

2010 SIR JOHN BUTTERS MEMORIAL ORATION
Institution of Engineers Australia

*Sticking with Plan A:
Canberra and the Politics of a Good Idea*
Roger Pegrum and Annabelle Pegrum
National Press Club
17 November 2010

PART 1
Backgrounds to Canberra

Roger Pegrum

Mr Denton Bocking, your excellencies etc, ladies and gentlemen

Annabelle and I are greatly honoured by your invitation to deliver the Butters Memorial Oration for 2010. We tossed a coin and I won, and so I will speak first, which doesn't happen all that often. Annabelle will therefore get the last word, which is of course the way it should be. You will find that our opinions may not always align, but they will not be contradictory and they may from time to time be parallel. Together we will discuss the design for our national capital city and we will share some of our views as to its past, its present and its future.

Sir John Butters lived in Canberra for only 5 years, but it is entirely appropriate that the Oration in his name be given in Canberra and be about Canberra because this city is his great legacy. The Oration is by default also about the Griffin design for Canberra, because it was Butters more than anyone else who put Griffin's mark forever on to Australian soil. As you know, Butters was an electrical engineer from England who went to Tasmania when he was only 24 years old. You will also know that Tasmania had the first hydro-electric generation scheme in the southern hemisphere. Butters' achievement in building the Great Lake scheme showed him to be both visionary and capable. His next job, to get Canberra ready so that Parliament could move here from Melbourne, was a natural continuation of that challenge. Appointed as chairman of a new Federal Capital Commission, he was given complete authority to get the job done, even more power than would be given to John Overall thirty years later. In both Tasmania and Canberra, Butters showed how much can be done by good people when they are given the means and the political support to get on with it.

I have also a personal connection to this evening and to the Institution of Engineers. My father, Ted Pegrum, was an active member of the Canberra Division of the Institution for many years. He studied in England as a civil and structural engineer and joined the office of the British Admiralty at Portsmouth. In 1936, he was posted to Singapore, where my twin brother and I were born. During the Second World War, my father worked on secret military projects including PLUTO and the prefabricated Mulberry harbours floated across to Normandy for the invasion of France. I have a paper he delivered almost 60 years ago to a meeting of

the Canberra Division of the Institution, when he also showed the remarkable film about Mulberry - 'A Harbour goes to France'.

In early 1948, my father was recruited in England for a project to increase the capacity of the dam on the Cotter River in Canberra. We arrived here on the long weekend in October 1948 and settled in to McKinlay Street Narrabundah. My father's work raised the height of the dam wall by some seven metres, and more than tripled the storage. All this will be buried under many metres of water when the new Cotter dam is completed, a rather nice way I think to preserve my father's first work in Canberra. There is a pleasant symmetry in knowing too that the caissons he designed also ended up under water, and played an important role in a war on the other side of the world.

When I first saw Canberra I was just 10 years old. I remember standing on Mount Ainslie and being told that there would one day be a great city laid out below me. We were just kids, we got on with our lives and didn't spend too much time wondering when this great city would arrive and what it would be like when it did. Canberra in 1948 had been occupied for not much more than 20 years, but it had everything to please and intrigue a young boy. At the time there was no good answer to the question, why is Canberra here? because it still wasn't really here. Trees were sparse and not very tall, it was bitterly cold and the water pipes froze. There was a wooden trestle bridge near the Albert Hall that joined the southern parts of the town to the bits on the north. The bridge got a lovely wobble up when the river rose, which seemed to happen a lot, and then they would close the bridge and we had to stay home from school, because the only way to get to the other side was via Queanbeyan.

I had two years at Telopea Park Primary, then 5 years at Canberra High School. Canberra was considered to be a leader in education in Australia, and when it was opened Canberra High School was said to be the most modern school in the country. I must have worked hard at Telopea and I was dux of the school in 1950. I was given the gold medal in the Capitol Theatre in Manuka by Charles Studdy Daley, who I found out much later had been Secretary to John Butters' Commission. They don't give medals for dux any more, certainly not gold ones, or ones good enough or pretty enough to give to your wife. I gave mine to Annabelle, who is wearing it tonight.

