
CANBERRA'S PLANNING CULTURE IN THE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY

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This paper looks at the classic shift in planning culture from technocratic modernism to market-based neoliberalism evidenced in many western democracies. The case study of the Australian capital Canberra provides particularly clear evidence of the underlying processes because in its formative years – and until the late 1980s – Canberra received political support at the Federal level that enabled professional planners to implement their vision of an ideal New Town and National Capital with exceptional perfectionism. Ironically, the neoliberal turn was conducted with a similar degree of perfectionism, throwing the changes into sharp relief and highlighting the mechanisms with great clarity.

The neoliberal turn has now reached its apotheosis with substantial revisions to the National Capital Plan announced by the Australian Government in 2015. These signal the end of Federal involvement in metropolitan planning leaving overall city-making to local government and local development interests in the Australian Capital Territory.

Based on material recently released by National Archives, the paper traces the mechanisms behind these developments. It examines how a new set of ideal concepts has emerged from the dialectic between neoliberal urbanism and the capital city planning ethos of the past and is transforming the city.

Keywords

planning culture, neoliberalism, civil society

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INTRODUCTION - SHIFTS IN PLANNING CULTURE

Drawing on discussions by Sanyal and Sandercock, we define planning culture as ‘the collective ethos and dominant attitudes of planners regarding the appropriate role of the state, market forces and civil society’¹ in the making of the city, acknowledging that this involves ‘an ensemble of people, ideas, social values, institutions, politics and power’ which can be analysed through an historical approach, studying ‘paths to the present, the shapings of the here and now, and the different forms that planning has taken in other historical eras.’²

Against this background, we look at a classic shift in planning culture evidenced in many western democracies – the shift from technocratic modernism during the era of the Keynesian Welfare State to a phase characterised by a continuing retreat of government from ‘top-down’ planning towards new forms of governance – a move associated with a set of hybrid approaches between stark market-based neoliberalism on the one hand and the search for suitable forms of collaborative planning in civil society on the other.

THE CASE STUDY

The case study of the Australian capital Canberra provides particularly clear evidence of the underlying processes because in its formative years – and until the late 1980s – Canberra received political support at the Federal level that enabled professional planners to implement their vision of an ideal New Town and National Capital with exceptional perfectionism. The planning history of this phase has been explored at length in the book *Canberra – Myths and Models*³ and in subsequent publications drawing upon common research by the authors.⁴

The phase of creating an ideal city in the form of a ‘government company town’ came to an end in 1989, when Canberra was granted self-government, a long-resisted move which made it necessary to divide responsibilities between the Federal government and the newly-created local administration of the Australian Capital Territory (ACT). An awkward division of planning powers at this time has led to a quarter century of dysfunctional planning and urban development, fully documented in a series of parliamentary and administrative enquiries but yet to be addressed.⁵

The neoliberal turn has been the one constant in this period of turbulence as the ‘government company town’ ironically embraced the ideology of small government and the superiority of market forces, the very opposite of its formative processes and functional realities. The neoliberal turn was conducted with a degree of perfectionism similar to that which had characterised the period of tight government control. Principles of downsizing and insufficiently controlled outsourcing were applied with a rigour comparable to that of the technocratic phase. This resulted in problems and sometimes catastrophic, even fatal consequences.

Among these were the disastrous bush fire of 2003 and the tragically failed project of staging the demolition of the Canberra hospital as a public spectacle. In 1997, an inexperienced demolition contractor, who had been able to undercut the bids of more experienced contractors, caused an explosion that showered the spectators with high velocity debris killing one person instantly. The structural significance of this incidence in our context is that it reveals a range of constituent elements of flawed neoliberal policies.⁶ Thus a coroner’s inquiry identified “systemic failures” associated with the downsizing and inherent de-professionalisation in the public sector, and a subsequent analysis by the Australian Audit Office revealed that this was a widespread feature of the neoliberal governance arrangements.⁷ It found that in Canberra and elsewhere, strategies of small government and outsourcing had led to a loss of corporate memory and professionalism to a point at which ‘reduced in-house staff numbers’ made it impossible ‘to manage the contract’ and thus ‘created an increased risk to the Commonwealth’ – and indeed, one might add, to the life of the victims of the catastrophes.

