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**the Federal Capital of Australia:  
A Virtual Planning History**

**Robert Freestone**

Urban Research Program  
Working Paper No.60  
June 1997



**URBAN RESEARCH PROGRAM  
RESEARCH SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES  
AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY**

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*Series Editor:*  
*Rita C. Coles*

## Abstract

*Canberra is one of the most significant products of twentieth century planning. The conventional historiography of its origins divides into three successive phases: a 'battle of ideas' over the very notion of a federal capital, the 'battle of the sites', and a 'battle of the plans' defined by the international design competition of 1911-12 won by Walter Burley Griffin. A less well chartered strand through the decade leading up to this competition was popular, professional and governmental debate and discussion about the desired look and layout of the new federal city. The aim of this paper is to recover this 'pre-history' of planning to give some insight into the state of early modern planning theory in Australia. The paper charts the evolution of the generalised notion of a federal 'city beautiful', its hardening into planning concepts for a 'practical twentieth century town', and the maturation of an integrated set of planning ideas and images that helped set the scene for the ways in which the competition entries would be assessed.*

# The Federal Capital of Australia: A Virtual Planning History\*

Robert Freestone†

The Federal Capital of Australia! Who among our young men has not seen visions and, among our old men, dreamed dreams of what the city may be! Her domes and towers rising into the azure, the sheen of still gliding water, the dark woods and, beyond the purple hills and distant highlands; a fair setting for a fair city, say you. A fair setting indeed for a city that, if her people wish it, need be second to none in the world for beauty, health and convenience.<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

The conventional historiography of early planning for the federal capital of Australia (officially named Canberra in 1913) neatly divides into three phases: a foundational debate over the very notion of a federal capital during the late nineteenth century; the so-called 'battle of the sites' during the first decade of the twentieth century, and thirdly a 'battle of the plans' through the controversial international design competition of 1911-12 from which entry No. 29 by Walter Burley Griffin emerged the winner. This narrative, the subsequent trials and tribulations experienced by Griffin in Australia from 1913-20, and the eventual turning away from 'the city beautiful of our dreams', is well documented.<sup>2</sup>

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\* The first version of this paper was presented in the Urban Research Program Seminar Series in September 1996. It subsequently evolved and expanded through presentations in London, Plymouth, Oxford, Potsdam and finally in Thessaloniki at the 7th International Planning History Conference in late October 1996. I am indebted to Brendan Gleeson and Pat Troy for the initial invitation to come to Canberra, as well as to a changing cast of seminar and conference participants, plus an anonymous referee, for their constructive suggestions and critical comments.

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<sup>1</sup> 'The Federal Capital', *Art and Architecture*, 8, 1911, p. 209.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Fischer, *Canberra, Myths and Models: Forces at work in the Formation of the Australian Capital*, Hamburg: Institute of Asian Affairs, 1984; Peter Harrison, *Walter Burley Griffin, Landscape Architect*, Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1995; Donald Johnson, *Canberra and Walter Burley Griffin: A Bibliography of 1876 to 1976 and a Guide to Published Sources*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1980; John Reys, *Canberra 1912*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, in press.

A less well chartered strand through the decade leading up to the competition was debate and discussion about the look and layout of the new federal city.<sup>3</sup> This is largely a post-federation discourse contemporaneous with, but overshadowed by, the 'battle of the sites', although there is evidence of earlier imaginary musings.<sup>4</sup> Certain visions from the 1900s have endured, notably Charles Coulter's rococo vision of a waterside federal capital and John Sulman's radially-planned city. Coulter and Sulman already loom large in conventional federal city narratives; the former as a Sydney-based architectural draftsman and public servant whose artistic renderings helped define Australian responses to the American city beautiful idea, and the latter as the expatriate British architect who became the leading town planning advocate of his generation. Theirs were but two contributions through a decade of unprecedented discourse on town planning. The *dramatis personae* is quite impressive, and includes prominent architects like John Barlow and George Jones, artist-brothers Norman and Lionel Lindsay, lawyer Alexander Oliver, inventor Lawrence Hargrave, and the surveyor-statistician George Knibbs. Knibbs emerges as a key figure through his involvement with a government site selection committee in 1900, his friendship with Oliver, and his innovative paper 'The Theory of City Design' (1901).

There are other more well-known public figures who drift into and out of the story, notably early federal members of parliament and prime ministers. But the formal interaction between political and professional discourses was limited. Architects, surveyors and engineers generally steered clear of heady debates about social reform, nationalism, and federalism. Their more earnest endeavours were directed towards statements of *de novo* town planning principles. The federal capital was usually treated as the vehicle for generic theoretical advancements rather than as the singular embodiment of national identity. Hence the sub-theme which underlays the events reconstructed here, albeit one never quite consummated, is the development of a sense of a completely new profession called town planning.

Drawing on a mix of fresh primary and selected secondary sources, the aim of this paper, therefore, is to recover a more substantive 'pre-history' of planning to give some insight into the state of 'home grown' planning theory

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<sup>3</sup> Gatis Gregors, 'The Capital City Design Theory debate 1890-1910', in R. Freestone, ed. *The Australian Planner*, School of Town Planning, University of New South Wales, 1993, pp. 191-200; Greg Murphy, 'Prelude to the Planning of Canberra', *Canberra Historical Journal*, No. 21, 1988, pp. 11-20.

<sup>4</sup> 'A Model City in 1916', *Town Planning and Housing*, September 1915, pp. 12-13.

in Australia, to examine how the notion of a federal 'city beautiful' evolved, and to record how the evolution and maturation of an integrated set of planning ideas and images by around 1911 had helped set the scene for how Australians would assess the best of the competition entries. The paper does not attempt to document the political and administrative machinations in early federal capital matters in any detail. Rather, it is an empirically-rich design history principally concerned with spatial representations of an ideal city. Following some obligatory scene-setting, there are four main sections: an exploration of generalised city visions, the articulation of specific design features, progress toward more inclusive theoretical statements, and actual plans which attempted to synthesise various ideas and theories into two-dimensional layouts.

### Inventing a Federal City

Given the broader economic, political and cultural implications, the question of a seat of government was not the major issue in the federation of the Australian colonies in 1901. But it was an inescapable detail which needed to be addressed. There were rival camps. Some observers favoured the 'rotatory principle' of a travelling Commonwealth parliament moving around the existing capital cities.<sup>5</sup> Another camp preferred a more permanent home.<sup>6</sup> There was also the issue of grafting federal capital functions onto an existing city versus the development of a *de novo* capital. The architects of federation were eventually swayed by the United States precedent where the Constitution reserved a special site for the national government.<sup>7</sup>

A locational compromise negotiating the competing claims of the two largest colonial capitals, Sydney and Melbourne, was embodied in Section 125 of the *Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act 1900*:

The seat of government of the Commonwealth shall be determined by the Parliament, and shall be within territory which shall have been granted to or acquired by the Commonwealth, and shall be vested in and belong to the Commonwealth, and shall be in the State of New South Wales, and be distant

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<sup>5</sup> Harold Willoughby, *Australian Federation: Its Aims and Possibilities*, Melbourne: Sands and McDougal, 1891, p. 91.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Garran, *The Coming Commonwealth: An Australian Handbook of Federal Government*, Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1897, p. 180.

<sup>7</sup> Roger Pegrum, 'The Politics of Planning; How Australia Chose its Federal Capital', MTCP thesis, University of Sydney, 1977, p. vii.

not less than one hundred miles from Sydney. Such territory shall contain an area of not less than one hundred square miles, and such portion thereof as shall consist of Crown lands shall be granted to the Commonwealth without any payment therefor. The Parliament shall sit in Melbourne until it meets at the seat of Government.

This was the catalyst for intensive and sustained lobbying of the federal government by various rural interests in New South Wales (NSW) eager to secure the prestige and economic advantages of the new city. Various 'federal capital leagues' sprung up to tout the physical qualities of sites in terms of criteria such as available land area, water supply, suitable building materials, accessibility, and climatic conditions. The protracted and highly politicised battle is chronicled by Pegrum.<sup>8</sup> A succession of experts was appointed to gather information and scrutinise rival bids with some putative analytical precision. One of these was a 1903 Royal Commission chaired by John Kirkpatrick, a well-connected Sydney architect later appointed a member of the board which judged entries in the 1911-12 design competition. The site issue was not finally resolved until December 1908 when the Commonwealth settled upon the Yass-Canberra district.

