

How the Canberra Camel Got Its Hump:  
The Departmental Board's Plan;  
Its Origins and Consequences

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# How the Canberra Camel Got its Hump: The Departmental Board's Plan for Canberra; Its Origins and Consequences\*

Paul Reid

## The Camel

When the first peg was driven by King O'Malley on 20 February 1913 to start construction of Australia's capital the work was based, not on the thoroughbred design of Griffin, but on a camel designed by a committee. This was the Board's plan drawn up by David Miller, Percy Owen and Charles Scrivener assisted by George Oakshott, John Murdoch and Thomas Hill. It is comforting to think the camel was a short lived aberration but that is not the case.

At the time the Board's design was attacked by Patrick Abercrombie in the Town Planning Review as 'the product of a department whose personnel are utterly untrained in the elements of architectural composition, whose mind is in a constant turmoil of confusion...Indeed the whole layout is so entirely outside the pale of serious criticism that we feel, it cannot be put into execution.'<sup>1</sup> Roger Pegrum later wrote 'The Departmental Board Plan, "concocted on the combination salad principle," was a ghastly thing,'<sup>2</sup> and James Birrell explained that 'The hotch potch departmental plan had miscarried, having become an object of ridicule throughout the technical world.'<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately when the government finally endorsed Griffin's design the Board's plan did not go into the waste paper bin, it went into the bottom drawer for future use.

The Board's plan is significant because it embodied the ideas of the men in government departments who were responsible for construction of the capital. These men did not see their work as support for Griffin's design, they saw things the other way round. They intended the competition to provide a source of ideas which they could draw on to enrich their basic strategy. The Board's plan of 1912 is not Griffin's design with a few

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\* Editor's Note: An earlier version of this paper won the Peter Harrison Memorial Prize in 1995, in the first category "community interests in the planning and development of Canberra".

<sup>1</sup> Town Planning Review, Vol III, No 4, Jan. 1913, p.222

<sup>2</sup> R. Pegrum, *The Bush Capital*, Hale and Ironmonger, 1983, p.166.

<sup>3</sup> J. Birrell, *Walter Burley Griffin*, University of Queensland Press, 1964.

improvements, nor is it an amalgamation of the best features of the premiated plans from the competition as O'Malley claimed. It is the plan that pre-existed in the minds of the departmental officers, augmented by selected ideas from the competition.

A study of the Board's plan reveals the basis of their opposition to Griffin's design and of the decisions they made for decades after Griffin had left the scene. The distribution of activities and buildings that was actually built on the ground in Canberra did not follow the arrangement set out in Griffin's 1911 plan or any of his revised plans, including the plan gazetted in 1925. It followed the arrangement illustrated in the Board's plan of 1912. The Board's arrangement of buildings was placed on top of Griffin's road plan. The strange compromise that resulted from the overlaying of the two contradictory plans forms the foundation of modern Canberra.

### **The Department's Preconceived Plan**

The officers of the department had spent over two years in Canberra, prior to the competition, thinking about the new capital city. Engineer Percy Owen, from the Department of Works, explained:

After Parliament accepted Yass-Canberra (in 1908) I was on a committee appointed by the government to decide which part of the region should be accepted as the city site. My colleagues were Colonel Miller, Colonel Vernon, and Mr Scrivener. (Miller, Owen and Scrivener were to be the authors of the Board's Plan). We looked at various sites, and we all came to the conclusion that Canberra was the best in the region. We then started to investigate Canberra itself. After going all over it Colonel Vernon proposed the city site, which has been called Vernon, after him. I went to Yarrolumla, and was greatly taken with the view of the mountains and the possibility of ornamental waters there, but Mr Scrivener, who had lived in the place, said the only thing to be done was to put the city under the protection of the hills. We others were finally convinced of this by the strength of the west wind. I told Mr Griffin this when he came out but he would never believe me. The experience of men like Mr Scrivener, who have lived here, and my own opinion — and I have been there constantly for years — is that, if we wish to get the best results of natural protection there is only one place for the city, and that is to the south east of Kurrajong.<sup>4</sup> (see Figure 1)

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<sup>4</sup> Australian Parliament, Public Works Committee, Report relating to proposed dams for ornamental waters at Canberra. F.9843, evidence by Owen 20 July 1915, para 32.

