



## **Between a Beautiful City and a Garden City: Walter Burley Griffin's Design of Canberra**

**Jinbin Park**

*Department of History, Kyung Hee University, Republic of Korea, Professor*

**E-mail: [jbinp@khu.ac.kr](mailto:jbinp@khu.ac.kr)**

**Received 23 Nov 2020: Accepted 21 Dec 2020**

### **ABSTRACT**

Canberra, the capital city of Australia, has been known as an example of the international Garden City movement, which started by an Englishman Ebenezer Howard in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. As a new capital site, Canberra was designed by an American architect Walter Burley Griffin, the winner of the world-wide competition for a federal capital in 1912.

However, a closer look at the early history of Canberra would reveal that the popular understanding of her as a Garden City was somewhat exaggerated and distorted. Griffin's ideas of the new capital strongly suggest that he was influenced by City Beautiful, an American urban planning trend. Also, Griffin's original plan for Canberra was never fully appreciated nor realized, as many objections and difficulties arisen. Furthermore, Australian understanding of 'Garden City' evolved to more inclusive and overlapping idea of greener and less condensed towns in general.

**Key Words:** Garden City Movement, Canberra, Walter Burley Griffin, City Beautiful

## I . Introduction

Oanberra, the capital city of Australia, has been known as an example of the international Garden City movement. The idea of the Garden City was first laid out by an Englishman named Ebenezer Howard in 1898 in his book, *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform*. He argued that well-planned towns with decent housing and local jobs in a garden like environment could solve problems of urban centers of the day and provide workers better living and working condition. His idea touched many concerned minds in industrialized places of the world and developed into an international movement to realize Garden City ideal.

It is a well-publicized fact that Canberra was designed along the Garden City concept. Most of all, the International Garden Cities Institute of Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation introduces Canberra as one of the examples of the Garden Cities in the world.<sup>1)</sup> An Encyclopedia of the world's planned suburbs published in 2013, *Paradise Planned: The Garden Suburb and the Modern City*, also lists Canberra in its chapter of Garden City. This massive book spared two chapters on the Garden City, one of which contained fourteen cases of Garden Cities spread over the six continents of the world including Canberra.<sup>2)</sup>

Canberra, then unnamed place in the valley of Molonglo, was chosen as a site for the new capital for Australia in 1908 and the world-wide competition for the design of the city was held. Among the 136 applications, the plan of Walter Burley Griffin won the first place. His plan for Canberra stood out with geometry of a concentric pattern with radial boulevards, which was one of the features of Howard's original plan for the Garden City. Comparing the two, the similarities between them



**Fig. 1** An Aerial View of Canberra  
<https://followfiji.wordpress.com/tag/canberra-australiancapitalterritory-oldparliamenthouse/>

1) <https://www.gardencitiesinstitute.com/resources/global-garden-cities>

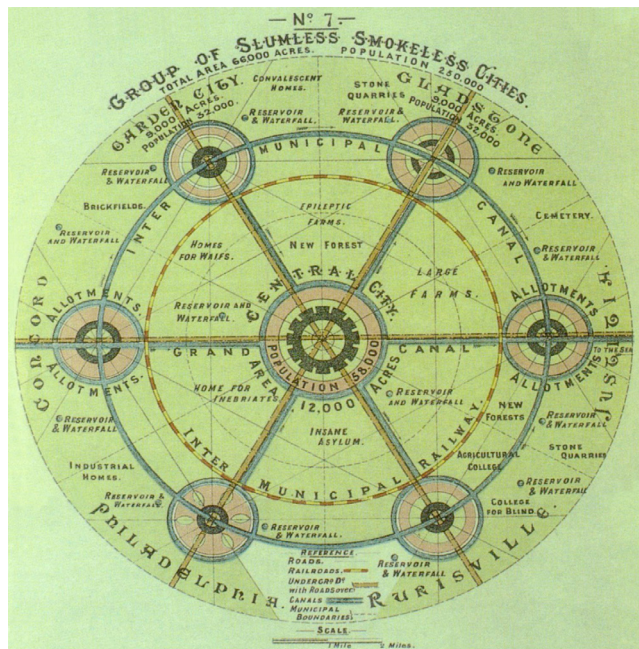
2) Robert Stern, David Fishman, and Jacob Tilove, *Paradise Planned: The Garden Suburb and the Modern City* (Monacelli Press, 2013).