The dominant flavour of the federal capital debate throughout the first decade of federation is captured in the remarks of an unknown member of parliament quoted by the planner-architect John Sulman in 1909: 'Very few ideas respecting the actual laying out of the capital were ever put before politicians. All the interest and controversy have so far centred upon the locality'.<sup>9</sup> In addition to this understandably narrow focus, many professional participants seemed reticent about discussing actual design issues, possibly reflecting the limited state of local knowledge (one source of the idea of holding an international competition) and a conservative reluctance to move beyond generalities before a specific site was chosen. As stated by a group of government experts in 1900: 'The whole question of the general form of the city design is so dependent upon the topographical features, including the

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<sup>8</sup> Roger Pegrum, *The Bush Capital: How Australia chose Canberra as its federal city*, Sydney: Hale and Iremonger, 1983, and see also his 1977 masters thesis; LF Fitzhardinge, 'In Search of a Capital City', in HL White, ed. *Canberra: A Nation's Capital*, Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1954, pp. 3-13; and GE Sherington, 'The Selection of Canberra as Australia's National Capital', *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, 56, 1970, pp. 134-147.

<sup>9</sup> John Sulman, *The Federal Capital*, Sydney: John Sands, 1909, p. 7.

grades, etc of the selected site, that it is impracticable to further discuss anything so problematical'.<sup>10</sup>

There may have also been an element of apathy among the design professions, injected by the drawn-out site debate. This would have been shared with the broader public for whom a federal city promised little joy. As stated in the Melbourne *Argus* in 1903, 'to a considerable number of tax-burdened Australians' it was 'a matter of indifference' whether 'the taxation factory' was located 'a few hundred miles nearer to or further from them'.<sup>11</sup> Even those knowledgeable about the Senate Park Commission's contemporaneous vision to resuscitate L'Enfant's plan for Washington were not necessarily inspired: 'few Australians...imagined that Australia's federal city would look like this, certainly not within their own lifetimes, and this accounted in many cases for a lack of enthusiasm in an early start to building a capital city'.<sup>12</sup>

### Envisioning a New Federal City

Nevertheless, through the 'battle of the sites' era came an undercurrent of debate on the general type of city desired as well as some quite instructive interventions on specific matters of layout. The predominant flavour was the need to aspire to a better urban environment than that offered by existing cities.

With few exceptions, and notwithstanding some grand plans in early days, Australian urban settlements had been founded and had evolved through the colonial era in an *ad hoc* manner with minimal attention to aesthetic questions. The major cities were not generally known for the grandeur or beauty of their physical fabric. At most, they could boast some interesting landmarks, a few handsome public buildings, maybe water views, and some public parks.

Leaving aside local boosterist literature and a broader consensus about the odd noble building or townscape feature, few places stood out. In the contemporary imagination, only Adelaide with its unique ring of parkland and the regional centre of Ballarat with its central boulevard were widely

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<sup>10</sup> G Allen Mansfield, WL Vernon, John Barlow, George Knibbs, 10 August 1900, in 'Report of the Commissioner on Sites for the Seat of Government of the Commonwealth', October 1900, *NSW Parliamentary Papers*, 1900.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Pegrum, *The Bush Capital*, p. 101.

<sup>12</sup> Pegrum, *The Bush Capital*, p. 111.

cited as model centres. Melbourne, for example, was said by one landscape expert to have 'the most uninteresting streets and surroundings of any great town in the world—convenient and clean—nothing more. No view points, no internal spaces, no dignity, no powers of revealing what we are or whence we came, or the significance of our every day life'.<sup>13</sup> The same diagnosis was offered by others: 'no one could call it beautiful' said a young architect in 1911 who also went on to chastise Sydney with its 'narrow streets, badly laid out', although at least the NSW capital was partly redeemed by its natural harbour setting.<sup>14</sup>

The federal city envisioned by most nationalistic commentators was the antithesis of these 'happy-go-lucky' environments. As DH Souter put it in 1908: 'Nothing that is mean or trivial should be permitted in its design; nothing that is shoddy or sham should be allowed in its construction...we are building not for to-day or to-morrow, but for all time'.<sup>15</sup> The recurring epithets in propagandist literature, politicians' speeches, government reports, and professional discourse were for the federal capital to be 'stately', 'artistic', 'commodious', 'sanitary', 'picturesque', and 'regal'. Such sentiments were echoed by overseas commentators anticipating a new city for 'the sea-girt continent' that would be 'beautiful and health-giving and ennobling to many generations'.<sup>16</sup> The architect George Sydney Jones spoke for most when capturing the essence of the nation's task: creation of a city which would be 'the most beautiful of the modern world'.<sup>17</sup> This aim was paramount, even when it was conceded that, realistically, the city might be destined to be only of moderate size.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> C Bogue Luffmann, 'The Agricultural, Horticultural, and Sylvan Features of a Federal Capital', in *Proceedings at the Congress of Engineers, Architects, Surveyors, and others interested in the Federal Capital of Australia held in Melbourne in May, 1901*, Melbourne: JC Stephens, 1901, p. 45.

<sup>14</sup> BC Woods, 'A Modern Utopia', *Victorian Architectural Students Society of the RVIA, Journal of Proceedings*, March, 1911, pp. 34-35.

<sup>15</sup> DH Souter, 'The Building of the Federal City', *Art and Architecture*, 5, 1908, p. 206.

<sup>16</sup> 'Great Opportunities', *The Garden City*, 2, 1907, p. 280. One of the earliest architectonic visions of an ideal federal city was apparently expressed in the London *Builder* in 1866 and reproduced as 'A Model City in 1916', *Town Planning and Housing*, September 1915, pp. 12-13. By 1911 considerable imperial interest was also focussed on New Delhi.

<sup>17</sup> G Sydney Jones, 'Some Thoughts Concerning the Federal City', in *Proceedings of the Congress ...*, 1901, p. 22.

<sup>18</sup> Norman Selfe, *Building, Engineering and Mining Journal*, 12 October 1901, p. 323; and Editorial, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 November 1909.

Contrasting with such glittering futures were more prosaic images of a 'bush capital'. These were more motivated variously by the view that Australia already had too many cities, the notion that Sydney or Melbourne could best secure ongoing contact with the realities of everyday life, and opportunistic political point-scoring. On one occasion George Reid, Prime Minister in 1904-05, urged that the new capital 'be constructed on the bush pattern, and should be characterised by a more than spartan simplicity'.<sup>19</sup> Alfred Deakin, who served three terms as Prime Minister between 1903 and 1910, had no great enthusiasm for a monumental federal city:

The seat of government would certainly not be more than a mere township for many years...the cost [of building] should be small and need only be small... it seems preposterous to contemplate the erection of palatial buildings in any capital that we may choose. We ought not to be above accepting the simplest accommodation.<sup>20</sup>

Certain sections of the media were also critical. The *Bulletin* regularly lampooned the excesses which would be involved. A March 1901 editorial suggested as much as 5000 square miles would be necessary to accommodate all the projected avenues, squares and parklands.<sup>21</sup> Later, when the Canberra site began to win official favour, the journal was mercilessly critical and championed alternative locations, becoming 'so hysterical that it lacked all pretence of reasoned analysis of the matter'.<sup>22</sup> There is a famous cartoon by Norman Lindsay published in June 1912 which discredits the Canberra site as the politician-infested and rain-forsaken country town of a banana republic—a 'city of Brown Misery'.<sup>23</sup>

The whole spectrum of views was disarmingly captured by the eccentric politician King O'Malley. He early dreamed of a city that would 'rival London in population, Paris in beauty, Athens in culture, and Chicago in enterprise'.<sup>24</sup> He then changed tack to question the sanity of federal politicians who would even consider leaving a 'healthy, prosperous successful city like Melbourne, where the rents are low, and the people are healthy and

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<sup>19</sup> 'For Australasia', *The Review of Reviews*, 23, 1903, pp.107-108.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Pegrum, *The Bush Capital*, p. 91.

<sup>21</sup> Pegrum, *The Bush Capital*, p. 70.

<sup>22</sup> FC Green, 'The Battle of the Site for the Federal Capital', *Tasmanian Historical Research Association, Papers and Proceedings*, 13 (1), 1965, p. 16.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Green, 'The Battle of the Site...', p. 16.