They were interesting times to be in Canberra. In 1954 we had a visit by Queen Elizabeth with lots of fireworks and the next month there was the defection of Colonel Petrov. Even then, it seemed that Canberra's scattered buildings had something to offer in terms of good design, but I am afraid that we took it all for granted. Only later did I realise that our public buildings were rather special and everything had been carefully placed within the pattern of the city - lovely buildings like the Melbourne and Sydney Buildings in Civic, the War Memorial, the Institute of Anatomy, the Arcade at Manuka, the Patent Office and the Albert Hall.

But change was on the way in Canberra by the time I finished school. I took up a cadetship with the Commonwealth Department of Works to study architecture at the

University of Sydney, and I was given many exciting projects over the next ten years. I refurbished the Cabinet room at Old Parliament House and fitted out the offices of Gough Whitlam when he became Leader of the Opposition. I got to design the first schools in the Woden Valley and I searched constantly to find the spirit of the place and respond with appropriate and creative buildings. At that time, the Department of Works and the public works departments in each of the States were the very best training grounds for young architects and engineers.

Planning and major projects in Canberra were by then in the hands of a new and extremely well-funded National Capital Development Commission, which became the greatest employer of designers in Australia's history. In 1963 the Department sent me over to the NCDC to work with Sir William Holford on the design of Anzac Parade. Holford asked me to design the original lights along the Parade - where else could a 24 year-old architect design the light standards on one of the most important avenues in the country? Some of you will remember those lights and the 'string-of pearls-effect'. They lasted almost 30 years - it was Annabelle as Chief Executive of the National Capital Authority who replaced them for the centenary of federation in 2001.

Canberra in those early years was still quite small so you could get around it and get to know it. But the federal government had committed to finishing what Butters and others had started, and Canberra was changing its face, filling in the gaps and filling out.

Annabelle Pegrum

I was born in Junee NSW in 1952 - my family were migrants who came to Australia the year before from Austria. My father was putting up power lines and we travelled a lot for his work, moving from town to town in southern New South Wales. Here I am in Junee with my siblings in front of his office (I guess) - I'm the one in the pram. It's a strange backdrop for a family picture but shows you the early influence of infrastructure in my life - and the value people placed on it.

I don't remember the first time I saw Canberra - I was two years old. Not surprisingly the family did a stint in the nation's young capital - here we are in Kingston where like Roger my siblings went to Telopea Park School - none remember meeting him - but you never know. My Mother used to recollect an empty town, dusty and hot - she could not believe it was the capital city. When she moved back here thirty years later, she became quite passionate about the city, often extolling its virtues of order, cleanliness and friendliness over Sydney.

The earliest memory of Canberra that I have is from the mid 1960s. I would have been 13 or 14 and I was staying with family friends, the Fremlins, in Bundanoon. Mr Fremlin was an engineer and he would take me on car trips to places of interest, Canberra being one of them. I recall standing on a mountain looking over the city - I am pretty sure that like Roger, it was Mt Ainslie - and Mr Fremlin talked with great enthusiasm of the plans for the city and of streets that had been planted with different coloured blossoms, pink and white, and trees that would change

colour with the seasons. It made a deep impression on me and I was inspired by what I thought was a wonderful place. I could imagine the city it was to become and I wanted to see it again.

For most of my young life I lived in Sydney on top of the cliffs in Dover Heights near the Heads – I loved the sea and the beach. I studied at Sydney University and later lived in inner city suburbs like Drummoyne and Annandale, places that were not elite as they are now, and I got a sense of the costs and benefits of denser city lifestyles.

By the end of the 1970s Sydney was going through what we now call ‘urban renewal’. The wonderful Rocks were about to change forever, Paddington was becoming trendy and the awful Darling Harbour redevelopment was underway. As a young architecture graduate I was of course interested in all of this and my friends and I debated the pros and cons of urban and social change. And yet, despite my love of the sea and experience and interest in a bustling urban environment, when I moved to Canberra in 1980 I instantly fell in love with the place – the open space, the big sky, the landscape and gardens and the great panorama of a city connected to the bush.

I also fell in love with the sense of community spirit – I had two small children (my son was born here), and I was immediately surrounded by the neighbours, other Mums and the support structure that was Canberra. It felt like a young city, lots of people with children, politically buzzed conversations, people with ideas and hopes, a city on the move, lovely gardens and parks for the kids to play and great pre-schools. It was easy to get around. I could not drive at that time but the shops and schools were all in walking distance and when I needed to go further afield I took buses with the kids – it seemed so convenient then to access services – or was I just younger?

