

ISCCC PUBLIC FORUM 28 MAY 2024 - SUMMARY OF PRESENTATION BY RICHARD JOHNSTON

“**BETTER RESIDENTIAL DEVELOPMENT – building & landscape design for climatic & social resilience**”

Walter & Marion Griffin’s vision for Canberra (their entry in the 1911 design competition for the new Federal Capital of Australia) was “a marriage of architecture and landscape” (Paul Reid 2002) – showing:

- respect for major ‘landscape’ features (Mt Ainslie, Black Mt. etc)
- use of water bodies as a major central element (the ‘Water Axis’)
- geometric city layout within and connected to the topography.

A major central feature of the Griffins’ plan was Capital Hill (formerly ‘Kurrajong’). They located a ‘Capitol’ building (a ‘peoples’ place – for “popular assembly and festivity”) on top of Capital Hill, with the Parliament down the hill and subservient to it and government offices below that again.

The politicians eventually decided however they wanted pride of place and the New Parliament House competition resulted in an amazing design by Aldo Guirgola, which sits IN Capital Hill rather than on top of it and is surmounted and surrounded by landscaping, but also has landscaped courtyards within it

We seem to have lost sight of the importance of generous open space and landscaping in more recent residential development, particularly. I think the major challenge now for urban designers is, as laid down in *Canberra’s Living Infrastructure Plan: Cooling the City* (2019) – better preparing the city for and being more resilient to climate change.

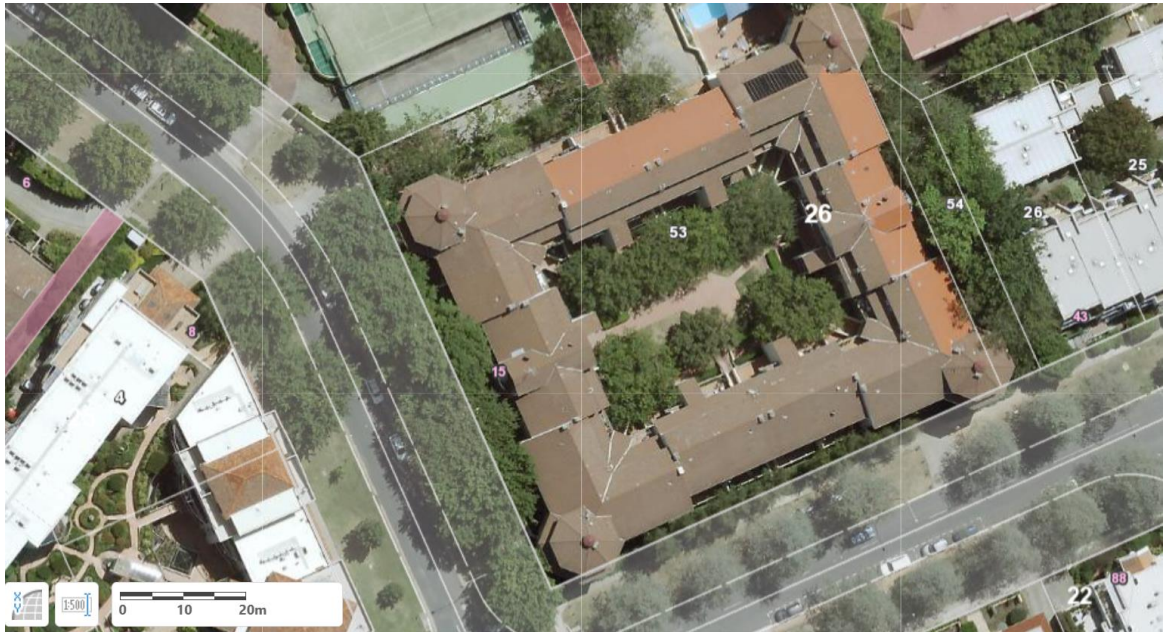
The **key goals** of this plan are to by 2045 achieve:

- 30% tree canopy cover (or ‘equivalent’); and
- 30% permeable surfaces.

This suggests to me that the built-on area of future development needs to be more limited than in recent examples and much more attention needs to be paid to functional landscape design of communal open space. For example, internal courtyards of various scales can have an important role in responding to climate but also building community. European cities have been doing this for centuries and there are some wonderful, more recent, medium density examples in Barcelona and even more northern cities such as Vienna.

