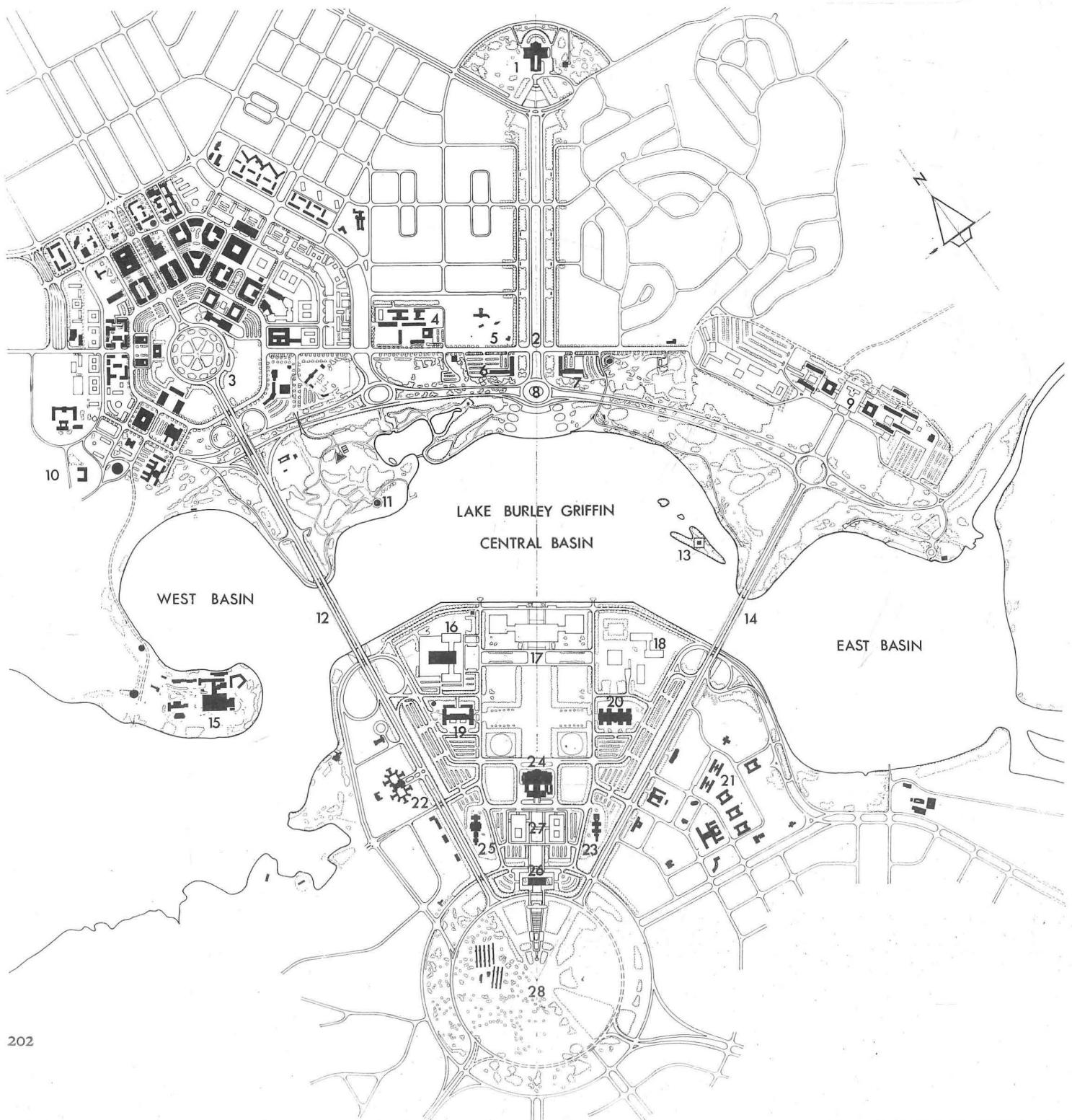


AUSTRALIA

Contributing Editor

Robin Boyd



CANBERRA

Master Plan

Walter Burley Griffin

Half a century after the first paper dream, after a few sorry setbacks and some discouraging episodes, 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 finally 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-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 renaissance 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 centre 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 two more axial lines upon it: one a centreline striking through the apex on the main hill, known as Capitol Hill, and the other crossing at right angles on approximately the middle line of the lake. He called these the land axis and the water axis.

