PART I

CANBERRA

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA. DESIGN FOR THE LAY-OUT OF THE FEDERAL CAPITAL CITY (1912)

This is Griffin's entry in the competition to design a new capital city for Australia. Griffin may have seen the Information, Conditions *and Particulars for Guidance in the Preparation of Competitive Designs for the Federal Capital City of the Commonwealth*, published on 30 April 1911 in the *Transactions* of the 1910 Town Planning Conference in London. Copies were also available at the office of the British Consul-General in Chicago. Competitors had to submit a set of required drawings along with a written description by 31 January 1912. (The deadline was later extended to 28 February.)

Competitors were instructed to 'embody in their Designs all recent developments in the science of city planning' and implicitly advised to consult the *Transactions* of the October 1910 conference, where they could have read a paper by Sir John Sulman, leading Australian town planner of the day, who suggested that radial symmetry was appropriate for the new city of Canberra. Such symmetry was indeed a feature of several submitted plans.

British and Australian architects, disturbed that the winners would be selected by the Minister for Home Affairs rather than a committee of professional architects, decided to boycott the competition. A panel of three judges (an engineer, a surveyor, and an architect) reviewed the 137 submissions, and eventually selected Griffin's as the winning entry. The Minister for Home Affairs, King O'Malley, accepted the recommendation of the panel and cabled Griffin on 23 May 1912 that he was the winner.

Griffin's plan displayed both axial and radial symmetry. It also paid close attention to topography (so that his plan required very little redesign of the terrain); it sited the most important buildings on the loftiest spots, and distributed buildings into separate groups, according to their function. Equally important, it was accompanied by a spectacular set of perspectives (drawn by Marion Mahony Griffin). It is commonly observed that Griffin's plan was influenced by the 1901 cruciform McMillan Plan for Washington, and by several features of the 1893 Columbian Exposition

at Chicago. But the examples of Chicago and Washington are not his distinctive contribution; both are invoked in Sulman's 1909 articles on 'The Federal Capital'.[1]

Griffin's description was probably written hastily (and not proofread), in order to meet the deadline. (One short section of his prose was misplaced; and one of the drawings was in fact submitted after 31 January.) There are many spelling errors, especially towards the end of the typescript (such as 'cite' for 'site' and 'capital' for 'capitol'), typographical errors (such as 'Banking' for 'Ranking'), and incomplete words and sentences.

The plan was published by the Australian government in 1912 as *Competition Plan – Original Report. Federal Capital Design Entry No. 29*. It also survives in three distinct typescripts now in the National Archives of Australia. One (29 pages) is catalogued A1818, 13 and identified as 'Copy A'. It is stamped '29' on its opening page and is apparently one of the typescripts Griffin submitted: it contains his hand-drawn schematic diagrams. A handwritten annotation on it indicates 'Copies made 24/7/12'. A second, identical to the first, is catalogued A1818,14 and identified as 'Copy B'. It too was submitted as part of Griffin's entry. A third typescript is found in a collection of 'Documents relating to design of Federal Capital – FC Series', A762, 2296/2/5/2. The typed words 'Design No. 29' in the upper right-hand corner of each page suggest that it was a transcript made by a professional typist in Australia on 24 July 1912: its diagrams consist of typed words and ruled lines; there are a few hand-corrections. It occasionally corrects Griffin's misspellings (for example, substituting 'Parliament' for 'Parliment', 'weir' for 'wier') and introduces some Australian spellings.

The text in this edition is based on Griffin's own typescript (Copy A). The five hand-drawn schematic diagrams are reproduced from the original typescript.

Marion Mahony Griffin's drawing of 'City and Environs' that accompanied Griffin's entry in the Canberra competition (National Archives of Australia: A710, 38)

Commonwealth of Australia Federal Capital Competition

Project Outline
Presentation

Plat² of City Central District Scale 400′ = 1″

Plan of City and Environs Scale 1/4 mile = 1″

Sections through City Scale 100′ = 1″

Axis – AB Black Mountain into Upper Lake

Axis – RA Central Basin Government Group

Axis – CD "Ainslie" to "Red Hill"

Perspective – Scale at intersection of the Axes
AB and CD 1340′ = 1″
View from Summit of Ainslie.

