



## **Canberra @ the crossroads: A commentary by Charles Landry**

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**Preface**

Canberra is thinking about its future and particularly that of Civic with a sense of determination and vigour. It is aware that the city faces a competitive threat from other Australian cities. Yet within the leadership groupings and elsewhere in the city there is the belief in Canberra's potential, although meshed with a feeling of frustration especially concerning its image. Perceptions of Canberra are often out of date or inappropriate and these damage Canberra. Within the complex puzzle to secure and enhance the city's future Civic will need to play an increasingly important role.

Canberra @ the Crossroads is the result of a week long visit to Canberra between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> May 2004 as part of the Festival of Creativity and Innovation. During the week I made six presentations to civic representatives, the business community, people concerned with learning and the learning city agenda, the arts community, a large group of school kids and a summary presentation to decision makers. In the period I had discussions with policy makers and was asked to summarize my impressions in a short document focusing on the future of Civic whilst reflecting on developments in cities in other parts of the world as a means of fostering debate. The opinions expressed represent the views of an outsider, interested in Canberra's future yet without deep knowledge of the city.

For a recent publication called 'Riding the Rapids: Urban Life in an Age of Complexity' I interviewed 30 key thinkers in the UK to assess what they saw as the main determinants of our urban futures. This leads me to believe that Canberra has significant prospects. 'Riding the Rapids' concludes that a major faultline in cities will be the battle between a narrow economic rationality and environmental ethics which is why this report highlights the potential of 'green urbanism' as a means of overcoming this apparent battleground. In addition there is an increasing disenchantment with gigantic size, endless sprawl and the desire for contained,

compact settlements with strong identities and easy access. People are increasingly preferring smaller cities so Canberra's settlement pattern has some of the positive features people are looking for. For this reason Canberra stands at a crossroads particularly if it is able to develop Civic as a more vibrant heart playing a central role to its surrounding settlements.

### **Is Canberra a city?**

Two views of the 'good urban life' often live side by side in Canberra. A desire for density and compaction that it is said generates liveliness and alternatively the right to sprawl so as to escape from a cramped world and not live cheek by jowl with neighbours. There is a sense that the latter is more predominant so strongly determining Canberra's self definition as a place of self-containment, tranquillity and domesticity. Yet at the same time many of the young and enthusiastic find this insufficiently challenging and even boring. This creates a vicious cycle, whereby perceptions of the city especially by outsiders reinforce themselves: A place of public institutions and public servants, increasingly untrue, without drive and excitement. As a consequence Canberra appears unattractive to sufficient numbers of cutting edge companies, which in turn leaves the young with the sense that they have little option but to leave.

**Can this momentum be shifted** and if so what role does Civic have to play? Canberra has been at the forefront of planning since its inception. It represents various ideals of planning 'the good city' over the last 80 years: Ideas of space, the civic realm, the separation of functions, how transport should work or the notion of balanced community. Much has already been written on Canberra's planning record without the need for repetition here – and the result is impressive in parts. Yet in standing back and reflecting 'where next?' questions emerge, these include: Is Canberra a city in the sense commonly understood? Is it in fact a park with a series of built up hubs. Or is it a set of dispersed settlements connected by expansive road systems that meet in an administrative core and set of national icons such as parliament or the cultural institutions. These icons are placed thoughtfully like artworks in a garden. Some icons like the parliament are part of the daily life of Canberra and Civic as support activities are based in the core. Others such as the museums probably connect less intensely into the core. This has a certain quality, but is one of these qualities 'urbanity'? Is urbanity important and what is urbanity? In assessing the future landscape of cities, their role and vitality and what makes places successful that quality is crucial. The essence of urbanity is:

- How the physical setting of a place encourages transaction, exchange and communication between a city's diverse potentials and viewpoints in order to foster economic and social interaction. The interaction between the physical structure and activity base can create a dynamic that helps build various forms of capital: economic, social and cultural. These interactions in principle can encourage both a culture of liveliness and creativity because ideas, initiatives

and projects are discussed, argued over and negotiated, deals are done and projects launched.

