

Canberra Observed

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City-shaping can be an art form, in essence like any other. Neither the theory nor the practice of it is today highly developed, but given peace and prosperity, it promises to engage our attention more in the future than it has in the immediate past.

The forming and re-forming of new cities, or of large sectors of cities, is becoming a more frequent task everywhere in the world, and wider circles of people are becoming involved in controversies about how these sorts of things should be handled.

Canberra provides, in Australia, a valuable case-study of city building as a deliberate aesthetic discipline. We should make the most of this and learn from it all we possibly can.

There is not even an agreed international name for this activity of city-shaping. 'Bring half a dozen buildings together and an art other than architecture is made possible', says the Englishman, Gordon Cullen. But

what is that other art? The Italians call it *Urbanistica*, while a contemporary Athenian calls it *Ekistics*. Some English call it Civic Design, others Townscape, while Americans call it Urban or Environmental Design. Gropius sees it as Total Architecture, while Mumford insists that it is a wider, and not wholly visual, dramatization of communal life. This diversity of language very simply illustrates the diversity of cultural and ideological approaches to urban aesthetics.

The Ethnic Domain

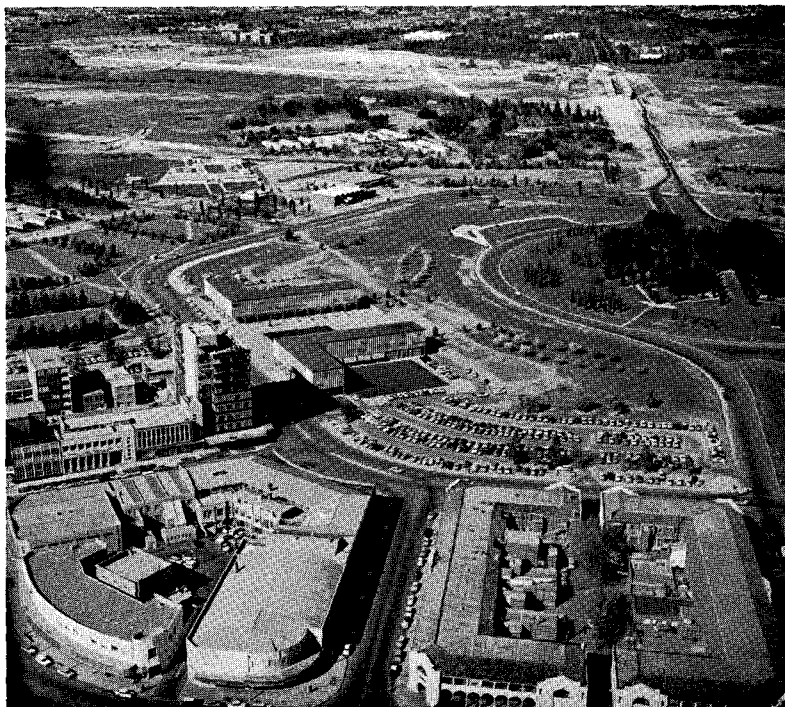
Any unified piece of the man-made physical environment – a whole city, a suburb, a parliamentary precinct, a university, a shopping centre, a neighbourhood, or a park – can transcend its ordinary function in the direction of art. This involves the transfiguration of an ordinary place into an 'ethnic domain', as Susanne Langer calls it, the semblance or image of a culture, a social order, or a way of life. This is a familiar enough concept, which underlies aesthetic appreciation or disdain of such distinctive urban places as ancient Athens, Venice, Versailles, Oxford, the English villages, Manhattan, the British New Towns, and the newer U.S. Regional Shopping centres. In the evolution of a city, there is a continuous feedback or interaction between city form and city life. We shape the city and it shapes us, in a symbiotic relationship which can spiral us and our city either to heaven or hell.

