

BUILDING CANBERRA from 1958–1988

The planning and development of Canberra from the selection of the site in 1909 to the mid-1950s was frustrated by bureaucratic bickering, political indifference and the effects of the Great Depression and the World War II.

A Senate Select Committee was appointed to 'Inquire into and report on the Development of Canberra'. The Committee reported in 1955 and, as a result, the National Capital Development Commission (NCDC) was established in 1958 as a statutory authority to 'plan, develop and construct Canberra as the national capital'. The NCDC was fully supported by the Prime Minister of the day, Robert Menzies.

John Overall, later Sir John, was appointed as the first Commissioner and lost no time in assembling a team of professionals. He did not hesitate to seek the advice of internationally renowned experts in town planning and landscape architecture, such as Sir William (later Lord) Holford, a Professor of Town Planning at University College, London, and Dame Sylvia Crowe. Dame Sylvia was one of the best-known landscape architects in Britain and provided the Master Plan for Commonwealth Park.

In his report, 'Observations on the Future Development of Canberra' (1958), Holford recommended three objectives for the future national capital:

- It should remain a Garden City;
- It should develop a modern system of communications by road and air; and
- It should eventually become a centre for several aspects of Australian culture.

The NCDC assembled the critical ingredients quickly: planning, development and construction capacities. It recognised that if the Commonwealth was to make a difference, it had to find a way to stimulate and plan substantial growth. The NCDC had to build on Griffin's original plan for the city and adapt it to the trends and demands of the second half of the twentieth century.

Key planning documents published by the NCDC in 1965 and 1970 spelt out the strategy for expanding Canberra to a population of 250 000 and one million people respectively.

The key features of the 'General Growth Strategy', or 'Y-Plan' (1970), were that growth should be contained within valleys, leaving the surrounding hills free from development. Growth was to be accommodated in a series of new towns, each with its own town centre containing major retail facilities and substantial office employment. The towns were to be linked to each other by a series of peripheral parkways, which reduced the need for traffic to pass through adjacent towns. The distinctive structure was designed to satisfy an increasing use of the private car through a comprehensive system of arterial roads, including the peripheral parkways, complemented by the development of an Intertown Public Transport Route.

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The 'Y-Plan' guided the development of Canberra for more than 30 years. 'New Towns' beyond the scope of Griffin's central Canberra were developed in Woden-Weston Creek (begun in 1961), Belconnen (1966), Tuggeranong (1974), and more recently in Gungahlin (1997). 'Town Centres' were opened in Woden (1971), Belconnen (1977), Tuggeranong (1987) and Gungahlin (1998).

In order to give impetus to development of the national capital, the Federal Government committed to a program of transferring public servants to Canberra, mainly from Melbourne. The transfer of the Department of Defence resulted in the development of the Russell complex, and the prospect of other departments moving to Canberra stimulated new plans for Civic Centre.

The most significant commitment secured from the Commonwealth Government by the NCDC was the decision to build Lake Burley Griffin and associated works such as Kings and Commonwealth Avenue Bridges. Opened in 1964, Lake Burley Griffin is the centrepiece of the Griffin Plan. Its development united North and South Canberra and established a distinctive image for the national capital.

Other major buildings and national institutions complemented the Lake Burley Griffin initiative. The NCDC commissioned Civic Square (1961), ACT Law Courts (1963), Scrivener Dam (1963), the Royal Australian Mint (1964), Anzac Park offices (1964), Anzac Parade (1965), and the National Library of Australia (1968). In 1963, the Monaro Mall (now part of the Canberra Centre) was the first enclosed shopping mall opened in Australia.

In the 1970s the NCDC focussed on the development of the new towns, ensuring coordination of housing and community facilities. Civic Centre grew rapidly during the 1980s and the High Court of Australia and the National Gallery of Australia were completed in 1980 and 1982 respectively.

Much of the credit for the planning of the new Parliament House must go to the NCDC, although a special purpose authority - the Parliament House Construction Authority - was established to manage its construction. The new building opened in Australia's Bicentenary year, 1988.

By the mid-1980s Canberra was well established, both as a national capital and as a city in its own right. With the advent of self-government in 1989, the NCDC was dismantled and planning responsibilities were divided between the National Capital Planning Authority (NCPA) and the Territory planning authority.

In its 30 years, the National Capital Development Commission transformed Canberra from a national capital in the making, to a city of international renown.

David Wright

Further Reading

- John Overall, *Canberra Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*, Federal Capital Press of Australia Pty Ltd, 1995
- NCDC, *The Future Canberra*, Angus & Robertson, 1965
- NCDC, *Tomorrow's Canberra*, ANU Press, 1970

