

## Canberra – Cultural Controversies and Urban Change in a Capital City Region

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### 1 ABSTRACT

Making international headline news, the uncontrollable forest fires that have devastated much of Australia in the summer of 2019/2020 have added a dramatic sense of urgency to the focus of this paper on cultural controversies in Canberra – controversies that relate to key themes of the REALCORP 2020 conference: the links between climate change and immanent natural disasters; the problematic co-ordination of urban development among urban and regional authorities; the conflict-ridden connections between public planning and real estate interests; and the role of civil society in the urban transformation process.

The Australian Federal Capital has come a long way from its conception as a physical expression of parliamentary democracy designed in 1911 for a new, progressive nation, hailed at the time in Germany as ‘The Social Continent.’ Cultural controversies on ideals and issues such as urban vs. suburban ideal concepts, leasehold vs. freehold land, and welfare state politics vs. market-led development were reflected in the growth and change of the capital during the 20th century. By 1988, urban development under conditions of high planning control on leasehold land had led to the production of a city that could be summarized as ‘a perfectionist garden city metropolis.’

This paper focuses on transformations that have eroded this ideal in recent years through a combination of dysfunctional inter-governmental relations, neoliberal policies, power plays among public and private actors, and superficial populism. In 1988, withdrawal of the Federal Government from most of its responsibilities for Canberra plunged the city into a fundamental crisis in term of its role and identity, its administration and its finance throwing up questions such as: Do we need a national capital at all? If so, which functions should the capital cater for? Should certain government departments be relocated to regional districts (preferably at the seat of the Federal politicians lobbying for such a strategy)? Does it make sense to maintain the ambitions the founders of Canberra had for creating a model city, ‘The Pride of Time’ or should Canberra pursue a path of ‘normalization’ by following the ‘business as usual’ pattern that characterizes urban development in most other Australian cities? Isn’t public planning an expression of ‘nanny state’ ideologies anyway? And above all, how should the burden of national and local expenses for the capital be divided?

At the administrative level, Canberra was subjected to years of turbulent change, with negative consequences at many levels including poorly devolved responsibility for forest management. This contributed to the conditions for a devastating bush fire in 2003, a harbinger of the fires of 2019/2020, played out in a political climate of climate change denial. Establishment of new suburbs on the burnt-out western flank of the city, exposed to the same threat of wildfire as in 2003 are an ominous sign of a development ethos that has put real estate interests above sound planning principles. In another instance, independent review by the Auditor General of the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) exposed a serious “lack of transparency and accountability” in the way in which the ACT government mingled public and private real estate interests – an issue of continuing concern, particularly given the ACT’s recent agreement to cross-border development on rural lands long-held by land owners in the state of New South Wales.

A core issue is that Federal Government divestment of all responsibilities beyond core national capital functions has meant that a substantial part of Canberra’s local government revenue has been financed through the sale of greenfield land. Since this approach is unsustainable given the limited extent of developable land in the ACT, strategies have been adopted which have culminated in densification through high-rise luxury apartment blocks. The upshot has been an intense cultural controversy driven by a remarkably crude and aggressive campaign by local politicians in unison with one of the biggest local developers ridiculing the planning approaches of the past and literally smashing the long-established image of Canberra as ‘The Bush Capital,’ a city oriented on the Australian landscape. Even the way in which the introduction of light rail is linked into this process does not come as the desired triumph of sustainability. One of the many issues there is that it is partly financed through the relocation of public housing to bushfire prone areas at the edge of the city. In the context of these cultural controversies, Canberra’s civil society is beginning to raise its voice, but is still struggling to do so in a way that ensures more than sporadic victories.

Keywords: Co-Ordinating Planning across Borders and Institutions, Climate Change and Natural Disasters, Planning and Real Estate Development, Transforming City Regions, Planned Capitals

## 2 CANBERRA – CULTURAL CONTROVERSIES AND URBAN CHANGE IN A CAPITAL REGION

### 2.1 Introduction – the significance of Australia, Canberra, the fires and the climate change debate

This paper begins with a perspective on the recent dramatic fires in Australia and its capital city. It does so not in order to wallow in sensationalism over the tragedy but to explore the significance of the cultural controversies confronting us in this context. These are controversies that relate to key themes of the REALCORP conference: the links between climate change and immanent natural disasters, the problematic co-ordination of urban development among urban and regional authorities; the conflict-ridden connections between public planning and real estate interests; and the role of civil society in the urban transformation process. These are themes that are confronting us on a global scale – in Australia no less than in Germany.

Uncontrollable forest fires burning in a continent at the other end of the world that made international headline news in the Australian summer of 2019/2020. Far away from the location of our Aachen conference, the bush fires were threatening not just any Australian city but Canberra, Australia's capital – a city that took pride in its name 'THE BUSH CAPITAL.' Even as the constant sea level rise diminishing the habitat of civilizations in the Pacific and elsewhere are continuing as silently as the expansion of the African desert, it was the roaring inferno of the Australian fires that added a dramatic sense of urgency to the threat of climate change – at least among those who believe that climate change is a reality.

The significance of Australia in the current international debate is that it has been the first country in which, in a short period of time, regions one third the size of Germany have gone up in flames killing dozens of people, destroying homes, leading to the possible extinction of entire species of animals and threatening the livelihood of the nation's big cities.<sup>1</sup> A dramatic wake-up call. Closer to the themes of our conference on planning and urbanism, the significance of Canberra lies in the fact that it directs our attention to the cultural controversies shaping the processes of urban and regional development.