I also recall a sense of freedom from the social siloing in suburbs so entrenched in the Sydney that I had left behind. Typically there was public housing in Manuka, even though it was already a relatively upmarket shopping area, and I looked at a lot of houses in the inner south and north, most of which a single income young couple (in those days) could afford.

My memories and first impressions of that Canberra mirror the sort of place that people talk about now as a desirable and sustainable city – affordable, enjoyable and accessible with a diverse and socially rich fabric.

What I also felt almost immediately was the pioneer spirit of the place. I was acutely aware of the personal impact that an architect – a designer - could have on the look and feel of the city if one wanted to ‘get involved’ – and I certainly did want to get involved.

My family’s early connections and memories of the region, and my own first perceptions of the city as a young girl have morphed into the things I still hold dear about the place – the physical beauty of the setting, the ceremony and quality, the

ever present immediate and borrowed landscape, the strong sense of community, and the endless opportunity and desire to be a part of its future.

PART 2

PLAN A: CANBERRA

Roger Pegrum

Even before federation in 1901, there were popular moves to make the new capital city a place of great beauty. The *Bulletin* newspaper pushed for a city in the Snowy Mountains, as shown in this drawing by Lionel Lindsay. The Sydney architect Charles Coulter prepared a sketch of a more colourful and a warmer city on the shores of Lake George, but unfortunately the lake dried up almost immediately.

Most of you here will know the stories of the selection of the Canberra district as the site for the seat of government and of the international design competition for the design of the capital city, and I don't intend to tell that story again tonight. But the outcome of that competition continues to influence all of our lives and is always worthy of discussion. This is Walter Burley Griffin's 1912 winning design for Australia's national capital city. Annabelle and I have referred to it tonight as Plan A because it is a Good Plan and it contains many Good Ideas.

Griffin's design for Canberra was a brilliant response to the site, merging his approach to architecture and landscape with the ideas of the English Garden City movement and the concept of the City Beautiful in the United States. In Melbourne in May 1901, the day after the first sitting of the new Australian Parliament, a 'Congress of Engineers, Architects, Surveyors and Others interested in the building of the Federal Capital' discussed the attributes the new capital city should have. There were of course theories about hygiene and amenity and the widths of roads, but there was also spirited debate about meaning and identity. What was wanted, said one speaker, was a city that would be 'essentially Australian, a place with the commonsense 20th century spirit of the Australian'.

The elements and broad detail of Griffin's original design are well known. The plan, wrote Griffin in 1912, is a logical architectural expression of the two major design determinants – the site itself and the function of the future city. The site, he said, could be broken down into a number of natural elements – the distant tree-covered Brindabellas; the three local mountains, Ainslie, Mugga Mugga and Black Mountain; the lesser hills within the Canberra valley and the flood plain of the Molonglo River bisecting the gently undulating land over the rest of the city site.

The distant ranges, said Griffin, were to be the background 'stage setting' for the city when viewed from what he termed the 'dress circle' on the northern slopes of the valley. The three mountains would be retained in their natural state as the 'termini of as many important vistas as possible', while the smaller hills would one day become the 'elevated foundations for buildings of dominating importance'.

Griffin drew a central land axis from the top of Mt Ainslie, down and across the valley floor, over Camp Hill to Kurrajong (now the site of the permanent Parliament House) and on for 30 miles in the direction of Mt Bimberi, the tallest mountain in the federal territory. A secondary water axis from Black Mountain crossed the land axis at the central lake and continued in a south-easterly direction to the Queanbeyan Plains. The heart of Griffin's composition, the national area, lay on the southern shore of the lake in, and I quote, 'an accessible but still quiet area', contained in a triangle by the lake shore and by two major avenues converging on Capital Hill.

It was, and is, a simple and splendid concept. Marion Mahony's wonderful renderings showed a beautiful city reflected in the central lake. In 1955, Peter Harrison, the first chief town planner in the National Capital Development Commission, said that almost half a century of town planning advances could not improve it. The Griffin plan was without doubt, as we have said tonight, a Good Idea, but politics often gets in the way of Good Ideas. The Griffin plan and Griffin himself were attacked almost as soon as his design was published. Politicians and others (including, I am sorry to say, a good number of engineers and architects) were jealous of both its philosophical backing and its simple geometry, and the government of Andrew Fisher turned it into this plan - a horrible hotch-potch described by some as a third-rate Luna Park, thrown together on the combination salad principle. This plan, known as the Departmental Board Plan (how bureaucratic was that!), was in fact the approved plan when the first peg was driven into the ground (and that, incidentally, is why the Power House and the railway sheds at Kingston are out of kilter with the adjacent city grid).

