Canberra’s Federal Capital Design Competition, 1911–12

Topographical map of the Federal Capital Territory Australia, 1911, included in the competition box made available from 30 April 1911.
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.

Minister for Trade and Customs, Austin Chapman, 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 writes: ‘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’.

The substance of the Telegraph articles is disseminated by Sulman 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, reinforces 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 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, Secretary of the Department of Home Affairs, the intimidating, calculating 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 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, focussing 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 its most strident 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 typically flamboyant style, that this competition will play no favourites, 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 great interest, across Australia and internationally. Australia’s design professions, in particular—in architecture, engineering and surveying—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 Transactions of the Conference total a massive 812 pages, a ‘rich record of papers, reports and speeches, defining the state
Canberra’s Federal Capital Design Competition, 1911–12

In Snapshots

Purposeful gathering in Melbourne, on 23 May 1912, of those men directly or indirectly involved in the judging of the international competition to design the Australian national capital. Minister for Home Affairs, King O’Malley, is in the foreground right, and two other men seated, Col David Miller (right) and Percy Owen (centre back) would in later years have controversial roles in the development of Canberra.

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.

**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 pounds 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 very 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 is destined to 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 pounds.

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 map of the preliminary contour survey of the Yass-Canberra area;
- two copies of the map of the contour survey of the actual 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 – Invitation, Conditions, Historical and Introductory, Requirements and (Site) Description are explored in detail in the PDF ‘The Brief.’]

Kits are despatched to: Wellington, Ottawa, Pretoria and Capetown, 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) and, more alarmingly for aspirants from the design professions worldwide and nationally, in particular members of the Royal Institute of British Architects, according to Section 14: '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 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 RIBA or the many Australian professionals for whom 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. 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, a total of 137 entries from fifteen different countries are logged (anonymously) by the Department. According to 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 constitute 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.
It is a 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 later 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 collections of the National Archives of Australia and the National Library 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’.
Thirty-eight of the original photographs of the forty-six short-listed competition entries survive in the collections of the National Archives of Australia and the National Library of Australia, along with lithographic images of the remaining eight.

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 shortly after to award Coane’s first choice—the Griffiths, Coulter and Caswell design—a fourth prize. This plan will assume a bizarre 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 a note to the Minister, dated 7 June 1912, 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 forefront of all Cities’.