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CANBERRA'S SIGNIFICANCE FOR AUSTRALIAN PLANNING

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Mr. Chairman, Members of the Institute, Ladies and Gentlemen: -

You have today been given a very expert briefing on how Canberra is administered, designed and developed. Tomorrow, and on Monday, you will hear about the details of residential, commercial and transportation planning, the co-ordination of works and services, and the planning of long term metro-city growth and form.

Many of us from the tributary States cannot help but feel both bemused by, and possibly envious of, the Canberra situation. The legal and administrative framework within which the National Capital Development Commission plans and develops Canberra is one of the most simple and rational in the world. It is a system which reflects the highest current aspirations of community planning and environmental design. Canberra, therefore, is indeed a laboratory of professional and technical theory and practice. The Australian people have consented to the principle of building a fine National Capital, and have permitted public powers to be widely and firmly exercised for the attainment of this high community purpose. The breadth and depth of planning powers granted to the N.C.D.C. in 1957 were surely granted with the implicit query -- could professional city planners be trusted to use these powers with maturity of judgement and technical skill?

Five years later, the answer is obviously YES. I feel that this all-too-short Convention will demonstrate to us all that, notwithstanding minor and, we trust, transitory difficulties here and there, the city planning process has proved itself in Canberra.

It is possible that more and more Australians who visit Canberra will return home and ask themselves whether they too can enjoy the benefits of a sane and pleasant urban environment.

In this way, opinion could gradually evolve in the Australian States that the city planning techniques of Canberra should be emulated in Sydney, Melbourne and so on. It is our duty, as professional people, to try to discover how we can adapt and use many of the successful N.C.D.C. techniques in the other cities and towns of Australia. We must not lag behind public opinion in this matter, but must continue to keep slightly in advance of it, in a position of leadership. This Convention, therefore, should try to come to grips with this problem. We are not here merely to look and listen, but also to learn how to make use of Canberra experience in the rest of the country.

CANBERRA AS A PROTOTYPE FOR NEW AND EXPANDED CITIES

The first major lesson of Canberra for Australia is that we can plan and build a fine city on vacant land if we have a valid economic justification for it. The economic justification for Canberra is its national governmental function. But other functions - such as mining, agriculture, manufacturing, tourism, port and distributive functions - could equally well justify new or expanded city projects of some magnitude. I quote here the Editorial of the July, 1963, issue of the Australian Planning Institute Journal:

"The national significance of Canberra needs to be assessed more and more, from now on, as a normal city development project, and less and less as a special National Capital project. Take out the monumental 'Cathedral Close' or 'Temple Precinct' of the Parliamentary Triangle, substitute another equally solid economic base, and you have the instructive example of a modern, planned metropolis reaching its point of 'take-off' in hitherto open country. Could not the results of the past five years of planning and concentrated investment in Canberra serve as an example to be emulated and bettered in other key locations? Should we consider, say, three new city development projects at, say Townsville, Tamworth and Portland, or at Darwin, Wyndham and Carnarvon?"

The British Government has, in the past few months, officially recognised and adopted the long-urged policy of concentrating public investment at what economists and regional planners call "growth points", but which Mr. Macmillan prefers to call "growth places". If Australian governments follow this lead, then we may expect that the creation of new and

expanded cities will play a part in some such national urban development and decentralization plan and programme.

If and when the need for such a programme is recognised in Australia, we will know that we should follow Canberra's example and set up a body, or bodies, with powers, duties and personnel like those of the N.C.D.C.

The Commission should by now be more widely recognised as being of a similar quality, in its special field, to the Snowy Mountains Authority. People commonly advocate very persuasively that the Snowy Authority should be transferred or enlarged to deal with Northern problems -- and the same could well be argued for the N.C.D.C.

Let us now try to analyse how the N.C.D.C. has achieved so much, and the significance of this analysis for planning practice elsewhere.

In doing this, we will try to forget for a few moments the unique symbolism of the National Capital which is enshrined in the civic design composition of the Parliamentary Triangle.

All of our cities, after all, have some kind of symbolic life, purpose, or inner spirit, which should be fittingly expressed in environmental form. The particular urban design problem may differ from one city to another, but as an urban designer, I must insist that it remains a matter of urban design. In design method, it is always essentially the same. Further, the achievement of some greater degree of aesthetic unity and character in our cityscapes is one of our main goals - and all of our legal, administrative and research techniques are merely means to ends.

But we can't even begin to wrestle seriously with the real issues of urban design in Sydney, Melbourne or anywhere else outside Canberra, until we have got an administrative and legal base for sophisticated community planning.

THE KEY POINTS OF THE CANBERRA TECHNIQUES

What are the key points of legal, administrative and planning technique which provides the opportunity for large-scale environmental design in

Canberra? If we can define the essence of these techniques, then we can begin to puzzle over the problems of how to achieve similar opportunities for environmental design in other places, whether these other places be new city sites or our existing State Capitals.

