CANBERRA for World Architecture 4

After a few sorry setbacks and some discouraging episodes, half a century afte the first paper dream, Canberra has come to be a unique environment for some hundred thousand inhabitants.

A new national capital for the newly federated Australian colonies was first discussed in 1900. The site, in a lonely valley, was selected in 1909, and an international competition for a plan was called in 1911. Walter Burley Griffin of Chicago won, but a year later his plan ran into its first difficulties. It was replaced by another prepared by the government's architectural department. A fairly spontaneous outburst against this substitution came from architects all over Australia and at langth the objections were heeded by a new Prime Minister, Joseph Cook, and Griffin was invited to Australia.

The development of Canberra over the next forty years maintained this painful stop and go pattern. Griffin soon left, disillusioned, and went to work in Melbourne. By the time of the Second World War the early idealistic spirit was all but dead and the thin young city was almost as free of artistic or planning pretensions as any outback town.

The renascence began in 1954, with a Senate enquiry followed by the appointment of an all-powerful National Capital Development Commission. Led by John Overall, the commission's policy was to restore the Griffin plan where practicable. Its first major task was to form the artificial lake which was the heart of Griffin's monumental scheme. In 1964 this was completed, filled, and named Lake Burley Griffin.

The main frame of the planning scheme of central Canberra is a triangle run between the peaks of three low hills that command the valley. This forms the basis of grand avenues and long vistas with ceremonial potential appropriate to a capital. Inside the triangle is the parliamentary centre and the central segment of the lake, and at each point of the triangle is some monumental feature. Yet Griffin subtly complicated this simple scheme by superimposing on it two more axial lines: one a centreline striking through the apex on the main hill, known as Capitol Hill, and the other crossing at right angles on about the middle line of the lake. He called these the land axis and the water axis respectively.

Canberra has become a significant environment because of this tense framework and its pleasant furniture and relaxing landscaping - ~~and despite the generally undistinguished architecture~~. Trees, space and perspective are the important things: geometry dressed with ponds, fountains, bridges, lawns, avenues, and acres of carefully selected and intermixed Australian and exotic trees.

However, architects who expect to see architecture in the artificial capital cities of the 20th century, thinking of Niemeyer's antiseptic triumph at Brasilia and Le Corbusier's thunderous creation at Chandigarh, can only laugh or cry at Canberra. It has virtually no building to excite them. Certainly Griffin had architectural visions half a century ago. He sketched horizontally stressed tiers of buildings punctuated by towers and a great ziggurat, 300 feet at the base, 225 feet high, on Capitol Hill. But after Griffin left there was no architect who could give Canberra architectural drive, and it never sought one. A hundred architects have had a finger in the pie. Each has been alerted to the importance of the occasion and obviously has been doing his best, which usually has meant being as different as possible from anything done by any of the others. Yet Canberra has succeeded despite architecture and almost without apparent art. It has thrived on planning and landscaping that has been consciously directed to making an attractive environment. As a result, simple non-architect people find it a good place to live.

By coincidence Chandigarh and Canberra have much in common - their political conception, their size, the mountains in the background, the parliamentary complex beside an artificial lake - and each is a perfect antithesis of the other. One's successes are the other's failures.

Chandigarh has the climatic masterwork of Le Corbusier - his trio of Secretariat, Parliament and High Court buildings - which transport architect visitors and no doubt will be counted, 33 years from now, as one of the few

great monuments left by this century. Yet among the many illustrated architectural reports of this phenomenon there are not many references, I think, to the misery of its environment. Before it is twelve years old Chandigarh's ideals have all but succumbed to the distress of India. The white stucco of street facades is jet black at hand height, fading out through brown above and below. Under the pilotis of a modern shop, ancient tinkers and merchants squat among rags and dirt and unspeakable bedding. Elsewhere discarded brick-batts are piled into a series of hovels roofed by scrap iron held down by more bricks. The owner-builders crouch on the mud inside, for the roof height does not allow for standing, watching the steaming rain silently for hours. Everyone knows of India's poverty, and it may not be fair to the fine spirit which conceived Chandigarh to stress this sordid side. Yet such an environment overwhelms even Corbu's architecture. The wavy green parkland belts that pulse through the heart of his drawn plan are barren waste strips on the ground. The stair wells of his High Court building are so unsavory that even the locals, who must have developed a high degree of olfactory insensivility, avoid congregating there.

Le Corbusier could not or did not want to foresee what the people would do to Chandigarh, or he might have designed it somehow differently. Griffin did not or could not foresee what architects would do to his plan. Neither knew well enough the human society they were working with, which finally makes or breaks any city plan. The creative architectural poverty of Canberra may be equated to the environmental destitution of Chandigarh. Any rational comparison of the two cities leaves no doubt as to which of these two qualities is more important to non-architect people.

The National Capital Development Commission's approach to the environmental design is given in this statement:

In establishing the city's basic plan form, Walter Burley Griffin affected a marriage between the 'city beautiful' and the 'garden city' concepts. By combining a formal baroque plan with existing topographical features, he created a pattern for the development of the central areas of the city which used nature as a close ally. Once accepted as an idea, the essentially simple plan had built-in defences against the temptations of expediency. The key element of Canberra's environment, therefore, is the city's marriage with nature.

The Parliamentary Triangle contains the heart of the city - the symbolic core - and within the core various elements are so arranged that they complement and strengthen the natural topography. Civic Centre - the C. B. D. - is planned around City Hill, and when fully developed will provide a man-made mass to complement but not compete with the adjacent hills, Mr. Ainslie and Black Mountain. The processional way, Anzac Parade, has as its northern backdrop Mt. Ainslie. The Russell Offices - the Defence Department complex which forms the north-eastern development of the triangle - have as their backdrop Mount Pleasant. South of the lake is the parliamentary complex. This is in fact a large park within which building groups can be placed in accordance with a precinctual composition. The land here is flat and offers the

opportunity for a balanced grouping of buildings and gathering places suitable for a 'forum' atmosphere. Nature completes the composition with the ring of distant ranges which surrounds the city.

Water is an important element of the design concept. The lakes of Canberra are artificial, and offer both formal reflective opportunities and a popular source of outdoor recreation. Pools and fountains are introduced in the civic and shopping centres, where the design intention is to integrate water, sculpture, paving, trees, shrubs, and architecture. Advertising is strictly limited and controlled.

Environmental design concepts are constantly under revision. Future residential areas will continue to be in character with the original "garden city" concept. As the core of the city continues to develop, however, a more urban character will evolve.