Seventeen years before the current disaster, in 2003, Canberra had experienced a fire storm of similar ferocity, with 4 lives lost, more than 500 houses burnt and the historic Mt. Stromlo observatory destroyed. Built in 1924, the observatory had been part of the Research School of Astronomy of the Australian National University. Since its founding in 1946, the ANU has been a beacon of international research. In fact, research is one of the fields in which the small country with today 25 Million inhabitants has gained and maintained international recognition 'punching above its weight,' to quote a somewhat corny metaphor much used in Australia.

Research on climate change has been carried out at the ANU and in Australia's excellent national research organization, the Commonwealth Scientific Research Organisation CSIRO. But in the debate about climate change or global warming, its former professor of political studies and Chairman of the National Capital Authority, the body responsible for planning Canberra's areas of national concern, took a definite stand not long after the fires. Declaring himself an agnostic towards the findings of the Club of Rome, he urged everyone to 'keep a cool head' in the debate about the alleged connections between climate and 'the burning of coal and oil.' Significantly, he did so in his address to the Planning Institute of Australia.<sup>2</sup> The following years saw budget cuts to the CSIRO which 'cut to the bone' of the organization's capacities for climate research.<sup>3</sup>

At the level of National politics, the Federal Minister Tony Abbott, later Prime Minister, has been quoted as saying that 'the science of climate change' was 'absolute crap'<sup>4</sup> and 'coal is good for humanity'<sup>5</sup> And at the level of symbolic Government actions, the enthusiastic advocacy of coal found its most curious expression in a spectacle staged by the then treasurer Scott Morrison. In order to demonstrate the innocent nature of the

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<sup>1</sup> The fires in the Amazon rainforest are another tragedy of global dimensions.

<sup>2</sup> Aitkin 2008

<sup>3</sup> Duffy 2014. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-12-12/csiro-cut-to-the-bone-after-funding-cuts/5963994>

<sup>4</sup> Yaxley 2017. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-10-10/tony-abbott-says-action-on-climate-change-is-like-killing-goats/9033090>

<sup>5</sup> Anon 2014. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-10-13/coal-is-good-for-humanity-pm-tony-abbott-says/5810244>

fossil fuel he took a lump of coal to Federal Parliament. The admiration of his party members would later propel him into his current office as Prime Minister.



As late as July 2019, Abbott proclaimed that there were no problems with coal, that indeed windmills were the ‘dark satanic mills of the modern era.’<sup>6</sup>

Beyond the ludicrous spectacle at Parliament, where the unresolved climate change issue had led to chronic instability with six Prime Ministers succeeding each other since 2010, the processes in which new and expanded coalmines are allowed to operate are experienced as frightening. This is so not only because of the environmental damage but also because of the perceived reduction of civil liberties, in particular with regard to protest.<sup>7</sup> In a recent major development, a one-billion-dollar subsidy has been granted to Indian coal mining giant Adani for the construction of a railway line connecting the mine in Queensland to newly created port facilities near the Australian Barrier Reef. The links between national politics, the ‘uncertainties for the longer-term outlook for coal exports’<sup>8</sup> and the alleged ‘end of Australia’s resources boom’<sup>9</sup> are all objects of controversial discussions in Australia.

We should not dismiss these developments as fringe phenomena with little relevance for Germany.<sup>10</sup> Siemens is right now selling its train signalling equipment to Adani in the face of international protest, obviously displaying a similar instinct for disastrous involvement with noxious industries as Bayer did with its purchase of Monsanto. Bayer is now facing enormous claims for compensation in connection with the use of Roundup (Glyphosat). And of course, we must not forget the piles of Australian coal on the wharves of Hansa Port, Hamburg, delivered to Germany, the 5<sup>th</sup> largest market of Australia, by the world’s largest coal exporter.



The controversies around climate change and other global challenges are taking a significant share of the Australian public discussion in politics, academia, think tanks, and the media. The latest contribution is an open letter of 3 February 2020, signed by 274 climate scientists, which outlines the scientific basis for the links between climate change and bushfires in Australia.<sup>11</sup> The Murdoch Press, which publishes most Australian newspapers, has been propagating the view that ‘it has never been shown that human emissions of

<sup>6</sup> Remeikis 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/jul/19/dark-satanic-mills-tony-abbott-continues-his-crusade-against-wind-turbines>

<sup>7</sup> Gotsis 2015. <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/researchpapers/Pages/protests-and-the-law-in-nsw.aspx>

<sup>8</sup> Cunningham et al.:2019, p.33

<sup>9</sup> Pearse 2019..

<sup>10</sup> Germany is the fifth largest importer of Australian coal. Australian Mining 2016.

<https://www.australianmining.com.au/features/where-does-australias-coal-go-infographic/>

<sup>11</sup> Abram et al 2020. <https://australianbushfiresandclimatechange.com/>

carbon dioxide drive global warming.<sup>12</sup> The most important of its daily papers, *The Australian*, has engaged eminent figures such as geologist (and director of multiple mineral exploration and mining companies) Ian Plimer, who proclaimed ‘There are no carbon emissions. If there were, we could not see, because carbon is black!’<sup>13</sup>

Cultural controversies such as these have always found their expression in the processes by which cities have grown, be it as a consequence of central planning or through incremental planning by individuals and groups. They can be traced from antiquity via the periods of the emerging industrial city through the transformations between the politics of the Welfare State to neo-liberalism, the age of modernism to whatever we want to call the phases coming thereafter.

### 3 CANBERRA

Similar to a majority of cities globally, planning discourse and politics in Canberra circle around themes such as: sustainability<sup>14</sup>; heritage and strategic planning<sup>15</sup> relating to fields such as urban renewal and densification; public and private transport<sup>16</sup>; and urban economics. As elsewhere, they are shaped by broadly-based cultural controversies such as those addressed in this paper.