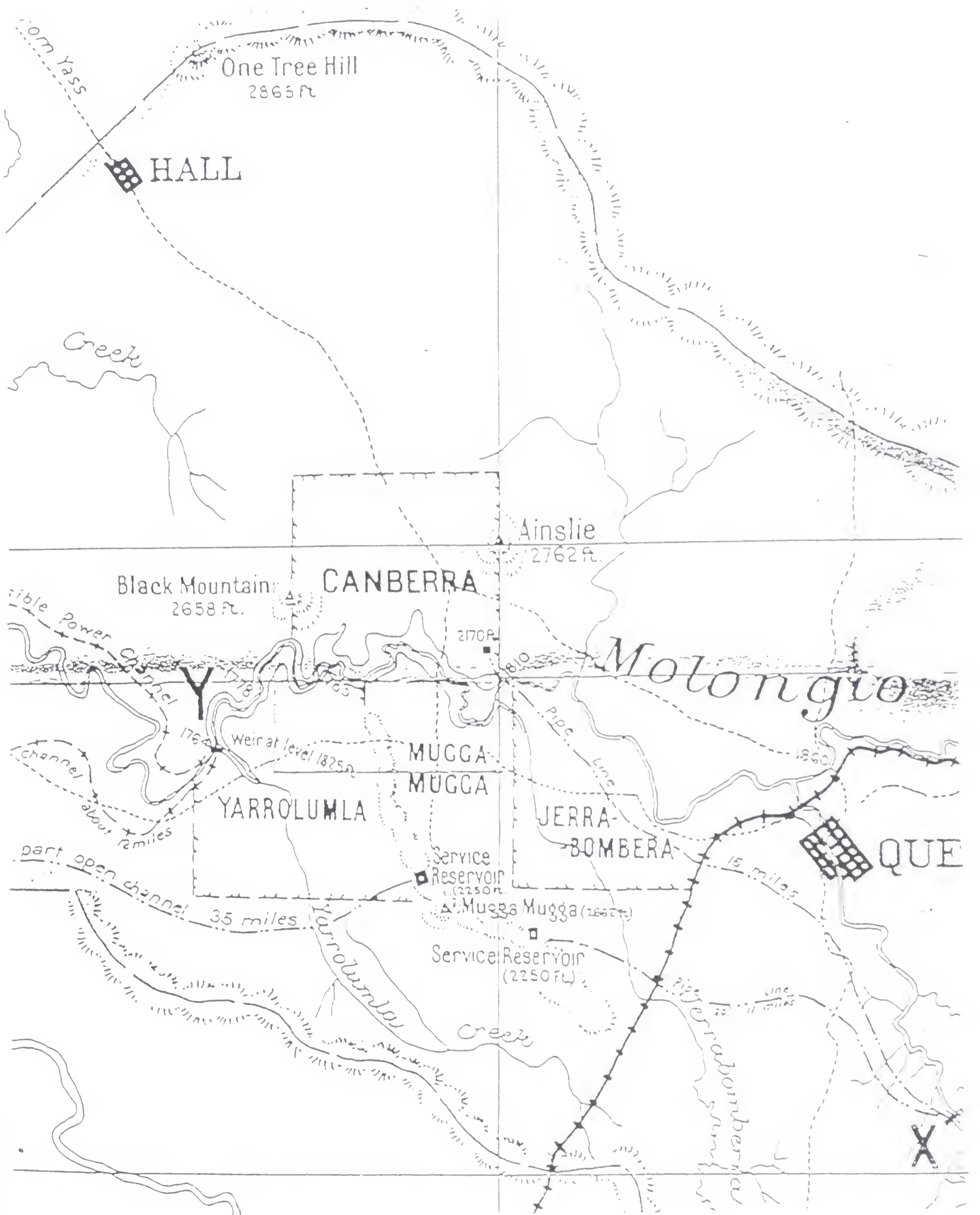


Figure 1: 1909 The departments' surveys covered four alternative sites, one north, and three south of the river. They planned their city at Mugga Mugga but they did not tell the competitors. Griffin's design was to spread over three sites and so be rejected by the departments.

Charles Scrivener, the government surveyor, submitted his report on 25 February 1909 confirming this decision. 'The capital would probably lie in an amphitheatre of hills with an outlook to the north and north east well sheltered from both southerly and westerly winds.' This sheltered valley, which the departments called the Mugga Mugga site, occupies the bottom right hand quadrant of the site base plan issued to competitors (see Figure 2) but they were given no hint that the city should be confined to that spot. One possible reason for the extensive base plan is for the inclusion of an alternative city location preferred by Sydney architect and planner John Sulman. His site was called Canberra by the surveyors. Sulman provided notional diagrams for both sites but told the 1910 Conference in London 'In winter the south and west winds are very cutting, and shelter therefrom of very great importance. Hence the selection of the site to the north east of the Black Mountain.'<sup>5</sup> The proposed railway line crossed both Mugga Mugga and Canberra sites.

The officers of the Board had not only decided that the city should be in the sheltered valley, they located all the major building groups as well. Owen explained that in 1909:

We spent many days at Canberra in considering what would be the most suitable site for Parliament House. Kurrajong Hill was considered, but the objection raised among us then was its altitude, and the difficulty of associating it closely with the administrative offices. As there is a difference of altitude of over a hundred feet in a distance of half a mile between the best site for government offices (the base of Camp Hill) and Kurrajong Hill, that site obviously presents some disadvantages. On the other hand we studied the aspect of Camp Hill for many miles around and Camp Hill stood out prominently. The selection committee was further influenced by the fact that Camp Hill is better protected than Kurrajong from the south westerly winds.<sup>6</sup>

Although not drawn on paper at this time, the departmental officers' plan was described in letters to each other and the minister. Ornamental waters would approximate the flood plain with the city itself to the south east of Kurrajong, in an amphitheatre of hills with an outlook to the north and north east where residents would be well sheltered from southerly and westerly winds. The powerhouse would be on the Molonglo River nearby

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<sup>5</sup> J. Sulman, *The Federal Capital of Australia*, in *Transactions of the Town Planning Conference*, London, October 1910, p.606.

