CAPITAL CONNECTIONS: AUSTRALIA, BRAZIL AND LANDSCAPES OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT / INTRODUCTION

Within the sphere of twentieth century urbanism, Australia and Brazil are most immediately linked by their mutual decisions to construct national capitals de novo. Sharing genesis as ‘political acts of faith’, the century’s new Australian (1912) and Brazilian (1957) capitals encompassed design enterprises aimed at codifying, projecting and physically accentuating visions of national identity. Neither Canberra (Camberra) nor Brasília was conceived in a vacuum. Although nearly half a century distances the two capitals, Brazil actually saw Australia’s capital building enterprise as an important precedent for its own Brasília endeavour. This study does not consider Canberra and Brasília through a typological or design genealogical lens. Alternatively, it is concerned with interpreting the symbolic content of the two capital layouts. Within this context, earlier scholarship has explored the socio-political dimension underpinning Canberra’s and Brasília’s designs. Enlarging upon these studies, this paper argues that shifting perceptions of and orientations to the indigenous landscape played a vital role in the construction of national identity at both Canberra and Brasília. In parallel, surveying the Australian and Brazilian quests to articulate and accentuate national identity re-illuminates a rich, albeit little known, dialogue between the two Southern Hemisphere nations.

GENESIS

The capital connections between Australia and Brazil, although most emphatic in the twentieth century, actually have a considerable history. The initial link was forged in 1787, when both nations were still colonies. That year, Captain Arthur Phillip famously sailed the ‘First Fleet’ to Australia and founded Sydney as the capital of England’s New South Wales Colony. Phillip’s flotilla called at Rio de Janeiro enroute and reached Australia in January the next year. One of his early tasks was to prepare the future city of Sydney’s layout. When conceptualising his plan, Phillip took cities of his own immediate experience as object lessons. Within this context, his first-hand urban knowledge was not limited to Great Britain and its possessions. Phillip’s earlier secondment to the

2 On Phillip see Fergusson (2010).
Portuguese navy (1774-1778), for instance, would prove of great import for the design of Australia’s foundational (and today largest) city. Arriving at Lisbon in 1775, Phillip encountered a ruinous city, one still recovering from a catastrophic earthquake twenty years earlier. Then in the midst of reconstructing the city, the Marquês de Pombal reconfigured its central Baixa quarter on a grid and focussed the precinct on a ‘revitalised Praça do Comércio, a major urban square fronting the River Tagus’. After calling at the Portuguese capital, Phillip next voyaged to Rio de Janeiro. Modeled after Lisbon, the Brazilian city also captured Phillip’s imagination. His urban vision for Sydney, as Diane Brand has carefully identified, ‘was heavily influenced by his experiences in Portugal and Brazil’. Emulating Lisbon and Rio de Janeiro, Phillip’s Sydney plan (1788) projected a waterfront square (sadly never realised) and ‘set aside a swathe of park space’ as the city’s ‘green heart’. Paradoxically, then, Portugal and Brazil, not ‘Mother England’, provided a formative source for Australian urbanism. Indeed, more than a century after Phillip founded the colony, one local town planner would identify Sydney’s ‘great rival in natural advantages’ to be none other than Rio de Janeiro.

**CANBERRA AND THE ‘MONUMENTALISATION’ OF THE BUSH**

Canberra’s origins can be traced to 1901, when six of Great Britain’s antipodean colonies, up until then autonomous, federated to form the Commonwealth of Australia. Ambition, if not quite resolve, to construct a national capital - later named Canberra- arose from within this ethos of political reconfiguration. However, on-going rivalry between the new Commonwealth’s two largest cities, Sydney and temporary national capital Melbourne, compelled it to construct a new capital de novo. Having adopted American precedent, the Australian constitution required the city be positioned within its own federal territory, not a state. Seven contested years later, in 1908 the Yass-Canberra district - inland from Australia’s eastern coast - in the state of New South Wales was selected. Next, the Commonwealth surveyor was instructed to determine the city’s specific site from a ‘scenic standpoint, with a view to securing picturesqueness, and with the object of beautification’. As these qualifications suggest, the capital building enterprise was as much a landscape design proposition as it was an architectural or engineering concern. In 1909, the surveyor selected a pastoral site within the broad valley of the Molongolo River as meeting these criteria. That the site was located roughly at an intermediate distance between Sydney and Melbourne also informed the choice; in turn, the desire for an inland capital was partly motivated by defensive concern. With the future capital’s site now fixed, the new nation was ready to contemplate the design of the city itself.