<sup>24</sup> *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 8 October 1903.

intelligent, and where we have libraries, great newspapers and the best of society'<sup>25</sup>. But when chosen by Prime Minister Andrew Fisher as Minister for Home Affairs with responsibility for federal capital matters in 1910, he announced that Australia's new capital 'must be the finest Capital City in the World—The Pride of Time'.<sup>26</sup>

This generalised notion of 'a new Eden' prevailed in official and professional discourse, at least until it came time to actually commence development. After the enervating site battles of the early 1900s, the early idealism was captured in 1908 when surveyors carrying out detailed topographical investigations of the Yass-Canberra district were requested to bear in mind the 'object of beautification' and 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'.<sup>27</sup> This upbeat philosophy persisted through to the official naming ceremony for Canberra in March 1913, and is reflected in the remarks of Governor General Lord Denman on the day who anticipated a city inspiring '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'.<sup>28</sup>

The apotheosis of these sorts of ideals was RGC (Charles) Coulter's 1901 watercolour depiction of 'a new Venice' on the shores of Lake George near Goulburn, NSW.<sup>29</sup> Lake George—despite its alarming tendency to completely dry up through times of drought—was a serious contender in the early years. It had its share of dispassionate advocates, including engineer Frederick Gipps who saw it as a site 'of picturesque beauty' for a city 'worthy of the aspirations of this Commonwealth in the cause of art, culture, and humanity'.<sup>30</sup> Coulter's mix of the neo-classical and the rococo, littering

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<sup>25</sup> *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 6 December 1909.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Harrison, *Walter Burley Griffin*, p. 6.

<sup>27</sup> Murphy, 'Prelude to the Planning of Canberra', p. 15

<sup>28</sup> *Canberra: Capital City of the Commonwealth of Australia*, Melbourne: Government Printer, 1913, p. 31.

<sup>29</sup> 'The Federal City, Lake George, N.S.W.', frontispiece to *Proceedings of the Congress ...*, illustrating a paper by A Evans, 'A Waterside Capital', pp. 35-37. The original is held by the National Library of Australia. The painting is reproduced back to front in Pegrum, *The Bush Capital*, p. 73.

<sup>30</sup> Frederick. B Gipps, 'Lake George (New South Wales) as a site for the Federal Capital of Australia', *Royal Geographical Society of Australasia (Victoria)*, 19, 1901, p. 38.

hillsides and the lakefront with ersatz grandeur, has been described, remarkably politely, as a 'fanciful architectural confection'.<sup>31</sup>

Employed in the office of the NSW Government Architect, Coulter was subsequently responsible for other lushly urbanistic visions on possible sites. In 1903 he transformed the countryside near Tumut in southern NSW into an Australianised version of a European river city, complete with arched bridges, spired buildings, and prominent civic squares. For Mahkoolma on the Murrumbidgee River, he drew on the same ideas in order to capture the stated vision of his superior, Walter Vernon, of a future city that 'like all European Capitals and Cities...[could] rightly lay claim to beauty of situation and appropriateness of combination, of city and surroundings'.<sup>32</sup> The images in all these Coulter creations anticipate the conservative imaginary townscapes of his joint entry with W Scott Griffiths and Charles Caswell in the federal capital design competition, a plan that won a consolation prize.<sup>33</sup>

A similar but unofficial image was that for Dalgety in south-eastern NSW. This locality was actually chosen by the Commonwealth Parliament in 1904 as the preferred site and enshrined in the *Seat of Government Act 1904*. The artist Lionel Lindsay imagined great things: a 'city-to-be of the snows—a beautiful city with great public buildings, boulevards, rushing waters, and the sun shining on the back-ground of snow-covered peaks'.<sup>34</sup> But in rugged country remote from established centres of population, lacking convenient rail access, and with a vigorous climate, Dalgety was an unpopular compromise site and the decision was eventually rescinded. Lionel's conservative artwork for a noble neo-classical city reproduced in *The Lone Hand* contrasts with the depiction of the rival Canberra site as a forlorn wasteland by his brother Norman in *The Bulletin*. That both journals had the same publisher underscores the politicisation of the federal capital project, with its representations contingent upon sometimes conflicting public commentaries on bigger issues such as government extravagance, national identity, and decentralisation policy.

<sup>31</sup> Peter Harrison, *Walter Burley Griffin: Landscape Architect*, National Library of Australia, p. 4.

<sup>32</sup> 'Federal Capital Sites. Reports respecting proposed sites at Mahkoolma, Canberra, and other sites in the Yass (Lake George) District. Report upon suggested site for the seat of government of the Commonwealth at Mahkoolma', WL Vernon, April 1906, *Commonwealth Parliamentary Papers*, 1906, Vol. 2, p. 5.

<sup>33</sup> A Benson, 'Canberra Design Competition of 1911: Contender for second place', *Canberra Historical Journal*, No 3, 1979, pp. 8-13.

<sup>34</sup> Green, 'The Battle of the Site...', p. 10.

## Ideas in Search of a Plan

Two periods of intense activity in attempts to translate generalised notions of a city beautiful to specific planning principles were in 1900-01 and 1909-10. The first comes when the idea of a new federal city initially animated popular and professional imagination; the second after a definite site had finally been chosen.

Many practical suggestions surfaced from the turn of the century, but as mere fragments decontextualised from any larger plan. Typical were the contributions on the subject of 'aspect' and street orientation to two technical journals, the *Australian Technical Journal* and *The Surveyor*. The suggestion for laying out streets off cardinal compass directions to maximise solar access proved an enduring one in early discussions.<sup>35</sup> Sanitary arrangements were uppermost in the mind of the President of the Royal Society of NSW in calling for 'an enlightened state policy' to realise a 'new and perfect City of Hygeia'.<sup>36</sup>

A similar theme pervaded the suggestions made by John Young, a building contractor-politician with extensive property interests in the suburb of Annandale. 'Is [the federal city] to be a model city that Australia can be proud of, or a happy-go-lucky irregularity?', he asked in March 1901.<sup>37</sup> He supplied an extensive list of ideas for securing 'the most attractive and healthy city in the world', including a good water supply, an efficient sewerage system, frequent garbage removals, detached houses, tree planted streets, common service trenches, and even the utilisation of 'rainwater from roofs of houses ...in watering trees or gardens'. Young elaborated these and other concepts—from constructing the city by private enterprise to organising the layout around a central park one mile in diameter—in a small pamphlet in 1905.<sup>38</sup>

Through various federal and state government reports produced during the site selection process runs an undercurrent of ideas with physical planning implications: the need for topographic variety, the desirability of a river location, the possibility for 'ornamental waters'. A recurring notion was that

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<sup>35</sup> John H Rumsey, Letter to the Editors, *Australian Technical Journal*, 4(3), 1901, p. 96.

<sup>36</sup> 'Mr. Hamlet the Past President of the Royal Society of N.S.W. on Modern Chemistry and the Federal Capital', *Australian Technical Journal*, 4(10), 1901, pp. 298-299.

<sup>37</sup> Letter to the Editor, *Sydney Morning Herald*, March 1901.

<sup>38</sup> John Young, *The Proposed Federal City for the Commonwealth of Australia, in New South Wales*, Sydney: Batson and Co., 1905, p. 5

of reserving 'rising knolls for public edifices'.<sup>39</sup> Knibbs had spoken of this objective as early as 1901 in suggesting that 'all conspicuous or prominent sites should be appropriated for those great public buildings and monuments upon which a people may be expected to lavish its wealth and artistically express its national feeling'.<sup>40</sup> In February 1909, after the Yass-Canberra district had finally been selected by the parliament for the seat of government, the surveyor Charles Scrivener reported that the Canberra site was the best choice, affording opportunities for 'ornamental waters' and streets 'with easy gradients', while its 'prominent hills of moderate altitude present suitable sites for the principal public buildings'.<sup>41</sup>

The 'Congress of Engineers, Architects, Surveyors, And Members of Allied Professions, to discuss Questions relating to the Laying Out and Building of the Federal Capital, and matters of professional interest generally, held in Melbourne during the Commonwealth Celebrations, May 1901, at the Institute Rooms, 175 Collins Street', to give the occasion its formal title, was the first significant opportunity for interested professionals to intensively discuss the federal capital project. Also the first national conference on town planning staged in Australia, it was held to coincide with the first sitting of the Federal Parliament.