<sup>6</sup> Australian Parliament, Public Works Committee, *Report on the provisional Parliament House*, evidence by Owen 22 March 1923.

and the railway station similarly on the alignment shown on the base plan. Parliament House would rise on Camp Hill with the departments on the flat land to the north and east. The city centre would lie between Parliament House and the railway station. Sewage treatment would be by land filtration below the dam on the rocky bar on the Molonglo River. Separate institutions would be sited north of the river. None of this was revealed to the competitors.

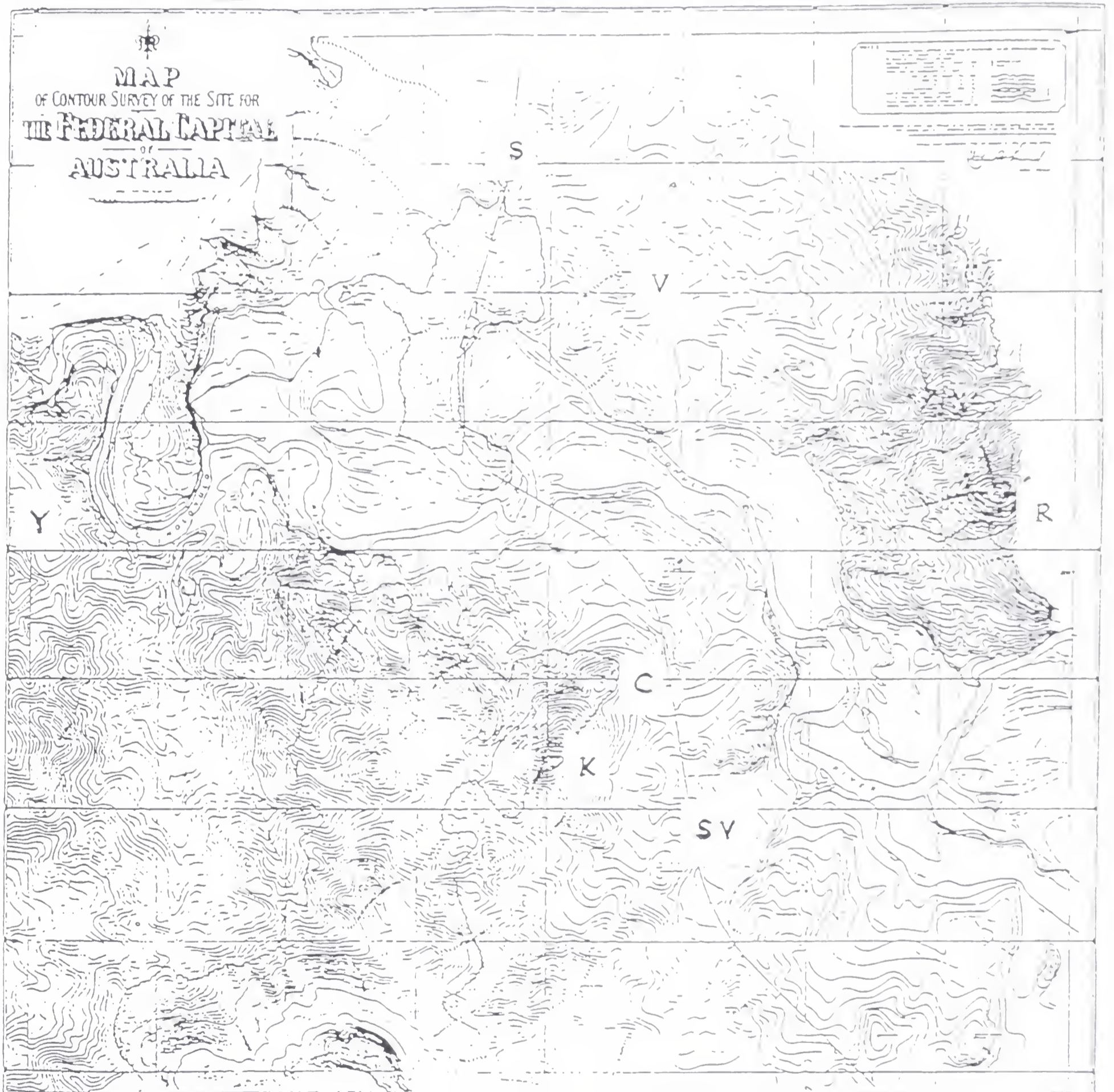


Figure 2: Site plan prepared by the departments. S—Sulman's preferred site sheltered by Black Mountain; V—Vernon Hill favoured by Vernon; Y—Yarrolumla favoured by Owen; K—Kurrajong Hill; C—Camp Hill; R—Russell Hill; SV—Sheltered valley favoured by Scrivner.

The departmental officers never wanted the competition to provide a new plan for the capital. This is made clear in a letter that departmental Secretary David Miller wrote to his minister explaining the purpose he saw in holding the competition, i.e. a source of ideas to add to the department's plan.