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3 ibid. Brand also notes, Phillip oriented Sydney’s streets and configured their width so as ‘to catch breezes’, a technique resonate with ‘traditional planning practices in the arid climates of the Iberian Peninsula’.
In 1911, a decade after its federation, Australia launched an international competition to secure a city plan. The next year, the plan of American landscape architect and architect Walter Burley Griffin (1876-1937) was selected from amongst 137 submissions as the winner. Although submitted in Walter’s name, the prize-winning entry was actually collaboratively designed with his wife and professional partner, Marion Mahony Griffin (1871-1961). Although conceived at a distance in their native Chicago, Walter and Marion Griffin’s entry was distinguished by its sensitive response to the site’s physical features, especially its rugged landforms and watercourse. Indeed, this attribute proved paramount to their design’s success. Organised on a cross-axial scheme, the plan fused geometric reason with picturesque naturalism. When negotiating the fit of their geometric template within the uneven terrain, the couple opted to venerate existing landforms. Hills, for instance, were not impediments to be erased, but ‘opportunities to be made the most of’. Divining a linear correspondence between the summits of four local mounts, the couple inscribed the alignment with a Land Axis. Anchored by Mount Ainslie at one end, the Land Axis extends some 25 kilometres to its other terminus, Mount Bimberi. The Molonglo River valley posed no less a design opportunity for the pair than did the site’s landforms. Accordingly, they delineated a Water Axis across its Land counterpart at a right angle, aligning it with the river course, now remade into a continuous chain of basins and lakes.

The future capital of what was then the twentieth century’s newest nation, of course, lacked the cultural artefacts and other monuments of human creation typical of Old World capitals. In compensation, the Griffins took the natural world as offering surrogates. By using Canberra’s hills and other landforms as axial determinants and visual foci of their heroically scaled Land Axis, for instance, the couple ennobled or sacralised the future city’s site. Through their design’s structural dialogue with the locale’s topographical idiosyncrasies, the Griffins appropriated the site itself as Australia’s primal, enduring monument. They had, in effect, fashioned a nascent national history from the continent’s ancient geology.

In complement with their landscape design strategy and in excess of the competition’s requirements, Walter and Marion also proposed a notional architectural scheme - a veritable palimpsest of global cultural references- for Canberra. Most remarkable was their unrealised proposal for a monolithic, planar Capitol building, situated atop the inner city’s highest hill (today site of Parliament House). A ceremonial building, the Capitol was to commemorate the achievements of the Australian people. Appearing to organically grow from the hill, the concrete structure was to have been capped by a ‘stepped pinnacle’ or ziggurat. For Walter, this form expressed ‘the last word of all the longest lived civilisations’ such as ‘Egypt, Babylonia, Syria, India, Indo-China, East Indies, Mexico or Peru’. This view revealed the larger symbolism of their architectural programme. Whilst Canberra’s landscape monumentalised the local, its architecture stylistically referenced and rendered legible the timeless global, lending the future capital a ‘trans-cultural’ patina of antiquity.

8 Griffin (1912): 9.
9 Griffin (1913): 68.
10 ibid.
Although largely unanticipated, the American couple’s design ideals proved compatible with Australian aesthetic sensibilities, especially notions of landscape beauty. Unlike Chicago’s increasingly urbanised hinterland, Australia remained the place where, as English novelist, poet and painter D H Lawrence assessed, ‘people mattered so little’. Partly owing to the spatial insignificance of its human occupation, Australia’s indigenous landscape - both actual and metaphorical - with its, again in Lawrence’s words, ‘age-unbroken silence’ was pre-eminent. Until the late eighteenth century, however, this landscape – known colloquially as ‘the bush’ – was popularly regarded as a melancholic or sombre obstacle to settlement. By the time of the Canberra competition, however, this perception had begun to evolve. Fuelled by sources such as landscape paintings, an idealised, pastoral image of the indigenous landscape with its distinctive eucalyptus trees was now gaining potency as a symbol of an inextricably ‘grounded’ Australian national identity. Through its comprehensive accentuation of the site itself, Walter and Marion’s design effectively valourised the local landscape as symbolic of a democratic national identity. Such democratic notions resonated with the fledgling nation’s aspirations and landscape sensibilities. The competition assessors possibly understood the Griffins’ design to be a celebration of the national landscape, owing to the significance it awarded the capital’s physical site. Marion Griffin compellingly evoked their design’s landscape imagery in a series of exquisite renderings infused with sepia and luminescent golden tonalities, in themselves similarly compatible as works of art.