A range of issues which would likely need to be addressed was outlined by George Higgins of the Victorian Institute of Engineers in his opening address to the Congress. This paper is worth quoting at length for several reasons: it provides the most detailed inventory to that time of the desirable features of a federal capital, it conveys the exciting prospect of new urban technologies at the dawn of the twentieth century, and it illustrates the fair distance local planning still had to travel from such statements of first principles to a more sophisticated appreciation of integrated comprehensive planning:

The laying-out of the new City, with a view to facilitate traffic and drainage, as well as the attainment of a pleasing appearance, and promoting health; the arrangement of breathing spaces, and the methods of planting parks and public gardens; the most suitable widths of streets and footwalks; devices for diminishing congestion of traffic at street crossings; the types of pavement best adapted to prevent the formation of dust and mud, or, if the formation of dust and mud cannot be altogether prevented, then the best ways of laying the dust

<sup>39</sup> Sir John Forrest, 'Federal Capital: Proposed Sites', *Commonwealth Parliamentary Papers*, Vol. 2, 1907-1908, p. 3.

<sup>40</sup> Knibbs, 'The Theory of City Design', p. 87.

<sup>41</sup> Murphy, 'Prelude to the Planning of Canberra', p. 15.

and removing the mud; regulations as to lanes and by-ways; comparisons of various systems of tramways; the means for rapidly and frequently removing refuse and waste matters, including smoke, and for satisfactorily disposing of such refuse, and for preventing the formation of smoke as far as possible; the question of procuring abundant supplies of pure water, not only for domestic purposes, but also for fire-extinction and street-watering; schemes for architectural adornment, and regulations for the prevention of a too-glaring want of harmony and proportion in the various buildings, without, of course, unduly curtailing individual taste; the choice of suitable building materials; precautions for fire-proofing houses; regulations for preventing houses from being too much crowded together, such regulations, for instance, as will prevent houses being so erected that their occupants have to live, during the hours of daylight, in rooms lighted by artificial means, a condition of things which ought not to have place in a city where the ground remains the property of the Government; regulations also, as to the ventilation of all buildings, and for providing ample means of egress in cases of panic; devices for equalising temperature in houses, especially hospitals, so that warmth can be supplied from central sources in winter, and a cool air service provided in summer by some such means as liquified air; again, the supply of gas and electricity, both for lighting and for power; provision for laying wires and pipes underground in suitable, accessible, conduits; questions of street-verandahs versus awnings; devices for permanently fixing the boundaries of blocks of land; even the important question of housing temporarily the armies of workmen who will be employed in building the City.<sup>42</sup>

The twelve papers presented at the Congress differed vastly in scope, sophistication, and technicality, but all were infused by the idealism and commitment to modernism required at the start of the quest for the ultimate 'twentieth century city'. Inevitably there were disagreements over particular ideas, ranging from the location of water supply pipes to whether terrace housing should be permitted. The most individualistic position was that of Bernard Hall, Director of Melbourne's National Gallery, in 'The Beautifying of a City'. He wished 'for the sake of picturesqueness, that the new city will be built in the usual miscellaneous way', a position which would not have been shared by many delegates, who would have agreed with Sydney Jones' call for 'some uniformity of spirit of design.' Despite this diversity, core issues of consensus can be identified (Table 1). Jones was even brave enough to attempt an early summation of the ideal federal city:

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<sup>42</sup> George Higgins, 'Inaugural Address', *Proceedings at the Congress...*, pp. 10-11.

**Table 1**  
**Some desirable features in an ideal federal city expressed at the Congress of Engineers, Architects and Surveyors, Melbourne, May 1901**

FEATURE	RATIONALE	AUTHOR
<b>Building design</b>		
Uniformity of design	'Varied magnificence' rather than a 'magnificent variety' should be the aim (Jones)	Anderson, Jones
Limitation of building height	To prevent skyscrapers interfering with other buildings	Inskip, Jones
Grouping of public buildings	Stateness and the architectural effect of a 'citadel'	Anderson, Inskip
Harmonious colour schemes	Visual harmony	Inskip, Jones
<b>Infrastructure</b>		
Underground services	To avoid 'a continuous state of upheaval'	Broadhurst, Inskip
Moving platforms, elevated sidewalks	Avoiding traffic congestion; boost commercial frontage	Anderson, Henderson
<b>Land use</b>		
Residential and general land use zoning	To preserve amenity and prevent lowering of property values	Anderson, Blacket, Inskip
Control of advertising signs	'This modern barbarism' (Jones)	Jones, Inskip
Fountains and drinking fountains	A climatic-relevant street decoration 'for man and beast' (Inskip)	Broadhurst, Hall, Inskip, McDowall
<b>Landscaping</b>		
Lake or riverfront location	'Healthful and lend more picturesqueness' (Evans)	Evans, Inskip, Luffmann
Open space and gardens	Health, beauty and showcasing buildings	Inskip, Jones, Luffmann, Broadhurst
Wide and tree planted streets	For traffic and views of architectural features; planting for shade and beauty	Broadhurst, Inskip, Jones

*Source papers:* JT Noble Anderson, 'A Twentieth Century City'; Cyril Blacket, 'Some Conditions to be Inserted in any Federal City Building Covenants'; A Evans, 'A Waterside Federal Capital'; R Henson Broadhurst, 'Suggestions concerning the Laying Out of the Commonwealth Capital'; JA Henderson, 'Notes Re Improved Facilities for Locomotion in Cities'; GC Inskip, 'The Federal City'; G Sydney Jones, 'Some Thoughts concerning the Federal City'; C Bogue Luffmann, 'The Agricultural, Horticultural and Sylvan Features of a Federal Capital'; A McDowall, 'Notes on Standard Marks of Reference for the Direction of Building Line of Streets in Cities'.

We are probably all agreed on general principles as to what the plan should be— for instance—that the streets should be wide and tree-planted, that the circus, the square and the boulevard, straight and curved lines, park lands, gardens, and the like should find their proper places; that the public, semi-public and private building blocks should be disposed in due relation one to the other on sites best adapted for each, and with due regard to the future expansion of the City.<sup>43</sup>

Some delegates were anxious for the Congress to produce definitive outcomes in terms of technical principles, professional opportunities and government commitment. Among them was George Knibbs, President of the Institution of Surveyors of NSW, who engineered the formation of a committee 'to draft a scheme shewing the questions which might profitably be submitted for discussion, and the mutual dependence of the various elements which called for consideration'.<sup>44</sup> His committee included the Surveyor Generals of Victoria and South Australia and John Montgomery Coane, later Chairman of the Federal Capital Designs Board.

This group quickly produced a more systematic statement of relevant issues than Higgins had provided at the outset, the principal considerations being the regional location of the federal capital, its actual site, processes for surveying and leasing land, and 'matters directly touching the creation of the Federal Capital', notably engineering works, public and private architecture. 'The general design of the city' was yet another grouping of relevant issues, defined as embracing sanitary aspects, aesthetic features, road widths, location of public buildings, the 'necessary degree of subordination of commercial to aesthetic elements', and 'the desirableness of introducing picturesque features to be found in [world] cities—for example, radiating streets, avenues, large areas at street intersections'.<sup>45</sup>

The full gamut of all these issues proved impossible for the Congress delegates to assimilate. Substituted was a more glib series of recommendations relating to the sorts of issues which an expert Commission should be formed to investigate. The question of city design was restricted to the resolution:

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<sup>43</sup> Jones, 'Some Thoughts concerning the Federal City', *Proceedings at the Congress...*, p. 22.

<sup>44</sup> 'The Federal Capital Congress', *The Surveyor*, 14, 1901, p. 87.

<sup>45</sup> 'The Federal Capital Congress', p. 88.

That in the opinion of this Congress it is important that the Federal Capital should be laid out in the most perfect manner possible, and that, to avoid the mistakes made in many cities of spoiling the plan by utilizing existing buildings, it is desirable that in any site obtained, all obstructions be removed that would in any way prevent the adoption of the most perfect design.<sup>46</sup>

### Towards a Theory of City Design

Through the latter part of 1901 local understanding of just what the 'most perfect design' might entail was advanced through further debate, primarily in the eastern states, Western Australia always being antipathetic to the federation ideal. In September 1901 several joint meetings were held between members of the Institutes of Architects and Surveyors of NSW in Sydney to discuss major papers by their respective presidents: John Barlow and George Knibbs.