The 2003 bush fire disaster had its origins in the reduction of long-established fuel-management practices in the forested hinterland of the city, the result of poorly-divided responsibilities between the Federal and local governments.⁸

Adding to the state of knowledge on which our research to-date has been based, new information that has become available since 2015 has thrown evidence of the neoliberal turn into sharper relief. Cabinet Papers from the 1980s and early 1990s released over the past two years by the National Archives reveal ways in which the withdrawal of Federal responsibility for Canberra planning was advocated ‘behind the scenes’ by neoliberal wings of the administration at the time of self-government.

PLANNING CULTURES OF THE MODERNIST PHASE

One of the unique characteristics of Canberra planning in the 1960s and 1970s had been the strategy of thinking of the capital city as a whole, in contrast to most other capitals. This had meant applying principles designed for the capital to the entire city – as opposed to splitting attention between a carefully designed capital district and an ‘ordinary’ urban area left to grow as typical Australian suburbia.

Transforming the sleepy Federal village of the mid-1950s into an administrative capital of 250,000 within 20 years was a heroic achievement. It was accomplished through a planning culture made up firstly by engineers who had worked on the mega project of the Snowy Mountains scheme with its water dams, turbines and canals; and secondly by architect planners imbued with the principles of English New Town planning whose varied experiences in Australia included the design and construction of public housing estates, and an attempt to impose a greenbelt/satellite city structure on metropolitan Sydney, an idealistic vision thwarted by special interest groups in both the public and private sectors.

This post-World War II generation, which also drew upon shared wartime experiences in military planning and organisation, seized the nation-building opportunity created by the Menzies Government to build the Federal Capital on the basis of lavish single-line budget appropriations, public ownership of land, a limited private sector and, initially, few residents. We might characterize this planning culture as an amalgam of engineering-type problem solving and a strong sense of social responsibility, which followed the model of the ‘benevolent omniscient planner’ unimpeded by activities of the private sector or notions of public participation.

The result was a remarkable ‘network city’ of New Towns separated by a continuous greenbelt, adapted from Ebenezer Howard’s model of a central city and satellites, dispersed not in a radial-concentric pattern but in a linear pattern generated by the traffic studies of American consultants. A balanced disposition of employment centres was the key to this concept, which was possible because the government was in control of the land and the location of its own offices.⁹

PLANNING CULTURES IN NEOLIBERAL TIMES

The concept began to unravel in the 1970s, when in the first indication of the neoliberal turn, the conservative Fraser Government ended the ‘company town’ practice of building and owning its own office complexes, creating instead a market for private commercial development underpinned by long-term leases from government departments. The privatisation of office accommodation led in due course to the creation of powerful development interests, which successfully lobbied to concentrate office development in the central city at the expense of the New Towns. By the 1980s, the planning culture of the city had shifted to a corporatist model in tune with the aspirations of the private sector, and the phenomenon of planners approving development contrary to their plans emerged.¹⁰



FIGURE 1 Completion of the New and Permanent Parliament House as an isolated, self-sufficient complex on Capital Hill, Canberra in 1988 signalled to Federal politicians that the Federal Capital was itself complete.

This shift in planning culture was part of a broader shift to ‘economic rationalism’ in the Australian public service initiated in the coordinating departments of Prime Minister & Cabinet, Treasury and Finance and rapidly extended to the line departments: ‘the approach was championed by an elite of public servants and intellectuals who subscribed to the view that rational economic planning should guide long-term policy settings. The urging was for the practical use of markets to resolve allocation and distribution problems.’¹¹ The public sector was considered ‘riddled with inefficiencies’ and the private sector ‘self-evidently superior’ to the extent that the public sector should ‘model itself wherever possible on the private. And where public sector activities can be done in the private sector, then the public sector should surrender such activities.’¹² Rationalisation, in short, ‘was a euphemism for shutting down as much of the public sector as possible.’¹³

In this intellectual climate, Federal government surrender of responsibility for the planning and construction of Canberra was a logical move. In the administrative sphere this underpinned the decision to force self-government on the reluctant population of the city, who were only too aware of the privileges they would lose in the process. In the political sphere, completion of the New and Permanent Parliament House in 1988, replacing the functions of the Provisional Parliament House of the 1920s at a cost of \$1.2 billion, created the impression that the city was complete and no more Federal funds needed to be spent on it (Figure 1).