Specific features of Canberra, a city of 460.000 in 2020, lie in its character as one of the great planned capitals of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and in its identity as a Garden City and ‘Bush Capital.’<sup>17</sup> The term addresses Canberra’s character as an inland city situated in the typical savannah landscape of south east Australia – the Australian Bush. Originally deployed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as an ideological expression of nation building and later as a shorthand formula for a low-rise ‘City in the Landscape,’<sup>18</sup> the label of ‘The Bush Capital’ has become an object of serious cultural controversy in the last decade.

Remarkably aggressive strategies for re-branding the city and of transforming the image of Canberra from what is depicted as a boring garden city and ‘bush capital’ into an exciting metropolis of luxury high-rise apartments were set in motion in 2010 by a twitter campaign by the then Planning Minister Andrew Barr<sup>19</sup>. In this perspective, Canberra is depicted as the product of a quirky, out-of-date plan, an escapee from a Simpsons’ Family cartoon, unfit for adaptation to today’s challenges and defended only by senile locals above the age of 40 (incidentally Barr’s age at the time).

Although internationally recognized as one of the great metropolitan plans of the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>20</sup>, the 1911 design by Chicago architects Walter Burley Griffin and his wife Marion Mahony Griffin has locally been an object of cultural controversies and has been subjected to a remarkable mixture of iconic reverence, ridicule and crude exploitation as a real estate branding device.<sup>21</sup> While the competition drawings have been inscribed in the UNESCO memory of the world heritage, the endeavours to recognize the ACT as National Heritage as a necessary step for UNESCO world heritage, have been thwarted. Similarly, at the level of civil society, the success of community-based campaigns has remained limited. A case in point is the campaign to recognize the biophysical resources of the ACT as a UNESCO biosphere reserve. This was defeated by local commercial interests – a strategic defeat of the informed scientific basis of Canberra’s society.<sup>22</sup>

The attacks on the Bush Capital image reached a climax in a 2019 video clip by one of the biggest real estate developers, GeoCon.<sup>23</sup> In the commercial, a young female athlete wielding a pick runs towards a sign inscribed “Bush Capital,” her face contorted with disgust and anger. She smashes the sign. Immediately, the

<sup>12</sup> Gillingham et al 2017. <https://climatefeedback.org/evaluation/commentary-australian-ignores-evidence-misrepresents-research-falsely-claiming-humans-not-responsible-climate-change-ian-plimer/>

<sup>13</sup> Plimer 2019. <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/commentary/lets-not-pollute-minds-with-carbon-fears/news-story/1a215e8b9d2d958f597654ea7b591bcc>

<sup>14</sup> Fischer and Weirick 2014

<sup>15</sup> Fischer and Weirick 2018; Sinclair & Straw 2016

<sup>16</sup> Fischer and Weirick 2019

<sup>17</sup> Pegrum 1983

<sup>18</sup> Taylor 2006

<sup>19</sup> Barr 2010; Wensing 2013a

<sup>20</sup> Bacon: ‘a statement of world culture’ 1968; Stretton 1970

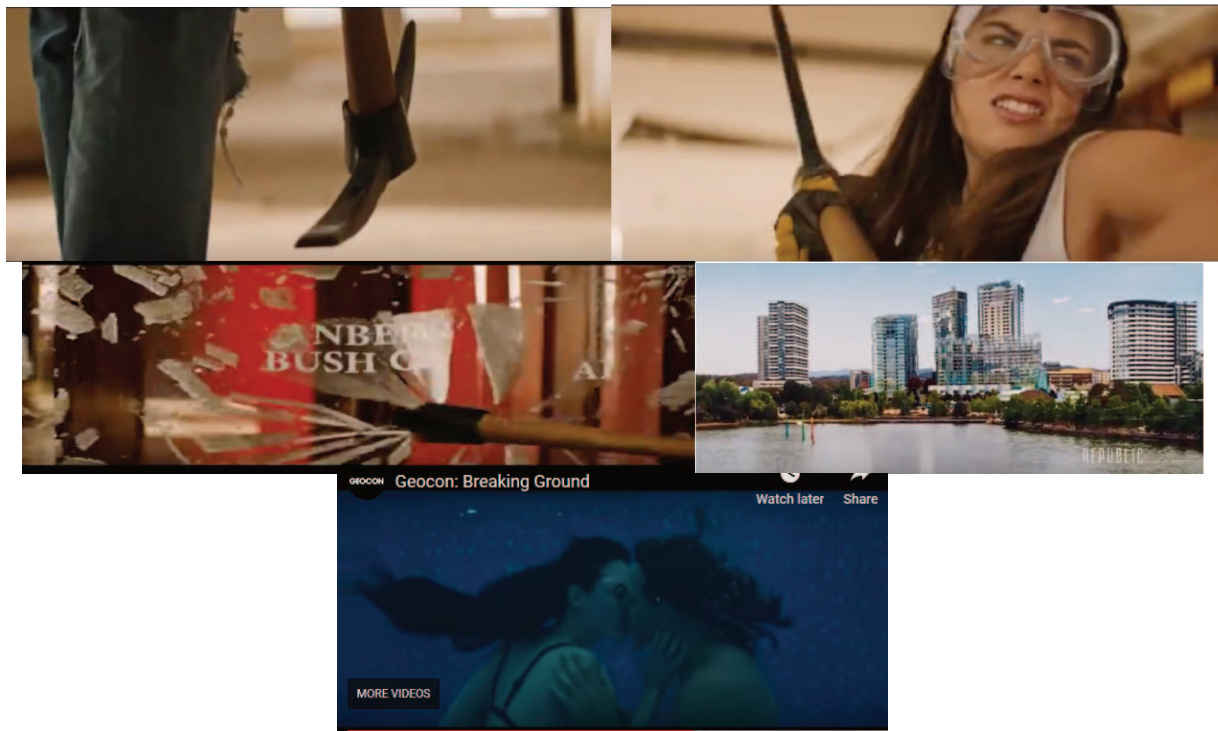
<sup>21</sup> Stockland 2005; UDIA 2008, p. 79

<sup>22</sup> Wensing 2013b, Weirick 2018

<sup>23</sup> Geocon 2019



black-and white images of Canberra we saw before turn into technicolour; all around the lake, high-rise towers shoot out of the ground; sparsely dressed young people with champagne glasses in their hands jump in the pool to make love.