Description

Explanation

Site Characteristics

Site Adaptation

General

Occupation

Public

Federal

Municipal

Private

Communication

External

Internal

Circulation

Distribution

DESCRIPTION

Although the information data are exhaustive, the time limit (especially for competitors of the opposite quarter of the globe for whom the mere matter of announcement took a considerable share of the period, finally arriving at the height of the season, preparatory to fall building, and from whom the duration of shipment has subtracted another month) has precluded to a degree the variety of tentative efforts with different "parti" that alone would render a solution final.

It is only possible to submit a design worked out tentatively but to a degree conclusive as to its practicability. In its presentation many final steps have been omitted in the belief that the general scheme is foremost in importance and the details are largely now, in the light of much discussion and publication, matters of common knowledge.

Because of the uncertainty of our privately administered means of rapid shipment, the Express Company, a duplicate of the written matter accompanying the drawings is posted.

DRAWINGS

The presentation of this scheme comprises a series of sheets mounted on 13 stretchers 30" x 60" and two fractional frames 30" x 30".

Plat of City, Central District, as required, on contour maps furnished with "Invitation to Competitors."

The drawing is mounted on muslin in two sections hinged together vertically.

The plat[2] indicates: –

Street and Block outlines (black line).

Prominent Public Buildings (gray line).

Alterations in contour as required by grading for thoroughfares, terraces, etc. (brown line).[3]

Plan of City and Environs, one frame.

Rendered on cambric in monotone to indicate graphically the dominant topographical features and the relation thereto of the proposed, and indefinitely proposed, public architecture and landscape treatment.

Also, the communication lines including rail and train ways and the local residential and industrial plots together with their resistance in future times.

Indication of axis of architectural arrangement in red –

Federal Group

Municipal Group

General Group

Indication of buildings –

Federal (black)

Municipal (black hatched)

Private (tone).

Section through the city rendered in decorative convention with color, since in fact highly conventional but technically descriptive.

AB – Northerly side of "Water Axis."
4 frames, hinge-joined.
Showing successively
Black Mountain in profile.
University and Professional Schools.

Municipal Center of Administration of Affairs.
Printery and Mint.
Bridge
Public Gardens including Zoo, Museums, Theatre, Stadium, Casino, Opera, Plant House, Gymnasia, and Baths.
Ainslie Park and Approaches.
Hotel
Bridge
Church
Station, Markets.
Public and Military Manufactories.
Central Power Station.
Viaduct
Military Headquarters, Armory, etc.
Lake Park.

DA – Southerly View of "Water Axis" along Central Basin, 1 frame showing Federal Government Building, their terraces and ramps. "Water Gate" in center.

CD – Easterly Side of "Land Axis."
4 frames, hinge-joined.
Showing successively
Ainslie in Profile
Casino in section
Ainslie Parkway
Railway, Viaduct, Freight House and Subway Entrance, and Church.
Library
Station and Military Headquarters
Museum of Plastic Art
Museum of Archaeology
Stadium
Gymnasia
Baths
Central Basin and Bridge
Courts of Justice
Departmental Buildings on First Terrace
Fountain Basin and Ramp
Houses of Parliament on Second Terrace
Plateau with Plaza, Monument, and Cataract
Subway for Trainways and Street Traffic
Capitol

Red Hill

Perspective – 1 frame, 2 half-frame hinge-joined.

View, South South-West from peak of Ainslie toward Parliament Hill, Capitol Hill, and Mt. Bimberi in line, with all Public Buildings and numerous private structures indicated per details of sections.

EXPLANATION

Site Characteristics.

The natural individual characteristics of the site, which it is the purpose of this plan to take advantage of by all means, are:-

1st:- The sheltering forested ranges and distinct snow-capped peaks south and west for background.

