

WEEKEND AUSTRALIAN

CANBERRA

August 13, 2016

THE
CAPITAL
COMES
OF
AGE





STORY BY Christopher Niesche

WORK ON A NEW CANVAS

Planners and developers were long constrained by a conservative palette, but new ideas are brightening the city

Visitors to Canberra don't need a keen eye for urban development to notice that Australia's capital is changing. They'll see the multi-faceted geometric shapes of Hotel Hotel looming over the NewActon precinct by Lake Burley Griffin; they'll see multimillion-dollar apartments springing up on the Kingston Foreshore; and they'll see the once industrial suburb of Braddon newly populated with hip street-food restaurants and new developments.

Canberra has come a long way from the monolithic concrete public-service buildings that so many people associate with the city. And even those buildings are changing. In Woden, south-west of the city centre, the 11-storey 1970s Juliana House, former home to several government departments, has been converted into a fashionable hotel.

Urban planner Hamish Sinclair has seen a dramatic change in the city in the 14 years he's been in Canberra. "When I first got here, working in the planning authority, we used to joke amongst ourselves that the colour palette was beige, mushroom, camel, light brown and any colour in between in that spectrum," says Sinclair, now a research fellow in capital city strategic planning at the University of Canberra. "Now, it's bright orange and bright reds and lime greens and graffiti art."

Sinclair says the city has shrugged off the conservatism that comes with being a public service town and the city is "radically reinventing itself".

One of the big changes is in housing density. Canberra is typically associated with freestanding single-storey houses on well-manicured streets and cul-de-sacs. But ACT Chief Minister Andrew Barr is planning to increase the urban density of the city. He wants half the population growth over the coming years to occur within 7.5km of the CBD, through a mixture of new development and redevelopment of existing suburban areas.

"In the last 15 years, that's been the most dramatic change in Canberra – more diversity in

housing forms. If 'densifying' is a word, Canberra would be the fastest densifying city in Australia, but it comes off the lowest base," says Barr. "There are more townhouses, units and apartments being built than there are new houses; that's been the case for some time now and that's driven largely by changes in consumer preferences – people wanting to live closer to the CBD or major employment nodes."

Barr envisages developments from three to 10 stories in the central areas, and taller buildings in satellite town centres.

"By any Australian or international city standard, our Canberra will remain a low-rise city, more in a European style than an Asian city with the skyscrapers," he says. Only 4000 people live in the CBD now, and the government wants 20,000 residents there in 10 years' time.

The ACT government has ambitious plans to rejuvenate the city, with several projects in the pipeline. Planned light rail along Northbourne Avenue – the



Geocoon's planned residential towers in Belconnen, top; and the view from Infinity Towers in Gungahlin

major road gateway to the city – will prompt new development and housing along the route. The government is part-funding the project by selling off public buildings along the route, which Barr expects to be used for eight to 10-storey residential projects.

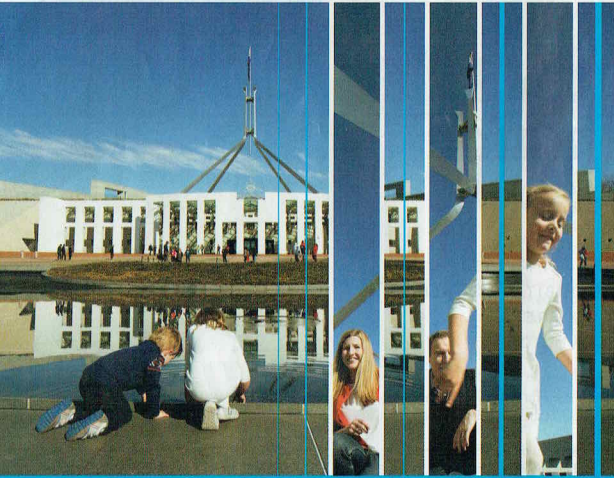
The long-term City to the Lake project aims to make better use of Lake Burley Griffin by spreading the CBD south to its foreshore. Currently, the CBD is cut off from the lake by the six-lane Parkes Way and bridging that road will incur a "significant cost," says Barr. In the near term, there are plans to improve the walking and cycling infrastructure in the area.

Canberra is starting to make more of its lake. At the Kingston Foreshore, the lake has been infilled to create an artificial harbour surrounded by what developers hope will become a thriving residential and entertainment precinct. The foreshore is lined with some of the most expensive apartments in Canberra – some have sold for close to \$3 million – and restaurants are starting to populate ground floors of the buildings.