The two American designers, however, were unaware of the Australian landscape’s increasingly nationalistic connotations. Instead, their impulse to monumentalise the natural world - along with registering Walter’s training as a landscape architect - was the couple’s prescriptive reaction to their American experience. At the turn-of-the-century, the Griffins’ native Chicago was metamorphosed by accelerating, largely unregulated urban and suburban expansion. The city’s formerly open natural and agricultural surrounds were being replaced with speculatively motivated city extensions and suburbs. In glaring contrast to this burgeoning metropolis and its indifference to the natural world, Australia beckoned the Griffins as an opportunity to perfect lessons learnt from America’s shortcomings; in their alternative capital, citizens would dwell in a monumentalised nature, an antipodean arcadia.

In 1914, Walter, accompanied by Marion, relocated from Chicago to take up a Commonwealth appointment to oversee Canberra’s construction. Once in Australia, the Griffins grew enraptured with the native flora and quickly advocated embellishing the future capital with it. There, along with its planting, the flora’s centrality was confirmed by, for instance, Walter’s use of botanical names to identify some of the protean city’s cartography of streets and suburbs. For Walter, as with the Australian painters before him, the indigenous landscape and its flora was central to the nation’s distinctiveness, emblematic of Australia as both place and nation. Foreshadowing Brazilian circumstance and despite the painters’ advocacy, however, not everyone

11 Lawrence (1995 [orig 1923]): 402.
12 See, for instance, Bonyhady (1985).
shared the émigré architect’s esteem for the native flora. Nonetheless, Griffin would prove undaunted in his effort to represent Australia by an idealised accentuation of its landscape.

Beginning Canberra’s detailed design, Griffin awarded priority to road layout and planting with local species. Buildings were to be constructed afterwards, carefully inserted within this structural template. His Canberra tenure, however, proved short-lived. Political antagonisms and the financial restraints posed by the World War soon thwarted the complete realisation of the couple’s design. Walter’s official association with Canberra ended controversially with the abolition of his position in 1920. Afterwards, his singular role was usurped by a succession of advisory bodies. Nonetheless, a version of the Griffins’ design was officially gazetted -enshrined in Commonwealth law- in 1925. The gazetted plan, however, reproduced only the couple’s street layout, omitting their design’s land-use and other structural elements. After the Griffins’ departure, the city’s construction continued, albeit slowly and only loosely in accordance with their plan.

THE GRIFFINS’ CANBERRA AND BRAZIL

In the opening decades of the twentieth century, the Canberra enterprise catalysed Australian professional scrutiny of overseas city building precedents, prompting critic George Taylor to publish *Town Planning for Australia*. Therein, he directed attention across the Pacific to Brazil. In 1894, the state of Minas Gerais, he reported, removed its capital from Ouro Preto and began constructing another on ‘virgin land’, Belo Horizonte (Beautiful Horizon). Only a decade later, some thirty thousand people resided in the city; it had also gained government and public edifices, ‘electric light, trams, theatres and other luxuries available’. Envisaging a similar future for germinal Canberra, Taylor offered the Brazilian example as overseas validation for Australia’s decision to build a capital *de novo*.

George Taylor, however, may not have been the first Australian to study the state capital; it was possibly known earlier to at least one Canberra competitor. At Belo Horizonte, urbanist Aarão Reis organized its streets on a chequerboard and then superimposed another boulevard grid at forty-five degrees to the first, creating a radial plan. Melbourne architect Alexander Macdonald also employed Reis’ technique in his competition submission. Although it was not officially promoted in Latin America, the Australian capital competition attracted a pair of entries from Mexico and Paraguay. One was received from Pedro Roveda, Mexico City, and another from John D Leckie, Villa Rica. The latter’s non-Hispanic surname raises the possibility that he might have been an Australian associated with the utopian *Colonia Nueva Australia*. As the plans were returned to their authors after the competition’s close, we have no knowledge of Roveda’s or Leckie’s actual designs. See Reps (1997): 397-398.

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13 The inclusion of native plants in ‘bush gardens’ did not gain currency until the post-war era. Up until then, Northern Hemisphere plants typically adorned Australian gardens. See Aitken (2010).
14 On Belo Horizonte, see Schmidt (1982).
16 One was received from Pedro Roveda, Mexico City, and another from John D Leckie, Villa Rica. The latter’s non-Hispanic surname raises the possibility that he might have been an Australian associated with the utopian *Colonia Nueva Australia*. As the plans were returned to their authors after the competition’s close, we have no knowledge of Roveda’s or Leckie’s actual designs. See Reps (1997): 397-398.
notice in 1917. That year a Santiago town planning text reproduced the Griffins’ layout, promoting it as ‘the last word on construction of cities’.  