Above: screenshots from the GeoCon video “Breaking Ground” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rUJohv6hgEo> below: Launch of Envie apartments <http://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/5993525/snakes-alive-geocon-ups-the-ante-with-glamorous-launch-of-envie/>. Car: <https://geocon.com.au/events-archive/high-society-vip-launch-event>

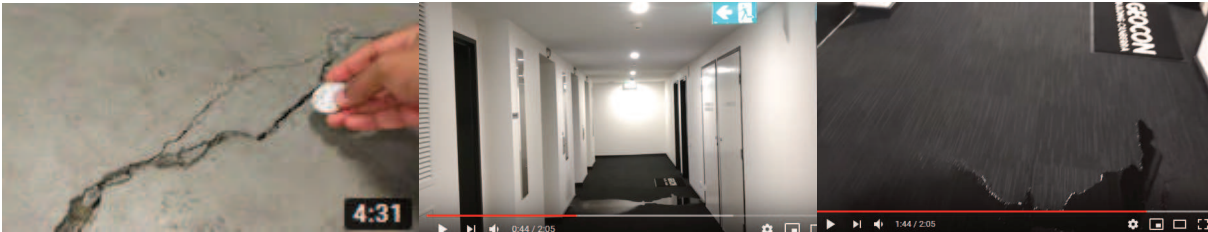


The film sequence of the ‘pick-runner’ quotes the famous Apple Mackintosh commercial produced by Ridley Scott shortly after his film *Bladerunner*.<sup>24</sup> In Scott’s 1984 spot, athlete Anya Major throws a sledgehammer into the screen on which Big Brother is giving a speech. Waking up, the moronic audience in front of the screen can now buy Apple instead of IBM computers.



<sup>24</sup> Apple 1984

15 years on, people in Canberra wake up to realize that they need no longer listen to the fake news of the 24 hours news cycle as the gloomy voice of the narrator points out. GeoCon, so the film explains, have made their own market analyses and calculations. Thus the light rail introduced by the government in 2019, they were saying in another video, would connect GeoCon's Brave New World of luxury apartments in the nearby New Town with the City Centre in under ten minutes travelling time – in contrast to the transportation planners' assessment of a travel time of 25 to 30 minutes.<sup>25</sup> And the calculations appear simple and sure-fire: "When you buy off-the-plan at Metropol, you're buying today's prices; so in two years' time when it's finished, you've actually made money because the value of the property has increased."<sup>26</sup> The fact that it may not be wise to rely on such prognoses is evidenced by you-tube videos demonstrating that the newly erected luxury "Wayfarer" building was suffering from severe damage such as cracks in walls and floors and rain water leaks.<sup>27</sup>



These observations came at a point in time when the evacuation of the 35-storey Opal Building in Sydney was making headlines.<sup>28</sup> Shortly thereafter, structural damage in Sydney's Mascot Tower blocks sparked widespread concerns about new apartment buildings across the city. In Canberra, too, analyses indicated that "the overwhelming majority of high-rise apartment buildings... are likely to have major defects." With Canberra experiencing "its biggest housing boom since records began," it appeared that the territory's construction industry "had reached a crisis point."<sup>29</sup>

There is a close connection between high-rise development, real estate marketing, the transformation of the bush capital image, the (belated) introduction of light rail and the mode of financing the associated infrastructure. The inauguration of the first light rail line in 2019 was a success of sorts and was due in part to the new dynamic introduced in 2009 through a Labor-Greens political alliance. The results are nevertheless not broadly seen as the desired triumph of the persistent struggle for sustainability they might have been. The reasons lie in a combination of issues in the narrow field of transportation planning and the wider, more complex economic and urban development context.

At the heart of this problematic lies the strategy of financing light rail infrastructure largely through the sale of government owned land occupied by public housing and through value capture from the new high-rise development, which will spring up on up-zoned properties along the light rail route. The focus on public housing land is not only a consequence of the fact that this is the major source of land over which the municipal government can dispose. Another important factor lies in a central (Commonwealth) government policy of rewarding the 'recycling of public assets' by awarding national subsidies. This is a major basis for financing light rail, which, as pointed out, is in turn a motor for urban renewal through high-rise tower blocks.

When the public housing tenants are relocated in the city, they are sent to locations not served by the light rail and in most cases badly served by buses, often far away from the inner city support structure in the form of job centres, help centres, cheap clothes shops etc. Among the locations where we find them are the edges of town, such as the city's western fire prone edge, exposed to the hot westerly winds, which carried the embers of the 2003 bush fires.

One of the sites we might look at was originally identified as definitely bush fire prone in the maps issued by the ACT Emergency Services. However, following the decision to relocate the public housing tenants to this

<sup>25</sup> Inman & Nowroozi 2019. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-05-20/canberra-geocon-apartments-light-rail-to-city-in-10-minutes/11128076>. The video has since been removed from the web.