But the Griffin Plan was reinstated soon after and has been accepted as a Good Plan ever since. Griffin's last plan in 1918 shows some of the detail of the inner suburbs and establishes a fine grain of buildings and public spaces in areas now under pressure for redevelopment. In 1925, Griffin's road pattern was gazetted by the Parliament and could no longer be changed without the approval of Parliament. But the Griffin design for Canberra is under attack again right now, from politicians and others who should know better, and we will come back to that later.

By the mid-1980s, when I returned to Canberra, I felt the city had come of age. I thought at the time that it was strong and comfortable and well put together and worth keeping and I still believe this. It seemed to have all the things that a small city or a large country town might need, even if some of them were not yet in the ground or were incomplete. There was a logical pattern to the place and it had a resiliency to adjust to different views. It was also laid out with simple confidence. You could see that its buildings might change over time without the city losing its character and it was free of fashion and pretence. And so this was the first quality of Canberra that I held and still hold dear - Canberra is a city that attracts and holds people because it makes sense and all the parts make sense.

A second quality of Canberra comes from my belief that the city deserves the highest standards of design, not just for its larger public buildings but also in the

suburbs and the urban landscape. Our 1950s houses were modest in size but were actually well designed and well built. They were not necessarily well sited, but the streets were wide and the ceilings were high and you could cycle to school and walk to the shops. We were living in the sort of place you would want to keep and look after. We didn't know it at the time, but in today's terms our houses were sustainable, they were built to last and they could be adapted to meet changing needs. Of course we heated our houses with wood in a fireplace and we lit bonfires, but we had fruit trees and vegetables, we mowed the lawn by hand and we all had compost heaps.

And a third essential characteristic of Canberra was that the city has both an urban and a natural landscape. In my book *The Bush Capital*, I wrote of the incredible achievement of Walter Burley Griffin to produce a design that sat so naturally in the Canberra valley. 'In a Chicago winter', I said, 'and for a site he had not seen, Walter Burley Griffin found a way to lay out a city 'like no other', a city which is more like a landscape painting than a town plan, perhaps the most outstanding landscape composition Australia will ever see'. This was not an argument for pretty parks and gardens but an acceptance that everything in the city is part of a larger setting. Walter Burley Griffin understood the delicate relationships of nature. He did not subordinate architecture or function to landscape but considered them all in his work. Were he around today, Griffin might be called an urban ecologist.

Canberra demonstrates Griffin principles of confidence and character, the importance of high quality design in buildings and landscape and a demonstrable connection of open and built space. The vanity and ignorance of those who say Griffin is out of date because he is dead is staggering.

Annabelle Pegrum

Roger has spoken of the design qualities of Griffin's Canberra that have made Plan A such a Good Plan. But I contend that what makes it a Great Plan is the philosophy that underpins it and the political willpower that selected it more than a hundred years ago and has supported its development ever since. The very existence of Canberra, as Peter Harrison has said, is 'an act of faith'.

Canberra is not just any city – it is a contemporary national capital for a democratic country, a country that celebrated its union with the founding of a new national capital city – a remarkable and gutsy decision.

National capitals are special places – they have a symbolic role that is as vital and essential as the infrastructure that supports them. That role goes beyond seat of government and administrative functions to embrace cultural and social leadership and to reflect national values and aspirations. Such cities are the manifestation of ideas and should properly demonstrate the talent and innovation of the country.

Capitals like Paris, Washington, Brasilia, Berlin and Canberra are the stuff of

international urban legacy. Such national capital cities are born of Big Visions – both politically and in their design composition. This Big Vision is an essential ingredient in the creation of world-class cities. If you read some of the political speeches associated with the founding and early development of Canberra you will find the language of the politicians replete with such Vision.

Plan A – this Canberra - is a remarkable demonstration of a multivalent capital city. Witness the composition and setting, the grand axis linking politics and sacrifice, the great places for ceremony and celebration and the warehouses of our heritage, talent and culture – it is a physical structure reflecting strong philosophical aspirations.

