

Garden City Values and Principles

Design Considerations for Residential Development
in Inner North and South Canberra

March 2008



ACT Planning &
Land Authority

Foreword

This purpose of this publication is to provide advice to developers, and to the community, on how redevelopment, in the Residential Core Areas of Canberra's older suburbs, can be designed to be complementary to the residential character and amenity of these suburbs.

When preparing the Neighbourhood Plans for Canberra's inner north and south suburbs, considerable concern was expressed in regard to the form and appropriateness of the redevelopment occurring. In approving these Neighbourhood Plans the then Minister for Planning Mr Simon Corbell, recognized that there was a need to articulate what established the Garden City character of these areas and how the new developments could be designed to respect this character. The Minister instructed the ACT Planning and Land Authority to prepare a document that would help to inform proponents of redevelopment and residents of how 'complimentary and sympathetic design' could be achieved.

The older inner north and south suburbs of Canberra are perhaps the best examples of how the principles of the Garden City movement were applied in Australia. Clearly, it is important to retain the essential quality of these suburbs, however, it is simply not feasible to 'freeze' or preserve these suburbs. The change has to be managed. To effectively achieve this it is necessary to understand what issues and reasoning informed the early design of the street, the block and dwelling, in order to identify how the pattern can be reinterpreted to resolve contemporary issues.

This publication cannot address all of the issues associated with managing change but does identify how well considered site and architectural design can, not only create sympathetic redevelopment, but also contribute to our understanding of our Garden City heritage.



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Introduction

Canberra's inner north and south suburbs were set out at a time when the planners and architects for the new Australian Capital considered it important to establish an aesthetic of balance, light and space – an aesthetic that evoked a desirable lifestyle. To create this, they turned to the design theory current at the time and that was guiding the new town developments in America and Europe – the Garden City Movement.

Borne out of the need to establish safe, healthy living environments for the expanding working class of the late 19th and early 20th Centuries, the Garden City movement aspired to combine the best elements of town and country life. Clearly, this aligned with the objectives of Canberra's early planners in regard to creating a spacious city and so they embraced the principles, setting out broad streets, more generous house blocks and ensuring that the vistas to parks and hills were maintained.

The result of this early planning is that today, Canberra's older suburbs are prized for the residential amenity they offer with their wide, tree-lined verges, mature gardens and proximity to Civic. Of course, it is precisely because of this amenity, that they are subject to the pressure of redevelopment and a fresh set of challenges arising from our aging population, differing lifestyle choices and climate change.

In 2003 the ACT Government introduced the Garden City provisions as a variation to The Territory Plan. These provisions recognised firstly, that given the changes in our population and lifestyle, there is a demand for an alternative dwelling that is still in a suburban setting but is not a single house with its larger attendant garden, and secondly; that if redevelopment continued to be allowed to occur extensively through a suburb, then the character and amenity of the whole suburb could be compromised.

While the Garden City provisions have ensured that multi-unit redevelopment, is restricted to the residential core areas, it is still important that in the older Canberra suburbs, this redevelopment is designed in a manner that respects the essential character of these suburbs, while responding to contemporary values, building technologies and more sustainable environmental design.

Because the residential character of a suburb must change over time – as trees grow, as architectural tastes and styles change – this publication sets out the spatial relationships between

The Street;
The Block; and
The Dwelling;

that have been underpinned by the values of the Garden City movement. By articulating these values and relationships in a set of objectives and principles there is an opportunity for contemporary design to reinterpret these and so retain the essential qualities of our older Garden City suburbs.

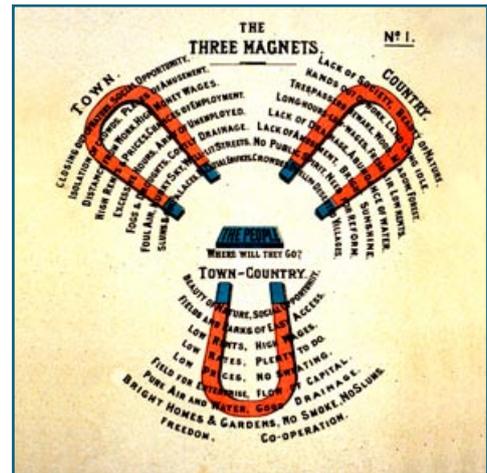
The Garden City Movement

... by so laying out a Garden City that, as it grows, the free gifts of Nature - fresh air, sunlight, breathing room and playing room - shall be still retained in all needed abundance. (Ebenezer Howard 1902)

The Garden City movement had its origins in 19th Century England where movement of people from the country to the cities placed pressure on the urban environment particularly in the industrial areas where living conditions were bleak and unhealthy.