In my opinion it is more than probable that no design will be accepted 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.<sup>7</sup>

In case there was any doubt as to who would assemble this collection of ideas Miller reminded his minister 'It is necessary also to stipulate that the city will be laid out by the Officers of this Department.' To make his task of plundering the competition entries easier Miller asked the nominated jurors to provide 'a full statement, after due enquiry, of the merits and demerits of all designs' and to place the first six in order of merit. When the jurors said this was unreasonable Miller agreed that they would simply select the best three designs.<sup>8</sup>

## The Competition

The outcome of the competition, announced on 23 May 1912, was a blow to the department officers. The three winning designs and two mentioned designs (all by international competitors), selected by jurors Smith and Kirkpatrick, were very different from the city the departments had been anticipating. Each of the five cities spread over the whole of the base plan on both sides of the river. Although Griffin placed Parliament and government departments where Miller and his men wanted them, he proposed building the city itself along a Municipal axis on the north bank of the river stretching between Vernon Hill on the west and Mt Pleasant on the east. It was not the city the departments had in mind (see Figure 3). Fortunately for them the minority juror Coane gave his prizes to designs the departments were expecting, with both Parliament and the city south of

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<sup>7</sup> Department of Home Affairs, Correspondence between minister O'Malley, Miller and departmental officers, 1912, Australian Archives A110 13/1466.

<sup>8</sup> Department of Home Affairs, Correspondence re appointing jury, 1912, Australian Archives A110 FC 12/4133.

the river. Coane's first prize went to entry No 10 submitted by Griffiths, Coulter and Caswell of Sydney.

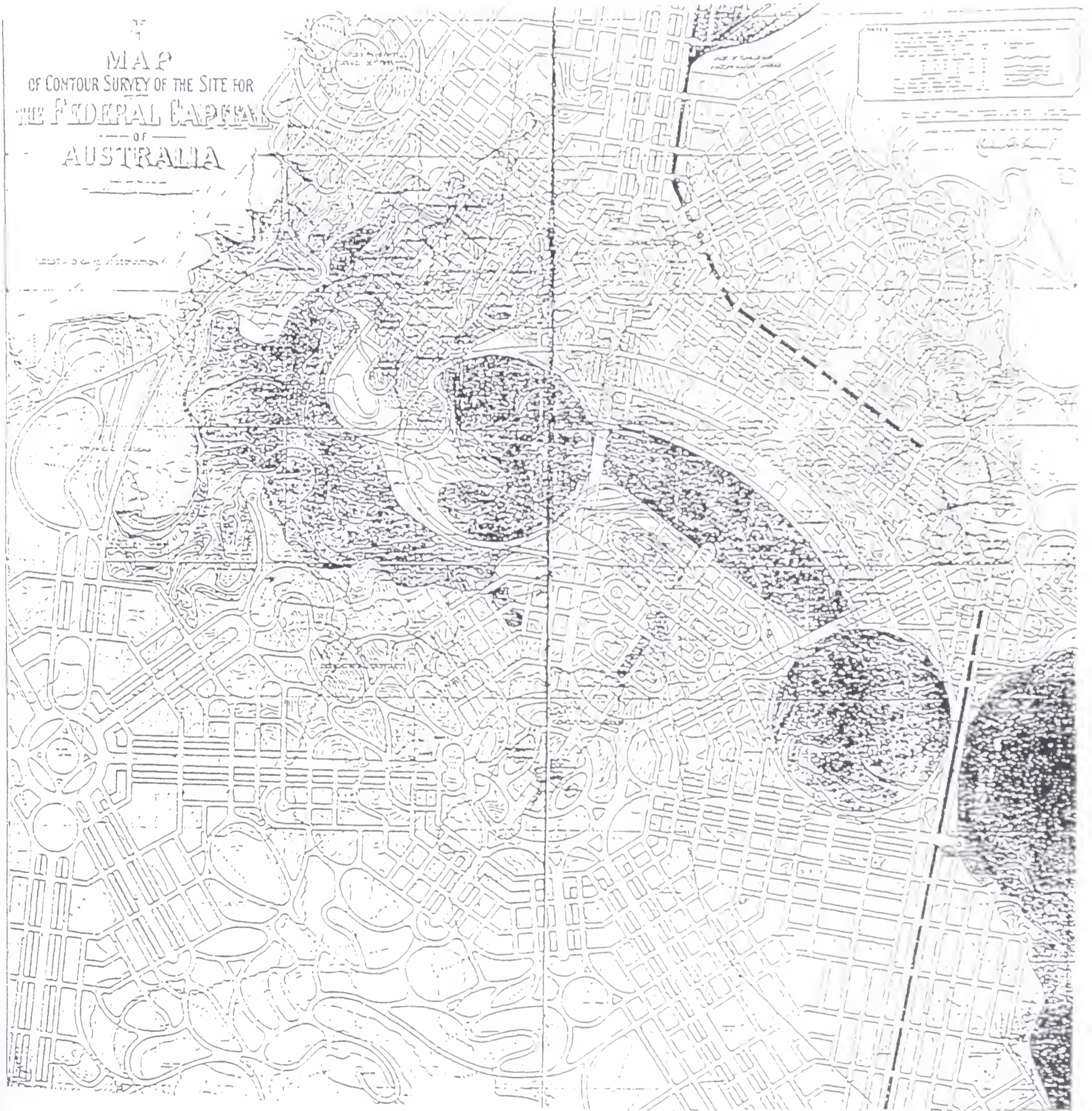


Figure 3: Griffin's winning competition entry of 1911/1912. The city was to lie along the Municipal Axis between Vernon and Russell Hills.