At the end of the 1980s, when self-government was given to Canberra, the city was also testimony to another essential ingredient for the realisation of great cities – a long-term and practical political commitment to building and maintaining public infrastructure. Canberra's parks and gardens, schools and other amenities demonstrate the value placed by successive federal governments on good physical and social infrastructure.

The decentralised Y-Plan of the 1960s was introduced to accommodate the amazing population growth of the time whilst protecting the central national areas of Canberra – the Griffin core. A peripheral network of inter-town parkways made ready connections to all parts of the city and retained the desirable quiet suburban character that we value today. The idea of strong communities and of a city in and with the landscape was continued and strengthened by preserving the hills and ridges as open space buffers between the new towns, and by including social infrastructure like shops and schools in each town. We might now despair of some of the sustainability issues we have inherited from the Y-Plan – like a car based city –but you have to admire the investment and the intelligence that was brought to bear in this extended interpretation of Griffin's Canberra.

So here we are just three years out from the Centenary of Canberra and we need to stop and ask: is Canberra/Plan A – the idea of the capital city, its physical manifestation and its continued quality – at risk?

A meeting of the minds by our federal and territory governments will limit risk if each sees Canberra as an 'act of faith' and if they view their roles as both essential and complementary.

I think it is fair to question whether our federal politicians are deserting the very 'idea' of Canberra. Surely they are aware of the history of federation and of the aspirations of the founders for a new and vital national capital. Do they no longer recognise or appreciate the value of Canberra to present and future generations? Is the Commonwealth trying to find a way to contain its interest and investment within only the Parliamentary area? Are they looking to create a sort of 'jewel box' for sightseers and politicians to dress-up in, a place divorced from the rest of Canberra and from the reality of a fully functioning capital city?

In my ten years at the NCA there were three federal inquiries into the role of the Authority, two of them public inquiries. Thankfully in every case there was significant local and national public support. In each of these inquiries, debate boiled down not to bureaucratic structures or details of planning processes but rather to the extent of the role of the Commonwealth in the future planning and development of the national capital. On each occasion the need for such a role was upheld, but the very need to keep asking the question, and to do it so frequently, is in my view unfortunate.

A second and allied matter is the degree to which our local politicians and our local community are being asked to bear the responsibility for the quality and development of the city. This question should be considered not only in terms of planning power – as it usually is – but also in the context of ambitions for the future of a national capital that belongs to every Australian, not just those who live here or work here. The Chief Minister’s initiative to develop the national arboretum is in my view visionary and of national consequence – and surely the Commonwealth government should contribute to its development and maintenance.

Finally, there remains the question of whether Plan A is sufficiently robust to cope with growth and change towards a sustainable future and to continue as an urban model for Australia. The reality of Canberra today is low population growth, an ageing population with young people deserting the city, and the need to address sustainability by interrogating big issues like infrastructure, transport and housing affordability. We must also position ourselves within the regional context – the borders aren’t really etched into the earth and critical health and education services cannot be defined by false boundaries. We are also environmentally vulnerable, with recent experience of both fire and drought. All of these issues have implications for the form and development of the city. I believe that Canberra has the necessary strength and that it will both survive and prosper.

Which brings us to the final part of this evening’s address – Sticking with Plan A – future directions.

PART 3

Sticking with Plan A – Future Directions

Roger Pegrum

Plan A is a visionary plan, one that has already proved good enough to inspire not only in the present but over long periods of time. As we have said it has taken passion and commitment to deliver a city in and of the landscape, one that makes sense and that has largely achieved design excellence and a quality lifestyle.

How do we hang on to all of this whilst facing the realities of the present? We can’t answer all of these questions but we think that deciding to stick with Plan A would make for a good start. This does not mean a slavish adherence to Griffin’s layout

but it does mean recognition of its inherent qualities and of the political will to build things of lasting value and real meaning.

In a recent newspaper cartoon, Griffin was compared to Aldous Huxley, whose *Brave New World* in 1932 gave us several made-up words not totally out of place in discussions about either planning or politics ('newspeak', 'big brother', 'thought police'). Many science fiction novels paint happy futures, but Huxley reminded us that we could be heading to a 'negative utopia', where individuals would be controlled by the masses or by the party political agendas. Huxley may have a point here in the matter of urban renewal in Canberra's inner suburbs.