For Australia and Brazil alike, 1927 was a portentous year, one that curiously saw Canberra’s Brazilian arrival. That May, Australia’s parliament finally opened in Canberra. Days later, the fledgling capital’s newspaper trumpeted Brazil’s similar decision to erect a purpose-built capital, leaving Rio de Janeiro ‘to prosper as a commercial city’. Brasília, however, would wait another three decades for a political champion to make it reality. Parliament’s opening also renewed media attention to the Griffins’ city plan. Only months later, a Columbian journal reproduced Canberra’s layout, assessing it as ‘the most splendid lesson for us in modern urbanism’. This account, along with the earlier Chilean publicity, offered an export conduit for the Griffins’ design and it apparently found its way to Brazil. In 1927 the Brazilian government retained French urbanist Donat-Alfred Agache to orchestrate monumental urban transformations at Rio de Janeiro. As with Canberra, that city gains grandeur not from concentrations of architectural magnificence, but from its spectacular landscape setting. Nonetheless, Agache was now to dynamite grand boulevards through and new building sites within its mountainous terrain. He was earlier, in an ethereal coincidence, one of the Griffins’ Canberra competition rivals, placed third in the contest. Polygonal geometries pervade his Rio de Janeiro proposals, suggesting that the Frenchman took backwards glances at the Griffins’ prize-winning plan for the Australian capital. In 1933, Brazil’s state of Goiás followed Minas Gerais’ lead and began a new capital de novo, named Goiânia. The nucleus of its layout distinctly resembles Canberra’s, which hardly seems a coincidence.

VANQUISHING THE JUNGLE AT BRASÍLIA

In 1955, Brazil elected Juscelino Kubitschek de Oliveira (1902-1976) its President. Branding his campaign ‘Fifty Years of Progress in Five’, Kubitschek pledged to finally realize Brazil’s long-standing vision to build Brasília. Unlike Australian circumstance, Brazilian interest in shifting its capital from coastal Rio de Janeiro to an interior locale was centuries old; even the future capital’s name was already embedded in the national psyche. That Brasília was to be an inland capital is also significant. Brazil’s population, mirroring Australia’s distribution, was ‘concentrated along the coast line’, leaving a ‘vacuum in the

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17 Valdés (1917). Canberra’s authors, however, were not identified.
19 Olano (1927) and (1930 [2nd ed]). France was the source of Olano’s knowledge of the Australian capital; the plan he reproduced appeared earlier in the French newspaper L’Illustration. See Henry A Tardent, ‘La Naissance D’une Capitale’, L’Illustration, no 4395 (28 May 1927): 550-553. Olano, as with the earlier Santiago text, also did not identify Canberra’s designers -although L’Illustration did. The writer has yet to comprehensively survey Latin American town planning literature of the period. It is possible, if not likely, there were other Canberra reports.
interior'. Consequently, Brasilia’s purpose was not exclusively governmental; the capital building enterprise was also integral to a larger regional plan to develop the nation’s interior. Underpinning the project, diplomat José Oswaldo de Meira Penna undertook a global study of national capitals, later published as Quando Mudam as Capitais (When Capitals are Moved) (1958); his scrutiny included Canberra, again bringing it – and, possibly for the first time, one of its authors – to local attention.

Brasilia, however, had been gaining momentum even before Kubitschek’s election. In 1955, the government had already selected, like its Australian counterpart, an inland plateau - then only sparsely populated and considered a cultural, if not actual, ‘wilderness’- as the site for its future capital. Unlike Canberra’s rugged terrain, Brasilia’s site is a comparatively level, vegetated with ‘savanna-esque’ cerrado. Roughly triangular in outline, the future city area had but two natural boundaries, the Bananal and Gamma Rivers, near their convergence into the Paranoá. The latter would soon be dammed to create an artificial lake, configured with a sinuous outline. Visiting Brasilia’s site in 1958, American Pulitzer Prize winning poet Elizabeth Bishop, then resident in Brazil, described the plain as ‘empty’ and ‘barren’ and marginalised it as a place of ‘dreariness and desolation’. ‘[C]ompared with almost any other inhabitable part of this fantastically beautiful country’, the poet lamented, the site ‘seems really unattractive and unpromising. There are no mountains nor even real hills, ...no trees of any size, no feeling of height, nor grandeur, nor security, nor fertility, nor even just picturesqueness; not one of the qualities one thinks of as capable of giving a city charm or character’. As Bishop’s reaction to it suggests, cerrado is a landscape type which defies conventional notions of landscape beauty. In an ethereal coincidence, cerrado is resonant with another aesthetically challenging landscape, the level prairies of the Griffins’ native Middle Western United States.