*Jinbin Park, Between a Beautiful City and a Garden City:  
Walter Burley Griffin's Design of Canberra*

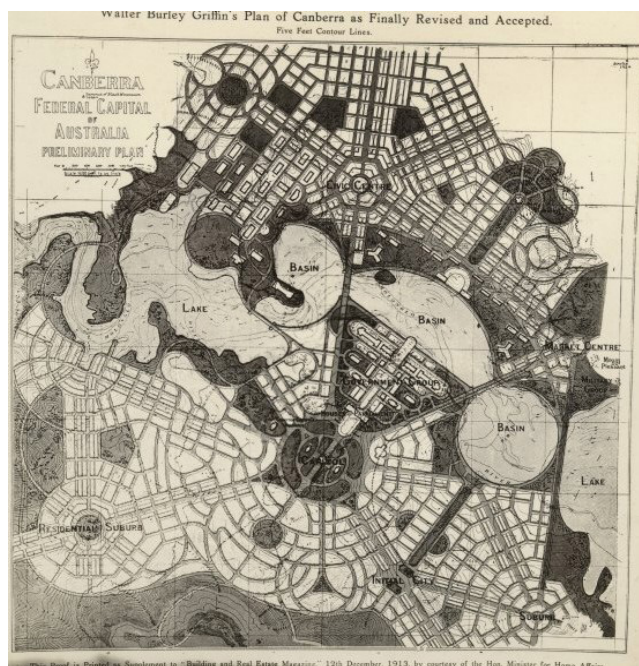
seemed undeniable.

However, there were some questionable responses to conclude Canberra as an exemplar Garden City. First, the comments of Garden City Association of Great Britain. The official bulletin of this organization, *Town Planning Review*, published a harsh evaluation on Griffin. In its October 1912 editorial, the association evaluated that Griffin's plan was "to devote the whole lay-out to a geometrical formalistic treatment" and the town was not at all holistic nor organic as it was "severed by a series of artificial lagoon".<sup>3)</sup> These comments meant that the association was not approving Griffin's plan for Canberra as one of their own. From their perspectives, Griffin's plan was too artificial and divisive. The editorial also went on to criticize that Griffin's plan lacked of consideration on residential sector.

Another bitter criticism came from William Davidge, an English architect and social reformer involved in the Garden City movement himself. He pointed out that Griffin's Canberra lacked charms of Letchworth, the first Garden City built in England. He even



**Fig. 2** Diagram from Howard's *To-morrow*, 1898



**Fig. 3** Griffin's Canberra Design, 1912

3) *Town Planning Review* 3 (October 1912), 166.

condemned that Griffin's plan "violated" Garden City thought on two grounds: first, "there was no evidence of town planning on garden city lines"; and second, there was no agricultural belt required for the Garden City.<sup>4)</sup>

Above responses make us wonder why, in the first place, Griffin's Canberra was even considered to be an example of the Garden City. In fact, his plan needed specifics of constructions still to be developed, did not have information whether it embodied Howard's ideas or not, except the discernible concentric pattern with radial boulevards. Some even argued that a closer examination would reveal that the designs of the 2<sup>nd</sup> place and the 3<sup>rd</sup> places in the competition better incorporated the Garden City elements.

This paper attempts to reevaluate Griffin's Canberra plan from the two perspectives. First, I will review the main goals of Griffin in designing and planning Australia's capital city. From his own explanation, one can discern that he tried to combine the two different yet interacting planning trends of the day: the City Beautiful and the Garden City. How Secondly, I will discuss the local aspects of Canberra. Appreciated to be one of the most important town planning events in Australia, the capital building drew attention from the Australian government and civil sectors. These domestic opinions and interests influenced Griffin's planning. I will show how these Australian urban planning sector mixed the City Beautiful and the Garden City ideas in their capital building.