Figure 4: Design entry No 10 by Griffiths, Coulter and Caswell of Sydney. Their city is the sheltered valley as intended by the departments.

The intriguing question is how Griffiths, Coulter and Caswell came to plan the city the departmental officers had anticipated and why Coane gave it first prize, refusing to compromise with the other assessors. One of the design's authors, Robert Charles Coulter, was the artist who had been commissioned by the departments to paint the panoramic views from Camp Hill and Vernon Hill that had been supplied to all competitors. He would have been party to discussions in 1910 about the preferred location of the capital so it is unlikely that the similarities are coincidental. He could have been convinced of the ideas of the departmental officers or, less likely, the Sydney design could have been their Trojan Horse. In the Griffiths, Coulter and Caswell design (see Figure 4) a lake followed the natural contour of the flood plain, Parliament was on Camp Hill with government departments on the flat land to the north and east. The city centre lay in the sheltered valley south east of Kurrajong with the railway station close by. Schools and churches dotted the residential districts rising up towards the Mugga Mugga ridge providing shelter from the southerly and westerly winds. Only the university and military barracks were on the north side of the river. This was the city the departments had been anticipating.

Coane was the chairman of the assessing panel, appointed by O'Malley and nominated by the Victorian Institute of Surveyors. He had refused an offer by the two other assessors to place Griffin first and the Sydney entry second. There is no evidence that Coane colluded with the departments but the coincidence of his choice with their ideas is remarkable.

### The Board's Plan

A fortnight after the competition results were announced Miller wrote to his minister as though the winner hardly existed.

It now becomes necessary for a design for the layout of the City to be adopted; such a design should satisfy the requirements and comply with your instructions that the Federal Capital shall 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.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> D. Miller, Letter to minister O'Malley, 7 June 1912, Australian Archives A110, FC 12/4133.

Miller expressly asked that design No 10 be purchased by the government and then requested his minister to refer the three premiated designs and the purchased Sydney entry to a Board comprising Owen, Scrivener and Vernon. O'Malley agreed, instructing the Board to 'report as to the suitability of any one of them for adoption in its integrity [sic].'<sup>10</sup> Fourteen years later Owen revealed their real intentions, claiming that they had been instructed to 'prepare a plan which would be more suited to the local conditions and less expensive to execute.'<sup>11</sup> The implication is that within three weeks of the jury decision the departmental officers had decided that Griffin's design should be rejected because it was too expensive and did not fit the site. They now prepared their plan with Miller himself added to the Board by the minister.

At the same time Miller approved a start on construction of the powerhouse between the railhead and the river. The Board proceeded to draw out the design they had been preparing for the past three years, adding ideas from some of the competition entries. This was consistent with the competition conditions that the departmental officers had written but it was not what the public expected.

The Board's report was submitted on 25 November 1912, six months after the announcement of Griffin as the winner of the competition. It said:

The Board is unable to recommend the adoption of any one of the designs, and advises approval of the plan for the layout of the City prepared by the Board. This plan incorporates features from the premiated and purchased designs *wherever, in the opinion of the Board, such a procedure is warranted.*<sup>12</sup> [my italics]

In accepting Miller's recommendation minister O'Malley did not choose his words as carefully as Miller:

It appears to me that a City laid out on the lines of the Board's design, incorporating as it does the salient features of the premiated and purchased designs, should be both practical and beautiful.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Australian Parliament, Report of the board appointed to investigate certain designs, 1912, Appendix A.

<sup>11</sup> Federal Capital Advisory Committee, Final Report.

<sup>12</sup> Australian Parliament, Report of the board appointed to investigate certain designs, 1912, p.1.

<sup>13</sup> K. O'Malley, Australian Parliament, Report of the board to investigate certain designs, cover letter 26 November 1912.

## Reaction to the Board's Plan

There was an outcry from professionals in Australia and Britain comparing the Board's plan unfavourably with Griffin and calling for the winner of the competition to be adopted as the plan for the city. Jury member James Smith smelt a rat. Angered that press reports were claiming that the Board's plan was based principally on Griffin's design, Smith wrote to O'Malley:

whilst actual comparison shows almost total dissimilarity between the premiated (Griffin) and the "amended" (Board) designs, it shows a marked identity in respect to the dominating features of the "amended" (Board) plan and portions of the designs numbered 9 (MacDonald) and 10 (Coulter).<sup>14</sup>

Entry 9 was not mentioned by any jurors but it does use a diagonal street grid adopted in the Board plan. 'Wherever possible the cardinal idea of securing sunlight to the City blocks, by planning them at suitable angles to the meridian, has been observed.'<sup>15</sup> MacDonald was a Melbourne planner subsequently seconded to assist Griffin.

At a glance it is apparent that the departmental officers had used the purchased design No10 as the vehicle to carry their ideas. The lake is the same, the government buildings, city centre, railway station, schools and residential districts and university are all in the same positions. The minor concessions to Griffin were to use his Capitol on Kurrajong and to use the axis from Kurrajong to Ainslie as the organising line for government departments (see Figure 5). The Board plan was accepted by the government. Minister O'Malley drove the first peg on 20 February 1913 and three weeks later the city was officially founded by the Governor General and named by his wife.