At the same time, there was some concern that Canberra should continue to be planned in accordance with its national significance. The result was that a much reduced planning body – the National Capital Planning Authority (NCPA) – established in 1989, was charged with the responsibility of preparing a National Capital Plan as an over-arching instrument to which local government planning would have to subscribe. The recently released Cabinet papers from this era highlight the problems faced by the NCPA from the start. The NCPA attempted to maintain Federal government control of office location to ensure a balanced distribution of employment in the dispersed Town Centres created by its predecessor, together with the retail viability of these centres and congestion-free crosstown traffic flows. When the draft National Capital Plan was submitted to Cabinet, however, this essential feature of the metropolitan plan was removed. The Australian Property Group of the Department of Administrative Services objected strongly on the grounds that little office space would be built by the private sector outside Central Canberra.¹⁴ With this decision, 20 years of technocratic planning were overturned by ‘market forces’. The NCPA could have continued to ensure a balanced distribution of employment centres through strongly-enforced land use controls but as the Cabinet papers further reveal, its very existence was at risk with the Department of Finance calling for its abolition on completion of the National Capital Plan.¹⁵ The NCPA survived but as a relatively powerless body, which dropped ‘Planning’ from its title in the 1990s and progressively lost the capacity to monitor and update the National Capital Plan.

PRIVATISING THE GOVERNMENT OFFICE MARKET

In 1996 the Australian Property Group (APG) and the Department of Administrative Services (DAS) were themselves rationalised. DAS was abolished and the APG sold to the private sector. All Federal departments were granted the liberty to decide their own location, as well as whether to continue owning their accommodation or pursue short-term financial gains by selling their office buildings and leasing commercial space from the private sector. In relation to the latter, the APG had provided advice and property expertise, coordinating dealings service-wide.¹⁶ Instead, departments had to go to the market on an individual basis, often with little or no expertise: ‘unfamiliar with the intricacies of how the property market worked, most departments fell victim to the property sharks. In the worst cases, agencies bid against each other for the same office in the same location. Rents went up, commercial real estate made an easy fortune, and the funds available for programs, as a percentage of total portfolio expenditure, were cut.’¹⁷ By 2000, the cost of private office space leased to the Federal government approached a half a billion dollars annually, and the government had lost control of employment distribution in Canberra. This sums up the political economy behind the new town office location policy.

PRIVATISATING THE AIRPORT

Into this situation, the conservative Howard Government projected privatisation of Canberra Airport under enabling legislation that rendered airports nationwide free from existing planning controls. As a consequence, Canberra Airport became a ‘free enterprise zone’ not subject to the National Capital Plan.¹⁸ Its owners proceeded to develop the gateway sector of the airport site as a business park and retail hub contrary to all previous planning undertaken in the National Capital. The viability of the venture was guaranteed when Federal departments took up long-term leases in the business park, which out-competed the distant employment centres of the New Towns and effectively prevented Gungahlin – the last of these to be developed – from attracting any commercial development at all. In due course, this ‘New Town’ to the north of the city centre became little more than a collection of dormitory suburbs with a population headed towards 60,000.

SALE OF GREENFIELD LANDS AS A SOURCE OF MUNICIPAL REVENUE

The development of Gungahlin and other sites on the periphery of the city was undertaken in the 1990s by the newly-created government of the Australian Capital Territory, which was forced to finance part of its municipal revenue through the sale of its principal asset, greenfield lands. The low-density, car-based city which the local government had inherited from the national government thus continued to expand with long-term costs overlooked in favour of short-term gains. To maximise these gains, the process of suburban development was privatised and in the push for low infrastructure costs and maximum yield, 60 years of exemplary neighbourhood planning in the National Capital was overturned, creating suburbs comparable to the worst in Australia in terms of environmental impact and environmental amenity.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, it seemed as though the neoliberal turn at national and local level had reduced Canberra planning to a travesty of its former self.

NEW VISIONS OF STRATEGIC PLANNING AND THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY

A turnaround, however, occurred – and from a most surprising source. In 2001, the OECD – that paragon of market economy orthodoxy – was invited to report on Canberra as part of its ‘urban renaissance’ studies of sustainable urban development in selected cities worldwide. The major findings of the OECD investigation included the lack of a strategic plan for Canberra, and the lack of effective community engagement in the planning of the city.¹⁹

The Territory government moved decisively to address both issues. In the vacuum created by withdrawal of the National Capital Authority (NCA) from meaningful engagement with the National Capital Plan, the Territory presumed to prepare its own metropolitan strategy. This was undertaken on the basis of comprehensive community consultation. A social plan, an economic plan, and a spatial plan were developed with an emphasis on sustainability principles including the introduction of a light-rail system, urban consolidation and a more compact urban form.²⁰