2nd:- The three local mountains, "Ainslie," "Black Mountain," and "Mugga Mugga" for aspect and prospect.

3rd:- The lesser hills, "Kurrajong," "Camp Hill," "Vernon," "Russell," "Shale," and others unnamed, which are utilized as termini of radial thoroughfares, sites for the most important structures.

4th:- The waterway for architectural effect, recreation, and climate's amelioration.

5th:- The generally flat valleys for the general purposes of industry and habitation.

ADAPTATION

General.

1. The background first mentioned above and visible primarily from the Northerly portion of the central district of the city is used to set off the governmental group, for which it serves as a "stage setting," as it were, from the closest adjacent flat lands of the opposite side of the basin used by the Public Gardens, a "parquet" for this theatrical whole and from the commercial portion of the city, next beyond and above occupying the "dress circle."[4]

2. The mountains retained in their natural state, as nearly as possible, as parks, and forest and game preserves, are treated as termini of the principal axes of as many important vistas as possible, conversely making of them the best possible view points from which to see the city in orderly arrangement. The greater of such commemorative or purely monumental structures as may be desired from time to time can be afforded on the side of Ainslie and Black Mountain, especially the most commanding of situations.

3. The hills, where practicable to conform with the regular arrangement, are utilized as the elevated foundations for the utilitarian buildings of dominating importance, such as the Capitol, the Parliament House, the Station, the Market, the City Hall, the Citadel, and the First Church, terminal to the greater thoroughfares which render them at the same time most conspicuous and accessible. Elsewhere in the lesser remaining instances, hills are in general avoided by the geometrical avenues and streets, and allowed to crop through only in places where they least interfere with the traffic and can be utilized for informal recreation or large residence sites, sanitoria, hotels, etc., reached by winding inclines with little or no artificial grading.

4. The main waterway, the "Molonglo," is left in its present state in the lowest and wildest regions, where it forms a feature of the forestry and botanical gardens continuous with Black Mountain in preservation of, or restoration to, primeval condition. Next above and at the second of the weir sites suggested in the invitation program, a dam of very modest proportions, constructed in connection with one of the roadway crossings, floods the lower outlying informal lake and the triple internal architectural basins which bound on three sides the government group for the reflection of its buildings and for improvement of the humidity conditions in the heart of the city. This dam may be high enough to form all the lake and basin waters, but it is suggested that the waters be held back at the point where the railroad and main lines of traffic pass around the governmental reservation, by another weir with sluices and locks to form a naturalistic lake whose beaches may be allowed to vary somewhat with the river supply as controlled at these sluices, to maintain the formal basins and lower lake uniform throughout the year.

The most difficult problem connected with the waterway through the center of the site is to minimize its interference with traffic, and at the same time least cut up areas. The circular pools and the connecting basin provide three water bodies, each complete in itself, and located in the spaces between the direct lines of communications from center to center.

At the same time, because of their largeness of scale and severe simplicity they conform to the architectural characters of the center of the city with its monumental groups and throngs of busy people.

The two irregular lakes are likewise located out of the direct lines of communication and their informal treatment corresponds with the park-like irregular character of the city's first suburban zone.

5. All the sheltered flatter areas are utilized for the general purposes of industry and habitation for the obvious reason of easiest adaptability to development, improvement, and upkeep as regards grading, paving, and wire and pipe service equipment.

In the laying out of these areas, which comprise the greater bulk of the city, first consideration is given to suitable plot units for building, tilling, and operating in systematic ways, the ideal being rectangles of various sizes.

Second consideration is for the greatest compatible facility of access, with from 6 to 9 directions readily obtainable at any point. Third consideration comprises special accommodations to suitable purposes in special case for large groups, as suggested in the proposed future extensions for manufactures, agriculture, etc., and in the general case to adapt the varying degrees of access and frontage of all the individual plots to accord with the uses to which their relative positions are best adapted.