Intriguingly, ‘an attractive landscape and nearby recreation areas’ was one of the criterion considered when identifying Brasilia’s site (albeit weighted at only 5%). The choice of this aesthetically unconventional locale, then, raises the possibility that those who made the selection, unlike their Australian counterparts, had no preoccupation with the picturesque. That Brasilia’s site was chosen at the recommendation of American civil engineering firm, Donald J. Belcher and Associates, is well-known. More obscure, however, is that celebrated Brazilian landscape architect Roberto Burle Marx (1909-1994) was also officially involved in the selection deliberations. In 1954, Marx served on the government commission which fixed Brasilia’s ‘precise site’, proposed an

24 Like most before him, Penna was unaware of Marion Mahony Griffin’s design contributions. More recently, owing to Penna’s study, Canberra merited inclusion in the exhibition and accompanying catalogue Brasil, Brasilia e os Brasileiros. See Couto and Matos (2002).
27 See ‘Table I: Criteria for the Final Selection of a Site for the New Capital’ in Epstein (1973): 47.
artificial water body and positioned the city centre on the peninsula.\textsuperscript{29} Today renowned for his exuberant use of native flora, Marx, as we will see, would undoubtedly have considered cerrado not as an aesthetic liability, but as an opportunity to create a modern Brazilian garden at an urban scale. The opportunity, however, would be delayed and diminished, if not altogether lost.

In 1956, its future capital’s site selected, Brazil followed Australia’s lead and staged a competition to secure a city plan. The Plano Piloto de Brasília (Pilot Plan of Brasília) contest, however, was limited to nationals. British town planning authority William Holford (1907-1975) was appointed one of the international adjudicators. Unlike Canberra’s protracted and sporadic development, Brasilia was to be completed within only four years. The next year, Lúcio Costa’s (1902-1998) layout was selected from amongst twenty-six submissions as the contest’s winner. Reflecting the sober ethos of functionalism -inspired by Le Corbusier and codified by the Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne- which typified planning thought of the day, the majority of competitors entered designs systematically derived from statistical studies. Departing from convention, Costa’s submission amounted to an assemblage of gestural sketches or ideograms, along a brief explanatory report. The poetic, conceptual qualities of Costa’s design were fundamental to its allure. As São Paulo curator and critic Pietro Bardi later put it, Costa’s layout is ‘practical and imaginative at the same time, midway between orthodox city planning, more preoccupied with measurements than with men’, and ‘uncontrolled urbanization’.\textsuperscript{30} Costa’s plan, Bardi distinguished, is the product of an ‘architect’, not a ‘sociologist.’\textsuperscript{31}

Unlike the Griffins’ Canberra approach, Costa saw Brasilia’s realisation as a ‘deliberate act of conquest’ and its site a \textit{tabula rasa}. In his first design maneuver (although not completely dissimilar to the Griffins’ axial strategy), Costa inscribed the plateau with a grand cross-axis. The Eixo Monumental (Monumental Axis), the cross’s primary spine, is an expansive turf greensward, flanked by dual boulevards. At its terminus, Costa concentrated the seats of legislative, executive and judiciary powers together to form the Praça dos Três Poderes (Square of the Three Powers). In conspicuous celebration of technology, the scheme’s cross armature is a motorway, the Eixo Rodoviário (Highway Axis), which traverses and links areas allocated functionally to housing. Costa warped the axial thoroughfare’s trajectory into a broad arc; a pragmatic concession to the steep topography at the plateau’s edge. Below lays Lake Paranoá (designed earlier by others), the only escapee from the city’s geometric order.

At Canberra, the Griffins permitted the site’s rugged landforms and other natural features to fix and spatially contain their axial alignments. Alternatively, the axes Costa etched into Brasilia’s plain were the assertive products of his immutable adherence to a geometric, functionalist ideal.


\textsuperscript{30} Bardi (1970): 52.