The overall expressiveness of urban form is therefore cultural rather than personal, and is often an overlay of the contrasting expressions of conflicting social groups and/or generations. Big, old cities may well seem to lack overall unity or coherence, despite their smaller districts of distinct character and form. Robert Musil, in his *Man Without Qualities* described Vienna as a whole: 'Like all big cities, it consisted of irregularity, change, sliding forward, not keeping in step, collision of things and affairs, and fathomless points of silence in between, of paved ways and wilderness, of one great rhythmic throb and the perpetual discord and dislocation of all opposing rhythms, and as a whole resembled a seething, bubbling fluid in a vessel consisting of the solid material of buildings, laws, regulations, and historical traditions.'

That could equally fairly describe Sydney life and the Sydney urban scene today. If read with only slight irony, it could almost describe Canberra too. Shorn of its first and last phrases, it could also evoke the complex order of a Fairweather painting. But it puts most aptly the extra-human scale and non-stop drama of urbanism as an art form. And that makes it valuable, because a truly 'modern movement' in environmental design is only now starting to emerge after several hundred years of decay and neglect. The early evolution of this movement owes a great deal to Walter Burley Griffin, a debt that is only now beginning to be acknowledged.

The two essentials

National or State capitals like Versailles, Washington, Canberra, New Delhi, Chandigarh and Brasilia, are all conceived as collective symbols on extra-human scale. In this they follow all the great temple precincts of history from Karnak to St. Peter's. They are knowingly contrived as



left

View southwards over Civic Centre, the central business district, which spreads around Civic Hill. The four blocks of shops and offices shown here are all very different in character. The block on the lower right was the earliest, is still the biggest and in many ways the best.

below

View taken this year along the Central Land Axis from Capital Hill towards Mt. Ainslie, with the future lake basin in the middle distance. The outline of the Parliamentary Triangle can be discerned, with the U.S. Memorial and the 'faceless' Russell offices on the right, and Civic Centre on the left. The Australian War Memorial is on the central axis, at the foot of Mt. Ainslie.



stopped, or will soon stop, its unselective experimental gardening. Let us also trust that the big trees planted on the centre line of some axes, which nullify the intended axial view, will soon be removed.

There has always seemed to be an uneasy conflict between the absolutist, formal, *Beaux Arts* surface appearance of Griffin's composition, his own gentle insistence on democratic idealism, and the sardonic, relaxed nature of Anglo-Australianism. This conflict is now being resolved, for better or for worse, during the detail designing of that great set-piece of classical landscape, the Central Area.

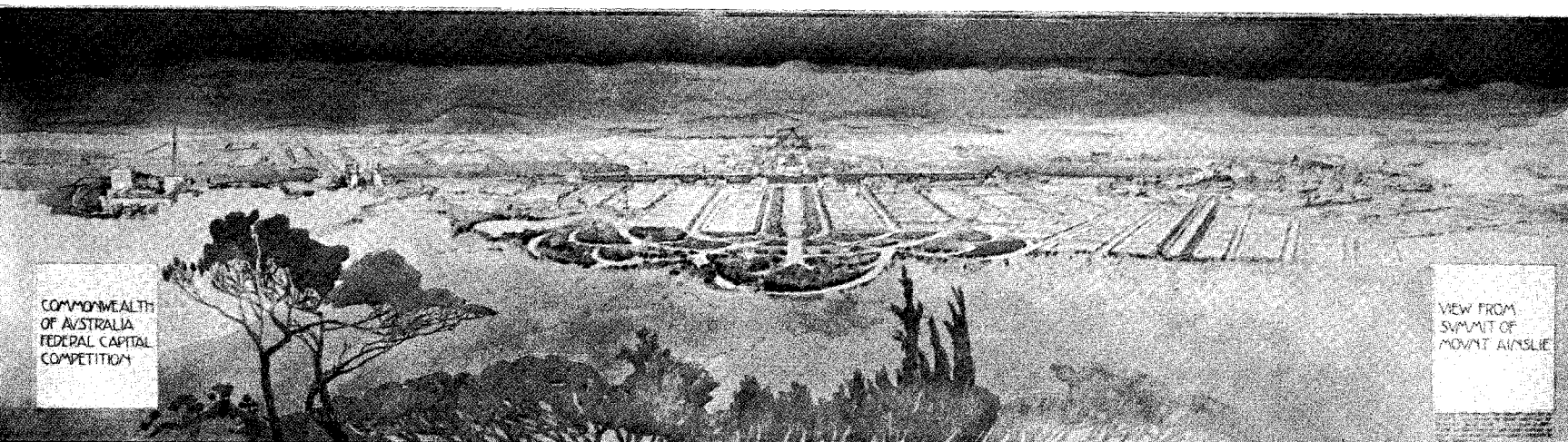
It seems we are to get a compromise, perhaps even the best of both worlds. The outlines of the Central Water Basins have been broken and made informal. The Basins, as well as the Lake, will be designed and used for recreation, rather than as a grand formal emphasis of the solemn dignity of Government. The massing of trees will flow freely, not geometrically. The Basins will be dotted with irreverent sailboats, and the Central landscape will be mostly *jardin anglais*, with only the central land axis, Anzac Park, being strictly formal.

