantly agreed, but insisted that Sydney would not be the host city because, if it was, the burgeoning east coast metropolis would overwhelm the rest of the country. The Premiers’ Melbourne pact was an important catalyst for a successful referendum, prompting Section 125 of the Australian Constitution (the capital in NSW, at least one hundred miles from Sydney) and an immediate escalation of the vigorous debate about where in NSW the capital should be located.

In 1898, the year before the Premiers’ Conference, a hemisphere away in Paternoster Square, London, a book was quietly published which came at the end of a couple of decades of global social protest, reform and radical political commentary. It was called To-Morrow: a Peaceful Path to Real Reform, and it was written by an unknown Englishman named Ebenezer Howard, a stenographer by trade and with ‘failed Nebraskan farmer’ on his then rather modest CV. Four years later, the volume appeared in a new edition with the title, Garden Cities of To-Morrow, to be re-published many times under that name in the coming decades. In the Introduction to a 2003 republication of the 1898 original, the three English editors – Sir Peter Hall, Dennis Hardy and Colin Ward – describe Howard’s book as ‘the most famous publication in the history of modern town planning’.

Howard was a most unlikely trail-blazer, but we know as a fact that his abundance of ideas on urban decentralisation, densely packed into Garden Cities, would alter the course of town planning. One town planning historian has labelled it ‘revolutionary’. While Howard did draw on a number of established sources – among them Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essays,
Walt Whitman’s poems, Henry George’s *Progress and Poverty* (1878) and Edward Bellamy’s utopian novel *Looking Backward 2000–1887* (1888) – it was the utterly original manner in which he adapted them that captured the world’s attention. He identified a pressing issue, the overcrowding of cities, and produced an innovative set of solutions in response.

Howard’s ‘Garden City’ model of urban decentralisation proposed 6,000-acre (2,400 hectare) sites, with 5,000 of those acres agricultural greenbelt, housing 32,000 people per site in a concentrically designed open space area containing six boulevards and a number of public parks. His acclaimed ‘three magnets’ explained the city overcrowding impasse simply: the ‘town’ magnet, where people are attracted to the city by the prospect of jobs and better amenities; the ‘country’ magnet, boasting sunshine and cleaner air, but in depressed and isolated rural districts; and the ‘town-country’ magnet, combining the best features of the first two, ‘social opportunity’ and the ‘beauty of nature’. This model presented a ‘field for enterprise’, its human population gifted with ‘pure air and water, good drainage, bright homes and gardens, no smoke, no slums, freedom and co-operation’.

Howard’s Garden City ideal had a legion of admirers, among them individuals about to establish their own global town planning reputations, including Raymond Unwin (1863–1940) and Barry Parker (1867–1947) in England, and a young Walter Burley Griffin in Chicago. They expanded on the Howard example in quite different ways, Unwin and Parker famously with the Letchworth and Welwyn Garden Cities, and Hampstead Garden Suburb, and Griffin at a far more expansive scale in Canberra. All three were keen readers, too, of the Scotsman Patrick Geddes (1857–1932), whose work in important ways complemented Howard, as he sought to identify an equilibrium between people and their environment which would lead to improved social conditions and widespread social reform.

During his first short stay in Australia in late 1913, Walter Burley Griffin gave an interview to the Sydney *Daily Telegraph* where he spoke with enthusiasm about the impact the Canberra site had on him at first-hand, with its:

… scenes of storm cloud or sunset glow, and mountain view, and the changing colour and mood, and especially the atmosphere after a storm. That atmosphere is just what they have up there at Canberra, particularly in the morning and evening. It is the altitude and the clearness of the atmosphere. It brings everything right up to you.
Exceeding his expectations, the site confirmed the approach to the original plan that he and Marion adopted in wintry Chicago, site-unseen, when they locked their new city into the imagined landscape, a City Splendid combining both City Beautiful and Garden City principles.

Curiously, the British press in the aftermath of the Australian competition announcement in May 1912 was not convinced, as Mark Peisch points out in *The Chicago School of Architecture* (1964). The University of Liverpool’s *Town Planning Review*, a staunch Garden City promoter, took exception to the ‘geometrical formalistic treatment’ of the winning design, while the December 1912 issue of *The Garden City and Town Planning Magazine* denigrated the winner’s ‘checkerboard’ design and apparent absence of a green belt.

Both critiques – no doubt reflecting the chagrin of the respective writers that such an important, internationally promoted competition in an Empire country could go to an American rather than a British planner – miss the point, one of which is clear throughout the plan’s description, particularly in Griffin’s October 1913 *Report Explanatory*. A ‘naturalist in architecture’ and confirmed believer in architecture ‘that is the logical outgrowth of the environment in which the building in mind is to be located’, Griffin admired Unwin and Parker’s Letchworth experiment. Marion also informs us that, after hearing Patrick Geddes’ lectures in Chicago in 1900, Walter ‘formed a lifelong admiration for the man and his ideas’ as well.