## Griffin Arrives to Attempt a Compromise

Within a month the Labor government was defeated and Kelly replaced O'Malley. Griffin was invited to meet the Board to see if there was a basis for agreement. The Board's resistance to Griffin's plan reflected their

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<sup>14</sup> J. Smith, Letter to minister O'Malley, 30 November 1912, Australian Archives A110 12/4133.

<sup>15</sup> Australian Parliament, Report of the board to investigate certain designs, 1912, p.2.

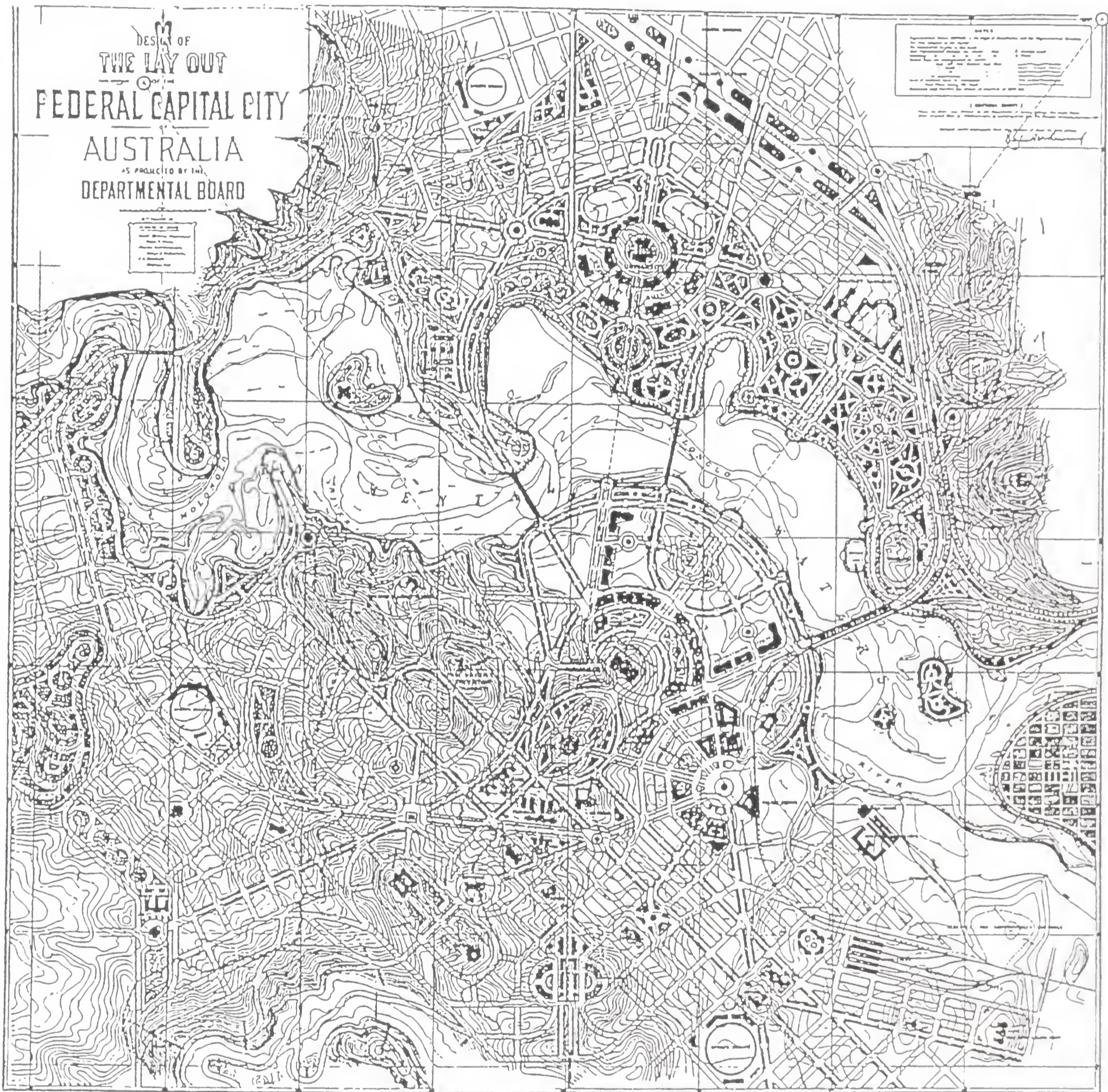


Figure 5: The departmental Board's plan of 1913 with the city in the sheltered valley. Concessions to Griffin are the Capitol on Kurrajong and the axis to Ainslie.



Figure 6: Griffin's revised plan of 1913. Concessions to the departments are the Initial City (removed by Griffin in 1915), the park strip to East Basin and the branch railway line over the Kings Bridge.

obsession with their own idea that the city should lie in the sheltered valley south east of Kurrajong. Their objections were set out by Griffin in his letter to the minister of 13 October 1913:

The Board's contention was that shelter from the wind constituted the first necessity and compactness for the initial population the second consideration. Furthermore that both these considerations necessitated the permanent practical confinement of urban development to the south-east corner of the site.