opposite

The two blocks of Russell Offices which will flank the U.S. Memorial. These unfortunate buildings do not seem vigorous enough to mark properly one of the points of the Parliamentary Triangle.

below

This is a tracing of one of the drawings submitted by Walter Burley Griffin for the design competition for the National Capital in 1912.



Sir William Holford has been a powerful force in this delicate process of detail-interpretation of Griffin's scheme. Some call it a transformation, or even an unwitting betrayal. Perhaps it really has a humanizing effect, more in spirit with our times. It certainly does not run counter to what we know about the human warmth of Griffin's character, but it does contradict his vision of the architectonic order best suited for a National Capital.

Griffin passionately wanted Canberra to have 'unity in plan, homogeneity in expression, and harmony with the whole natural environment'. He was a spiritual heir of Louis Sullivan, and as James Birrell catalogues in his impressive new book (*Walter Burley Griffin* by James Birrell, Queensland University Press, November 1963) was at least as sensitive an architect as Frank Lloyd Wright, and quite possibly one of the greatest architects of this century. His clearly stated views, then, cannot lightly be set aside, even though he himself emphasized the flexibility of his plan and its capacity for organic growth and technological change. The only really disastrous change to his basic plan has been the emascula-

continuous cellular growth, to accommodate a million or more people.