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

CANBERRA MASTER PLAN KEY

- 1 Australian war memorial
- 2 Anzac parade
- 3 Civic centre
- 4 Technical college
- 5 St John's church
- 6 Secretariat
- 7 BMR building
- 8 The Ellipse
- 9 Russell offices
- 10 National University
- 11 Regatta Point pavilion
- 12 Commonwealth Avenue bridge
- 13 Tower
- 14 King's Avenue bridge
- 15 Community hospital
- 16 National library
- 17 Parliament house site
- 18 High Court site
- 19 Commonwealth avenue offices
- 20 Administration
- 21 Barton offices
- 22 Hotel Canberra
- 23 East block
- 24 Parliament house
- 25 West block
- 26 National gallery
- 27 Conference area
- 28 Capital Hill

Architects, however, who expect to see *architecture* in the artificial capital cities of the twentieth century, thinking perhaps 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 has usually meant producing something 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, the simple layman finds it a good place in which 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. The successes of the one are the failures of the other.

Chandigarh has the climactic masterwork of Le Corbusier — his trio of Secretariat, Parliament and High Court buildings — which transport architect visitors and no doubt will be counted, thirty-three 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, I think, few references to the misery of its environment. In less than twelve years Chandigarh's ideals have all but succumbed to the distress of India. The white stucco of the street façades is jet black at hand height and fades 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 brickbats are piled into a series of hovels roofed by scrap iron held down by yet 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 Le Corbusier'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 unsavoury that even the locals, who must have developed a high degree of olfactory insensitivity, 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 somewhat differently. Griffin did not or could not foresee what architects would do to his plan. Neither knew well enough the human society with which they were working and 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 the people who live in them.