At the same time, the NCA initiated a ‘new urbanist’ study of the symbolic centre of the National Capital, proposing large-scale commercial and residential development in the manner of the 1990s ‘Extending the Legacy’ project in Washington, D.C. Drawing upon a selective re-examination of the original Canberra plan by Walter Burley Griffin, the NCA’s ‘Griffin Legacy’ proposals dovetailed with the Territory’s proposals for a compact urban form.²¹

BETWEEN VISIONS AND REALITIES

Urban development realities in the following years, however, did not live up to expectations. The reliance of the Territory government on revenue from land sales continued to drive greenfield development on the periphery, where it was easier to gain quick returns on the disposal of its own land than through a complex process of value capture from urban consolidation of inner city built up areas. Turning as well to inner ring greenfield sites, the Territory began a process of urbanising the greenbelt it had inherited from the New Town metropolitan structure of the 1960s and 1970s. This led to plans for dormitory suburbs in bush fire prone, flood prone and ecologically-sensitive sites.

The combination of an inner ring of dormitory suburbs, the dormitory suburb ‘New Town’ of Gungahlin to the north and the over-development of office space in the central city created the very radial-concentric metropolitan structure the planners of the 1960s had rejected in favour of the linear distribution of New Towns. The result has been the concentration of traffic flows in the symbolic centre of the city, the very sites identified in the NCA’s ‘Griffin Legacy’ study for urban intensification.

As the inner contradictions and inconsistencies in metropolitan planning have become manifest, the early 21st century achievements in collaborative planning through community engagement have become fraught. While neoliberalism has been the constant keynote Canberra's planning culture since self-government, there is also a strong presence of a lively civil society providing qualified input and informed discussions on issues of urbanism, sustainability and resilience. Canberra is a city with a highly educated community engaged in research, public policy and media commentary. This has played a significant role in campaigns to create a more responsive planning system. Considerable resources have been devoted to building up community engagement frameworks and public consultation protocols at both NCA and Territory levels. There are, however, no standing committees at neighbourhood or district levels to provide regular input. The fact that collaborative planning in practice has not progressed beyond the two lowest tiers on Arnstein's 'ladder of participation' is confirmed by a recent analysis of three case studies in the ACT. The study concludes: 'the strong shaping role of the private sector, and the political imperatives of government, preclude citizen involvement in Canberra's planning, except at the margins To improve citizen input into planning would require a more coordinated and transparent process with which citizens might engage, both at the strategic/operational interface and in relation to specific development approvals. In turn, these improvements would require changes to institutional structures, processes and values in order to generate trust through enhanced planning capacity.'²² This has been a constant finding of parliamentary inquiries since 2004. In large measure, however, the existence of these inquiries has been a result of active citizenship with community groups using the media and political processes to at least ventilate issues of moment, if not resolve them.

The most significant of these inquiries was undertaken in 2008 by the Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital of the Federal Parliament (JSC) into the role of the NCA. Among its recommendations, the JSC called for reconciliation of the National Capital Plan with the Territory's statutory plan based on 'clear geographic boundaries between the two plans' and the 'objective that, where possible, land administration be aligned with planning jurisdictions.'²³ In December 2008, the NCA received a Ministerial directive to carry out the recommendation.²⁴ It took until June 2015, almost 7 years later, for the NCA to release the first round of draft variations to the National Capital Plan in accordance with this Ministerial directive. In itself, the delay is indicative of the planning and organisational weakness within the NCA, revealed by its chairman in an appearance before the JSC in November 2010, when 'no progress' on the task was acknowledged.²⁵ In 2012 the NCA received extra funding to carry out the necessary review of the National Capital Plan but it took until 2014 and a high-profile campaign by a conservative Senator from the ACT pushing the interests of the Territory to begin to advance the review.²⁶ The process was subsequently fast-tracked. Release of the Draft Amendment signalling the most significant change to National Capital planning in a generation, elicited informed submissions from the public, professional organisations and government agencies. Although consultation reports were prepared the D A was signed into law without significant changes in May 2016.²⁷

WITHDRAWAL OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

In summary, the changes signal the end of Federal involvement in the metropolitan planning of Canberra leaving overall city-making to local government and local development interests in the Australian Capital Territory. The NCA has proposed to surrender oversight powers for the forested hinterland of the ACT, the river corridors and the 'Lanyon Bowl', a significant cultural landscape in the New Town of Tuggeranong, saved from urban development by a citizen campaign of the 1980s²⁸ (Figures 2 & 3).