At the time Ebenezer Howard, English town planner and figurehead of the Garden City movement, started to formulate his Garden City ideal.

The Garden City ideal sought to raise the standard of health and comfort for factory workers, through providing a living environment that combined the best elements of town and country life. In 'The Three Magnets' diagram Howard identified the beneficial elements of both country and town lifestyles and sought to replicate them in his Garden City ideal.



Three Magnets Diagram

The key values underpinning the Garden City ideal can be summarised as follows:

Country lifestyle

Appreciation of the beauty of nature and a high level of residential amenity.

Commerce and trade

Access to services, facilities and commerce.

Town lifestyle

Access to safe, pleasant housing as well as the opportunity for social interaction and the opportunity to participate in the community.

The Canberra Garden City Experience

Canberra, where the garden city influence became most apparent in the 1920s, was destined to be Australia's best expression of the garden city ideal ... (Freestone 1989:115)

Howard's Garden City Ideal was not as relevant in Australia in the early 20th Century given the smaller population, the space and in general a better living standard. Never the less, Australian planners were influenced by English ideas and, to a lesser extent American planning thought and they adapted the Garden City principles to suit the local conditions. The Australian experience was more about the idea of the garden suburb, rather than the garden city.

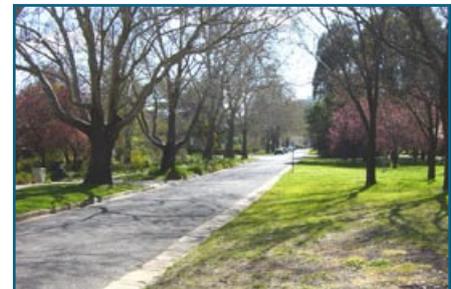
In Australia, the principles and values of the Garden City movement are most closely identified with Canberra. Whilst the development of Canberra has been influenced by the planning imperatives of the day, planners have always had regard to the fundamental values of the Garden City Movement.

1911 Griffin's Canberra

Walter Burley Griffin's 1912 plan for Canberra used the Garden City planning principles to underpin the design of the residential areas. The Griffins believed that these principles, with the emphasis on people participating in society, having good access to parks and to the workplace were fundamental to an emerging democratic nation. Accordingly the Griffin's laid out terrace houses that fronted parks and residential streets that allowed people to walk to 'trolley buses' that would be running up and down the main avenues. This concept built on the American experience and development of Garden City planning.

1921 The Federal Capital

John Sulman, who as chairman of the Federal Capital Advisory Committee was responsible for implementing Griffin's plan, took an approach to the garden suburbs of Canberra that was more English in its origin. Sulman largely ignored Griffin's subdivision pattern with its smaller allotments and emphasis on the public realm – the parks and streets. Despite being advised from many quarters that the large number of single storey cottages he was building in Canberra were wasteful and should be balanced with two-storey attached and semi-detached houses, Sulman held to providing individual cottages on generous blocks of land. In his view, trees and gardens were to dominate and there should be no back lanes or front fences.



1927 Parliament moves to Canberra

Permanent housing was needed for the public servants and their families. The government housing developed was of differing sizes to suit various incomes. They were designed on 'modern, aesthetic and economic lines' that evoked a 'desirable lifestyle' with plenty of sunshine and 'relaxed outdoor living'. The earliest Canberra dwellings had details and external finishes that were consciously decorative. The dwellings are visually attractive, cohesive and well-executed examples of traditional architectural styles.



1945 Post World War II development

In the post war years development of Canberra's suburbs continued the housing types proposed by Sulman. Large blocks with strong definition of the street and large private open spaces at the front and back of blocks. Shortages of materials and labour after the Second World War brought a wide range of more austere house types to Canberra. The dwellings of the National Capital Development Commission were much more modest, and are best referred to as 'background' buildings to the principle activities of living, working and relaxing in a pleasant landscaped environment.



1958 Suburban Planning by NCDC

From the late 1950's Canberras planners developed neighbourhoods based on Radburn planning principles. Suburbs featured large blocks with street access for cars and open space corridors providing pedestrian links to community facilities such as local centres and schools. The urban woodland character of the streets displayed less definition between public realm and open space on blocks. Existing mature native trees were retained as significant elements of the streetscape. Medium density housing was characterised by the large areas of landscaped open space on blocks for communal recreation.