## **II. Griffin's City Beautiful**

Our first task it to listen to Griffin himself, how he explained his intentions and goals in designing Canberra. Astonishingly enough, Griffin never referred to the Garden City. The first and most prominent citation he was making was the World's Columbian Exposition of Chicago in 1894. Known to be the starting point of urban planning, the "White City" of Chicago Expo offered an excellent model for "scheme and system", which Griffin, in his speech in front of the City Club of Chicago, confessed to be the most important elements of designing a city.<sup>5)</sup>

Griffin, an Illinois-born Chicagoan by education and career, was greatly influenced by the rising

---

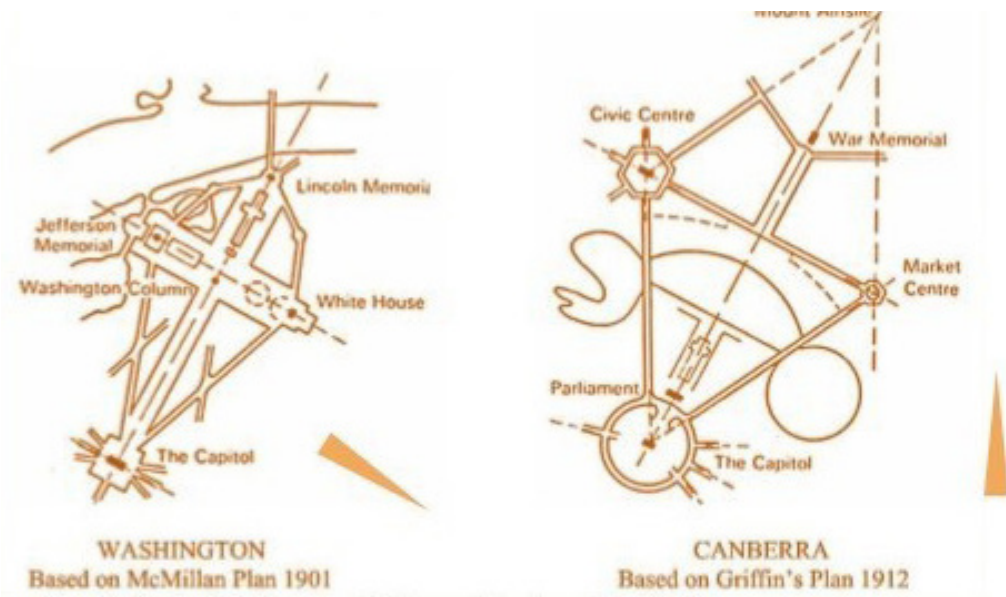
4) William Davidge, *Garden City and Town Planning* 12 (1912), 271-278.

5) Walter Burley Griffin, *City Club Bulletin* (February 1914), 66.

*Jinbin Park, Between a Beautiful City and a Garden City:  
Walter Burley Griffin's Design of Canberra*



**Fig. 4** The White City in the World's Columbian Exposition in 1894  
<https://www.britannica.com/event/Worlds-Columbian-Exposition#/media/1/649070/91900>



**Fig. 5** A Comparison between Washington, D. C. and Canberra  
[https://www.academia.edu/7835182/URBAN\\_PLANNING\\_AND\\_DEVELOPMENT\\_OF\\_THE\\_AUSTRALIAN\\_CAPITAL\\_TERRITORY\\_CANBERRA\\_A\\_CRITICAL\\_REVIEW?auto=download](https://www.academia.edu/7835182/URBAN_PLANNING_AND_DEVELOPMENT_OF_THE_AUSTRALIAN_CAPITAL_TERRITORY_CANBERRA_A_CRITICAL_REVIEW?auto=download)

field of urban planning. He had worked for Frank Lloyd Wright before he set up his own practice. His wife, Marion Mahony Griffin, who were responsible for drawing and painting of all his designs, also worked for Frank Lloyd Wright's practice.<sup>6)</sup> They both were familiar with Chicago's prairie style which would be seen through the spread out layout of the city like Canberra.

Another layout Griffin had adopted in preparing Canberra was that of Washington, D. C.'s. This city was a model for all other later administrative centers, planned and constructed as the national capital from the beginning. Designed by L'anfant and enhanced by McMillan's plan in 1901, Washington, D. C. had radial patterns of avenues filled with important government buildings connected by gardens and squares.<sup>7)</sup>

As approaching capital planning, Griffin instantly referred to the successful example of the American national capital. The use of grand axis, vistas, diagonal avenues, and monumental cores all intended to create symbolic space for the nation's center. The similarities of the two capital cities were already argued by many, including Bunnarith Meng whose work shown below.