<sup>26</sup> Peppas 2017

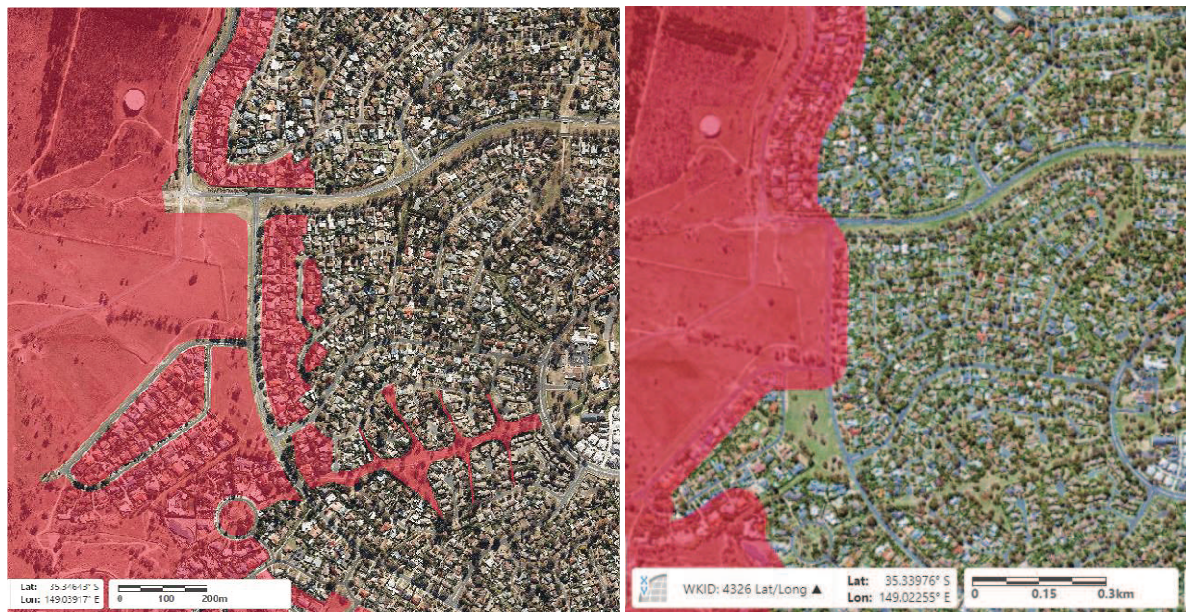
<sup>27</sup> Trondhjem 2018 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mnjqd0mYtx8>

<sup>28</sup> Farrelly 2019. <https://www.smh.com.au/national/welcome-to-the-faulty-towers-state-where-any-mug-s-an-engineer-20190117-p50s14.html>.

<sup>29</sup> Jervice-Bardy 2019



area, the bush fire rating was changed. The public housing is now going to be behind a line deemed to be safe. It goes without saying that this did not convince the people concerned. One of the ironic comments was 'of course the fire knows it must not cross these lines.'<sup>30</sup>



These maps show the bushfire-prone rural area (pink) leading into the bushfire-prone suburban edge. The top image is from February 2017. The second image is the revised BPA<sup>31</sup> from June 2017. (Source: [actmapi.act.gov.au](http://actmapi.act.gov.au))

In fact, the Canberra bush fires are magnifying the underlying conflicts and indeed highlight the way in which these are interrelated. While public protest about these issues is continuing, it is apparent that the public debate is far from uniform and reflects cultural controversies that have shaped the very specific situation of Australia's National Capital.

The following pages briefly sketch a selection of major cultural controversies in the history of Canberra to arrive at the current controversies and their expression in urban politics from the angle of the interrelated REALCORP themes addressed above. These controversies have had immediate and lasting consequences for Canberra's achievements as well as for the interrelated issues culminating in the fire disasters of the 21st century.

### 3.1 Cultural Controversies: The 'Bush Capital' between Pride and Parochialism

The need to establish the Federal Capital as a new city arose in part out of the Australian constitutional debates of the 1890s, but principally the need out of the competition between Sydney and Melbourne.<sup>32</sup> Rivalries among all parties concerned have fostered a negative image of the circumstances of Canberra's foundation. As historian Keith Hancock put it, 'Canberra was conceived not in generous national enthusiasm, but in the haggling of provincialism.'<sup>33</sup> Those cultural controversies concerning the nature and even the very necessity of the capital have played an existential role throughout much of Canberra's history. They shaped planning processes around 1900 as much as they do today; and in fact, the underlying dialectic of pride and parochialism has persisted until this very day.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Costin 2003. <https://the-riotact.com/2003-revisited-the-canberra-firestorm-is-still-a-health-hazard/230099>

<sup>31</sup> The BPA is a risk-based map that shows the area of the ACT that has been assessed as being at high risk to bushfires. Canberra's urban areas that are adjacent to forest and grassland are defined as BPA, as is the ACT's entire rural area. Currently, close to a quarter of all dwellings in the ACT are located in the area identified as BPA. ACT Emergency Services Agency 2019: <https://esa.act.gov.au/cbr-be-emergency-ready/bushfires>

<sup>32</sup> Fischer & Weirick 2014

<sup>33</sup> Hancock 1930:278

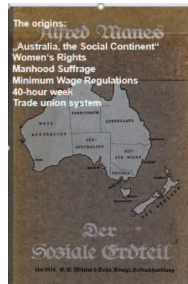
<sup>34</sup> During the twenty-first century, affirmations of the national commitment to the capital, culminating in the centennial celebrations in 2013, have contrasted with crippling budget cuts, political statements of disdain and eventually with plans for the transfer of national agency staff to smaller provincial cities in the electorates of responsible ministers. In 2017, Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce declared 'moving public servants out of Canberra [was] core business for

The ‘haggling of provincialism’ found an early expression in the site selection process, which became known as ‘the battle of the sites.’ Eventually, however, this led to the creation of Canberra as an inland city situated in the typical semi-arid savannah type landscape of south east Australia composed of grasslands with occasional trees and wooded hills – the Australian bush.<sup>35</sup> This is the origin of ‘Canberra the Bush Capital.’