The methods for this are detailed further under the two general aspects, Occupation and Communication, into which the problem resolves itself.

OCCUPATION

General.

If this were the problem of an ordinary general city, consideration of the requirements of regular plot shapes and distribution and arrangement of the buildings would be sufficiently treated by utilitarian considerations of the graduation in respective requirements from centers and lines of activity and bustle to operations requiring lesser degrees of popularity and more and more of quiet and room and freedom, to that finally of individual habitation. Were there but one center, zones would accomplish this most simply. But with many centers the first consideration is their distribution and functions, and then the more complicated gradation of the intermediate areas. In the city each group of most individualized purpose is based upon its rectangular system of buildings, all system-connecting via avenue thoroughfares of general activity with polygonal centers of the liveliest businesses where popularity is essential at all times of day.

Public Buildings.

The prime object of the Capital City is not an intensive commerce of the throng but the housing of various specialized deliberative and educative activities demanding rather the quiet zones. Architectural rather than traffic considerations govern therefore in the placing and treating of these various functions and determine therefore for this site

one general treatment which altogether must of course dominate all other constructions.

Experience from the beginnings of architecture has demonstrated that the simplest and most formal style has evolved with the completed civilization of each race at its ultimate development. Our civilization is tending that way, though by no means near the finality in rehashing the completed Roman expression or that of any other historical epoch.

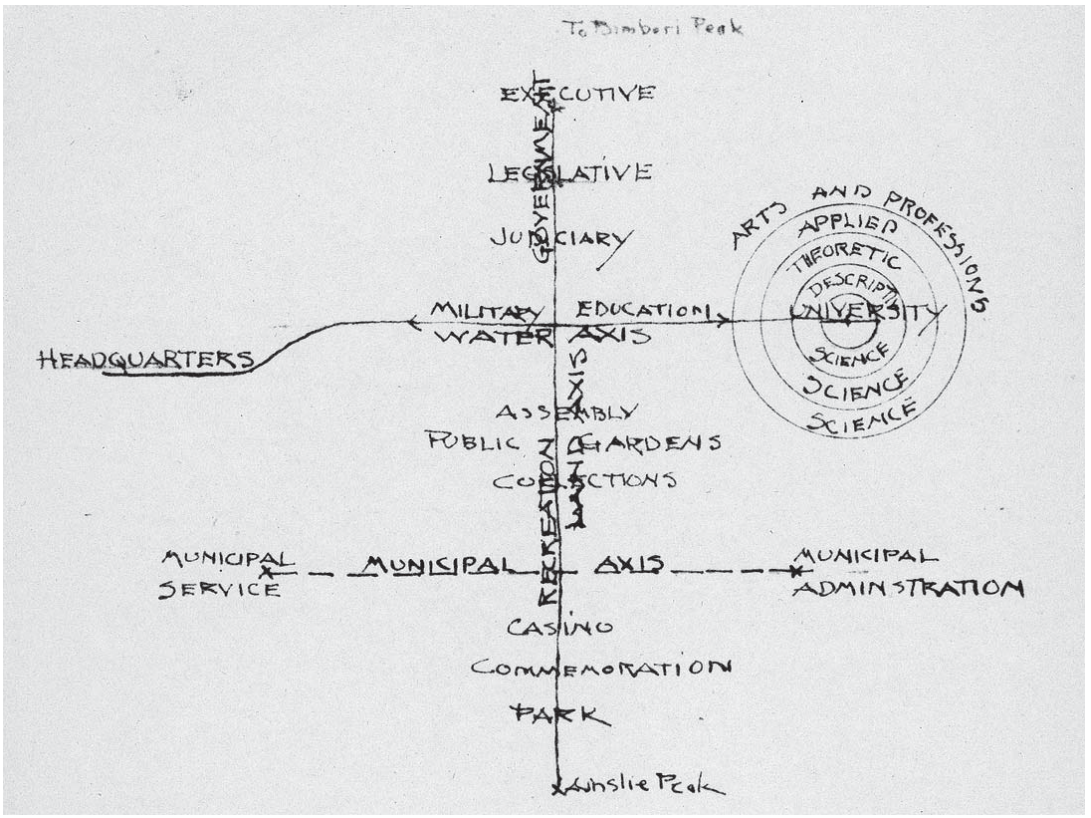
Possibly the fullest scope for this tendency has been given designers in the numerous exposition projects, typical and best of which may have been the Columbian Exposition at Chicago, where the restriction to one colossal scale and single type of design around a rigidly formal enclosed court produced an impression outliving those of all subsequent experiments, or of perhaps any architectural ensemble of modern times.