Application of Chicago and Washington, D. C. means that Canberra needs to be considered as an example of the City Beautiful. The City Beautiful movement was an American peculiar mode of urban planning in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The goal of this movement was to 'clean-up, paint-up, fix-up' dilapidated American cities. Advocates of the City Beautiful believed that beautification and functionality could promote a social order and the quality of life for citizens. And Chicago and Washington, D. C. were the epitomes of the City Beautiful.<sup>8)</sup>

In fact, the City Beautiful had its proponents in Australia. John Sulman, for example, was one of the significant members in Australian urban planning and would later play a crucial role in completing the construction of Canberra. He was interested in new changes in American cities and involved in importing urban reform in the line of the City Beautiful. Australian urban planners were eager to learn from the American counterparts, as they republish an American article "Beauty a City Asset" in their own *Journal of the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects* .

"A city with streets convenient for traffic and parks for recreation, with refined and

---

6) Jeffrey Turnbull, "Dreams of Equity, 1911-1924," in Anne Watson, ed., *Beyond Architecture: Marion Mahony And Walter Burley Griffin in America, Australia and India* (Sydney: Powerhouse Publishing, 1998), 104-119.

7) Walter Burley Griffin, *The Federal Capital: Report Explanatory of the Preliminary General Plan* (Melbourne: Government Printer, 1913), 5.

8) Charles Mulford Robinson, *The Improvement of Towns and Cities*, (New York: Putnam's Sons, 1901); Charles Zueblin, "The Civic Renaissance: "The White City" and After." *The Chataquan* 38 (December 1903), 372-384; Daniel Burnham and Edward Bennett, *Plan of Chicago* (Chicago: The Commercial Club, 1909).

*Jinbin Park, Between a Beautiful City and a Garden City:  
Walter Burley Griffin's Design of Canberra*

dignified buildings, graceful and inspiring statuary, attractive and well-planted parks, combined in one harmonious composition, becomes a city useful, a city practical, a city attractive, and a city healthful. This combination is an asset which accrues in the culture and refinement of the public and in the enjoyment of the people. At the same time it is a great financial resource.”<sup>9)</sup>

Discussion on adopting the City Beautiful ideas in creation of Australian capital took place earlier. The “Congress of Engineers, Architect, Surveyors, And Members of Allied Professions, to discuss Questions relating to the Laying Out and Building of the Federal Capital, and matters of professional interest generally” was held in 1901. The 12 papers prepared for the event focused on how to realize beautiful capital city among many values to pursue. “Beautiful harmony of practical functions”, was the sum-up of their demand for the new capital.<sup>10)</sup> This was a far cry from creating workers’ community for better living and working condition, the thesis of the Garden City.

Why, then, was Griffin’s Canberra considered as an example of the Garden City? There were some similarities between the City Beautiful and the Garden City. First, both tried to be close to nature, embracing green space in their plans. Also, both urban planning concepts avoid coercive authoritarian decision making processes. Since Griffin’s planning embodied those values, there were some aspects that his design could be confused as a Garden City.

### **III. Australian Understanding of the Garden City**

Now we need to turn our attention to Australian context of capital building. The federal board to decide the capital designing had published the criteria for selection. The board asserted that Canberra required to have symbolic characters as the permanent seat for the national capital; it needed to have orderly sections for administrative buildings and a vista to overlook the area.<sup>11)</sup> When Griffin’s design

---

9) *Journal of the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects*, 11 (May 1913), 76-77, republished from *Journal of the American Institute of Architects*.

10) Robert Freestone, *Designing Australia's Cities: Culture, Commerce and the City Beautiful, 1900-1930* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2007), 83-93.

11) “Federal Capital City Designs: Report of Board Appointed to Investigate and Report as to Suitability of Certain Designs for Adoption in Connexion with Lay-Out of Federal Capital,” A657: Design (approved) for Lay-Out of Federal Capital City, National Archives of Australia.

was announced as the winner of the design competition, the news came out as a surprise. In addition to the fact that Griffin was a rather less known figure in the field, there were several internationally well-known architects including Australian's own in the competition. Was Griffin's far better than those?