In some ways, Barlow's vision was unremarkable for the time: a predominantly radial-concentric city in which:

The main thoroughfares should be triple avenues about 150 feet in width, and the other streets need not be more than a chain in width. There should be trees everywhere—deciduous trees for the most part, and not the ubiquitous pepper tree and the eternal fig. Flowering trees should also be placed at intervals, such as the Japanese plum and cherry, in order that we might have a blaze of blossom interspersed among the tender green. There should be lawns or rather ribbands of smooth shaven turf, separating the houses in the residential part from the footpaths; circuses should be formed at the intersections of the main streets, and the centre in each case marked by a great fountain or monument. As for the houses themselves, each block should be more or less uniform as regards height and material, but a good deal of latitude might be allowed with regard to treatment, imposing only sufficient restraint to prevent incongruity. There should be no overhead electric wires; and it is to be devoutly hoped before the city is an accomplished fact that engineering science will have advanced sufficiently to enable the Federal Water and Sewerage Board to devise some system of sewerage which will not necessitate a forest of hideous ventilating pipes to ensure its efficiency.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> *Proceedings at the Congress...*, p. 7.

<sup>47</sup> 'The Federal City', *Building Engineering and Mining Journal*, 5 October 1901, p. 312.

But Barlow's notion of city beautiful planning tended to veer away from the beaux arts mainstream toward the picturesque and informal.<sup>48</sup> Acknowledging that in older parts of cities a lack of planning had actually lent 'a charm without which they would be for the most part utterly uninteresting', the core of his federal city would be similarly a compact city 'as complete and self-contained as the town of medieval days surrounded by its wall'. He dismissed the idea of a grand master plan which might limit future opportunities and inhibit rectification of past mistakes, instead favouring a more incremental and economic model of planning and development: 'let us do the best we can to meet our present requirements and let us attempt no more'.<sup>49</sup>

Knibbs' paper was an abbreviated version of an elaborate statement presented a few weeks earlier to the premier scientific organisation in the state, the Royal Society of NSW.<sup>50</sup> 'The Theory of City Design' stands as a seminal contribution to early town planning theory by an Australian, certainly the most substantive modernist treatment since John Sulman's 'The Laying Out of Towns' in 1890.<sup>51</sup> Knibbs was then a Lecturer in Surveying at the University of Sydney, but had wide-ranging scientific interests and in 1906 became the first Commonwealth Statistician. Involved in the Federal Capital project since penning a technical memorandum in August 1900 for Alexander Oliver jointly with Barlow, G Allen Mansfield and WL Vernon on site selection issues, Knibbs credited Oliver's interest with helping to shape his own views. He recalled that he would have prepared a paper for the 1901 congress had he not been 'too busily engaged' on other matters. When his committee work in Melbourne produced nothing concrete, he resolved to develop his own treatise.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> John Barlow, 'The City Beautiful', *Journal of the Institute of Architects of New South Wales*, 1, 1904, pp. 7-9.

<sup>49</sup> *Building Engineering and Mining Journal*, 5 October 1901, p. 311.

<sup>50</sup> GH Knibbs, 'The Theory of City Design', *Journal and Proceedings of the Royal Society of New South Wales*, 35, 1901, pp. 62-112; and Knibbs, 'The Designing of the Federal Capital', pp. 122-138.

<sup>51</sup> John Sulman, 'The Laying Out of Towns', originally presented to the 1890 Australian Association for the Advancement of Science, is reprinted as an appendix to Sulman's *An Introduction to the Study of Town Planning in Australia*, Sydney: Government Printer, 1921, pp. 214-216.

<sup>52</sup> *Building Engineering and Mining Journal*, 7 December 1901, pp. 386-387.

Acknowledging his debt to Sulman, but approaching his subject matter in more scientific mode, Knibbs portrayed the creation of a capital city as a synthesis of sound 'technical preparation' and 'aesthetic consciousness'. He concentrated on the former in a rigorous search for the best general laws of city design. A radial street system was commended for convenience, efficiency and artistic effect. Knibbs calculated the optimal angle between diverging avenues radiating from multiple centres of 'particular types of civic activity' as  $60^{\circ}$ . He dealt in extraordinary detail with principles for the direction, grade and width of secondary streets, and considered a wide portfolio of other issues including systematic land use zoning ('necessity for some official control of the localisation of the different classes of occupation'), the need to control building height ('limiting the skyline'), and devising a mathematically-inspired formula of desirable building form ('simple numerical ratios').

Knibbs' interpretation of the most desirable 'aesthetics of design' was based on symmetrical but not excessive grouping. 'The possibility of beauty' was further enhanced by numerous other considerations such as the provision of parks and gardens, tree-planting, 'foliage-squares' and other public spaces and embellishments which could also function as 'a desirable corrective' in breaking up the 'wearisome regularity' of long straight streets. Amplifying the need for the 'spatial provision necessary for the proper viewing of all features of interest', Knibbs characteristically devised a scientific rule that around every monument 'the unobstructed space should be between a distance equal to the height and that equal to at least three times its height' to enable it to be seen with maximum advantage. As regards to implementation, the Washington DC idea of a Commission 'elaborating a comprehensive scheme for...beautification' was suggested as a desirable model.<sup>53</sup>

### Cartographic Plans 1901-1908

Public and professional interest in detailed matters of layout receded while the 'battle of the sites' raged through the early 1900s. The work of Knibbs, Barlow and the 1901 Congress was not consummated, the limp denouement being a deputation comprising 'medical men, architects, surveyors, engineers and many leading citizens' which called upon the first Prime Minister,

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<sup>53</sup> 'The Commonwealth Capital', *Building Engineering and Mining Journal*, 5 October 1901, p. 312.

Edmund Barton, in February 1902 to formally bring his attention to the resolutions of the Melbourne Congress ten months earlier. Barton had to leave prematurely because of another meeting. The delegates were then received by Sir William Lyne, Minister for Home Affairs. Lyne returned to glib generalities in professing the government's commitment to a federal city 'possessing beauty and health...perhaps the model city of the world', one to be savoured, he noted with the disquieting rider, by 'those who lived to see it'.<sup>54</sup>

Individuals with an interest in the actual design of the projected city were to invariably submit their ideas for consideration to the Commonwealth Government.<sup>55</sup> But the number of sketch or diagrammatic ground plans which surfaced in the public arena was quite limited (Table 2).

There were two utilitarian schemes of note (Figures 1 and 2). At the 1901 Congress although George Sydney Jones suggested that 'we are perhaps not agreed' as to whether 'the radiating plan or the chess-board plan is the better', a clear preference emerges for a radially planned city through the 1900s. A notable dissenter was the inventor and aviation pioneer Lawrence Hargrave, a participant in the joint institute meetings in Sydney in 1901. He contended that the radial plan was uneconomical and created awkward triangular allotments—and by extension, triangular-shaped rooms and furniture! This criticism was hard to take seriously, especially when Hargrave invoked the 'spider's web' as the best distribution system for all public utilities, albeit underground to take advantage of advances in 'subterranean engineering'.<sup>56</sup> Another pragmatic suggestion came from Sydney engineer J Haydon Cardew. He contended that there were 'no superlative advantages in a virgin site' as far as the 'comfort and convenience' of federal capital residents were concerned, and argued for remodelling and extending an existing city as the federal capital.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>54</sup> 'The Federal City', *Building, Engineering and Mining Journal*, 8 March 1902, p. 75.

<sup>55</sup> While some of the correspondence between erstwhile city designers and early federal politicians and bureaucrats survives, mainly in the Australian Archives in Canberra, few of their designs do. A case in point is Melbourne architect Joseph Parer who in 1907 submitted a package of some fifteen plans and specifications for his 'Federalist No. 1' city design to Prime Minister Alfred Deakin (Australian Archives, Series A6, Item 01/120). Some indication of Parer's ideas would come from his entry (No. 99) submitted in the international design competition four years later.

<sup>56</sup> 'The Federal Capital', *Building*, May 1909, pp. 38-39.

<sup>57</sup> 'The Federal City', *Building Engineering and Mining Journal*, 7 December 1901, pp. 384-385.