This notion of the Bush Capital was an object of conflicting sentiments, of different cultures to an extent. On the one hand, they reflected the ‘Bush ethos’ of the settler society as an ideological expression of nation building as well as romantic feelings associated with the typical Australian landscape.<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, the term was used in a derogatory way by public servants reluctant to leave the cultivated ambiance of the provisional capital of Melbourne and to move to what was derided as ‘the Siberia of the Southern Tablelands.’

But there is an important other side, which lies in the realm of cultural aspirations and indeed achievements. From the beginning, Canberra’s mission was to be more than an administrative capital. It was to become the prestigious symbol of a young federation, ‘the finest Capital City in the World – the Pride of Time’ in the words of Minister for Home Affairs King O’Malley.<sup>37</sup> As an expression of the will for nation building, these words were more than empty politicians’ overblown political rhetoric. They rested on the economic optimism following the discovery of rich gold fields in Australia – arguably the beginning of a series of (intermittent) mining booms, which created the legendary wealth of 19th century Australia.<sup>38</sup>

Apart from this material background, early 20th century Australia was characterised by a social and cultural climate in which a strong will for democracy and egalitarianism led to the creation of legislation for women’s rights, universal suffrage, the secret ballot, minimum wage regulations and the beginnings of a trade union system. It was a period in which Australian legislation was ahead of that of many older nations and in which the country found admiration in Germany as ‘The Social Continent.’<sup>39</sup>



In one important respect, this political situation permitted Australia to learn from its bitter experience with the rampant land speculation in the early settlement years. This led to the adoption of a progressive policy of public ownership of for the capital. Canberra became an exemplar of an urban development process based on leasehold tenure.<sup>40</sup>

In a similarly commendable way, the task of assessing the qualities of the site involved leading scientific and professional figures of the day. These experts, together with the professional staff of the Commonwealth

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the Turnbull government’ (Canberra Times 2016. Available at: <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/6044351/barnaby-joyce-needs-to-rethink-blatant-pork-barrelling-move>; Massola & Towell 2017, Available at: <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/barnaby-decentralisation-is-core-business-and-there-will-be-more-of-it-20170322-gv3psz.html> 12 September. Available at: <http://www.canberratimes.com.au/comment/ct-editorial/barnabyjoyce-needs-to-rethink-blatant-pork-barrelling-move-20160912-gre5ir.html>.

<sup>35</sup> From the first practical moves toward Canberra’s establishment, principles of what we today consider as sustainability were central to the formation of the city. Beyond the principles of social and economic sustainability behind the land policy, principles of ecological sustainability, in particular in terms of a secure water supply, were paramount. This was particularly important because under Section 125 of the Constitution, the Seat of Government was to be located in New South Wales, no closer than 100 miles to Sydney and outside the range of naval bombardment. This suggested an inland location of the capital.

<sup>36</sup> Ward 1958

<sup>37</sup> O’Malley in 1911, quoted in Harrison 1995, p.6

<sup>38</sup> Blainey 1963, 2003

<sup>39</sup> Manes 1914; Fischer 2004

<sup>40</sup> Brennan 1971. The leasehold provisions still exist today as the land tenure system of the capital, although the land rent component was lost when the system was mutilated in the 1970s.



Department of Home Affairs, assembled impressive documentation on the geology, geomorphology, hydrology, soils, vegetation and climate of the Canberra site, together with comprehensive topographic plans. They formed the basis for the exceptionally comprehensive documentation for the international competition.

It was on this information that the Chicago architects Walter Burley Griffin and his wife Marion Mahony Griffin prepared their entry in the competition for the Australian Federal Capital, launched by the Australian Government in 1911. The Griffins' winning scheme was a synthesis of amazingly advanced ideas on town planning combining the approaches of the City Beautiful and Garden City movements, underpinned by the model of the American parks movement of the nineteenth century, the architectural philosophy of Louis Sullivan, the political economy of Henry George and the democratic ideals characteristic of the Progressive Era in the United States.<sup>41</sup> The central area was thus conceived as a physical expression of parliamentary democracy. Features of the metropolitan plan included: neighbourhood units (explicitly named as such in 1911) and diversified urban sub-centres connected by a tramway system 'borne at public expense' ('Nulltarif'); ideas on functional and social mix and – of great importance in the light of sustainability and bushfire issues – principles of water recycling, decentralised sewerage treatment, urban gardening and hydroelectric energy from nearby dams. This was of particular importance for the vision of the "Bush Capital" in its semi-arid setting.<sup>42</sup>

So far so good. The further course of events in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, can be read as a clash of local cultures – that of the experts and that of the politicians who subsequently co-opted the competition. The politicians' decision to act as the adjudicators in the process led to the Royal Institute of British Architects recommending its members that they not participate. Locally, the problems culminated in a muddle in which several of the winners' plans were combined into a 'Departmental Board Plan' derided by Patrick Abercrombie in the editorial of the *Town Planning Review* as 'a hodge-podge conglomerate scheme... [for] a third rate luna park.'<sup>43</sup> Eventually the ignominious treatment of the competition winner by Canberra's administrators drove Griffin out of his job as Federal Director of Design in Canberra. Present-day historians cringe with embarrassment similar to that experienced in the case of Utzon and the Sydney Opera house in the 1960s.