Griffin's work was a beautiful one, but some might argue that it was vague in details and too vast in scale. Some raised a question as to practicability of his plan, including difficulties in engineering. It was also known that the three professional evaluators did not agree on the first prize. The fact that his design was not unanimously chosen weakened Griffin's position from the beginning. This exasperated the locals who had long prepared for the capital design and ignited the discontent against this foreigner from America.

Therefore, Griffin was without a full support from the Australian locals from the beginning. King O'Malley, the Minister for Home Affairs responsible for the whole competition process, asserted the legitimacy of the selection of Griffin's plan. Another American origin who had immigrated to Australia, O'Malley expedited the construction of the capital city along the Griffin's design.<sup>12)</sup>

Even though the Australian government invited Griffin to Canberra and appointed him as a construction manager in 1914, Griffin faced with some difficulties. Local resistance to the foreign planner was one thing. The pressure to reduce the scope and scale with the outbreak of the World War was even greater threat to the project. Griffin was forced to revise his plan and the government came up with its own plan combining aspects of other plans submitted for the competition.<sup>13)</sup>

In the meantime, English town planners visited Australia and organized special lectures and publicizing campaigns for Australian urban planners. Thanks to their efforts in Australian Town Planning Tour in 1914-1915, Australians formed the local divisions of the Town Planning Association in many cities. These organizations propagated urban reform with the improvement of residence and development of parks and green areas in the city. They recommended that "the principles of the Garden City Movement should be applied to or adapted to every scheme of Town Planning, or to every new town created in the State."<sup>14)</sup>

Even though these Australian urban leaders clearly employed the English town planning and the Garden City idea, what they meant by it is not clear. To them, the Garden City seemed just another model town idea, not necessarily a Howardian town planning for workingmen's communal living. As

---

12) Rowan Henderson, *King O'Malley* (Canberra Museum and Gallery (2011).

13) Freestone, *Designing Australia's Cities*, 105-109.

14) Robert Freestone, *Model Communities: The Garden City Movement in Australia*, (Melbourne: Nelson, 1989), 66-71.



*Jinbin Park, Between a Beautiful City and a Garden City:  
Walter Burley Griffin's Design of Canberra*

their leader John Sulman wrote in his book,

“The term garden suburb, or garden city, is constantly used in reference to Town Planning. Just what the term connotes is, however, somewhat difficult to define..... The special characteristics which differentiate them from the ordinary town or suburb are the allocation of special quarters or sites for each kind of building, the absence of congestion of dwellings and their better arrangement, the ample provision of parks, playgrounds, and open spaces, the planting with trees and grass of part of the width of the roads where nor required for traffic, and the provision of greater opportunities for social intercourse.”<sup>15)</sup>

Sulman's assertion seemed to mixing aspects from the Garden City, as well as elements of the City Beautiful. From the Australian perspective, the Garden City was mere a greener urban space with low density. They did not differentiate urban planning ideas whether the City Beautiful or the Garden City, with delicacy.<sup>16)</sup>

Griffin left Canberra project in 1920, and the Australian government formed a new governance for the capital building, the Federal Capital Advisory Committee. It was Sulman and others in Australian architectural circle who was left for the completion of the capital. They kept the nature-friendly features and the main axes structure from the Griffin's plan, and yet tried to lower the cost as the government wanted. They focused on realizing the functional and symbolic aspects of the capital city. Adding the War Memorial on the central axis, the monumental character of Canberra was enhanced.<sup>17)</sup>

## IV. Conclusion

Canberra is “a garden without a city.” (Higgins, 1915)

“Canberra is an overgrown garden city, with the emphasis on the garden, and with isolated

---

15) John Sulman, *An Introduction to the Study of Town Planning in Australia* (Sydney: NSW Government Printer, 1921), 106.

16) Robert Haddon, *Real Estate* (February 1924), 16.

17) Freestone, *Designing Australia's Cities*, 109-114.

architectural incidents which are too distant from one another to give any cohesion to the plan.” (Brown, 1952)

Whether it was because of the lack of residences or the absence of a consideration of communal living, these critical assessments showed continuing disagreement of the advocates of the Garden City on Canberra.