1960's and 1970's Canberra's New Towns

Houses were no longer sited for street effect but for economy of excavation on sloping sites so that the streetscapes were more broken up. Streets were narrowed and laid out in curvilinear forms, with roll-back kerbs and no footpaths. For the first time in the national capital, it was fashionable to plant mainly native trees and plants, and lawns disappeared almost completely from front gardens. The changing street character, together with the emergence of walls of concrete bricks or blocks and lower roof pitches, meant that the image of the streets was no longer English but was clearly Australian.



1980's and 1990's Urban Intensification

Development of new suburbs focused on sustainable use of land and energy with greater attention to issues of orientation and solar access. Block sizes were reduced and landscape was predominantly in the street and open space realm of the suburbs. Less definition the boundary between public and private space was a continuing character of the streetscape and pedestrian paths were associated with the roadway rather than the front boundary of blocks. Planning controls for older suburbs closer to City and town centres provided for medium density housing and apartments.



Garden City Values – Contemporary Significance

The values that underpinned Ebenezer Howard's Garden City model are still as relevant to our community as they were over 100 years ago. Access to light and fresh air, to land for growing plants, keeping animals and for recreation are still significant. Similarly, it is still important in our contemporary society, that individuals can enjoy a level of prosperity, have access to healthy, safe housing, to services and employment and have a variety of opportunities for socialising and participating in the community.

Because these values are fundamental to an egalitarian society, they have remained at the 'core' of planning policy and strategies and have continued to influence the structure and layout of Canberra's urban environment. What have changed over time are people's aspirations and the exponential development of new technologies. The result is that as our lifestyles, tastes and use of new building designs and materials have changed so has the visual character of the suburbs. Reid, Griffith and the other early suburbs of Canberra have a very different character to the suburbs developed after the mid 1960s but the structure of street, block and dwelling are essentially the same.

Contemporary planning policies and strategies now have to deal with challenges resulting from an ageing but active population, a highly mobile workforce that also demands flexibility in the working regimes, greater personal liquidity and of course the environmental costs that accrue with climate change - high energy costs, prolonged drought, bushfires and floods. Clearly, in responding to these challenges and our community's differing expectations there will be a further change in the form and character of Canberra's urban areas. Nevertheless, the Garden City values and the emphasis they place on social and environmental well being will still underpin how any new development recognises the essential layout and quality of Canberra's older suburban areas.

Applying the Values

The Garden City values can be encapsulated in objectives and expressed in design principles to guide redevelopment. This ensures that there is congruency with the existing character of the Canberra's inner suburbs but allows the new development to respond to contemporary challenges. As it is the layout and spatial structure of the suburb that is critical to achieving social and environmental amenity, these objectives and principles identify the spatial relationships between street, block and dwelling.

These principles are intended to provide practical guidance for those people interested in the design of redevelopment and moderate intensification for single dwellings, dual occupancies and small-scale residential unit developments in the Residential Core areas in Canberra's inner north and south suburbs – those areas that most epitomise the early Garden City planning models.

New development can offer contemporary living choices as well as being complementary and sympathetic to the character of the early Garden City suburbs by recognising and incorporating the original values that sought to promote human well-being in a visually pleasing landscape.

The Street

In the Garden City movement, the public realm and hence the street is fundamental to establishing a place for social interaction and setting the environmental quality and character of the suburb.

In the *Territory Plan* 'streetscape' is defined as 'the visible components within a street including the private land between facing buildings ...'. This encompasses the area of land between the building lines on either side of the street, and includes all that is visible from the public realm of the street: the form of the buildings, treatment of setbacks, fencing, trees, landscaping, driveway and street layout and surfaces, utility services and street furniture. In this arrangement the built form is an important, but not the dominant visual element. Dwellings are framed by the street and garden plantings and afford glimpses to more distant views.

New development in the established suburbs is to recognise the amenity that the earlier pattern of setbacks, front gardens and well-maintained verges provides to the residents and the community.

Garden City Value:

Access to safe, pleasant housing as well as the opportunity for social interaction and the opportunity to participate in the community.

Objective:

To enhance the street as a place that provides an opportunity for residents to casually meet or to stroll and is not just for vehicular access.

Design Principles:

Dwellings are designed to address the street with prominent front entrances and places to sit and observe the street such as porches and terraces.

Dwellings overlook the street to promote casual street surveillance and safety, and opportunities for residents to engage with the local community.