These processes are an expression of the parallel co-existence of far-sighted perspectives with blatant incompetence and pragmatic compromise – something which persists to the present day (although this phenomenon is of course not restricted to Canberra nor in fact to town planning).

### 3.2 Cultural controversies between urban and suburban ideal concepts<sup>44</sup>

At a different level, the cultural controversies that have shaped Canberra reflect a range of attitudes found world-wide towards such as urban vs. suburban and traditional vs. modernist conceptions. Thus, the low-rise, medium-density scheme and the clearly urban character of the Griffin plan morphed into the suburban conception of a city of bungalows in the 1920s – not so much a Garden City as a city of gardens. This was partly due to the economic realities of the inter-war years. But it was also an expression of a cultural preference for suburbia as a way of life. As early as 1909, the British-Australian architect John Sulman had predicted in his advice for the competitors: 'The European boulevard with its street cafés would be unappreciated in Australia.'<sup>45</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Weirick 1988

<sup>42</sup> When the site for the Bush Capital' had been selected, a secure water supply for a large inland population was the determining factor. Therefore, the city was set in a large territory determined by the natural boundaries of river catchments. The Australian Capital Territory catchment gave the ACT a hinterland of high-value wilderness areas, which have been protected as national parks and nature reserves since the 1980s. The overall area of the ACT – 2,400 sq. km – is more than twelve times the size of Washington D.C., mostly comprising these mountainous forested areas, an impressive backdrop and hinterland – but bush fire prone, posing considerable problems for ecological management and sustainability of the city.

<sup>43</sup> Abercrombie 1913:, p.222

<sup>44</sup> Fischer 1984, 1989 The notion of 'ideal concepts in planning' and the ways in which the glance through specific 'windows' have influenced city making have been essential to the publications between 'Myths & Models' (1984) and 'Windows Upon Planning History' (2018).

<sup>45</sup> Sulman, 1911, p.606

Following Griffin's dismissal in 1920, the skeleton of wide City Beautiful avenues was indeed merely fleshed out with 'mostly single storey, single family houses on generous allotments.' The City Beautiful avenues became automobile thoroughfares rather than settings for urban compositions. The rich semantic content of the plan was altered and impoverished.<sup>46</sup> The city entered an adolescent stage – seven pleasant but oddly proportioned suburbs in search of a city. Unified by the creation of Lake Burley Griffin in the centre in 1963, the garden suburbs developed in this period with their now mature trees have become much sought-after heritage real estate.

From the 1950s on, Canberra's development followed the growth patterns of British New Towns and the methods of US land use transportation planning. In 1957, after a long period of stagnation, Prime Minister Menzies – in many ways a close counterpart to Germany's Konrad Adenauer, created an exceptionally powerful new organization for planning and developing the capital. He ensured that the new National Capital Development Commission (NCDC) would have a large budget and that federal legislation and Parliamentary support would continue to give it a high degree of planning control on the basis of public ownership of land. Imbued by a sense of public responsibility, the NCDC's professional planners acted in the mode of benevolent dictator until their New Town model was firmly on the ground.

### 3.3 The tipping point: 1988

As a planned capital, Canberra was thus built and managed much in the manner of a government company town during the first 75 years of its existence. In 1988 then, completion of the new and permanent Parliament House was interpreted by Federal politicians as evidence that the Federal Capital was itself complete.<sup>47</sup>

So, the Commonwealth said, the time has come to talk of many things. If the city had come of age, it should henceforth fend for itself like other state capitals too. The Commonwealth would divest itself as far as possible of financial responsibility for the city beyond core capital city functions.

One authority would look after the associated Areas of Special National Concern and another municipal-style planning department at the territory level would be responsible for the rest of the city and the ACT.

However, what may have looked plausible at first sight, was associated with a range of problems at the interrelated levels of finance, governance, and urban structure.

First, finance: A 'city-state' like the ACT could not operate in the same way as the other state capitals by raising substantial revenue from mining, manufacturing and industry. It was therefore more dependent on Commonwealth government grants than these; and in a system set up with the intention of minimizing Federal funding, Commonwealth grants would always be a bone of contention.

Second: Finance and governance: One consequence of this arrangement was chronic underfunding of the agencies responsible for the planning and development of the capital. Creation of these authorities in 1988 was followed by almost never-ending turbulent administrative reform and a proliferation of governance arrangements and overlapping and conflicting plans.

Third: finance and urban structure: It soon turned out that the territory government could not afford paying for the city it had inherited from the Commonwealth on the basis of the revenue from rates and local taxes.

That city, the Canberra of 1988, was a perfect manifestation of Australian ideals of urban/ suburban living and could be seen as 'the perfectionist Garden City Metropolis.'<sup>48</sup> It was a city with high development standards across the entire urban area. At the same time, it was a problematic low-density, car-dependent urban conglomeration extending over a north-south length of 40 km with a population of 400.000 in 2016. This corresponds to the east-west extension of the urbanized core of Germany's Ruhr district with a population of several Million.