\textsuperscript{31} ibid.
Moreover, as Brasilia’s terrain is comparatively level, his axes risked vacuousness. In remedy, he relied upon monumental ensembles of Oscar Niemeyer’s (b 1907) architecture to define and accentuate the Eixos Monumental and Rodoviário. Modern architecture, for Costa and Niemeyer alike, was an agency of civilisation. In stark contrast to the Griffins’ architectural proposals for Canberra, Niemeyer’s is an architecture of pure form, one lacking explicit or overt stylistic reference to the past (although historical references are often abstracted or encrypted within his buildings). Through this denial or camouflage of the vernacular, his Platonic forms de-historicised Brazil’s colonial past and reinvented the nation as a modern, twentieth-century phenomenon.\(^{32}\)

Similarly, the cerrado - Brasilia’s metaphorical jungle - was vanquished, relegated to the city’s periphery in favour of lawns. Refugee native trees encountered on the Eixo Monumental are usually heavily manicured so as to disguise their local - and therefore inferior - origin.\(^{33}\) That the jungle was still popularly associated with the primitive and held as the antithesis of culture probably motivated the erasure. \(^{34}\) Curiously, by the time Costa conceptualised Brasilia, the avant garde had already begun celebrating the jungle.\(^{35}\) As in Australia, painters - such as Tarsila do Amaral - were amongst the provocateurs re-orienting landscape perceptions. Costa, inescapably aware of this on-going development, chose to overlook it; as we will see, his decision was likely a deliberate one.

This is not to say Brasilia’s landscape is amnestic. Costa’s turf expanses remember the architect’s French childhood and, more broadly, Brazilian colonial gardens. At an even larger scale, by the architect’s own admission, Brasília’s cross-axial plan resonates with Louis XIV’s Versailles.\(^ {36}\) Costa was, as Guilherme Wisnik discerned, ‘educated in a nineteenth-century culture and effectively associated with a lifestyle not yet entirely modern - from this follows his insistence on preserving that “memory of the colony” in the face of anonymity imposed by mass society’.\(^ {37}\) For Costa, Wisnik compellingly argues, ‘the continuous presence of this “memory” within the modern project preserved a sense of nature as an untouched entity. He attempted to reduce, as if that were possible, the violence perpetuated by modernity, by keeping design distant from nature, so as to make clear the impossibility of ever transforming nature into culture’.\(^ {38}\) This stance also possibly explains why Costa eschewed the cerrado. And, it is one diametrically opposed to that of the Griffins’.

\(^{32}\) See, for instance, Holston (1989).
\(^{33}\) In bourgeois gardens, Lauro Cavalcanti enlarges, “noble” species such as roses, cypresses, pine trees, begonias and azaleas prevailed, planted in geometric patterns in the style of a French garden. It was unfathomable to use local plants, even if those from temperate climates proved to be inappropriate, unable to adapt to our hot and humid climate’. See Frota (et al) (2009): 235.
\(^{34}\) See, for instance, Herkenhoff (1995) and Stepan (2001).
\(^{35}\) Sanguino (et al) (2009) is a recent source on do Amaral.
\(^{36}\) At Brasilia, Costa aimed to, as he put it, ‘take possession of the place - in the manner of the conquistadores or of Luis XIV’, quoted in Philippou (2008): 233.
\(^{38}\) ibid.
If only superficially, Niemeyer’s sculptural building ensembles seem aloof or indifferent to their landscape surrounds. Was landscape merely a stage or platform for architecture? When attempting to answer this query, it is useful to return to Elizabeth Bishop’s impressions of Brasilia’s site. ‘The two gifts Mother Nature seems to have bestowed on Brasilia so far’, she assessed, ‘are sky and space’. ‘[W]hen one imagines these endless swelling plains covered over with modern white government buildings, monuments, skyscrapers, shops, and apartment houses’, she prophesied, ‘the only natural beauty left it is the sky’.39 To some degree, this has eventuated at Brasilia today. Yet, we must remember that this effect was calculated, not accidental. As Costa himself explained: ‘In contrast to the cities which conform, and try to adjust themselves, to the landscape, at the point where the desert of the cerrado and an immense sky meet, like a high sea, the city created a landscape’.40 Taking the horizon and dynamic sky as their backdrop, Niemeyer’s buildings ‘approximate dream-scapes in which discrete elements are distributed in space in a fashion similar to the disposition of objects in surrealist painting’.41 Even if landscape served only as a visual field, Niemeyer did not conceive his buildings as objects in isolation, independent of one another; landscape is architecture’s point-of-beginning.

