

BUILDING CANBERRA to 1958

The first steps towards an Australian federal capital were modest. In 1911, before the development of a formal city plan, the first administrator, Colonel David Miller, determined that the temporary administrative centre for the new city should be at 'Acton', now the site of the National Museum of Australia.

Here, overlooking the Molonglo River, the first buildings of the new city were erected. By the following year, the site housed a huddle of small timber buildings, surrounded by a sea of tents for construction workers and a small plant nursery. This first tentative footing for the new capital was confirmed with the erection of 'The Residency', now known as Old Canberra House, at the crest of the Acton promontory in 1913.

That year saw the capital's commencement celebrations at Kurrajong Hill, now the site of Parliament House, on 12 March, and the naming of the capital. It was also in 1913 that the American winner of the design competition for the new capital, Walter Burley Griffin, arrived in Canberra to convince the federal administration of the worth of his plan. In the face of considerable departmental opposition, on 17 October 1913 Griffin was appointed Federal Capital Director of Design and Construction.

With the acceptance of a city plan, new projects were commenced. Water, roads and sewerage engineering works were begun, and by 1918 Griffin had produced his 'final design' for the city and its environs. By late 1920, however, Griffin had gone - a victim of unbending administration and his own uncompromising, creative genius. Development over the next four years was to be directed by a Federal Capital Advisory Committee (FCAC).

The Committee's task was to investigate the work already completed and to advise the government on completing new works within Griffin's plan. The Committee firmly stated a vision for an initial Canberra phase as 'a garden town, with simple, pleasing but unpretentious buildings'. The Committee commissioned a number of new buildings, including 'Provisional [Old] Parliament House' (1923) and the flanking East Block (now the National Archives of Australia) and West Block. The provision of housing estates at 'Civic' (now known as the Braddon Conservation Area), and an estate at Kingston adjacent to the Kingston Power House, were also commissioned.

By 1925, Canberra had been transformed from a construction camp site on a winding, picturesque river, to a small country town with aspirations to future greatness. It was the same year that the Federal Capital Commission (FCC - the successor to the FCAC) took over the Federal Capital project. The FCC assumed, as its primary role, the relocation of Parliament - and the associated task of relocating departments and public servants from the capital cities of Australia (primarily Melbourne and Sydney) to the infant capital of Canberra. The following five hectic years witnessed: the completion and opening of the provisional Parliament House (now known as Old Parliament House) in 1927; the planning and building of large areas of housing according to the innovative designs of the FCC Architects Department; and the constructions of the Institute of Anatomy. The 'Sydney' building in Civic, the city centre, was started in 1927.



By 1930, with Parliament transferred and the nucleus of the city created, responsibility for the building of the city transferred to the Department of Works and Railways. The early Depression years initially halted all development, except for the completion of Manuka Swimming Pool and the first National Library on Kings Avenue. Talented architects such as Malcolm Moir worked on the drainage works at York Park. By the mid-1930s, building activity recommenced and major projects such as the Australian War Memorial, the Patents Office, a new city hospital and the Telopea and Canberra Public Schools were commenced.

The war years once again dampened building activity. A new advisory committee for Canberra's development was established in 1939. This committee, the National Capital Planning and Development Committee (NCPDC), was established with a similar structure to its counterpart in Washington DC. This Committee commenced its advisory work at the onset of World War II but, following the war and into the early 1950s, little building of consequence was undertaken and the most dramatic development was an 'ad hoc' departure from Griffin's 'Canberra' plan. The principal achievements were the establishment of suburban shopping centres such as at O'Connor and Ainslie, and the Works and Planning. However, the 1950s were generally characterised by 'ad hoc' responses by planners and architects to short-term needs identified by bureaucrats and politicians. Put simply, the Federal Capital was rudderless.

It was not until the late 1950s, and with the active intervention of Prime Minister Robert Menzies, that an active and political interest in the development of a planned Federal Capital re-emerged. In 1958 the National Capital Development Commission (NCDC) was created to make Canberra, in Menzies' memorable phrase, a 'worthy capital'.

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Further Reading

- John Overall, *Canberra Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow – A Personal Memoir, Canberra*, The Federal Capital Press of Australia Pty Ltd, 1995