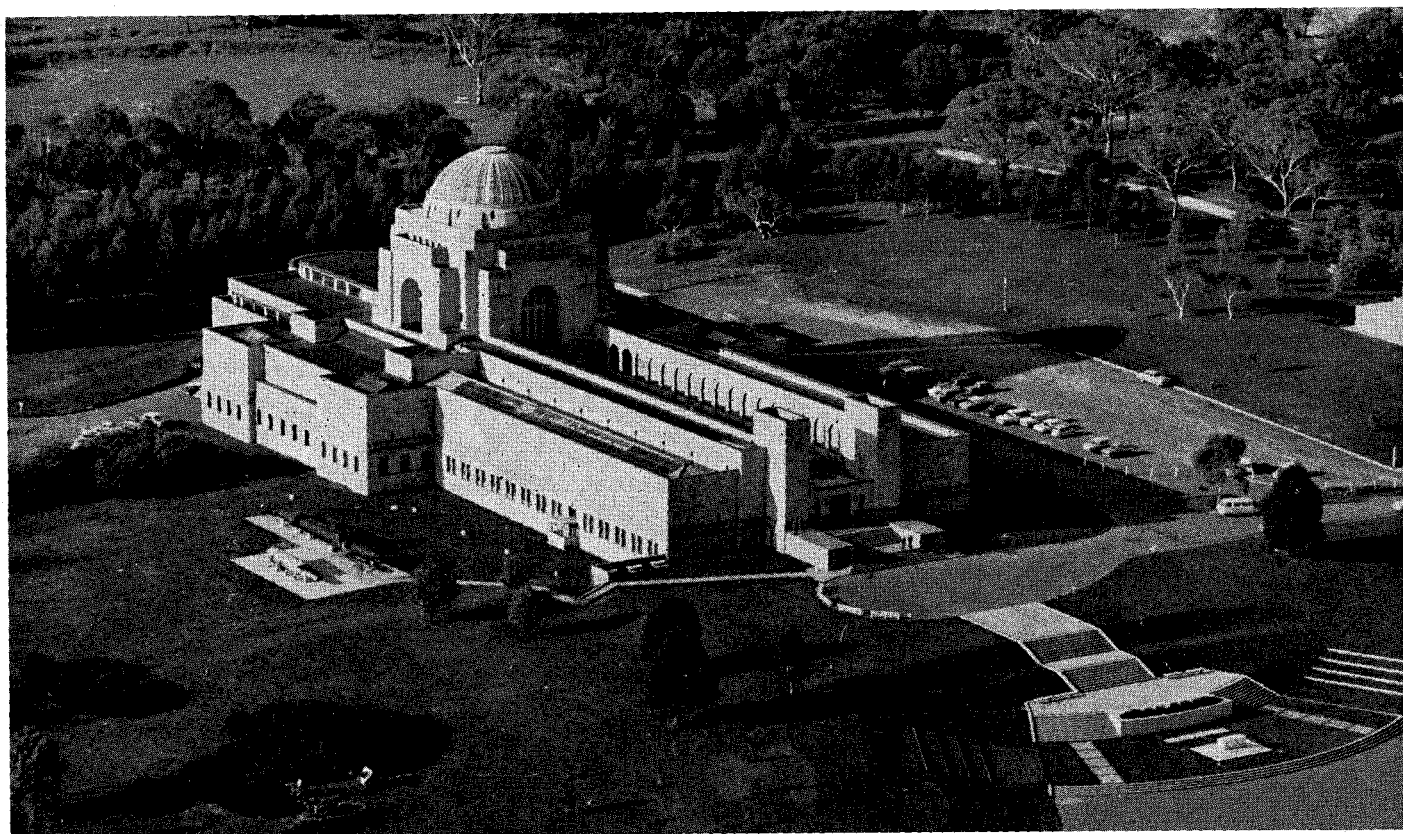
Growth and change can occur in either or both of two ways. Individual cells, like Civic Centre, can grow to a certain size and state of finished form, and can then rest and be maintained while other identical cells are formed in other places. On the other hand, those cells can be in a state of continuous transformation, never resting, always plastic and flexible, continually spreading and redeveloping.

Howard and Griffin understood well the first method, based on their then revolutionary principle of the cellular, organic growth of a regional cluster of cities. We now accept this, but we have not yet found elegant answers to the challenge of giving a plastic unity to each developed city centre which is in a constant state of high-density flux and regeneration.

A British team is facing up to this problem in designing the new city centre at Cumbernauld. Here the overall urban or architectural form

below

The Australian War Memorial more successfully achieves neo-classic dignity because of its strong silhouette



looks like abstract sculpture. It is aggregative in character, and grows both internally and in linear fashion. Cars, public transport and delivery are handled on the ground while pedestrians circulate freely above on an overall platform. Out of the platform grow, on successive levels, shopping, business and some residential penthouses. The scheme is fully reported in *Architectural Design* for May 1963.

Canberra's main city centre at Civic is so far an unhappy collection of experiments, all more or less unsuccessful. The latest experiment, the

Hobart Offices, tries to imitate the aggregative, irregular forms of a cluster of private office buildings in an ordinary unplanned city, but separates and clarifies their individual shapes and tidies up the spaces between them. This is fine, and is an historic step forward in Australian city-shaping, but is still not a satisfactory solution, either in terms of function or design, for the fast-approaching distant future.