In order to continue paying for this city in the face of parsimonious Commonwealth contributions, the Territory Government resorted to a strategy of financing a significant part of its revenue through the sale of its principal asset, greenfield land.<sup>49</sup> This approach is of course unsustainable. It has resulted in a vicious

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<sup>46</sup> Fischer 1989, p.168;

<sup>47</sup> Weirick 1989; Fischer & Weirick 2013

<sup>48</sup> Fischer 2013, p.ix

<sup>49</sup> Corbell, 2005; ACT Government 2005; Sansom 2009; Stanhope & Ahmed 2019

circle of further extending an already extended city and exacerbating the very costs of urban management it is seeking to defray. Among the consequences has been the constant encroachment on the City's greenbelt system. Even more critical in the light of the bushfire events, a new satellite district with a population of 50,000 was established on the area devastated in the major bushfires of 2003. This is further extending and exposing the western flank of the city in the era of climate change to fires driven from the wilderness areas by hot westerly winds from the deserts of Central Australia. Other suburbs on the edges followed suit.

### 3.4 The fires 2003 and 2019/2020

With all the complexity regarding what caused the ACT fires in 2003 and also 2019/2020, the connection between the dysfunctional division of responsibilities decided upon at self-government cannot be overlooked. At the time it seemed to make sense, at first sight, for the Commonwealth to focus its interest and responsibility on the Parliamentary Zone, the visually significant Inner Hills and the lakeside parklands. But in that process, the responsibility for the huge National Park that forms the backdrop of the ACT was shifted to the municipal-style agency which was not able to pay its way even in the city area. This arrangement was problematic to say the least.

As James Weirick put it in 2003, 'in this way, the National government became responsible for a city park, and a city government became responsible for a National Park. Here lay the seeds of tragedy.'<sup>50</sup> The new arrangements following self-government constituted a rupture and a tipping-point also for the practice of the National Park management. Due to the lack of resources, the complex hazard reduction programs preceding the new arrangements, which had involved back-burning in experimental programs by the CSIRO, were discontinued. Understaffed and under-resourced, the authorities were overburdened and inefficient in their reactions in 2003.

The dislocation and chaos which spread across the south-western suburbs of the city seemed to take on a surreal and terrifying intensity in inverse proportion to the planned perfection of Canberra's suburban landscape. Indeed, the elemental force of the firestorm mocked the very order and perfection which has distinguished the city since its inception.

While since then, improvements have been made to the park management system in the ACT, many questions remain. What difference the continuation of the back-burning practice would have made for the fires in 2003 and in 2019/2020 remain a complex issue hotly debated on technical as well as ideological grounds by science, politics and the public including individuals and bots in social media. The national debate over bushfire management is polarized between many groups including forester/farmer demands for large-scale prescribed burning and land clearing and conservationist concerns for the maintenance of biodiversity.

Since the firestorms of 2019/2020, a completely new dimension of the climate change and fire calamity has emerged. A phenomenon that was once considered a 'rare and unique' weather event seems to have become more common. The bushfires in Australia are creating violent weather systems that can spark new fires, conjure fire tornadoes and make fighting existing fires much more challenging. They can project embers up to 30 km ahead of the fire front. The rising heat from the intense bushfires creates massive, powerful clouds called pyrocumulonimbus, or pyroCb. These 'fire clouds' are created 'when fires lift enough heat and moisture into the atmosphere to produce a smoke-infused thunderstorm.'<sup>51</sup> The fires are creating their own weather, and at present, these firestorms cannot be modelled and their behaviour predicted.<sup>52</sup>

In other words, climate change in Australia is producing more extreme bushfires.

This uncontrollable situation has arisen during the decade of climate change denial in the Australian political sphere that is still destabilising national governance as Parliament House at the centre of the 'Bush Capital' disappears from view in choking clouds of bushfire smoke.

<sup>50</sup> Weirick 2003, p.3

<sup>51</sup> Cosgrove 2020. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/01/07/australia-bushfires-create-their-own-dangerous-weather-systems-experts-say.html>

<sup>52</sup> Sanderson & Fisher: A fiery wake-up call for climate science. In: Nature Climate Change.





#### 4 CONCLUSION

This paper has looked at Australia's capital city through the window of the cultural controversies that have shaped its development – from conflicts between narrow-minded competitive thinking and the visionary perspectives that created one of the great planned capitals of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; the unique controversies around the Bush Capital image as well as the common controversies around urban vs. suburban ideal concepts; the crisis which emerged with the unfortunate dysfunctional arrangements at self-government in 1988 and which created the issues of governance and finance and urban management; on to the ensuing interrelated problematic strategies of urban and regional development in recent years.

It has identified the close connection between the necessity of subsidising the municipal household through unsustainable strategies such as the sale of greenfield land from its limited territory, the consequent loss of greenbelt land; the mechanisms of financing the light rail infrastructure through the relocation of public housing to make way for urban renewal through high-rise tower blocks – all embedded in aggressive strategies directed at a selective re-writing of history aimed at demolishing the traditional Bush Capital brand; and finally how the interlocked issues have contributed to the weakened response to the fires of 2003. Canberra has been lucky in the 2019/2020 fires, but on the basis of our current knowledge about the fact that the embers can travel up to 30 km ahead of the fire, we have to realise that it would only have taken a change of winds for large parts of Canberra to be worse affected than in 2003.

At the structural level, we can draw a connection between Canberra and the locus of our conference, the University of Aachen. The Canberra story in this paper provides a spotlight on a cultural dimension behind the discourse on 'the production of the city' as developed at the department of Planning Theory some 50 years ago.<sup>53</sup> What Harald Bodenschatz identified then as the 'block of interests' between local politicians, architects and the building industry in Berlin,<sup>54</sup> finds an echo in the Australian capital. At this point in time it is evident that following the withdrawal of central government from its responsibility for the Australian capital, local development interests have trumped the national and international concern for the meaning of Canberra to the world

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<sup>53</sup> Fischer 2018, Fehl & Rodriguez-Lores 1980

<sup>54</sup> Bodenschatz 1987

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