A place whose heart operates largely 9-5 and closes down once offices and shops shut does not have urbanity. It appears dead after hours and is not using its potential beyond the prescribed 8 hours. Nor does a place with a majority of buildings that do not 'speak to the street' at ground floor level. The same is true where segments of the core are harshly segmented off from each other such as learning, living, shopping and offices. This describes the experience of Civic for many.

This does not mean that creativity only happens in lively urban settings. Creative impulses may occur in a research lab, an isolated office park or suburban backwater or in the quiet domesticity of one's front room. Yet the city core has a special role to play as a zone of transaction, stimulation and meeting place.

Encouraging urbanity has implications. It involves an element of surprise, uncertainty and even at times a sense of danger. It requires policies to address conflicting uses such as apartment living and problems created by the evening economy such as noise. Getting the level of urbanity right hangs often in a balance between order and disorder.

### **Green urbanism**

What planning paradigm could bring the differing views of Canberra's future together? There is the idea that Canberra represents an ideal of the city in nature surrounded by parklands with allusions to sustainable development, even though its spread operates against sustainability. On the other hand there is an understanding that urbanity matters and that urbanity's essence could best be represented in Civic.

The idea of '**green urbanism**' is a conceptual framework that can encapsulate a set of seemingly disparate ideas that chime with Canberra's objectives. 'Green' and 'urbanism' at first sight seem like a contradictory pair. Yet this gives the slogan a potential power because it jolts the imagination. At its best urbanism can align with sustainability. Density and compaction can lead to effective resource use as walking and cycling trips increase and car use declines. Yet urbanism per se does not imply resource conscious use in terms of building construction methods or materials used. This has to be driven by will, policy and the regulations and incentives regime. In Brindabella Business Park Canberra's Civic has a prime example of what can be done, which is both a benchmark as it raises the stakes and is a competitive challenge to Civic. Whilst initially marginally more expensive to construct its urban design quality and environmental tag has given it a superior market position. If Canberra's attempts to create a lively hub at the core are to succeed in attracting wider business and accommodation markets it needs a set of unique selling points that fits with perceived quality of life indicators. 'Greenness' is a key indicator. The frequent problem is that 'greenness' in the physical environment cannot be seen and 'green grass' or parklands too often stand as a proxy for sustainability, although in the

Australian context it may be precisely the opposite (unless the grass is made to stay green sustainably). The ACT government has focused on sustainable development yet it is not tangible or sharply enough communicated so that everybody knows what the objective entails in detail and what greenness could look like in the physical environment.

Civic could set itself up as a **world model of sustainable urbanism**. This would flow with Canberra's history of being a leader in planning (and implementation). It will require Canberra to communicate strategically by making sustainability visible on the ground that may at first sight seem superficial and irrelevant to the purists. Yet its psychological power can be great. Brindabella at the airport signals greenness, although it may be necessary to signal the business park's green intent iconically and without wordy or worthy explanations so the visitor realizes they are entering 'green Canberra'. By this means Brindabella helps the perception of the rest of Canberra as first impressions count and linger so providing an interpretative key to the experiences that follow. For example, the subsequent green route from the airport to Civic is likely to be perceived by the uninitiated as positively sustainable.

The arrival then in Civic needs to **reinforce this impression in multiple ways**. Fountains should clearly signal they are recycling water, which they already do; buildings with green credentials should spell out through signage what they are saving in resource use and costs (and by implication send a message to neighbouring buildings with lower standards) thus creating a competitive environment around sustainability; recycling areas should be placed strategically, visibly and be created with an artistic touch. Schemes like free bikes should be available or any other means that signal iconically that Civic is different. This includes greening blank walls (implemented in green conscious ways) or having a long term plan to solarize Civic which has immense power to communicate ambition as would waterproofing Civic or installing large screens that highlight existing pollution levels and the ACT's targets. Combined these initiatives push ambition and aspiration and it involves operating at the subliminal level to get the green message across. This would encourage citizens and organizations to be even more inventive.