CANBERRA’S LANDSCAPE ‘DE-MONUMENTALISED’

As the Brasilia enterprise accelerated, the comprehensive development of Australia’s national capital languished—despite its governmental occupation. In 1955, chief town planner Peter Harrison reported on his investigation into Canberra’s development. Perhaps prompted by or in compensation for the city’s lack of a palpable urban fabric, Harrison concluded that Canberra ‘did not depend for its realisation on the construction of grand buildings’.42 For him, buildings were ‘made important’ by ‘their setting’. Canberra, he concluded, was ‘not an architectural composition but a landscape composition’. Although Harrison accurately identified the landscape’s pre-eminence within the Griffins’ scheme, Harrison’s conception of it as simply an architectural setting conveys the contemporary power of the Modernist viewpoint. Such a vision sees architecture in rational opposition to the chaotic natural world. Architecture, in turn, is held as the only means by which to structure and order that chaos. Landscape, instead of as a discrete, formal entity in its own right, is regarded as merely an architectural stage, the space between buildings. Nonetheless, now convinced that Canberra amounted to a landscape design proposition, the Commonwealth was now ready to re-start the national capital’s development. Seeking expert town planning advice, the government solicited William Holford for design recommendations. Accepting the Commonwealth’s invitation, he travelled to Australia in June 1957—fresh from adjudicating the Brasilia competition. Although unanticipated, the new Brazilian capital’s influence would soon reach Canberra.

41 Read (2005): 263.
The most dramatic built outcome of Holford’s consultancy was Canberra’s much-anticipated lake (1964), a central component of the Griffins’ plan. Holford’s water body, however, encapsulated prominent departure: eschewing the geometric clarity the Griffins originally envisaged for its central basins, the new lake’s margins were alternatively executed with an irregular edge and cloaked with ‘naturalistically’ planted parklands, compatible with Modernism’s benign landscape imagery. Moreover, Holford believed its banks to be the ideal locus for Australia’s yet-to-be-constructed permanent parliament buildings. This view was informed not by the Griffins’ thinking, but by his own Brazilian experience. Taking Costa’s Praça dos Três Poderes as precedent, Holford proposed an Australian ‘lakeside parliament’. Abandoning the Griffins’ elevated parliamentary site, Holford shifted the complex down the city’s central Land Axis to the lake shore. The scheme’s implementation began in 1958; however, it was abandoned a decade later.

Brasília’s influence also extended to Canberra’s architecture. One survivor of Holford’s parliament initiative is the National Library of Australia, whose principal designer was Walter Bunning – an architect well-versed in Brazilian Modernism. If Holford’s lakeside parliament resonates with Costa’s Praça dos Três Poderes, then Bunning’s library does no less so with Niemeyer’s Palácio do Planalto (Palace of the Highlands or Presidential Palace) (1958), and Palace of the Supreme Court (1958). With Holford’s ideas and proposals as catalyst, the transformation of the Griffins’ modern landscape into a post-war Modernist ‘setting’ was begun.

THE JUNGLE’S RETURN TO BRASÍLIA

By the time of the Brasília competition launch, if not before, Roberto Burle Marx’s involvement with the project had ceased – despite his friendships and earlier collaborations with Costa and Niemeyer. The landscape architect belatedly returned to the project in 1961, a year after the city’s inauguration – although the source of his invitation is unclear. In his absence, Costa had already effectively silenced the cerrado. Marx would now attempt to reassert the indigenous, if only cosmetically, in a series of designed landscapes at

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43 Earlier, in 1945, for instance, Bunning published *Homes in the Sun*. Advocating climatically responsive architecture, he illustrated two Brazilian examples. A São Paulo courtyard-plan house (1941), by expatriate architect Bernard Rudofsky, for Bunning, perfectly demonstrated ‘opening out a house to allow good air circulation in a hot climate’. He also reproduced the iconic Ministry of Education and Health Building, designed by a team of Brazilian architects, including Costa and Niemeyer, in consultation with Le Corbusier (1937). The adjustable louvres cladding the edifice compelled its inclusion; excluding sunlight with such devices was, Bunning believed, also apt for Australia. See Bunning (1945) and Margalit (2012): 122-123.

