

Essay for Capital Magazine

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I have given up defending the city in which I live from attacks by outsiders. In the past I might have agreed with them, just to shut them up. To their 'What a boring place. I can't imagine why you live there!' I might reply 'I'm sure you're right, and I'll think about it.' That ended that part of the conversation.

But now, on the whole, I just shrug. I'm extraordinarily lucky to live in this beautiful, easy-to-get-round, harmonious and creative place. OK, we pay high rates, but then we get a lot for them. People pay high rates elsewhere too, and get much less. I know the city will continue to grow if our country does, and I think we can continue to keep all of its great assets if we think and plan well.

Why does it get such a knocking? There's one over-powering reason. The knockers almost universally come from other cities. Almost without exception, those cities are badly planned, expensive, noisy, chaotic and difficult to negotiate. In our own country Sydney is simply an urban disaster, and Melbourne, though topographically easier, is nonetheless very large. I took my grand-daughter from Frankston to the Werribee open-plains zoo, and we spent more time driving there and back than at the zoo itself.

The critics are simply used to other urban environments, and think their city is normal — even 'natural'. But the world's cities are not natural, even if they are normal. They are the evidence of failure to plan and keep the planning relevant. Everywhere those that have the resources are 'retro-fitting', doing today what should have been done generations ago. And now at such expense! No wonder those in regional NSW think these initials stand for 'Sydney, Newcastle and Wollongong'.

So, to the typical urban eye, Canberra appears 'wrong' and 'unnatural'. Where are the high-rises? Where are the giant neon signs on the tops of buildings? Why is the traffic congestion at peak hour so short? Where's the King's Cross equivalent? The answers are not obvious, so the quick assessment is that it is boring.

To appreciate Canberra properly you have to live in it, and make it your home. Before long the prejudiced scales drop from your eyes, and you begin to appreciate the light, the way in which the natural environment envelops you, the relative ease of living, and the much greater amount of time you have to devote to your own life.

Walter Burley Griffin, designed our national capital to be a city where ordinary people would have a beautiful environment in which to live and work. I bless him for it, every day.

22 July 2011