Direct and convenient access is provided from the street, via the front garden to dwelling entries.

Parking on the verge is discouraged.



The Street

Garden City Value:

There is an appreciation of the beauty of nature and a high level of residential amenity.

Objective:

To establish in the street a distinctive, harmonious setting, that recognises the features of the existing landscape and allows for the appreciation of space, light and seasons.

Design Principles:

Footpaths adjacent to the property line are to be continuous over the width of driveways.

New driveways are to be located to one side of the frontage, of single lane width and maintain the existing spacing in the street

Existing paired driveways with adjacent dwellings are to be maintained.

Existing street trees are retained or if it necessary replaced an advanced tree of the same species.

Verge planting and character is to match the existing verge character.

Provide variety in the front setbacks of dwellings to avoid the perception of a 'wall of buildings dominating the street.

In varying the front setbacks, new dwellings are not to be sited any further forward than any established building for that side of the street in which it is located.

Establishing 'front gardens' that enhance the character of the street.

Retain views from the street of distant treed hills and of large trees behind.

Waste and service areas are not to be visible from the street.



The Block

The house located with space between it, the street and its neighbours is at the heart of garden suburb planning. This afforded light and air to every house and meant that the residents had access to land to support various household activities, such as growing vegetables, drying clothes, playing with the children or entertaining the neighbours.

The block is a key element in establishing a place for social interaction and further enhances the environmental quality of the suburb.

In the early Canberra suburbs, the block was developed with a front garden, a hedge often defining the front property line and a semi-private garden behind it. Garden areas behind the houses were used for private activities out of sight from the street and these backyards were mostly large enough for shade trees and extensive play areas.

The treatment of the block, not only influences the appearance of the building in the street but can also contribute to the well-being of the residents. Separation between neighbouring buildings and the street can facilitate good solar access, allows for the provision of gardens and/or service areas behind the building line and for the establishment of porches and front gardens that can be used for sitting reading, watching or talking with neighbours in the street.

New development must consider the opportunities that the block provides to integrate the site and building design and hence produce a good residential environment. In appraising the block for dual occupancy and multi-unit development the values and principles outlined below should assist in determining its suitability.

Garden City Value:

Access to safe, pleasant housing as well as the opportunity for social interaction and the opportunity to participate in the community

Objective:

To integrate the site development and the design of the dwellings to provide safe, useable private and communal open space that encourages residents to entertain, to garden and participate in other informal outdoor social and leisure activities.

Design Principles:

Each dwelling has ground floor access to private open space, which is useable in dimensions and located for adequate solar access.

Communal open spaces are to have equity of access from all dwellings and have a clear function and purpose, either for circulation, utility or leisure activity.



The Block

Garden City Value:

There is an appreciation of the beauty of nature and a high level of residential amenity.

Objective:

To site building on the block so as to retain the spatial character of the suburb and to respond to the existing natural features on the block, on adjoining properties or in the street.

Design Principles:

The front building line of dwellings are stepped so as to avoid establishing the appearance of a continuous facade.

Front gardens are to be soft planted and provide connection between the public realm of the street and the private realm of the dwelling

Rear setbacks are to maintain a reasonable separation of buildings and to allow sufficient space for deep root planting for larger trees.

Driveways are to be understated in appearance and cross front garden areas at right angles.

Garages facing the street are to be located to the side of the building frontage

Retain, where practical, the existing vegetation on the block and protect from damage during demolition and construction.

Landscape design responds to good water sensitive design principles incorporating plants that will tolerate frost and low water use.

Paving is to fall to planter beds and be permeable to avoid excessive runoff of stormwater.



The Dwelling

The appearance of those parts of buildings that can be readily seen from public spaces, or from adjoining properties, impacts upon streetscapes. The emphasis in building design should be on the components that affect the streetscape: how a dwelling is sited and designed to face or address a street, building height, roof pitch, articulation, detailing, form, materials, colours, textures and identity.

Early dwellings in Canberra's garden suburbs were sited on the blocks primarily for street effect, rather than for northern orientation and good solar gain. Redevelopment in these older areas provides an opportunity to create housing that responds to Garden City values, that is attractive, compatible with the existing streetscape and is solar efficient.

Good residential building design has economic, environmental, cultural and social benefits for the individual and the community. To achieve this the internal and external building design should be well planned and detailed, responsive to peoples changing lifestyles and to the unique challenges of the Canberra environment. In suburban areas undergoing change, good building design also means recognising the desirable elements of the locality and contributing constructively to the desired future character of the street.