Of course to the Board, the south east corner *was* the site. Griffin amended his plan (see Figure 6) to include an 'Initial City' in the south east corner, at the head of a new park plaisance on the centre line of the east basin. This park, later called Telopea, was to take over the role Griffin had intended for the plaisance on the north shore of the lake; it became the centre line of the official city. The Board rejected Griffin's peace offering.

Unable to find a compromise minister Kelly dismissed the Board and appointed Griffin to direct the departments in the building of the city. Inevitably there was a deadlock. Griffin's three major initiatives: for the Parliament House, the lake and the railway all came to nothing. Griffin's case was supported by a sympathetic Royal Commission who found (inter alia) 'That the...members of the Departmental Board endeavoured to set aside Mr. Griffin's design and to substitute the Board's own design.'<sup>16</sup> Feeling vindicated Griffin removed the Initial City from his drawings. Little happened on the ground. Griffin's legacy was in a series of plans. His most detailed subdivision plan of 1916 focused on the Municipal Axis, north of the lake, where his city was to be concentrated. The war of attrition between Griffin and the departments lasted seven years. In 1920 Griffin resigned rather than serve as just one member of the Advisory Board.

### **The Departments Build Their City on Griffin's Road Plan**

From the beginning of 1921, with Griffin out of the way, the department officers had the opportunity to build the city how and where they thought it should be. The new planning body, the Federal Capital Advisory Committee (FCAC), chaired by John Sulman and including Griffin's old

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<sup>16</sup> Australian Parliament, Federal Capital Administration, Report of the Royal Commission (1) Issues relating to Mr Griffin, 15 March 1917, para 34.

enemies from the department, immediately proposed a reinstatement of the Board's plan. Sulman wrote to the minister:

The whole (of Griffin's) city plan is so extensive...and calculated for a population of probably 250,000 that it cannot be realised for a century or more...A nucleus has already been started at the powerhouse and I advise that this be developed...the area is sheltered...bisected by the existing high road from Queanbeyan...streets could be laid out on natural lines...and heavy cuttings and embankments avoided...By adopting the above suggestions a compact easy to build and easy to work city would be obtained, in contrast to a scattered, expensive and hard to manage settlement if commenced to the north-east of civic centre.

This was a very biased description. The powerhouse site was little more than a rail terminus, a works depot and the powerhouse itself. But these lay in the sheltered valley south east of Kurrajong, the site that had been envisaged by the departments since 1908 — incorporated in competition entry No 10 — and formed the basis of the Board's plan. The department's claim that Griffin's city site on his Municipal Axis would be 'scattered, extensive and hard to manage' only applied if the department refused to give up the south-east corner. Griffin's municipal axis was the obvious place for an initial compact city. The government rejected Sulman's plea and instructed the departments to follow Griffin's plan. It was not Griffin but the FCAC who made early Canberra a city that was scattered, extensive and hard to manage.

Forced to accept Griffin's plan but unwilling to build it, the FCAC adopted a devious strategy. They claimed that Griffin's design required expensive monumental buildings which would have to be postponed. In the meantime the capital would comprise buildings of a provisional nature. They then proceeded to locate the buildings for the provisional city in positions that corresponded with the Board's plan but on Griffin's road layout. All their siting decisions, scattering buildings widely across the outlines of Griffin's road pattern, can be seen on the 1933 plan (see Figure 7). The FCAC built their city in the sheltered valley south-east of Kurrajong, where the department officers had wanted it since 1909.

Between Parliament House and the railway station, around Telopea Park, the beginning of the city appeared. An industrial district grew beside the powerhouse at the rail head. Shops appeared at both Manuka and Kingston. Two hotels, private and public schools, churches of all denominations and a swimming pool all served the FCAC's town for the officials. Houses spread

from the flat land beside Telopea Park up the sheltered slopes to the most prestigious areas around Collins Park and further east under the shelter of Red Hill and Mugga Mugga. Canberra's first citizens would not have needed to cross the river.