**Table 2**  
**Early diagrammatic plans for the federal capital of Australia prior to the international competition of 1911**

AUTHOR	DATE	DESCRIPTION	COMMENTS
C. St John David (engineer)	February 1901	Polygonal spiders web government and business zone, punctuated and bordered by public parks and framed by a gridiron residential zones	An adaptation of Wren's 17thC plan for London.
Alexander Oliver (lawyer)	July 1901	Radial-concentric ground plan focused on a centrally located parliament house	Based according to Oliver on 'the radiation principle'
J Haydon Cardew (engineer-surveyor)	October 1901	170° radial-concentric extension of an orthogonal town grid, a new houses of parliament defining the intersection of the two templates	Application to the town of Bathurst, New South Wales
John Sulman (architect)	March 1909	Octagonal spiders web plan with a system of radial, ring and diagonal avenues organised around a central parliament house with outer areas marked diagrammatically as industrial quarters, outer suburbs and parks	Application of Sulman's principles outlined in his 1890 paper 'The laying out of towns'
John Sulman	March 1909	Fan-shaped variation of the spider web plan, with parliament house as the 'culminating point' on rising slopes	An adaptation of the spiders web principle to the eastern slopes of Black Mountain on the Canberra site
Lawrence Hargrave (inventor)	May 1909	Utilitarian gridiron street plan for economy	Subterranean network of public utilities on the spiders web plan

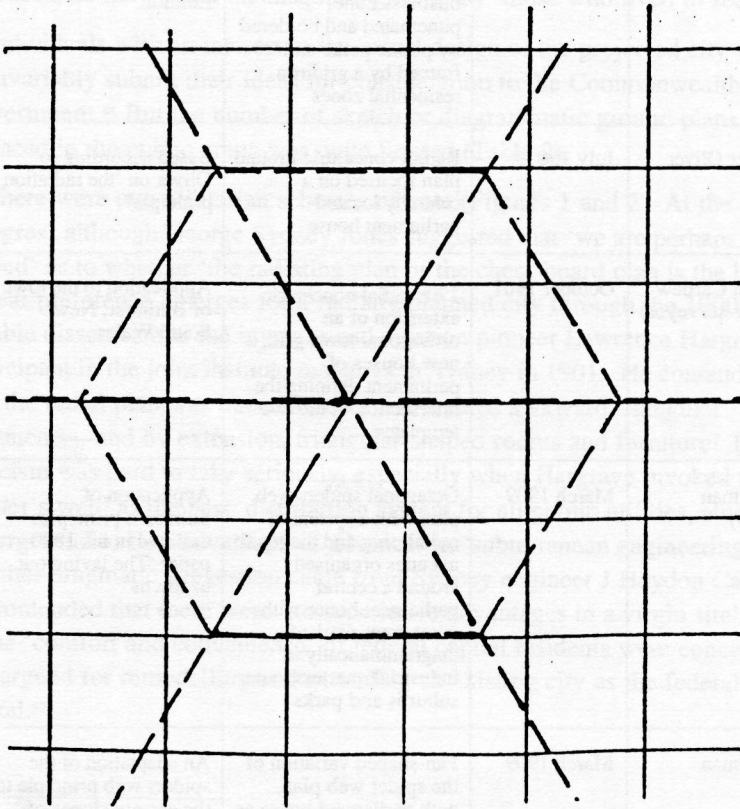


Figure 1: Lawrence Hargrave's ideal capital: an orthogonal grid of streets underlain by a radially-planned network of service tunnels (*Building*, May 1909).

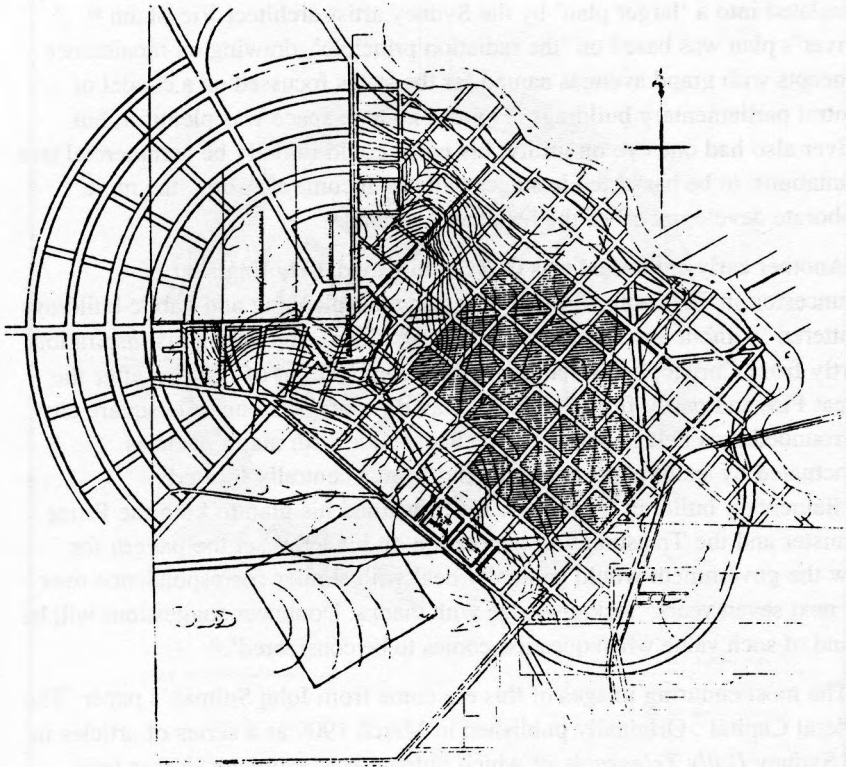


Figure 2: J Haydon Cardew's suggestion for grafting a curvilinear-planned federal capital city onto an existing NSW country town, taking Bathurst as an example (*Building Engineering and Mining Journal*, December 1901).

In November 1899 Alexander Oliver, President of the NSW Land Appeal Court, was appointed a Royal Commissioner by the last colonial government of NSW to investigate the competing claims of the Federal Capital Leagues and to provide the first analysis of the suitability of places suggested for the seat of government. Although beyond his initial brief, Oliver was known to advocate 'the advisability of having a sketch design' to develop specific layout ideas.<sup>58</sup> After submitting his report, he made such a sketch which was then translated into a 'larger plan' by the Sydney artist-architect Vic Mann.<sup>59</sup> Oliver's plan was based on 'the radiation principle', drawing on renaissance concepts with grand avenues named for the states focussed on a citadel of central parliamentary buildings (Figure 3). Open space was plentiful, but Oliver also had one eye on utility: his parks could initially be commercial tree plantations, to be harvested in stages with the income assisting 'the more elaborate development' of the resultant parkland.<sup>60</sup>

Another early enthusiast was C. St John David, City Engineer of Launceston in Tasmania. Critical of rectangular planning and public buildings scattered 'without any regard to relative positions', and taking his inspiration partly from Christopher Wren's proposed remodelling of London after the Great Fire and partly from Adelaide, David proposed a one mile square city surrounded by a belt of parkland 10 chains wide with major avenues punctuated by small parks and radiating from a centrally located parliamentary building (Figure 4). He forwarded his plan to both the Prime Minister and the Treasurer. An annotation on his letter set the pattern for how the government would generally deal with similar correspondence over the next seven years: 'Acknowledge with thanks. Doubtless suggestions will be found of such value when question comes to be considered'.<sup>61</sup>

The most enduring images of this era come from John Sulman's paper 'The Federal Capital'. Originally published in March 1909 as a series of articles in the *Sydney Daily Telegraph*, of which Sulman was a director, it was later reprinted as a pamphlet and reproduced in the *Journal of the Royal Institute*

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<sup>58</sup> George Knibbs, *Building, Engineering and Mining Journal*, 7 December 1901, p. 387.

<sup>59</sup> GVF Mann to WH Ifould, Letter with Sketch Plan, 30 January 1924. Mitchell Library, Sydney, A027/9A.

<sup>60</sup> George Knibbs, 'The Designing of the Federal Capital', *The Surveyor*, 14, 1901, p. 136.

<sup>61</sup> Australian Archives, Series CRS A6, 1901/118. Canberra.