This paper showed that the original plan of Canberra by Griffin did not pursue a Howard’s Garden City, rather it tried to develop a beautiful city similar to the White City of Chicago and Washington, D. C. Some similarities with the Garden City, a diagonal lay-out and greens in urban setting, exaggerated garden character of Canberra. Moreover, the Australians who took over the capital building project failed to differentiate the Garden City ideas with other low density town planning concepts.

Actual construction of Canberra further altered the original plan. Government buildings were constructed on major axis, but Griffin’s grand scale had to be reduced. Later on, the Australian government put the symbolic function of the national capital in priority, and added memorials and monuments. Today, Canberra much looks like Washington, D. C., another capital on another new continent, but would hardly seem like Letchworth, an English Garden City still boasting its history and legacy of working class communal living.

### **Ethical considerations**

Ethical issues (including plagiarism, informed consent, misconduct, data fabrication and/or falsification, double publication and/or submission, and redundancy) have been completely observed by authors.

### **Conflict of Interests**

The author has no conflict of interests to declare.

*Jinbin Park, Between a Beautiful City and a Garden City:  
Walter Burley Griffin's Design of Canberra*

## References

- Brown, A. J. (1952). Some notes on the plan of Canberra, federal capital of Australia. *Town Planning Review*, 23(2), 146--163.
- Burnham, D. H., & Bennett, E. H. (1909). *The Plan of Chicago*. Chicago: Commercial Club of Chicago.
- Davidge, W. (1912). *Garden City and Town Planning* 2, 271-278.  
<https://www.gardencitiesinstitute.com/resources/global-garden-cities>
- "Federal Capital City Designs: Report of Board Appointed to Investigate and Report as to Suitability of Certain Designs for Adoption in Connexion with Lay-Out of Federal Capital," A657: Design (approved) for Lay-Out of Federal Capital City, National Archives of Australia [https://www.academia.edu/7835182/URBAN\\_PLANNING\\_AND\\_DEVELOPMENT\\_OF\\_THE\\_AUSTRALIAN\\_CAPITAL\\_TERRITORY\\_CANBERRA\\_A\\_CRITICAL\\_REVIEW?auto=download](https://www.academia.edu/7835182/URBAN_PLANNING_AND_DEVELOPMENT_OF_THE_AUSTRALIAN_CAPITAL_TERRITORY_CANBERRA_A_CRITICAL_REVIEW?auto=download)
- Freestone, R. (1989). *Model Communities: The Garden City Movement in Australia*. \ Melbourne: Nelson
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2007). *Designing Australia's Cities: Culture, Commerce and the City Beautiful, 1900-1930*. Sydney: University of New South Wales Press.
- Griffin, W. B. (1913). *The Federal Capital: Report Explanatory of the Preliminary General Plan*, p. 5. Melbourne: Government Printer.
- Griffin, W. B. (1914). A Speech in the *City Club Bulletin*, 7 (February 17, 1914), 67-68.
- Higgins, B. (1951). Canberra: A Garden without a City. *Journal of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada*, 18, 245-256.
- Journal of the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects*, 11 (May 1913), 76-77, an editorial republished from *Journal of the American Institute of Architects*.
- O'Malley, K. (2011). *King O'Malley*. Exhibited at Canberra Museum & Gallery October 29, 2011 – March 12, 2012.
- Robinson, C. M. (1901). *Improvement of towns and cities*. New York, NY: Putnam's Sons.
- Stern, R. A., Fishman, D., & Tilove, J. (2013). *Paradise planned: the garden suburb and the modern city*. New York, NY: Monacelli Press.
- Sulman, J. (1921). *An Introduction to the Study of Town Planning in Australia*, Sydney: NSW

Government Printer.

Turnbull, J. (1998). Dreams of Equity. In A. Watson (Ed.), *Beyond Architecture: Marion Mahony and Walter Burley Griffin in America, Australia and India*, pp. 104-119. Sydney: Powerhouse Publishing.

Zueblin, C. (1903). The "White City" and After. *Chautauquan*, 38, 373-84.