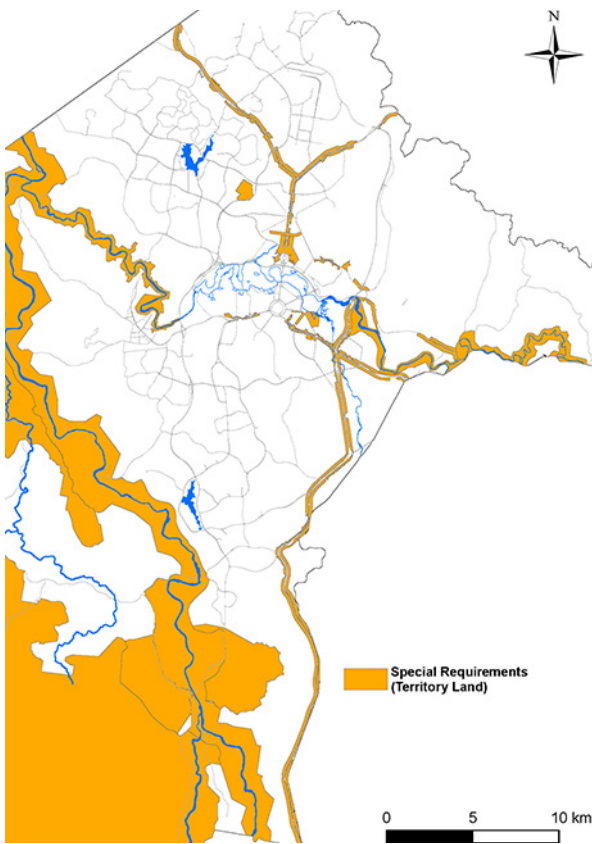


FIGURE 2 Removal of the 'Special Requirements' of the National Capital Plan covering the forested hinterland, river corridors and 'Lanyon Bowl' cultural landscape of the ACT, as shown in the contrast between existing controls

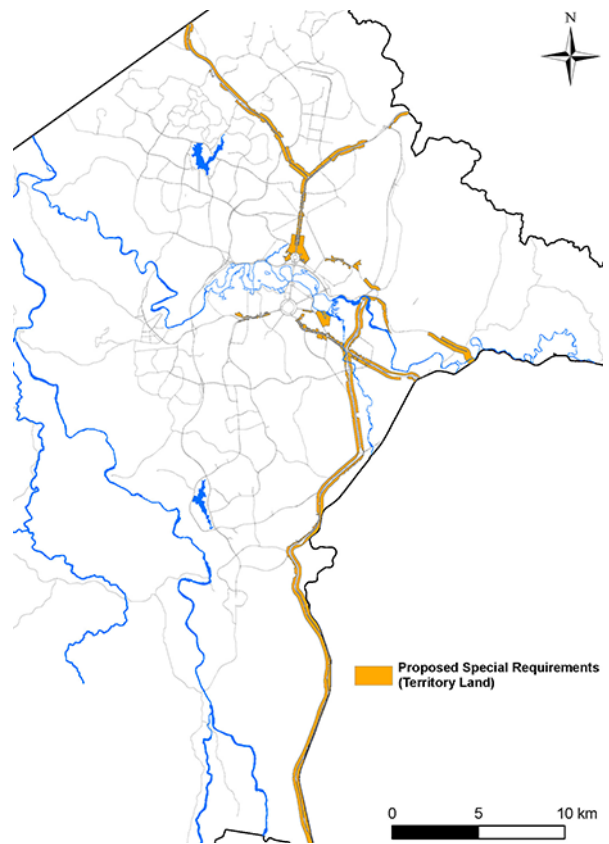


FIGURE 3 Proposed controls released for public comment in 2015 as draft amendments to the National Capital Plan.

The NCA has acquiesced to pressure from the ACT to urbanise the greenbelt between North Canberra and Gungahlin, to extend urban development in the New Town of Belconnen to the far north-west border of the ACT to connect with rural lands in the adjoining state of New South Wales held by property speculators who have campaigned for just this result; and to re-activate plans to urbanise both banks of the major river of the region – the Murrumbidgee – which had been rejected in the 1970s on environmental grounds.