Robin Boyd

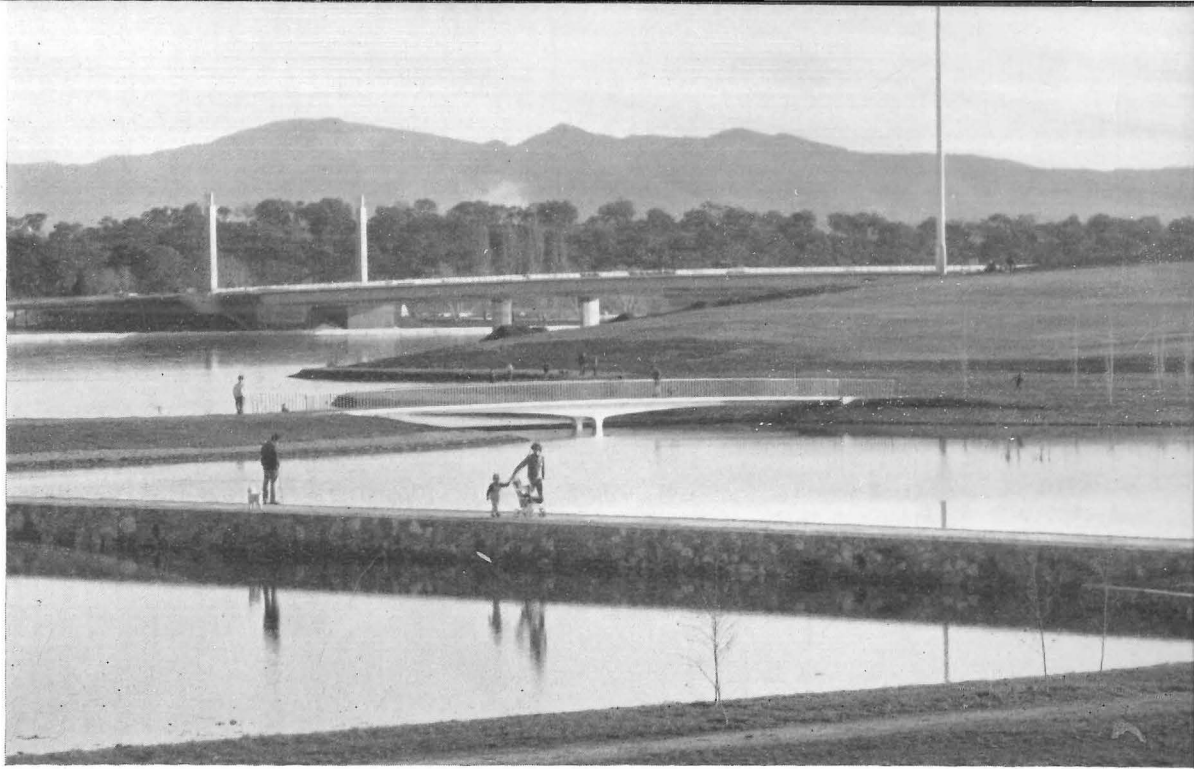
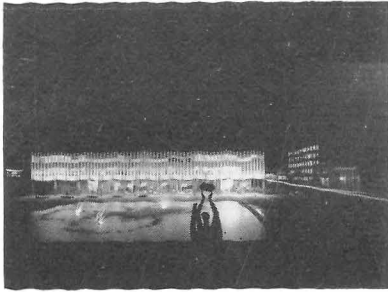
In establishing the city's basic plan form, Walter Burley Griffin affected a marriage between the 'city beautiful' and the 'garden city' concepts. By combining a formal baroque plan with existing topographical features, he created a pattern for the development of the central areas of the city which used 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. The Civic Centre is planned around City Hill, and when fully developed will provide a man-made mass to complement but not compete with the adjacent hills, Mt Ainslie and Black Mountain.

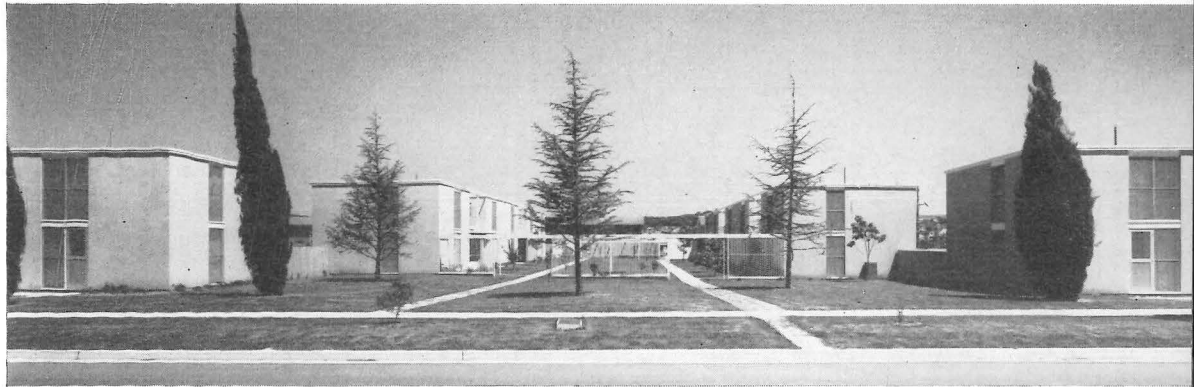
South of the lake is the parliamentary complex. This is in fact a large park within which building groups can be placed in accordance with a precinctual composition. The land here is flat and offers the opportunity for a balanced grouping of buildings and gathering places suitable for a 'forum' atmosphere. Nature completes the composition with the ring of distant ranges which surrounds the city.

Water is an important element in 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.

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.



Photos: Max Dupain



CANBERRA
Master plan: Walter Burley Griffin
Civic plaza, lake, municipal and
private housing