Plans for the future of Civic include the reservation of perimeter surface car parks, to be used for multi-storey parking structures when pressure demands. The centre of the hexagon will then be gradually converted to a pedestrian precinct. It is to be hoped that the centre, as a whole, will be shaped in the future with greater unity, enveloped and bound together tightly in some way with decks and enclosed malls, so as to produce a full sense of tension, flexibility, enclosure and civic drama. The tightly enclosed shell of the new Monaro Mall shopping centre already provides a welcome relief from Canberra's universally wide open spaces. It is also a good example of a fully flexible urban envelope, sheltering many small and changing activities in one roofed complex.

Perhaps the most significant point to be made about Canberra's adaptation to movement and change concerns the radical transformation in twentieth century modes of seeing and perception. Canberra was conceived as a series of fixed point perspectives, in the manner of a classical landscape, one of which is illustrated with this article. One was meant to go and stand at the selected points and look at the set-piece. But today we move through the city at an average speed of forty miles an hour, perceiving and absorbing an image of the city built up in rapid and continuous sequences. The new city is a mobile relationship and our mode of perception has adjusted itself to this, although most of us do not yet consciously realize it.

The landscaping of the new expressway along the north side of the Central Basin may take this new scale of movement into account. Success here in designing for vision in motion may lead to alterations in the tree planting patterns along other of the major avenues.

Size and scale

The great axes, while they are defined largely by topography and landscaping, rely for certain accents on buildings. Every commentator on Canberra has been constrained to emphasize the extreme difficulty of constructing buildings of sufficient size to be effective as accents: particularly and explicitly, this was Sir William Holford's reason for moving the site of the new Parliament House to the lake front, at the centre of the land axis. Griffin was also well aware of the difficulty (which arose out of his decision to accept the existing topography as the basis of his design) and his major building, the Capitol, was to tower two hundred and seventy-five feet above the two hundred foot eminence of Capital Hill, and be three hundred feet wide at the base. Even this has been criticized as being in principle too small. Here Sir William's solution has been to combine, with buildings of practicable size, ornamental verticals. The U.S. war memorial already existed and was to be given a base in the form of the Russell offices for the Defence Department; in place of immediately intended buildings Civic and Capital Hills were given flag-

poles. It would seem likely that Civic Hill may eventually have a really tall and slender building as the seat of the local government, while Capital Hill, in addition to the group of cultural buildings sketched for it, might have a combined lookout and communications tower of the kind for which the Eiffel Tower provided the model, and of which more recent versions have been, or are being, built in several European and American cities. Thus the corners at least of the great triangle would receive adequate visual emphasis.