Significantly the green agenda is a business sector in its own right, which has consistently grown over the last decade given increases in demand and the raft of innovations and services that are required to be invented. Thus the Civic agenda can tie into economic development and university research goals and the creation of a green cluster, which are more likely to base themselves in a city sympathetic to their aims, especially if Civic sets itself up as an experimentation ground.

The long term overall effect would be to reposition Civic as a very special hub. Clearly at the outset the green agenda will need a kickstart from the public sector. Yet Canberra is one of the few Australian cities with public assets to act as role models or with which it can trade planning gain agreements to pursue its broader objectives before the market kicks in and high green standards become a day to day part of policy. The attractiveness of green thinking to the young is well documented and

would create reasons for people to stay with possible spin-offs for company relocation, given that companies increasingly follow people rather than people companies.

Measuring and evaluating the efficacy of a 'green urbanism' requires a more sophisticated indicator system that balances hard and softer measures. Such a system should be set up at the outset. It would need to track issues such as: whether the strategy is attracting key talent to stay; whether it has an impact on new inhabitants to Civic; whether Canberra's perception externally is changing; whether it affects potential relocating companies; whether green companies are interested in the city as well as hard indicators such as job increases and the like.

### **Civic's urbanity**

The particular urbanism for Civic highlighted requires various shifts in focus largely concerned with bending the market to public good objectives. It requires a shift in planning from a focus on hard to soft infrastructure, specifically to enable the soft infrastructure of Civic to unfold. Soft infrastructure concerns how people feel and fulfil ambition in a place; their networks of communications; the overall ambience and atmosphere. This means hard infrastructure (roads and buildings) need to be assessed in terms of how they foster or deter interaction or make people feel psychologically. For example, does the width of a road or the set backs affect a person's mental geography so they feel the distance to the opposite side is unbridgeable. This does not come naturally to the architecturally, land use or engineering minded. Thus decision making teams need these additional skills which can either be acquired through training or through specialists who also require the appropriate authority to be heard.

ACT has already determined that Civic should become a mixed use hub of work, living, learning and leisure pursuits. This implies certain characteristics for Civic's development, including:

- Encouraging the development of Civic so it becomes more a zone where interaction, linkage and synergy take place, so fostering a discussion culture. In this way the user would feel Civic is a learning resource.
- Designing hard infrastructure in order to encourage a lively public realm so that buildings 'speak to the street' and roads do not stretch space too far making interactions decline.

Pre-existing decisions make those goals difficult and in part need to be unwound. For example, undergraduate and mature students are potential regenerators of Civic either as participants in Civic life to increase its liveliness socially and economically or as inhabitants. Yet student accommodation is as far as is possible from Civic – a 15minute walk which makes casual interchange between student and Civic life more difficult exacerbated by surface car parking and general ugliness at the transition

point. The recently announced student accommodation on the Civic side is a step in the right direction. Ideally student and Civic life should inextricably intermesh with ladders of opportunity provided for students to cascade into career accommodation ranging from start up units to sites suitable for progression. The spin-off benefits are likely to outweigh problems especially if Civic accommodation is targeted at mature students.

The image benefits are likely to be substantial as Canberra is still seen as dowdy and even worthy (and the green tag could exacerbate that, which is why the green agenda needs to be projected with verve and style) yet the focus on projecting Canberra as a centre for young entrepreneurs conveys an energizing feel. In the context of companies inventing green products and services the worthy feel should dissipate as it is essentially a high tech sector. Indeed the green sector is but one opportunity for growth. Others include the creative industries and well-being sectors, which in part have an overlap. For example, there is the design component to product development and environmental monitoring devices use the new media extensively.