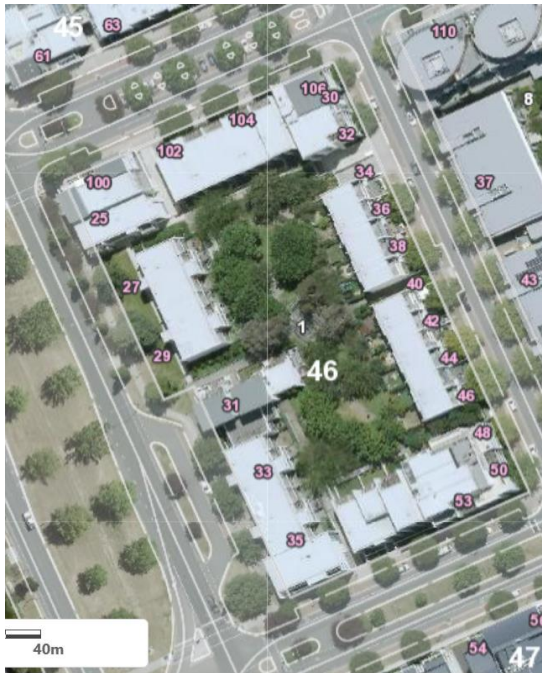
We used to do this sort of thing in Canberra. For example one of the public housing complexes of the 1970’s, Jerilderie Court on Ainslie Avenue, Reid, features a large communal courtyard with big trees and meeting and play spaces. Unfortunately it’s looking poorly maintained. Is it another one that will be given over to higher density, private redevelopment?

Another early public housing complex was the former Stuart Flats, Manuka – it was sold off to private developers and a much higher density scheme has resulted, with loss of on-site trees and communal open space.



But, there were some good private redevelopments done in Canberra 20 or 30 years ago. The above picture shows one of these, ‘Somerset’ in Giles Street Kingston (opposite the old post office), built in the 1980’s or 90’s under NCDC redevelopment guidelines which favoured block amalgamation for larger sites, enabling reasonable dwelling densities with generous communal open space. This is on a two-thirds hectare site with 87 apartments (density about 130 dwellings per hectare). They are ‘walk-up’ mainly three storey buildings around a very generous central open space including large trees. Carparking is under the buildings in a sub-basement.

The communal open space seems to be well used, particularly by kids playing after school, in a fairly safe place within sight of home, instead of having their own private back yards.



There were some similar early projects in the Kingston Foreshore, like this one on Wentworth Avenue between Giles and Eyre Streets. It occupies a whole street block (1.1 hectares) with 109 apartments and 11 ‘terrace’ houses – total density 109 dwellings per hectare and a fine internal communal open space with large trees.



This one is a recent project called ‘Kingsborough’ – a whole street-block development on The Causeway & Cunningham Street, Kingston Foreshore. This one has featured in the ACT Government’s *Housing Design Guide* and media releases about the first stage of the ‘East Lake Urban Renewal’ project. It is 4-6 storeys and contains 280 apartments on a total site of about 1.2 hectares, (density about 230 dwellings per hectare). It has a relatively small and narrow lineal central space with no large trees.

In my view, ‘Kingsborough’ is an example of the kind of **overdevelopment** that has been occurring over about the last two decades, as sites have been getting smaller and relatively more expensive and developers have been wanting to maximise their investments. The Government and developers benefit, but does the city and community?

Finally, on the theme of integrating buildings & landscape, one of the very recent and in my view quite masterful examples of how to do it well is the approved scheme for a 403 dwellings residential development on a 3.5 hectare site at Dairy Road Fyshwick by the Molonglo Group – about 115 dwellings/hectare. (The ISCCC had a presentation by Molonglo in August last year.)



Note:

- lots of open space with a central lineal 'water feature'
- 4-storey L-shaped buildings grouped to form semi-private 'courtyards'
- vehicular circulation and visitor parking areas confined to under the buildings and on the perimeter of the site, allowing deep-rooted tree planting in the open space areas.

This project was also the subject of a 'Microclimate Assessment', which the Government said would become mandatory for major projects, but the guideline document is still to emerge. The objective is **no net heat** gain by new development. This study indicated that the main contributors to heat reduction would be:

- at least 30% site area to be canopy area of shade trees;
- permeable ground surfaces including rain gardens and wetlands;
- appropriate location of open space and buildings (courtyard layout).

Wouldn't this be a great model for the East Lake 'urban renewal' area, which the Government claims will be an 'exemplary' project? My concern is however this will be more overdevelopment like Kingston Foreshore.