The obvious legal principle on which Canberra's development is based is that of wholesale resumption and permanent public ownership of the land for the entire city-region. Although much has been made of the theoretical principle that land in Canberra can only be leased, and not sold outright, to occupiers, we find today that the 99 year leases seem, for all practical purposes, to be the same as freehold. However, the really essential key to city planning in Canberra may rather be that land is under complete public control during its transition from a vacant or rural, to a built-up urban, condition. After it is developed with roads, landscaping and utility services, leases are sold and buildings are built subject only to restrictive covenants and other regulations.

Relatively little difference would, I feel, be caused in the appearance of Canberra, at least for the first twenty or more years life of any section, if developed land were sold freehold, subject only to high standards of local government by-laws, regulations, and ordinances. I am not here suggesting that the leasehold system in Canberra be abandoned: but I am suggesting that in order to gain most of its benefits in other parts of this country, we should concentrate upon controlling, or temporarily resuming and amalgamating, areas of fringe land during the period of rural-urban transition. In order for us to make any kind of real progress in central area renewal and redevelopment, we must similarly concentrate on finding some formula for temporarily amalgamating whole blocks of decayed property under a single, composite ownership. Canberra can achieve things like the Hobart Offices project as a conscious piece of comprehensive urban design. But the rest of us can't so far begin to achieve comprehensive design because central city ownerships within blocks in other cities are ridiculously fragmented. I will return to this subject after outlining what seem to be the key areas of administrative and planning technique in the National Capital.

The essential administrative principles underlying Canberra's success are perhaps harder to pin down. One of them seems to be the unity of purpose and action which stems from a relatively centralized authority which combines research, planning, design and construction. This

authority, the N. C. D. C., is also able to pursue its long term task somewhat removed from the immediate hurly-burly of local week-to-week politics. It is responsible directly to Parliamentary, or Cabinet, control, through a single Minister. Although it still only receives its capital funds in annual allocations, it does prepare and publish works programmes five years ahead. One presumes that it can plan its finances ahead with slightly more confidence than the average Australian State or Local Government authority.

The Commission's work has of course been made easier by a high and steady rate of concentrated public investment, the disposition of which it co-ordinates and controls. It has also been able to employ a relatively large number of highly qualified staff and consultants from all over Australia and from overseas. But, more importantly, all these and other factors have combined to permit a high degree of economic planning of the private sector, at the city scale.

The Government, through the Commission, has a refined series of tools with which to manipulate economic activity and growth in Canberra, besides the primary power over public service immigration. It controls the timing of releases of land for residential, retail and service industrial uses. The Commission, after exhaustive research, plans the precise types, sizes and locations of these facilities and consequently can, and presumably does, effectively influence the rate and character of private economic growth. The Commission has at least the potential ability to evolve a system of long-term capital budgeting for both the public and the private sector.

Here, then, is what I feel to be the essence of Canberra's success in urban administrative technique. In the A. C. T. we find an integration of economic and physical planning and development, with ties to the highest levels of policy formation on strategic issues.

This is surely what we have always lacked in our State and Local Government structures. The "town planning" branches and sections of these authorities have, of course, been newcomers and juniors in the administrative structures of our States and Cities. They have rarely, so far, been in close and effective contact with the financing or constructing authorities. They have often been at cross-purposes with

the economic development agencies dealing with industrial growth, employment, irrigation or agriculture. They have rarely had close relationships to the highest States levels of policy formation.

It is interesting to note that, in New South Wales, there is at present a Bill before Parliament to establish a N. S. W. State Planning Authority. The powers and duties proposed for this Authority promise to make it very effective indeed. The proposed State Authority could bring to N. S. W. many of the characteristics of planning in Canberra. It would be, for example, a Constructing Authority, with the ability to raise loans and implement projects. It could be capable of positively preparing and co-ordinating a series of regional economic and physical development and decentralization plans, with a series of new and expanded town projects. The potential opportunities of the new Authority do serve to emphasize the importance of studying and learning from recent Canberra experience.

To return now to Canberra and the N. C. D. C., I wish to refer to the essence of its actual urban research, planning and design technique.

The essence of the N. C. D. C. 's work in this field is perhaps best expressed by the word continuity. First, there are studies and research projects to see what Canberra could and should be like when the population reaches first 100,000, then 250,000, then 500,000 and even beyond. So the process of research and planning ranges down from the general to the particular. Finally neighborhoods are planned, and designed: shopping centres are located, planned and designed. Utility services and landscaping are designed. Finally, contracts are let, land is developed, leases sold, and buildings built.

This delicate and complex process is a continuous one; all under the guidance of a single major body. The original conception of an area's ultimate purpose and character is not lost on the way, as happens so often outside Canberra, where scores of State, Metropolitan, Local and Private bodies can all senselessly conflict with one another over the smallest item of development.

Let us have no irresponsible talk about the Canberra system being in fact a tyranny. A similar system could conceivably be one, but the N. C. D. C. isn't. It has, of course, all the ponderous faults of any organisation which

earnestly tries to reach an agreed consensus of opinion on major planning and design matters. It works through innumerable committees. It works through interminable processes of consultation and discussion. But so do, of course, the multifarious, overlapping, independent and conflicting bodies which manage, nevertheless, to keep out of touch and out of step with each other, while enforcing petty tyrannies of their own.