All these concessions to the ACT represent a significant expansion of greenfield development sites, demonstrating the fundamental conflict between the role of the ACT government as land developer and conservation of the environment of the National Capital in the national interest. In this way, the neoliberal turn which began to subsume national capital planning to market forces in the 1970s has reached its apotheosis.

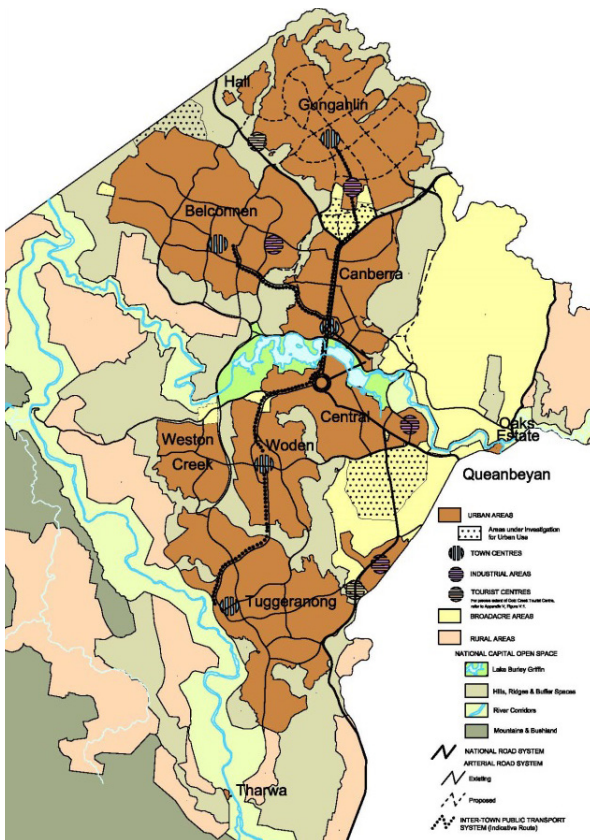


FIGURE 4 Metropolitan Canberra, General Policy Plan, 2002 (left)

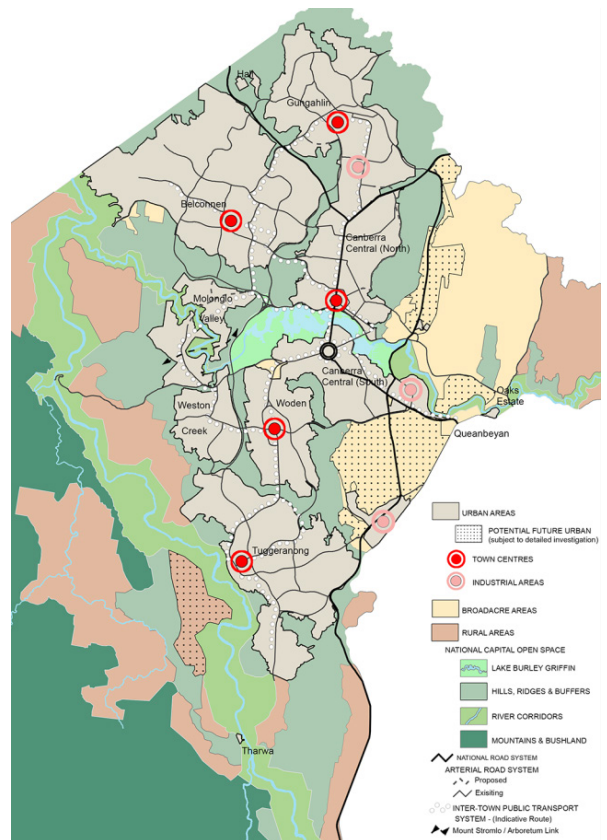


FIGURE 5 General Policy Plan as proposed under Draft Amendment 86 to the National Capital Plan in 2015 showing progressive urbanisation of the greenbelt separating the New Towns (the National Capital Open Space System) and extension of Belconnen to the north-west border of the ACT to connect with speculative landholdings in NSW.