The idea of residential infill makes sense if we are to deliver appropriate lifestyle choices for Canberra and if we are to make the most of our infrastructure. Urban infill in central Canberra is also entirely consistent with Griffin's ideas for the city. But the way in which it is being done is not consistent with his ideas and is not of the quality that we have the right to expect here or anywhere else.

All the heat and most of the misinformation and poor planning in Canberra at the moment focuses on proposals for redevelopment in the inner suburbs and on the lack of communication between planners and residents, and, in some cases, politicians. These older areas are highly desirable places to live – near to town and to employment centres and entertainment, with established streetscapes, parks, local schools and shops, all the things that are being deliberately left out in the newer and more distant suburbs. Not all the housing has reached its use-by date, and there are good arguments to retain or modify a lot of the building stock. There are also good arguments for increasing the density - more people could live close to where it is happening, and public transport might flourish.

But what we are getting is happening by accident rather than design. There is a real risk that we will all wake up one day to a second or third rate result. Sydney architects and planners Philip Thalys and Peter-John Cantrill have noted that political masters '*consistently favour expediency over long-term commitment ... the planning profession has retreated from the making of projects, contenting itself instead with process, regulation and development facilitation ... in fumbling retreat, planning at the metropolitan level has become an exercise in non-determinism*'.

Development and redevelopment in Canberra is controlled by the Territory Plan, a cumbersome document that is difficult to follow and is constantly being amended. The Plan adopts a one-size-fits-all approach to residential redevelopment. It shares with the planning codes of many Australian cities a tick-the-box process to achieving planning outcomes that increase density but allow undistinguished and second-rate buildings. Typical pages from the planning code for multi-unit developments give building envelopes without guidance as to their detail; simplistic no-go zones for building footprints; and vague design criteria about reflecting residential scale, privacy and solar access and providing 'sufficient spatial separation between adjoining developments'.

This absence of understanding by politicians and lack of courage and design skills

by planners (and indeed architects and engineers) has given us a situation where approval can be given to an inappropriate scheme for development not because it is good at all, but because it meets (or nearly meets) a raft of rules and numerical criteria. *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* reminds us that a common mistake when designing something foolproof is 'to underestimate the ingenuity of complete fools'. The Territory Plan suggests that the answer to a problem in one area can be the same as in another place, but commonsense says otherwise. There is an artificial limit of 2 storeys in all Canberra suburbs, but why should there not be some 3 storey housing here and there to break the skyline? Ainslie is not the same as Narrabundah or O'Connor and that is that. What will give better design solutions for urban residential redevelopment is a commitment to local precinct planning and creative urban design.

I am reminded of a lovely line by G K Chesterton: 'Stand up and keep your childishness, read all the peasant's screeds and strictures, but don't believe in anything that can't be told in coloured pictures'. Who will make the coloured pictures and who will pay for them? In a virtual world, where almost everything is three-dimensional anyway, and in a city like Canberra which has been at the forefront of design innovation for almost all of its life, it ought not to be too hard to produce drawings or models to show what these new and denser environments will look like.

A change of use charge is currently applied to the redevelopment of residential leases. (It is ridiculously low, but that is another story). Part of this income could fund research and high quality design studies and working models for precincts ready for renewal. It has also been suggested in several quarters that the cost of proper planning is less than the cost to the government and the community of endless appeals to planning tribunals. Development applications should be assessed in the terms of the 'Canberra qualities' I spoke of earlier. Rather than measure its area, ask is it a good idea? If it is a good idea, is it good enough? What are its architectural qualities? Does it relate well to the street and its present or future neighbours? Do solutions for car parking, mail delivery and garbage storage contribute positively to the amenity and appearance of the street? Will the proposed construction system provide low-maintenance facades? Are the external areas well designed? and so on.

Redevelopment can be carried out with style and imagination. An old petrol station in Yarralumla has become eight rather nice townhouses. Two timber cottages on a corner block have been replaced with elegant terrace houses. Two dozen apartments have replaced three 1950s cottages without appearing to dominate the street. Not all developers look only for the profit. After all, Regent Street in London was a fully speculative development. So too was most of Paddington in Sydney. None of these projects is the result of a box-ticking exercise. Once upon a time, Canberra led the country with an imaginative planning regime and high standards for design and construction. It's time for us to take the lead again.

Annabelle Pegrum

Let's pick up the thread of my last question about the potential of Plan A to be robust and flexible. For nearly 100 years the Griffin Plan has proved to be a touchstone for the future, not a millstone as has been suggested by some.