In passing, it is relevant to note that private developers much prefer the sureness and simplicity of the Canberra system to conditions elsewhere. Mr. G. J. Dusseldorp, speaking at the 1962 ANZAAS Conference, gave an agonising account of the senseless difficulties of getting permission for and planning a building in the City of Sydney. The principals of major architectural firms have published articles along the same lines.

The other essential basis of Canberra planning is that comprehensive, detail, three dimensional planning and design is carried out for whole blocks or single large pieces of the city. This occurs regardless of which, or how many separate bodies or individuals are eventually going to finance, build or occupy the spaces which are designed.

It is finally this ability to design and develop the urban environment for the convenience and delight of the community which is, of course, the final and vital step in the planning process.

NEXT STEPS IN AUSTRALIAN PLANNING

I now wish to conclude my contribution to this Convention by outlining what I believe to be three major steps which Australian communities should take, in their own vital interests, in emulation of what has so far been achieved in Canberra.

First, the community should see that urban and regional physical planning is integrated with economic planning and long-term capital budgeting. The chief community planner of a municipality or city or state cannot function effectively unless he can work closely with such people as the Mayor, the Town Clerk, the Secretary of the Treasury, the Department of Industrial Development and/or those other people whose policies can make or disrupt urban growth. The City of Philadelphia is the prime example of a City with a long-term capital budget under the control of the City Planning Commission, but we can also learn much from Canberra's experience.

Second, the community should, sooner or later, find a satisfactory way to control the design, development and financing of fringe land being brought into suburban use. We must continue to try to squeeze the unearned increment in value out of land on our suburban fringes. There are many ways in which this value can be recouped by the community as a whole - its rightful owners.

This issue is now being highlighted in N. S. W. by the long-standing proposal that Campbelltown should be developed as a major satellite city. The issue also arises when discussions take place about the desirability of developing proper industrial estates in provincial cities. The issue may also be highlighted in Melbourne Region, where massive government investment has been predicated for the Westernport area. Land values around places like Campbelltown and Westernport rise in speculative anticipation of the killings to be made. Control could perhaps be exercised through community ownership during the process of transition. This has been advocated by some American planners who point out that this is what occurs now in the process of urban renewal, where land is taken from private use, properly planned and re-assembled and finally resold for private development. I quote the remarks of Mr. Edgardo Contini, in a paper read earlier this year at the University of Southern California:-

"This extension of the community's control would be far less disruptive of human welfare than urban renewal is now because nobody would be uprooted except the farmer, who is being uprooted anyway by the increased burden of taxation that accompanies urban sprawl. It would prevent land speculation, but it would not penalize the genuine developer, who would be called upon to apply his skill, his capital, and his initiative to the physical implementation of the community's plans.

In one aspect this process would differ significantly from the present pattern of urban renewal: the community not only would not have to sink monies into the process - either its own funds or those of the Federal Government - to make up the difference between purchase price and resale value, but rather would, if I may use a crude term, "make money" because while it would pay for the land only its fair agricultural price, it would sell the land for development -- properly planned, readied with utilities, and at locations justified by the immediate demands or urban growth -- at the much higher price that urban land devoted to various uses

and densities would command. Thus, the community would derive for itself the profit that the Community's own growth makes possible, rather than allow the land speculator to remain beneficiary of this windfall, while the community remains burdened with all the costs and problems consequent from growth. These monies the community could spend well".

Third, the community should find some formula of amalgamating the fragmented sites in old decayed areas, arranging for comprehensive block or precinct planning and design, and arranging for resale for development in accord with such a design/ plan.

This is something that Canberra teaches us we should have, but Canberra does not show us how to achieve it where land is in freehold title. Even the Canberra authorities seem to be hesitant about how they are going to handle redevelopment of their built-up leaseholds near Civic Centre.

In this field, the community is very slowly, I feel, coming to see that some form of sophisticated partnership between government and private enterprise is the answer.

Perhaps we need, in Sydney particularly, a body of the calibre and powers of the N. C. D. C. to sort out the mess into which central city development has fallen. Perhaps the proposed N. S. W. State Planning Authority will do the job.

One heartening sign in Sydney in recent years has been the emergence of committees of highly respected leaders of public companies who are concerned about the future shape and character of the inner city. The most positive such committee has been the Sydney Cove Improvements Committee, which sponsored research, planning and design studies for the area of Sydney Cove, near the Quay. What is not so heartening is to note the civic apathy and irresponsibility which has so far followed the Citizen Committee's generous gesture. What is perhaps heartbreaking is to learn that no notice whatsoever has apparently been taken of the proposals for the setting up of a Co-operative Development Company, for a Land Exchange Commission, or for a Land Bank. Instead, the Department of Local Government itself, has apparently granted Interim Development Consent for the erection of at least three separate major new multi-storey

buildings on small pieces of land sitting astride the central features of the comprehensively redesigned area.

CONCLUSION

In this brief paper, I have restricted myself to a few of the most basic points which I feel Canberra demonstrates for the rest of Australia. I hope you will find something in the paper worth discussing further.