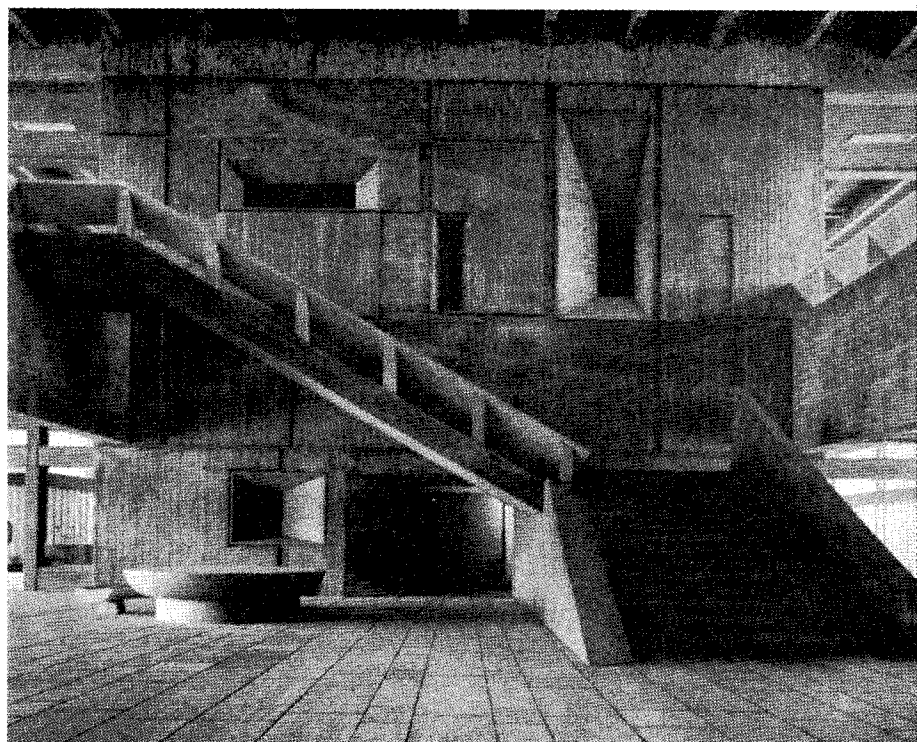
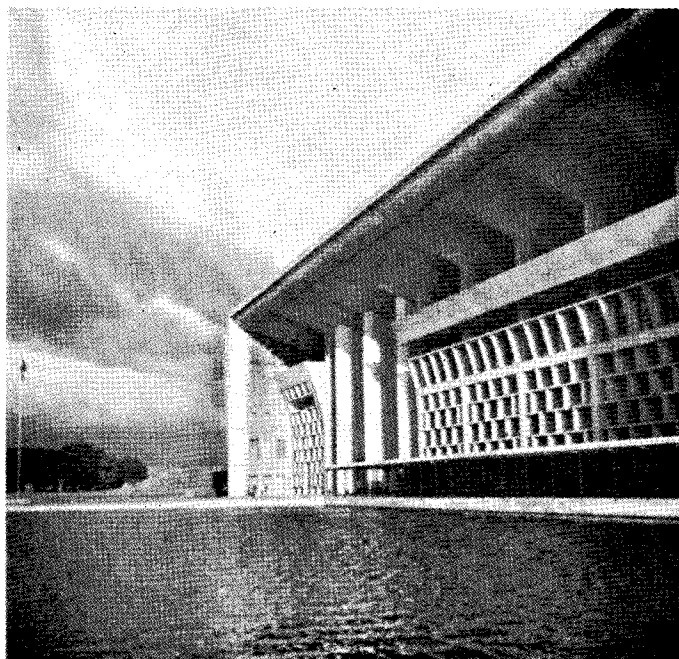
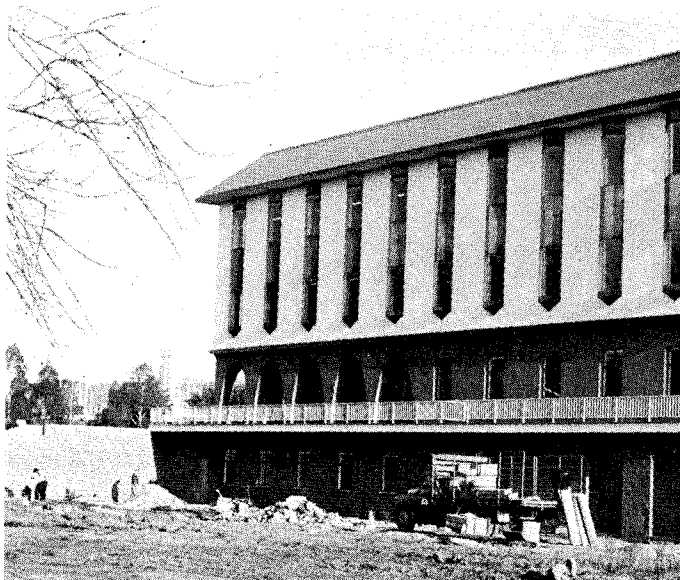
That however, is at the city scale; let us now consider the architectural problem. Major buildings still have to be constructed, within the Parliamentary Triangle, at Mount Russell and, as is now proposed, along Constitution Avenue. Besides being seen in the ordinary way by pedestrians and motorists, these buildings have to play their part in a set-piece when viewed from distances of between half a mile and two miles.