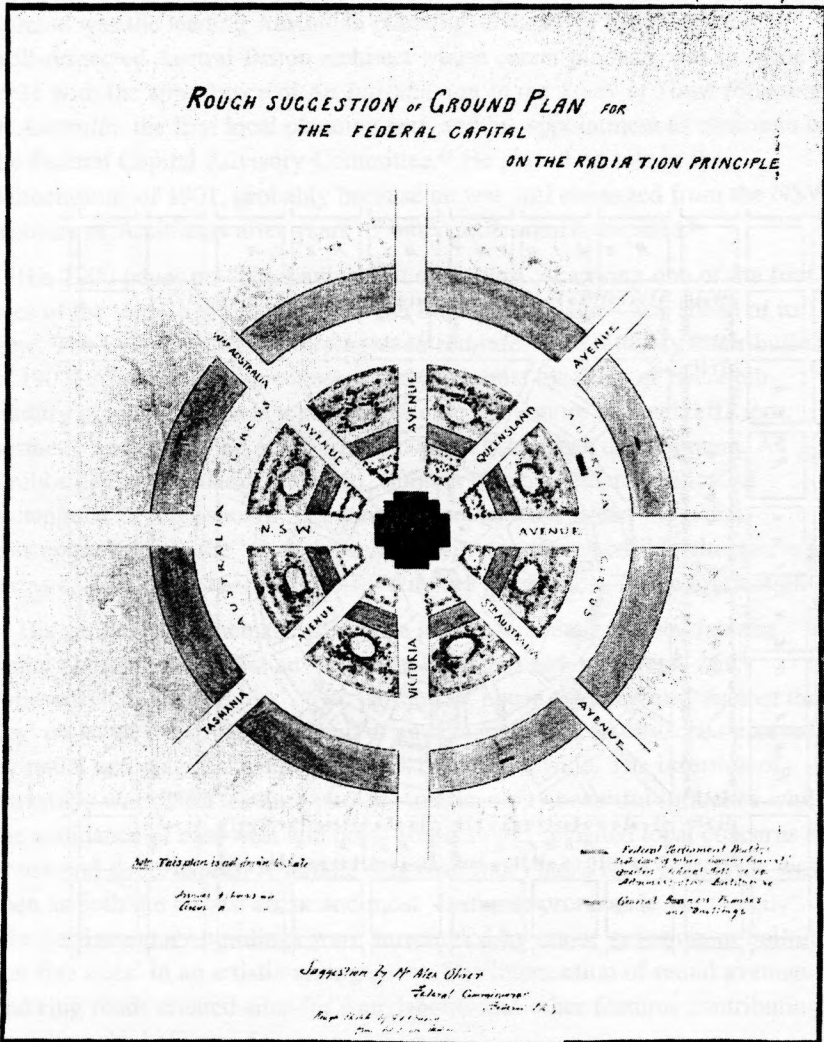


Figure 3: Alexander's Oliver's 1901 ideal of 'a beautiful and commodious city'. (National Library).

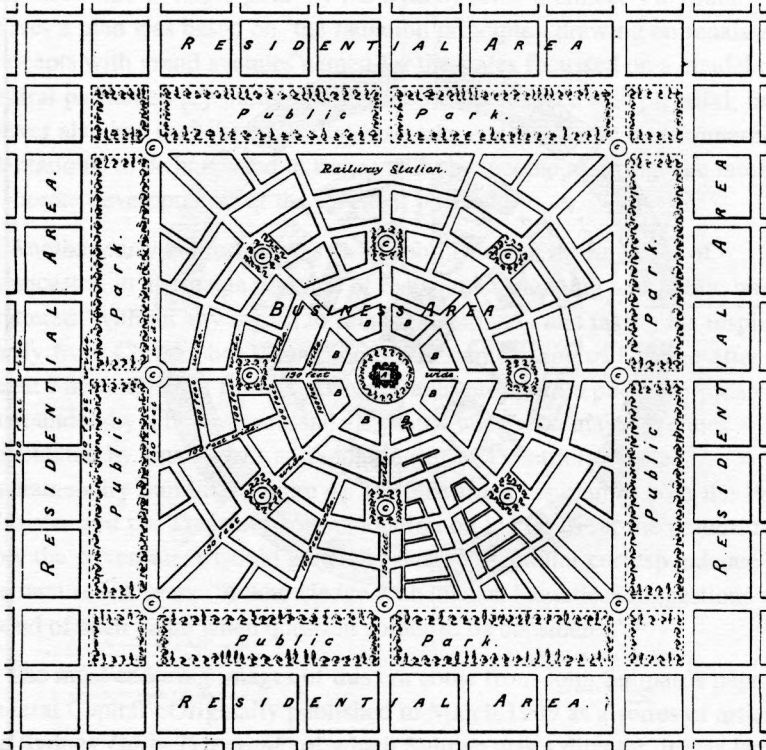


Figure 4: St John David's ideal plan was first published by the *Launceston Examiner* in February 1901.

of *British Architects* (RIBA).<sup>62</sup> A shorter version was included in the *Transactions* of the 1910 RIBA Town Planning Conference in London. Sulman was the leading Australian planning advocate of his generation, a well-respected Austral-Briton architect whose career pinnacle was to come in 1921 with the appearance of *An Introduction to the Study of Town Planning in Australia*, the first local planning text, and his appointment as chairman of the Federal Capital Advisory Committee.<sup>63</sup> He played no role in the deliberations of 1901, probably because he was still estranged from the NSW Institute of Architects after years of bitter professional disputes.<sup>64</sup>

His 1890 paper on 'The Laying Out of Towns'—carrying one of the first uses of the term 'town planning' in the English language—was ahead of its time. The Sydney journal *Building* even reprinted it as a timely contribution in 1907! Anticipating the concerns and modernist ideology of twentieth century planning, it made a persuasive case for a more rational, efficient, aesthetic and controlled approach to town and suburban development. As Knibbs had acknowledged in 1901, Sulman was particularly critical of rectangular or 'chessboard' planning and advocated instead the radial-concentric lines of the 'spider's web' pattern as a more sensible alternative in terms of both convenience of movement and possibilities for beautification.

His generalised schematic plan for a new federal capital embodied the radial planning ideas first advocated in 1890. His federal capital was 'primarily...an official city', with parliament house standing out 'against the sky' on an elevated site at the hub of an octagonal-shaped city, criss-crossed by radial and diagonal avenues at least two chains wide. The insertion of parkways was direct testimony to an American city beautiful influence while the avoidance of east-west and north-south streets revisited local concerns for house and street aspect. A middle ring road four chains (264 feet) wide was seen as both the busiest street and most 'favourite promenade...of the city'. The parliamentary buildings were surrounded by major government buildings 'on fine sites' in an artistic arrangement. The intersection of radial avenues and ring roads created sites for roundabouts and other features contributing 'artistic value' (Figure 5).

<sup>62</sup> John Sulman, *The Federal Capital*.

<sup>63</sup> Robert Freestone, 'Sulman of Sydney: Modern planning in theory and practice 1890-1930', *Town Planning Review*, 67, 1996, pp. 45-63; and Robert Freestone, 'Sunlight, space and suburbs: The physical planning ideas of Sir John Sulman', *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, 81, 1995, pp. 139-149.

<sup>64</sup> John M Freeland, *The Making of a Profession: A History of the Growth and Work of the Architectural Institutes in Australia*, Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1971, pp. 72-75.



A 'fan-shaped' variant saw Sulman adapting his general principles to a different site, one where the chief buildings had to be planned 'to look well against a background of hills'. Here Sulman had in mind the eastern slopes of Black Mountain on the Canberra site. This version also highlights his emphasis on the railway station as secondary in importance only to Parliament House as 'the actual portal of the city' (Figure 6). Sulman gives few clues as to what his Parliament House would actually look like but from this point on actual buildings begin to come more sharply into focus.<sup>65</sup>

### Sources of Planning Ideas

From numerous presentations and papers in the 1900s emerged several enduring planning ideas. The importance of radial city planning, a waterside but flood-free federal city, and the reservation of elevated sites for major public buildings and monuments became concepts *sine qua non* (beyond the obligatory references to banning slums and enshrining civic beauty). A recurring theme was the notion of securing an amphitheatre-like location to best 'present the artistic features essential for the development of a really beautiful city'.<sup>66</sup> The notion of fusing the artistic and the utilitarian was also established from the 1901 Melbourne Congress.<sup>67</sup> Such ideas were generic expressions of modern town planning principles. The 'federal-capitalness' of spatial representations was usually quite basic. The naming of features to symbolise national institutions and identity was one continuous thread from Oliver onward. And the centrality of a new Parliament House did become *de rigueur*, so much so that this was one of the few specific spatial directives

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<sup>65</sup> In one of the first such schemes after the site had been finalised, Sydney designers Nicholas Shiels and DH Souter collaborated on a hexagonally-arranged and colonnaded parliament house, its flat roofs 'serviceable as landing stages for the air-ships which will be the common method of locomotion', and the number of supporting columns commensurate with the total of parliamentary members. Statues representing the six states were placed on the outer angles of the hexagon. Testimony to the mainstream anglophilic racism of the day, a footnote to their article comments on a rumour that New Guinea was to be made part of the Commonwealth as threatening to destroy all their 'carefully elaborated symbolism'. Souter took comfort in the fact that 'as they are mostly blackfellows up there my idea still stands as representing a White Australia'. DH Souter, 'Designing of the Federal City: Some imaginings by architects and artists', *Art and Architecture*, 6, 1909, pp. 14, 17.