But where to from here? By way of example I want to focus on elements of the central national areas – the core of the Griffin design. Parliament approved the Griffin Legacy amendments to the National Capital Plan four years ago. The National Capital Authority proposed these amendments as a contemporary translation of Griffin's design and to deliver sustainable planning for the central national areas with the potential for innovative urban consolidation and renewal. Of significance this planning opportunity unlocked the potential of nearly 200 hectares of land for residential and commercial uses that is currently surface carparks, large road reservations or remnant areas – delivering good development space consistent with the intention of Plan A without any take up of existing parkland or established inner suburban areas.

The amendments link the city to the lake, making foreshore promenades and cultural attractions more accessible. They make it possible for West Basin, one of our most beautifully sited foreshores, but also one of our more degraded open areas, to sustain recreation, residences and cultural centres and importantly to link back to the city centre. The amendments also make it possible for City Hill – the Griffin pivot point between the civic and national areas - to be revitalised with strong links to the wider city centre.

Constitution Avenue is the base of the National Triangle. It is also the municipal axis of Griffin's plan and yet it presents along its length as a river of carparks and a disconnected shambles of paths, intersections, weeds and unloved trees. It should be a generous boulevard, with wide sidewalks and quality lights and street furniture. The beautiful oak plantings should be cared for and the gaps reinstated with advanced plantings. It should – and could be – lined with businesses and residences, national uses and cafes, what Griffin called 'the commerce of the throng'. Constitution Avenue deserves to be a meaningful part of the national area and a sought-after address for residents and visitors, but it is instead the Cinderella of world avenues.

None of these opportunities can be realised without public infrastructure and infrastructure takes money. I contend that given the national status and value of Constitution Avenue, funding to build such an important street after more than a century should rightly come from the Commonwealth. Indeed the funding was committed by one Government only to be removed as a 'saving' by the next – where is the federal commitment, vision or leadership in such action?

So much seems to come down to who is responsible – who pays and who gains. I have heard all of the arguments over the years about the so-called duplication of planning and the tension between the Commonwealth and ACT Government roles and responsibilities. There is no doubt that self- government has been a significant

defining factor in the development of the city. But there is, will always be – and in my view should be - a dual role for our city. A National Capital for all Australians and a terrific city to live in for us Canberrans. I have always said that this duality is healthy. It protects the city from absorption with purely parochial issues and guards against the Capital becoming sterile and out of touch with the ‘people’. The rest is just about bureaucracy and administration – call me an optimist, but surely we can fix that sort of stuff with good will and a bit of common sense.

So let’s stick with Plan A – let us reinterpret it and extend the good things within it. Let us use the centenary to make a serious and continuing Commonwealth funding commitment to the future of the city – not just pretty events but real infrastructure for a real future. At an ACT government level let us accept that we also need imaginative and thoughtful local area planning, not a whitewash of planning regulation with ‘one size fits all’ – it doesn’t work elsewhere and it certainly won’t work in Canberra.

And in closing, as designers, engineers and architects, let’s make sure that we maintain the debate about the capital that began with the coming together of architects and engineers in Melbourne in 1901. We have a very real obligation to use our skills and experience to make Australia’s capital city worthy of the nation – that’s what sticking with Plan A is really all about – the politics of a Good Idea is about making the right sort of future.

Roger and Annabelle Pegrum
Canberra
November 2010

about 6000 words

ROGER PEGRUM and ANNABELLE PEGRUM are architects who have lived and worked in Canberra for many years.

ROGER PEGRUM is a Life Fellow of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects. He was the Australian Government Architect from 1986 to 1988 and before that was associate professor of architecture at the University of Sydney. His buildings have received numerous design awards and he has published in many areas of architecture and planning. He is the author of *The Bush Capital*, the history of the selection of the Canberra district as the federal capital of Australia.

ANNABELLE PEGRUM AM is a Professorial Fellow at the University of Canberra and is presently the University Architect. From 1998 to 2008 she was Chief Executive of the National Capital Authority and before that held a number of senior executive positions in the ACT government. She has been president of the ACT Chapter of the Institute of Architects and was the 1998 Telstra ACT Business Woman of the Year. In 2007, she was appointed a Member in the Order of Australia for her services to architecture and to the planning and development of Canberra.