At the same time, positive aspects of the collaborative planning undertaken by the ACT government in formulation of the Canberra Spatial Plan in 2004 have begun to be realised. In recognition of community ideas for a creative, compact city freed from car-dependency, which date back to a path-breaking study of 1991, 'Towards a More Sustainable Canberra',²⁹ the Territory government has advanced plans for the first stage of a light-rail system to connect Gungahlin with the central city. At the same time, mixed-use developments on the edge of the central city, both upmarket ventures by the private sector and a student housing precinct fostered by the Australian National University, have begun to bring life to the notoriously dead heart of the National Capital. Flexible planning controls for a former trade uses zone on the city fringe have succeeded in generating the seductive appeal of 'unregulated space' with popup stores and restaurants emulating, if only superficially, signature elements of the creative city. An urban renewal project on the foreshore of Lake Burley Griffin at Kingston, underway since the 1990s, has activated the waterfront of the city for the first time and stimulated support for a more ambitious 'City to the Lake' project that the ACT government has developed from a controversial component of the NCA's 'Griffin Legacy' proposals.

CONCLUSION

Since self-government in the late 1980s, planning culture in Canberra has been caught in a dialectic between a dominant neoliberal paradigm, which drove the ‘company town’ to self-government in the first place, and various forms of collaborative planning, relatively weak in the face of market forces but nevertheless responsive to the knowledge and passions of the Canberra community, which at times draw upon the capital city planning ethos of the past. The withdrawal of the Federal government from metropolitan planning for a ‘disembedded capital’³⁰ of its own creation is a tragic abdication of responsibility – particularly considering the challenges presented by a city with a population approaching 500,000 located in an environmentally-sensitive inland region of Australia. The extent to which the ACT government, captive to land development interests, will step into the role of the Federal government and plan Canberra in the national interest will depend on the strength of its civil society in coming decades, and a planning culture which balances the driving force of neoliberalism with an embrace of collaborative principles and practices in a meaningful way.

Endnotes

- 1 Sanyal, “Preface,” xxi.
- 2 Sandercock, “Picking the Paradoxes,” 310.
- 3 Fischer, *Myths and Models*.
- 4 see for example, Fischer & Weirick, “Sustainability as a Key Theme.”
- 5 Fischer & Weirick, “Canberra 2013,” 6.
- 6 for details cf. Fischer, “Building Culture”
- 7 Sherman, *Report of an Assessment*; Yates, “Technical Expertise as a Contributing Factor in Three Disasters.”
- 8 Weirick, “Anatomy of a Disaster,” 5-6.
- 9 National Capital Development Commission, *Tomorrow’s Canberra*.
- 10 Gilchrist, “Commercial Centres in Canberra,” 36-47.
- 11 Weller & O’Neill, “An Argument with Neoliberalism,” 112.
- 12 Whitwell, “The Triumph of Economic Rationalism,” 124.
- 13 Pusey, “What’s Wrong with Economic Rationalism?” 64.
- 14 Peake, “Cabinet Papers: National Capital Plan Born in Disagreement over Office Space.”
- 15 Peake, “Cabinet Papers: National Capital Authority Dodged a Bullet.”
- 16 Australia. Auditor-General. *Commonwealth Management of Leased Office Property*.
- 17 Hewison, “We Must End the Ruinous Cycle.”
- 18 Freestone & Wiesel, “Privatisation, Property and Planning,” 35-54.
- 19 OECD, *Urban Renaissance: Canberra, 167-170*.
- 20 Australian Capital Territory. Chief Minister’s Office, *The Canberra Plan*; Fenton-Menzies, “A Planned City Takes a Fresh Look for the 21st Century,” 13-15.
- 21 NCA, *The Griffin Legacy*; United States. National Capital Planning Commission. *Extending the Legacy*.
- 22 Stewart & Lithgow, “Problems and Prospects in Community Engagement,” 31; Arnstein, “A Ladder of Citizen Participation,” 216-224.
- 23 Australia. Parliament. Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories. *The Way Forward*, xxi.
- 24 Australia. Minister for Home Affairs. “Australian Government Response,” 11.
- 25 Australia. Parliament. Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories. “Review of the National Capital Authority: Biannual Hearings,” 16.
- 26 Seselja, “ACT Planning Laws Out of Date”; Peake, “National Capital Authority Too Powerful Says Liberal Senator.”
- 27 NCA, *National Capital Plan: Exposure Draft*; NCA, *National Capital Plan: Exposure Draft – Consultation Report*; NCA, *National Capital Plan: Draft Amendment 86: Sinclair & Straw*, “When is a Plan not a Plan,” 196-201; Peake, “Go Ahead for Sweeping Changes.”
- 28 Taylor, *Canberra: City in the Landscape*, 128-129.
- 29 Newman & Kenworthy, *Towards a More Sustainable Canberra*.
- 30 Joffe, “Disembedded Capitals,” 549-551.

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