<sup>66</sup> Report of the Commissioner, October 1900, p. 28.

<sup>67</sup> Most revealingly, in the two papers which suggested the treatment of humble surveyors marks as either ornamental drinking fountains or street gardens: A McDowall, 'Notes on Standard Marks of Reference for the Direction of Building Line of Streets in Cities', p. 13; R Henson Broadhurst, 'Suggestions Concerning the Laying Out of the Commonwealth Capital', pp. 14-17, *Proceedings of the Congress...*

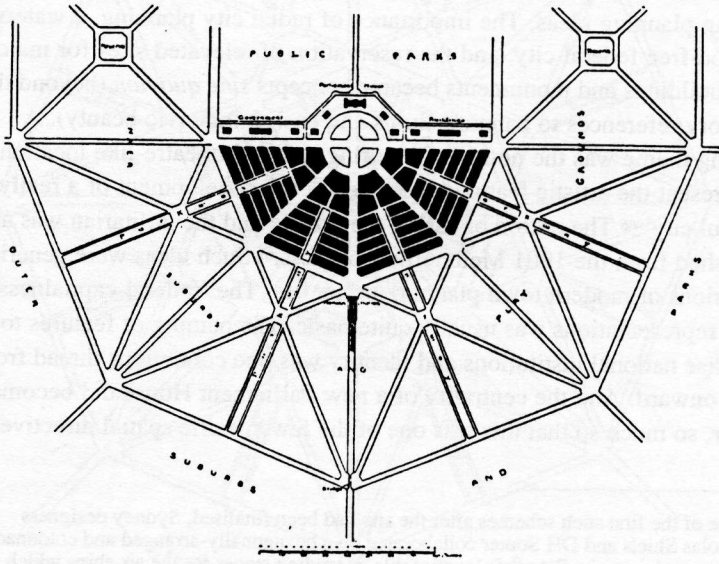


Figure 6: The 'fan shaped' variant of Sulman's general principles (RIBA, *Town Planning Conference*, London, 1910)

given to prospective competition entrants in 1911; viz. the building 'should be so placed as to become a dominating feature of the city'.

Most of the early design ideas floated for a new federal capital of Australia suggest that Australian professionals were not yet fully engaged with the evolving and already quite sophisticated modern planning discourse in other countries.<sup>68</sup> The images were frequently a mix of the home-grown, populist images of stately cities, colonial notions, and historical referents like Wren's 1666 scheme for London. For a country described by Sulman as 'one of the most democratic in the world', many plans, including his own, looked back to didactic geometries. And more than any other place, eighteenth century Karlsruhe informed his own model of the 'spider's web' city. Through the intense discussions in 1901, there are few explicit references to progressive overseas sources and models. The writings of Horace Bushnell on 'City Plans' in his *Work and Play* (1864) was cited by Knibbs. The one contemporary name to surface is Joseph Stubben, the German advocate of extension planning.

The appointment of Joseph Davis on an overseas fact-finding mission in 1906 marked the beginning of a more concerted effort to keep in touch with such foreign developments. In 1906 Prime Minister Deakin instructed Davis, the Under-Secretary of the NSW Department of Public Works, 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—who attended the joint institute meetings in late 1901—returned 'with much useful information' from Paris, London, Washington and Ottawa.<sup>69</sup> His main recommendations relate to an endorsement of multiple-centred radial-spoked cities, the 'need for adequate provision for expansion', and generous park space. The very notion of an international competition—mooted as early as 1901<sup>70</sup>—reflected the growing consensus that the science of planning was 'comparatively new in Australia' and that it was 'not likely the best result would be attained by local effort owing to lack of experience'.<sup>71</sup> When conditions for the international

<sup>68</sup> Anthony Sutcliffe, *Towards the Planned City: Germany, Britain, the United States and France 1780-1914*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1981.

<sup>69</sup> J Davis, 'Federal City for Commonwealth of Australia', 31 December 1906, Australian Archives, Series A100/1, Item A1907/238, Canberra.

<sup>70</sup> Young, *The Federal Capital*, p. 5; Jones, 'Some Thoughts on the Federal City', p. 22; and Barlow in *Building, Engineering and Mining Journal*, 5 October 1901, p. 311.

<sup>71</sup> John Sulman, 'The Federal Capital of Australia', *Transactions of the Town Planning Conference, London, October 1910*, London: Royal Institute of British Architects, 1911, pp. 604-605. The following year Sulman advocated foreign experts like British architect

design competition were finalised, pointed reference was made to the RIBA Town Planning Conference as necessarily having 'a marked influence upon city design from the utilitarian, the architectural, the scientific, and the artistic standpoints'. It was the competition which first really opened up Australia to global influences.<sup>72</sup>

## Conclusion

The 'pre-history' of federal capital planning, a kind of virtual history of ideas and imaginings of the ideal modern city, charts a metamorphosis away from 'a fantastical child of our imagination' and towards thoughts of 'a practical twentieth century town'.<sup>73</sup> The various concepts in the air began to fuse into more complete and coherent statements of an ideal city, notably that by Sulman. By 1911 even the President of the Local Government Association of NSW was advocating preservation of 'the natural beauty of the land', convergence of radial avenues on suitably grouped public buildings, ample provision of parkland, and the extension of main avenues from two or three main radial points with avenues between them on a rectangular system.<sup>74</sup>

Such a statement begins to anticipate elements of the winning Griffin scheme which arrives replete with 'specialized centers and radial axes', representation of the site as a 'stage setting', an elaborate symbolic system of axes, elevations and concentric circles; and sensitivity to what Americans called 'beautility' in designing and siting complexes like the gas works both 'for economy and to avoid ugly tanks so conspicuous usually'.<sup>75</sup> The Griffin scheme was conceived without reference to early Australian discourse. It had its own unique mix of the city beautiful and garden city movements, a debt to Wren's plan for London, brilliantly intuitive landscape architecture at a large scale, and even tacit references to ancient paradigms.<sup>76</sup> But its incorporation

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Aston Webb and Chicago's Daniel Burnham as possible competition adjudicators or even designers: Letter to the Editor, John Sulman, *Daily Telegraph*, 8 February 1911.

<sup>72</sup> There were also nearly 100 non-Australian entries. John W Reps (c1992) 'Entries in the 1912 Competition for the Design of the Australian National Capital', *Planning Historians' Notebook*, Society for American City and Regional Planning History.

<sup>73</sup> Woods, 'A Modern Utopia', p. 34.

<sup>74</sup> 'The City Beautiful', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 December 1911.

<sup>75</sup> 'Copy of Federal Capital Design No. 29 by W.B. Griffin', Appendix B, in 'Report from the Select Committee appointed to inquire into and report upon The Development of Canberra', *Commonwealth Parliamentary Papers*, No 52, September 1955.

<sup>76</sup> Peter Proudfoot, *The Secret Plan of Canberra*, Sydney: University of NSW Press, 1994.

of ideas and features which had become defined as theoretically desirable in Australian professional circles may also go some way to explaining why it appealed in 1912 to members of the Federal Capital Designs Board, two of whom had been active participants in design and site selection debates since the turn of the century. In these terms, as Haeefe as argued, 'while the international design competition can be seen as a beginning for Canberra, it was also a culmination...of thinking about the way Australia could create the ideal city.'<sup>77</sup>

Ironically, the competition was the highpoint of the city beautiful dream. Thereafter, it was steadily eroded by disagreements between Griffin and just about every other stakeholder in the project during his stormy seven years as Federal Capital Director of Design and Construction from 1913. In 1920 when the Federal Capital Advisory Committee under Sulman took charge of planning matters, the monumental city was put on hold. Government parsimony and public apathy had aligned with an unromantic new planning ideology stressing efficiency, functionality and scientific land use and transportation arrangements rather than architectonic values. A quite different planning context for Canberra was constituted, one that stressed garden suburbs, tree planting and 'provisional' public buildings. The accent was now to be on 'utilitarian development and economy'. In 1921 an artist for the *Sydney Mail* envisaged a 'dream of marble palaces and civic magnificence' arising on the Limestone Plains. This was one of the last images of its kind. The accompanying text was more accurately reflective of the times: 'All the grand ideas of this beautiful city', it was noted with remarkable understatement, 'are now somewhat modified'.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Mark Henry Haeefe, 'Ideal Visions of Canberra', MA thesis, Australian National University, 1995, p. 32.

<sup>78</sup> 'Making Ready at Canberra', *Sydney Mail*, 23 November 1921, p. 9.

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