Garden City Value:

Access to safe, pleasant housing as well as the opportunity for social interaction and the opportunity to participate in the community

Objective:

To provide a greater diversity of dwellings that can meet a variety of lifestyles contribute to a balanced, inclusive community whilst maintaining privacy and a sense of personal security.

Design Principles:

Dwelling options and sizes provide for varying lifestyles.

Floor plans and construction provide for some modification to suit a residents changing needs.

The layout and configuration of dwellings minimise overlooking of adjacent living areas and private open spaces.

Separate ground floor entries to each to unit provide a harmonious connection between the street and the residence.

Good access to secure storage for bicycles, garden tools and other bulky items is provided.



The Dwelling

Garden City Value:

There is an appreciation of the beauty of nature and a high level of residential amenity.

Objective:

To recognise and respond to the existing and desired street character with the scale form and detailing of the building.

Design Principles:

Analyse the existing composition and grouping of houses and gardens. If an existing articulation of wall faces or rooflines contributes to a successful streetscape, a similar composition and palette of materials should be used.

Use familiar forms, materials and details.

The composition of the street façade identifies individual dwellings.

Dwelling entries are visible from the street.

The windows may be extensive in area, but openings and doors should be of a residential scale.

Landscape elements can reduce the visual impact of a new building and enhance environmental performance.

Retention of an established front hedge can similarly assist in adding visual interest to the overall architectural composition.

Entries to car parking are not located on the dominant or most forward façade of a new building.

Entries to basement garages are well recessed and scarcely visible to the casual passer-by.



The Dwelling

Objective:

To provide more sustainable dwellings that respond to Canberra's seasons and that promote a greater personal well-being.

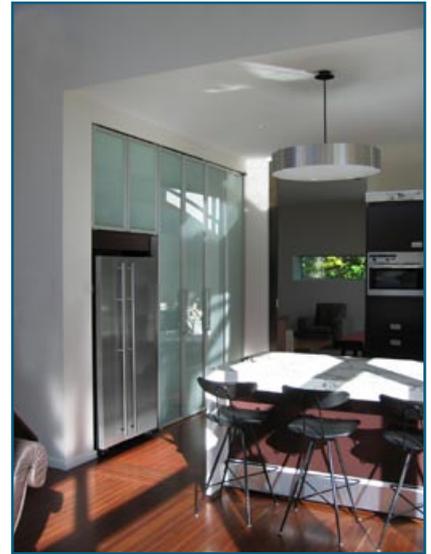
Design Principles:

Design should consider adequate solar access. Solar access 20 degrees either side of solar north should be provided for living areas.

Well designed roof overhangs, shading devices, window types and sizes will assist in allowing the entry of sun in winter and excluding the hottest summer sun.

The dwelling design utilises prevailing winds, cooling breezes and ventilation for amenity of residents.

Shade trees can reduce reliance on cooling systems in summer, particularly for north facing rooms with deciduous trees.



Development Applications

The ACT has had the benefit of a long and consistent application of quality design in city planning and in suburban developments. This has resulted in unique suburbs that are enjoyed by residents, their friends and visitors to our city. Maintaining the natural environment and the amenity of our suburbs is critical to maintaining our quality of life.

This publication is intended to help home-owners, designers and builders incorporate Garden City principles into residential development proposals, with advice provided on how the principles may be applied at the level of the streetscape, the block and the dwelling. It is recommended reading for anyone contemplating residential building work in the inner north and south suburbs, and in particular within the RZ2 Suburban Core Zone.

The design principles provided in this publication are not provided as development controls and do not constitute matters which are to be taken into account in assessing a development application. However, all development applications must comply with the controls specified in the Territory Plan which is available from the ACT Legislation register at <http://www.legislation.act.gov.au/ni/2008-27/current/default.asp>

For more information on planning and development in the ACT:

- Visit the ACT Planning and Land Authority Customer Service Centre at 16 Challis Street in Dickson
- Visit the web site at www.actpla.act.gov.au
- Phone the Authority Customer Service Centre on 6207 1923
- Email the Authority Customer Service Centre at actpla.customer.services@act.gov.au

Credits

Project Team

Pegrum and Associates Architects

ACT Planning and Land Authority

- Urban Design Section
- Communications Section

Images

Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation

Pegrum and Associates Architects

ACT Planning and Land Authority

- Urban Design Section

Further Reading

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