At this sort of range all the detail, and even the window and door patterns, to which a large part of an architect's attention is usually directed, is completely lost, and buildings become almost exactly like those geometric children's blocks which we see in the models of Canberra. Precisely this effect can be seen in the first group of Russell Offices. These are curtain wall buildings, though the curtain is of granite; the walls envelop the building in a smooth featureless skin, concealing the structure; the plan and silhouette are simple and rectangular, as is the case for very good practical reasons with most office buildings. In the distant view they are very dull. The design of the next two buildings, which are now under construction, has been greatly changed. The columns are strongly expressed, the corners are marked by large pseudo-piers and there is a massive and slightly projecting cornice. The resulting pattern is large in scale and will read at considerable distances, but it is doubtful that it will be significantly more effective than a quite smooth building in the really long views which have to be considered. The modelling is not sufficiently vigorous; the wall face is too close to the column face and the cornice for a deep shadow to be cast, and it is on shadow that modelling depends. The design for the National Library shows a thorough appreciation of this point. The columns are very large, set well clear of the building, and support a generous overhang which will cast a deep and clearly legible shadow.

It is important to notice that although colonnaded forms, used with understanding, are indeed capable of providing modelling and character in very distant buildings, there are at least two other devices which are potentially more effective, both of which, incidentally, are suggested in the architectural decorations with which Griffin embellished his original drawings. First and less importantly, there is the use of a number of strong horizontals, at each floor or more frequently, to give a number of heavy shadows; Griffin obviously intended such a series of horizontals in his Capitol building. And second, there is the modelling of the building mass itself, in plan and silhouette and not merely in detail. Griffin gave almost every one of his imaginary buildings a broken silhouette, with towers, domes, and advances and recessions in plan as well, again revealing that he understood very clearly the detailed consequences of his own proposals.

It may therefore be necessary to point out that the exploitation of association in architecture in this sort of way is like the addition of rhetorical flourishes to a speech: if they are necessary, the speech is bad: if not, why use them? The belief that association has an important part to play in architecture was responsible for the abysmal quality of much nineteenth century work. While it is true that its contemporary exponents have kept their allusions strictly within inverted commas, so did the Gothick and Picturesque architects who touched off the Battle of the Styles. We no longer have a Griffin, we do not have a Corbusier, a Tange or a Maekawa to conjure up monuments for us. But we should still be able to attack our problems resolutely and directly, remembering the adage that it good to be an heir, but better to be an ancestor.

An opposition may still be loyal. If, in this article, alternative policies to those which have been or are being pursued in the creation of Canberra have been suggested, it is not because the authors are not profoundly grateful for the quality and quantity of what has been done. This applies



particularly to the first five years of work by the National Capital Development Commission and its dedicated staff. To praise without reservation would be easy: but it seems to us that this would do the planners and architects at work in Canberra the same disservice which is sometimes done to science and medicine by adulatory reporting: that by making the achievement appear magical it also is made cheap. A great and serious endeavour deserves to be understood and not merely gaped at. What we have written is therefore not to be understood as an *ex cathedra* judgment on what Canberra is or what it should be, but as an attempt to raise for discussion some of the issues involved and so assist the understanding and appreciation due to our National Capital.

top
The Undergraduate Library of the National University suffers aesthetically, like so many Canberra buildings, from underscaling, particularly in the arches at each end.

left
Le Corbusier's Law Courts at Chandigarh are a twentieth century monument.

right
Kenzo Tange's Kurashiki Town Hall is another example of a genuine modern monument.