By concentrating additionally on developing a 'discussion culture' possible reinforcement effects can be created. This might mean shifting the focus of Canberra's cultural strategy towards debate and conversation (and clearly seeking to do this with imagination and an artistic twist). This would broaden out notions, for example, of festival towards say a festival of inventions so that a culture of entrepreneurship is fostered. This would be part of an approach to 'make the invisible visible' and especially re-valuing invention and creation. This takes the focus of the festivals of ideas that exist in Adelaide and Brisbane one step further and could position Canberra as 'a doing place'. Thinking through how inventions and entrepreneurship can be imaginatively projected is a challenge the artistically minded might focus on. Here the cafes, restaurants, shops and other existing venues can be seen as part of a much broader array of provision rather than focusing exclusively on flagship venues. Civic then becomes an open stage. This approach chimes well with those who believe traditional arts festivals need to be reassessed.

The implications of this thinking has significant implications on the physical environment. It implies that urban design guidelines might be reassessed to ensure there are active street frontages; that green thinking is embedded in any future developments; that green retrofitting is encouraged and crucially that the car is seen as a guest rather than the driver of development so giving pedestrians the sense that as a matter of course they have priority. The Kingston Foreshore development could act as a model. This might mean that single storey buildings heights in the shopping area are reviewed so that living over the shop becomes a reality. Equally traffic in Northbourne Avenue near the Sydney and Melbourne buildings could be radically calmed so it feels like a new square for Civic.

## **Recommendations**

The comments above can be framed into recommendations, these are:

- **Risk** Re-assess and re-view existing risk policy and the risk criteria of each professional discipline concerned with Canberra's city making. Are existing guidelines and ways of operating obstructing opportunities and do they foster or hinder the development of Civic as a vibrant and vital hub?
- **Green urbanism** Assess what green urbanism can mean for Canberra and use Civic as the experimentation ground. Define the principles, strategy and tangible and visible actions to project his theme.
- **Zone of interaction** Assess development proposals and initiatives in terms of whether they encourage and foster interaction and synergy between the various communities in the core, such as students, business, residents or visitors.
- **Embed the university into Civic's life** Encourage initiatives that mesh university with Civic, for example in terms of accommodation, relocating departments into Civic, setting up incubators or other office accommodation and lower cost retail outlets. For example, the new library perhaps should have been located at Civic West as a joint public and university library so creating interaction between the public at large and university life to the benefit of both parties.
- **Increase levels of collaboration** In order to develop the art of city making the need for collaboration has become a cliché and mantra of the age. How well does Canberra do in this respect? Are the different stakeholders in Civic aligning themselves in the context of a bigger vision? How well connected are the public sector, university, retail and business worlds? How well do the hard and soft infrastructure professionals connect? For example, do transport planners and those who know about social dynamics and the psychology of urban life work together?
- **Re-think road infrastructure** within the concept of the 'car as a guest' rather than as the driver of development.
- **Re-value assets** The Melbourne and Sydney buildings are the major heritage assets of Canberra, that lie somewhat forlorn. Their inner courtyards are an embarrassment to Canberra, which could be significant venues in their own right. Potentially with significant traffic claming in Northbourne Avenue this nexus could become a Civic hub as well as an attraction.
- **Attracting visitors** Consider how Civic could become a destination and what the key attractors might be, such as Sydney and Melbourne. What reasons can be created for visitors to come to Civic? How would visitors be welcomed?

- Re-view cultural policy      Is the cultural policy essentially an arts policy? Does this matter? In the context of Civic's vision of itself is this sufficient to invigorate Civic? Does the policy encourage a discussion culture between different sectors about the future of Civic?
- Indicators      Develop an indicator set that measures Civic's progress both in hard and soft terms. This would not only include increases in residents, job created or property values, but also more qualitative data such as perceptual studies of different groups (inside and outside Canberra) as to how they feel about Civic, as well as tracking talent in Civic or levels of liveliness.