The lessons to be learned from these examples are, 1st, Largeness in the unit buildings, which modern fireproof construction renders at the same time the most convenient and the cheapest and, as well, as the most monumental shelter for our operations. With a liberality in public space, and judicious distribution of centers and directness, and speed in communication between all points, the necessity of making these large units stand on end, as in the congested American cities, can be avoided in a Capital City at least, securing a horizontal distribution of the large masses for more and better air, sunlight, verdure, and beauty.

For the essential uniformity in style it is hardly advisable to recommend, however, an adaptation of any historical style which different requirements will inevitably render a caricature instead of a reminiscence of its own proper grandeur. Thus are Greek temples rendered boxes with glass windows instead of masses of masonry, and colonnades are applied in front of windowed walls to the detriment of light and comfort, and thus are noble features like columns, capitals, and consoles mutilated and distorted, distributed for every sort of function except their inherent one of support. That sort of treatment may be well enough in scene painting and even exposition buildings, but can by no means be considered dignified, as permanently standing for the life and government of a great modern commonwealth. It would seem that a suggestion of restriction to one material, reinforced concrete, the newest, cheapest, most durable, least limited, most plastic and variable single medium yet introduced into construction, would contribute to [the] dignity and impressiveness of the entire city, while purity in proportion and unity in scale, appropriate immensity in spans and masses with contrasting[5] delicacy in plastic ornamentation, the elimination of useless protective features and connective expedients, uncalled for in monolithic construction, together with a maximum of repetition and rhythm, and a general simplicity which is best suited to the economical handling of this medium, would with imagination suffice for rational and genuine style.

Rigid adherence to the principles of honest direct solution of the building problems in a civilization of aspiring ideals, possessing a medium with qualities so individual, so limitless, must result in an architecture proportionately greater than any on earth heretofore.

For the purpose of grouping, the following general classification has been observed, in accordance with which a single system of co-ordinate axes [is] for esthetic reasons given to the Public Buildings, the primary axes of which are the federal groups and a secondary arm municipal.



Possibly observations may be made of discrepancy between preaching and practice in the buildings as indicated on this city scheme, but here scene painting is the theme, and of the most hurried sort, not architecture under such limitations.

A suggestion of stepped pinnacle treatment in lieu of the inevitable dome is no adaptation or innovation, although [as] fully direct an expression of the construction as any double shell, and it is an expression that was the last word of all the longest lived civilization[s] hereto[fore], whether that be of Egypt, Babylonia, Syria, India, Indo-China, China, East Indies, Mexico, or Peru.[6]

By this arrangement all the public buildings, of whatever group, are built on parallel lines, so that, as the predominant feature, because of number, size, scale, and open and elevated situations from any general view point of the town, they will work together into one single pattern, into which the other groups must merge subordinately, to maintain the fundamental simplicity.

The principal axes of this Federal Group co-ordinate system are determined by the most natural features of the site, since they furnish the fundamental basis of a Capital City at this particular location.

In the panorama, Ainslie with its distinct conical peak stands out first, and forms one terminus of the "land" axis, which, running from it to "Kurrajong," the Capitol, and after passing directly through "Camp Hill," produced 30 miles, extends direct to the peak of Bimberi, the highest in the entire region, a series of coincidences marking it distinctly, almost without the assistance of man's handiwork.[7]