It shows. The Griffins’ visionary design, clarified in accessible terms by architectural historians such as Peisch and the University of Western Australia’s Christopher Vernon, is an informed compromise: an inspired ‘design hybrid’ integrating the formality necessary for certain ceremonial parts of a national capital and ‘the charm of Garden City living’.

Perhaps *The Griffin Legacy* puts it best:

> While the geometric regularity of Griffin’s spider-web of streets lacks the informality preferred by advocates of Garden City town planning, it is difficult to deny that Griffin’s fundamental tenets, particularly for the layout of residential areas, reflect Garden City theory. His monumental federal Groups and Main Avenues may belong to City Beautiful design but the principles – applied to residential groups, protection of natural features, integration of agricultural land, universal access to nature reserves and even public ownership of land – are true to Garden City ideals.

As an aside, it would be precisely these ideals that drove Canberra’s modest development in the 1920s, in the aftermath of the Great War and after the termination of Griffin’s position as Federal Capital Director of Design and Construction. The subsequent Federal Capital Advisory Committee (1921–5), severely restricted by post-war financial constraints, conceived of Canberra into the foreseeable future as ‘a Garden Town with simple, pleasing but unpretentious buildings …’
Democratic City

Mr Griffin was one of those deeply interested in the whole [Australian] story. His imagination was fired over the wonderful opportunities which lay before Australia to build a national capital which should be worthy of a young, modern nation, and which should be planned in accordance with the very latest ideals of architecture and sanitation, and fulfil the highest needs of a twentieth century democratic community.


For most of the four intoxicating years stretching from the time the Griffins committed to entering Canberra’s international design competition in late 1911 to the pressured withdrawal of Australian troops from the rocky cliffs of Gallipoli at the end of 1915, Walter held dear a conception of Australia and Australians that fuelled the optimism and idealism of his world view and that of his wife and partner.

Throughout the period of the competition, the announcement of winners and the aftermath, a succession of Griffin letters, articles and interviews underscores an individual holding the highest hopes for the new democracy in the south. Just as the great American poet Walt Whitman late in his long life found himself energised by correspondence with a small group of working class, ‘democratic’ Melburnians in 1889–91 (citizens of a young nation, Whitman felt, where a true democracy would soon take shape), so Walt Griffin, twenty years later, passionately held to the same belief. In a January 1913 letter to King O’Malley, Minister for Home Affairs in the Fisher Labor Government, Griffin maintained that he had ‘entered the Australian event to be my first and last competition, solely because I have for many years greatly admired the bold radical steps in politics and economics which your country has dared to take …’  Late in the same year, in an article for Sydney’s Building journal, Griffin elaborated: ‘Australia, of most democratic tendencies and bold radical government, may well be expected to look upon her great future, and with it her federal capital, with characteristic big vision …’  The American revelled in the notion that his ‘ideal city’, his ‘city of the future’, would be built by a nation of ‘nature and liberty loving, to say nothing of art aspiring, people’.

The rich quantum of Griffin’s reading of American sources (in particular, Jefferson, Emerson, Whitman, Henry David Thoreau and Louis Sullivan) had equipped him admirably for the Australian task. He had been hired by the Australian Government, in the months from late 1913 to late 1914, to construct a democratic city for a city of democrats, and this milestone commission would be carried out in part through the construction of what he and Marion termed ‘democratic architecture’.
The Griffins’ understanding of democratic architecture appears to coalesce around five core ideas: firstly, in the tradition of Emerson and Sullivan, the firm belief that a building’s form, a city’s form, had to follow its function (Sullivan’s oft-quoted mantra, ‘form follows function’, resonated for the Griffins throughout their careers); secondly, a work of genuine democratic architecture necessarily had to express its designer’s individuality and originality; thirdly, such independence of thought and action demanded individual courage along the lines argued by Emerson and Sullivan in their seminal writings; fourthly, the democratic metropolis also had to embrace the reformist zeal of Ebenezer Howard and be a Garden City of ‘tomorrow’ achieving, as Griffin espoused courtesy of Jeremy Bentham, ‘the greatest good for the greatest number’; and finally, the democratic architect had to demonstrate an intimate, respectful and productive relationship with nature.

In the June and August 1914 issues of Building, Marion discussed ‘Democratic Architecture – Its Development, Its Principles and Its Ideals’ in a typically upbeat manner in which, informative rather than authoritative, she firmly supported the design and planning stance of her partner, one of two men, she wrote in her first article, ‘whose natural bent, training and sympathies have been entirely democratic’. The second article began: ‘We are so fortunate as to be living in a time when the ranks of the democratic forces are rapidly being filled in the political field, and even along ethical, domestic and social lines ...’ Building’s editor, George Taylor, boasted that Marion’s contributions were ‘destined to aid in the awakening of the national spirit and the establishment of the modern trend in architecture’.

The historical irony, however, is devastating. Marion’s second article, in the Building issue of 12 August 1914, appeared exactly one week after Great Britain had declared war on Germany and Austria–Hungary. That same day, Australia’s telegraphic network buzzed with the news that, since the British had declared war, Australia too was at war. The belief that Marion
expressed in her second piece, that ‘Democracy is a fundamental world-principle’, would in the ensuing years be severely tested, both personally and within the broader community that she and Walter had adopted as their own.