44 Haruyoshi Ono, Marx’s later partner, recollected that until 1961 ‘Burle Marx hadn’t been commissioned to do any projects there [Brasília], because of his prior disagreements with President Juscelino Kubitschek’. Ono, however, did not reveal the nature of their conflicts. Quoted in Frota (et al) (2009): 235. Andreas infers Niemeyer involved Marx, noting ‘arguments over money and differences of political opinion that emerged during the construction work for Brasilia and thereafter evidently poisoned the relationship between the two to such a degree the neither Burle Marx nor Niemeyer have wanted to talk about it’. See Andreas (2003): 85n5.
Brasília - retro-fitted within Costa’s geometric frame. His first project at the capital was to create a garden surround -replacing lawn and replete with enlivening fountains - at Costa’s Torre de Televisão (Television Tower), prominently positioned on the Eixo Monumental. Apart from this project, Marx’s 1970 garden for Niemeyer’s Ministério do Exército (Ministry of the Army) is perhaps the most remarkable of his Brasília landscapes. Here, Marx interwove a garden tapestry within a triangular frame of boundary streets, accentuating its abstract forms with indigenous flora. As this garden illustrates, his interest in referencing the immediate local was not confined to the botanical. The Ministério’s garden also evoked the site’s geology. In inspired response to crystalline formations unearthed during building excavations, Marx sculpturally represented them in concrete. Composing these monolithic volumes in a manner akin to a Japanese Zen garden, he next gave them an aqueous surround. This ornamental water body, in turn, mirrors the sky and dynamic clouds above. For Marx, the design interpretation of the indigenous landscape was the means by which the otherwise universalising ethos of Modernism could be ‘domesticated’.

Another one of Marx’s Brasilian interventions merits attention as it illustrates how his landscape sensibilities diverged from those held by Costa. In 1975, Marx proposed to further usurp the Eixo Monumental’s lawns and transform the Esplanada dos Ministérios (Esplanade of Ministries) from a surficial into a spatial parkland. Costa politely refused the plan. Marx’s partner, Haruyoshi Ono, recollected the architect’s explanation: ‘Yes, it is very nice, but I don’t agree with you, Burle Marx. I prefer this to be an open area so that people can see the architecture from here, and along the sides as well’. With respect to landscape, unlike architecture, it seems Costa was more preoccupied with French Baroque, rather than Brazilian Modernism.

CONCLUSION

Walter Burley Griffin, Marion Mahony Griffin and Lúcio Costa were unified in their conception of national capital cities as holistic works of art. Canberra and Brasília, however, are fundamentally distinguished by the varying significance and role each designer awarded architecture and nature. At the Australian capital, the Griffins sought to render ambiguous the distinction between the two or, more broadly, to make nature into culture. Today, Canberra’s monumentality or civic grandeur is not engendered by the more familiar means of magnificent, unified architectural ensembles. Instead, this quality is

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46 Andreas reports Marx ‘handled the design of the expansive green-belt sections of the Major Axis, although he was not able to really implement his own ideas in full. The brief he was given by urbanist Lúcio Costa was quite simply too detailed’. See Andreas (2003): 83.
47 (Fraser 2000b).
48 Quoted in Frota (et al) (2009): 235. The precise commission date is unclear. The project is labelled ‘Eixo Monumental - Anteprojecto’ and dated 1975 in Curriculum Vitae de Roberto Burle Marx (1999): 7. Ono, however, recollected that José Aparecido de Oliveira, Governador do Distrito Federal (1985-1988), had invited the scheme. If Ono’s memory is correct, then the project was a more recent one.
imparted by the almost ethereal omnipresence of the wider landscape. At Brasília, this relationship is inverted. As Holford diagnosed, Costa’s and Niemeyer’s ‘architectural seeds’ had been sown on comparatively poor soil and consequently they ‘must rely on their own beauty and invention to make an impression’. Brasília’s landscape is constructed or – as Holford put it – invented, one conceptualised with little reference to the actual indigenous landscape.

Brasília has now passed the half-century mark and Canberra’s centenary is fast approaching. Within a heritage context, the significance of these twentieth century capitals transcends the architectural, the aesthetic – although both are indeed undisputable benchmarks in modern design. Arguably more importantly, Canberra and Brasília encapsulate and articulate wider social concerns for the natural world, nation, and identity. Despite time’s passage, there is another lingering perception which links the two capitals. Paradoxically, some locally view their national capitals as surreal, artificial cities - Brasília is ‘un-Brazilian’ and Canberra ‘un-Australian’. On a recent flight to Brasília, a local passenger cautioned me that were I only to visit the national capital, then I would have missed experiencing the ‘real’ Brazil. Many Australians would say the same of Canberra.

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