

AN IMMODEST PROPOSAL

Is prevention better than a cure? Is Canberra?

— *The Joyful Mysteries*, John Forbes

One hundred years ago in 1911 Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony, two Chicago-based architects, won a competition to design Australia's new capital city, Canberra. It was to be the century's first modern capital city, 'a democratic vision of the garden city'ⁱ that the couple designed whilst on their honeymoon, almost failing to meet the competition's deadline. While their proposal has since been appreciated as a synthesis of 'City Beautiful' and 'Garden City' ideals, a culmination of nineteenth-century theory and practice,ⁱⁱ there are numerous aspects of the Canberra plan that do not accord with either paradigm. For example, there is the influence of the area's topography on the geometrical organisation and location of centres, and the suburban roads' capillary-like emanation from the carefully arranged regional and city centres, whose presence clearly point to a nuanced and site-specific engagement with city planning. The three centres are unified by three axes: the Land Axis, the Municipal Axis and the Water Axis, which form a triangle — the pinnacle of which is Parliament House.

The Griffins' vision for Canberra has been criticised as being a 'wolf in sheep's clothing',ⁱⁱⁱ which overlays strongly nationalist symbolism — the objects at the poles of the axes being Parliament House and War Memorial — with decorative elements drawn perhaps from Beaux Arts Baroque.^{iv} Thus, the citizen is coaxed into complicity with an aggressive nationalism, marked by objects such as the Captain Cook Memorial Jet (1970), which squirts a column of water 140 metres into the air in commemoration of the 'discovery' of the continent, and the National Carillon, a bell tower on Aspen Island that was Britain's gift to Canberra on its 50th anniversary.

In this way, the Griffins stood against the antipathy towards decoration and ornamentation characteristic of the modern industrial tendencies of the time. Their contemporary designs caused controversy, and the battles over national identity politics led to Griffin walking away from his post as Federal Director after seven years knowing that little of his original plan would remain intact. His fraught legacy is commemorated in *Asspen Island* by an inter-generational mix of artists, many of whom are associated with Australian post-formalism, a particular breed of artists Billy Gruner has described as 'gently-spoken rebels against contemporary art norms',^v and secessionists whose practices have alternately developed within what has sometimes been a hostile arts environment. This situation has led to a somewhat hermetic exchange between artists in what has been formalised into a dialect — a dialect of Australian post-formalism.

Justin Andrews, a younger member of the movement, writes:

- A reference to history within an artwork is a system.
- A reference to multi-generational dialogue is a system.
- A reference to formalism within an artwork is a system.
- The process of re-interpreting (the idea of) representation is a system.

The process of engaging with the monochrome (as a readymade form) is a system.
The process of interpreting an exhibition (as a combination of systems) is a system.^{vi}

If this were a New Formalist poem, these reductive formulas would probably be decried by purist formalists for being not systematic enough, for frivolity evident in each line being measured out in coffee spoons that keep changing size. In its own domain, it reads as both a manifesto for the quietly spoken post-formalist cause, as well an acknowledgment of the indebtedness of each practice to those that came before. On the centenary of the Griffins' planning of Canberra, *Aspen Island* strikes a similar note between reverence for the original plan, and rebellion against it.

ⁱ Freek Colombijn, "Canberra: A Sheep in Wolf's Clothing" *International Journal of Urban & Regional Research*, Vol. 22, Issue 4, 1998, p. 566.

ⁱⁱ Peter Proudfoot, "The symbolism of the crystal in the planning and geometry of the design for Canberra" *Planning Perspectives*, Vol. 11, 1996, p. 230.

ⁱⁱⁱ Colombijn, "Canberra: A Sheep in Wolf's Clothing," p. 566.

^{iv} Proudfoot, "The symbolism of the crystal in the planning and geometry of the design for Canberra", p 248.

^v Billy Gruner, "Post-Formalism in Recent Australian Art,"

http://www.sno.org.au/Images/Text/gruner_postformalism.pdf (accessed 15 October 2011).

^{vi} Justin Andrews, artist statement, *Systems* exhibition catalogue, September 2011.