The Great War changed everything: Australia’s naïve though insistent nationalism, the Griffins’ buoyant aspirations, the Federal Government’s commitment to getting on with the building of the national capital, and the attitude of the bureaucrats to the task of capital building. Everything.

It would not take long for George Taylor to become one of the Australian community’s more belligerent pro-war advocates. The honeymoon period for Taylor and the Griffins came to an abrupt halt. Amidst a sharp increase in jingoistic sentiment, in the media and in the neighbourhood, democracy was an early casualty.

A speech Walter Burley Griffin gave at the Henry George Society headquarters in Melbourne, on 18 September 1915, with Australian troops still embroiled in the fighting at Gallipoli, reads today as a poignant coda to his optimism about Australian democracy. Much had changed since August 1914, and Griffin started his talk, entitled ‘The Present Crisis’, by paraphrasing an Emerson quote from the essay, ‘Self-Reliance’, which emphasised the necessity of the individual standing firm on principle in difficult times. Preserving that ‘steadiness of independence’ was vital and, while not citing him directly, later in the talk Griffin recalled the sentiments of Henry David Thoreau’s landmark essay, ‘Resistance to Civil Government’ (published in 1849 and later called ‘Civil Disobedience’ – an inspiration, much later, for Mahatma Ghandi and Martin Luther King) when he stated that the ‘cure of the evils of democracy is more democracy, and that government is best which governs least’.

Just over six weeks after Griffin’s talk, William Morris Hughes would become Australia’s seventh Prime Minister. He determined to prosecute Australia’s role in the war as a loyal ally of Great Britain. War censorship increased, anti-democratic laws proliferated, conscription referenda bitterly divided Australian society and, by November 1918, Australia counted over 60,000 war dead.

The world changed. Pursuit of democratic architecture by a nation of bold democrats no longer applied.
Since its beginnings, Canberra has been the result of the aspirations, ideals, pragmatism and hard work of the many Australians involved in the making of the city: they made a place that stands forever at the centre of the nation’s identity. They made the capital of Australia.

This concept informed Walter Burley Griffin’s plan in its multi-faceted aspects, a beautiful plan with its places, avenues, vistas and landscapes that now looms large in the environmental consciousness of the world. This plan, whilst reflecting the democratic principles of human settlements, goes beyond a mere ethical or aesthetic project: it has become a powerful symbol of solidarity for the nation.


When Aldo Giurgola, Principal Design Architect of Parliament House and proud Australian citizen, attended La Sapienza (the University of Rome) in the later 1930s to study architecture, he was greeted daily by a poster on the Department wall of Marion Mahony Griffin’s 1911–12 competition rendering, ‘City and Environ’, a centrepiece of the sixteen-part Griffin entry. He would not forget it; indeed, having prepared the Mitchell Giurgola Thorp entry in Australia’s Parliament House competition in the late 1970s, he subsequently commented that he felt as if the Griffins were upon his shoulders, watchful sentinels ensuring that the lofty ideals of Canberra’s evolution as the national capital remained intact.

Canberra has exerted a profound effect on generations of its citizens and visitors over the years, many in the public eye, even more not. A century ago, Andrew Fisher, O’Malley, the Dennmans, Chris Watson, John Gale, John Joseph Cusack, Austin Chapman, George Fuller, Percy Owen, Walter Liberty Vernon, John Sulman, Charles Scrivener, Percy Sheaffe, Arthur Percival and Charles Weston, not to mention a poetic couple born and bred in Chicago, Illinois, were just some to respond to the power of Canberra’s town/country magnet. For later generations, the relationship with place has deepened.

It is to the credit of the Federation generation that it stuck to its guns. A progressive idea—an inland city designed through an international competition—would over time be recognised as an inspired vision. Aldo Giurgola is right to rank Canberra among the nation’s greatest achievements. Peter Corrigan may yet be right in saying that the city is Australia’s greatest artwork. If economic depression and war imposed restrictions and obstacles over the last one hundred years, it is certain that, as this century progresses, Canberra will consolidate its rightful place as the world’s finest capital city in the landscape.
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In contrast to the first five booklets in this series, this volume does not include Endnotes. Space and budget considerations, plus a commitment to adequately showcase some of the visual splendour of the four prize-winning entries in the 1911-12 international competition to design the ‘Federal Capital City of the Commonwealth of Australia’, made this impossible. Virtually all direct quotations can be easily accessed, but because a small group of helpful scholars could not be cited in detail, I would like to acknowledge John W Reps (Cornell University, USA), Peter Harrison (Director and First Assistant Commissioner, Town Planning, National Capital Development Commission, 1959-67), Robert Freestone (Professor of Planning and Urban Development, University of New South Wales) and Christopher Vernon (Associate Professor in Landscape Architecture, University of Western Australia).

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