Canberra’s
Federal Capital Design Competition, 1911–12

THE BRIEF

Topographical map of the Federal Capital Territory Australia, 1911, included in the competition box made available from 30 April 1911.
The contents of the competition kit box that raced around Australia and the world in the later 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 entirely 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, aggressive legislative action to broaden the social experiment in the south 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, sharp policy and selective pragmatism. He also took a keen interest in the complex 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. Some 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 collection today.

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. 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 can give us and we have got it’.

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 Mahon and Fisher, had spent their childhood years in the northern hemisphere entrenched 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 link directly to the lively global town planning context of the previous fifteen 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 1901 Congress of Engineers, Architects and Surveyors in Melbourne, all the talk was directed towards realising the City Beautiful in Australia. Minister Mahon and his department were simply tapping in to the zeitgeist.
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 the recent booklet on Canberra’s Centenary history, *Crystal Palace to Golden Troubles* (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-related centenaries in the build-up to the big event in mid-March 2013. 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 very best of town planning scholarship, past and present.