Currently, it's largely a development site. In the daytime construction noises drown out the birdcalls, but when the building noise dies down it is surprisingly quiet, as close to the centre of the city as it is. The government is also tendering for an arts precinct to be built just behind the foreshore.

Barr says the ACT has some advantages over other cities in terms of urban planning. "The government is unique in Australia in that it's both a local council and a state government. So, we have all of the planning, taxation, and other policy levers at our disposal, so we're able to bring that together in a unified form," he says. "Canberra's a very young city. No city is ever finished but Canberra is half-built at best."

But higher-density development is not without its critics. Emeritus professor Ken Taylor, a town planning academic at the Australian National University, says



THERE'S PLENTY TO DO AND SEE AT AUSTRALIAN PARLIAMENT HOUSE

Daily tours, live political action, renowned architecture, an impressive art collection, and amazing rooftop views of Canberra!

F (02) 6277 5399 E VISITORSERVICES@APH.GOV.AU W APH.GOV.AU/VISITPARLIAMENT

FOLLOW US Visit Australian Parliament House @aust_parliament @visit_australian_parliament



one of the characteristic features of Canberra are the views through the city to Lake Burley Griffin and to the inner hills and ridges that surround it.

He says increased urban density is inevitable, but there has been very little thought or attention given to the effect on these views, which he says are a "defining and distinctive aspect of Canberra".

"There's a beautiful synergy and that sense of nature in the city – it's very much the sense of place, of what Canberra is about," Taylor says.

Braddon is a one-time industrial part of Canberra which is now being occupied by street food restaurants and new developments.

It is turning from the old Canberra into the new. In Lonsdale Street, a rundown industrial shed full of food trucks of all types and a hipster barber sits across the road from a blond brick 1970s government office. Down the road an Indian street food restaurant nestled with others in a former auto workshop plays Bollywood music out onto the street.

It's all very haphazard – not the sort of neat and well-ordered layout visitors associate with Canberra. Restaurants are interspersed with mechanics' shops and government offices and the broken footpaths get muddy when it rains.

Nick Georgalis is one of the developers changing the face of Canberra. His Gecon development company was the first to convert a public-service building to other uses when it turned Juliana House in Woden into a hotel.

"That was a building that was at the end of its life cycle and it didn't fit any government tenant requirements, but what it did lend itself to was an adaptive reuse into a hotel," Georgalis says.

The first hotel in Australia to win a Green Star environmental rating, there is no doubting what the Abode Hotel Woden once was – concrete sunshades line the windows on the concrete facade building. "I actually appreciate the architecture of that day – some of it is quite brutal, but this was an interesting one, says Georgalis.



Our Canberra will remain a low-rise city, more in a European style than an Asian city with the skyscrapers

ACT Chief Minister Andrew Barr

It's the first of several similar projects. Another developer is planning to convert the 11-storey Eclipse House – home to the Department of Territory and Municipal Services until November – into a 153-room hotel.

Gecon is also building Canberra upwards. At Belconnen, where CBD height restrictions don't apply, the developer is building five residential towers, some as high as 27 stories, with 1300 apartments along with retail, hotels and commercial premises.

Georgalis says the timing is right. "Canberrans are sick of living below the canopy, of living in short squat buildings that don't have much of an outlook," he says, adding that the "tall, sleek" apartments will cast less shadow than shorter, narrower buildings.

"I want to see an articulated skyline – I want to see Canberra sitting above the canopy, with density and people and vibrancy," Georgalis says.

"Canberra was a town in its infancy when I was growing up, and now I feel it's more of a city." □

PARLIAMENT
HOUSE

SPRING GLORY

10 SEPTEMBER –
16 OCTOBER

SEE THE PEOPLE'S HOUSE IN FULL BLOOM

See a different side of 'the people's house' on a tour of the stunning private gardens during Floriade, meet an experienced Parliament House gardener, or celebrate spring with a delightful high tea amongst the blossoms.

BOOK

P (02) 6277 5399
E VISITORSERVICES@APH.GOV.AU
W APH.GOV.AU/VISITPARLIAMENT

FOLLOW US

f Visit Australian Parliament House
t @aust_parliament
@visit_australian_parliament


AUSTRALIAN
PARLIAMENT HOUSE


CANBERRA