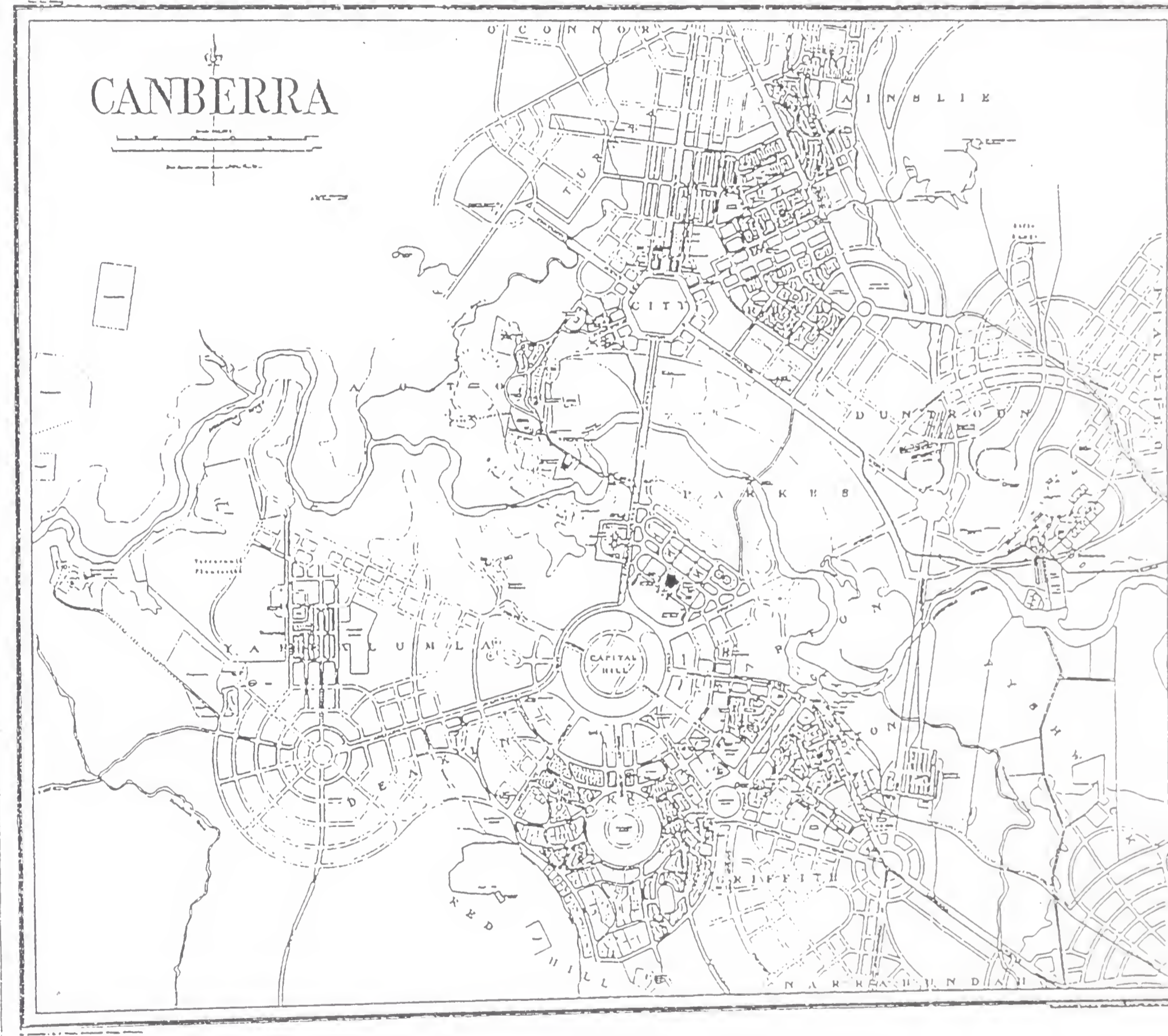


Figure 7: Canberra plan of 1933. The department's buildings on Griffin's road plan. The Municipal Axis (Constitution Avenue) ignored and the city started in the shelterd valley which is still the focus of Canberra's establishment sixty years later.

The housing program was developed for the FCAC by Owen. It had a first stage on the government (south) side, providing residences for the Prime Minister, President and Speaker with ten bungalows for members of Parliament and a hotel for visitors. For permanent residents the government would erect 310 cottages, hostels for 70 families and 310 single people. Private enterprise would build 30 cottages and hostels for 328 single people.<sup>17</sup> This accommodation for about 2150 people was quickly enlarged to consolidate the capital on the Board's site.

As a gesture to the government's instruction to follow Griffin's plan a second settlement was started on the other side of the river north-east of Vernon Hill. Here Owen's second and third stages provided for 336 cottages and hostels for 90 families provided by private enterprise, some 1500 people. They were provided with one government primary school, one modest church and two church halls and one hotel. When shops were eventually started some distance from the housing they initiated the move north up the open valley, away from the heart of the capital, rather than east to start Griffin's Municipal Axis. This northern town with few amenities was designated for workers.

The northern and southern towns grew away from each other, leaving Griffin's Municipal Axis as no more than a withered appendix to Civic.

### The Legacies

During the 1955 Senate Inquiry Peter Harrison reinstated Griffin's central geometric figure of three avenues and the Land Axis but Griffin's city of symbolically sited institutions and linear settlement never appeared. Griffin's city location, along the municipal axis from City Hill to Russell was ignored. The shape of land use and density had been determined by the ideas of the department officers; conceived in 1909, incorporated in the Board's plan of 1913, and implemented by the officers in the 1920's.

When, in 1957, Holford observed the two towns north and south of the river and asked 'which is Canberra?' he was not looking at the failure of Griffin's ideas, as his words implied<sup>18</sup>, but at the consequences of the Board's plan built in defiance of Griffin.

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<sup>17</sup> Australian Parliament, Public Works Committee, Report on the erection of a hostel, 1922, evidence by P.Owen, 19 December 1921.

<sup>18</sup> W. Holford, Observations on the future development of Canberra, December 1957.

The Board's city, in the sheltered valley south east of Kurrajong, remains the home of Canberra's establishment, containing the suburbs of Forrest, Red Hill, Griffith and Kingston. The Manuka centre continues to attract the most exclusive shops of the capital and from the 1970s Kingston has developed as the only desirable medium density suburb in Canberra, containing the first two high rise residential towers. Most recently the ACT government has proposed substantial redevelopment of the Kingston foreshore around the old powerhouse at the base of Telopea Park.

The hump of the Canberra camel may carry a prosperous cargo but that cannot disguise the fact that it is not the thoroughbred steed designed by Griffin.

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