

BACK TO THE FUTURE – NORTH ARM COVE

CALL FOR INNOVATIVE URBANIST

'Our future is determined by the choices we make, don't make, or leave for others to make for us'.

Brad Larsen

Back to the Future – North Arm Cove is a student research competition that seeks innovative multidisciplinary proposals for future regional Australian settlements, by example of North Arm Cove, NSW.

The objectives of the competition are:

a) to promote academic research and explore:

- The historical context of North Arm Cove, local and global
- Ideas behind “ideal city” of Port Stephens and assessment of those ideas in today’s context
- Environmental, economic, and social context of North Arm Cove today

AND

b) to provide recommendations and answers to:

- Anticipated challenges in the next 20-30 years related to:
 - o Climate change,
 - o New technological advances,
 - o Changing core values, lifestyle changes caused by COVID-19 and likely similar events in the future
- Innovative ways of addressing those and other future challenges.

Having faced bush fires, floods, and a pandemic all in the same year, we have all identified persistent problems from varied sources at different levels; starting from individuals or communities all the way up to a national and global scale. Moreover, these problems greatly vary in nature broadly covering social, environmental, and economical aspects. Evidently, problems that are so diverse, call for varied skills, expertise, and ideas from more than a single discipline.

If design is about solving problems, planning is about anticipation of the future, identifying future problems and opportunities, and acting now to be ready for both.

Background Information

North Arm Cove (NAC) village of around 450 people lies 200kms north of Sydney on the northern shore of Port Stephens in the Mid North Coast area of NSW. In 1899 NSW Royal Commission included North Arm Cove as the 16th of 40 potential sites for the nation's capital. Although losing out to Canberra for the prestige of being the national capital, the site was selected by Walter Burley Griffin as most suitable place for a new major city and seaport – ‘the New York of Australia’ – with a visionary approach to planning of the continent as a whole, including its interior.

While still working on the Canberra design project, Walter Burley Griffin was commissioned by Austin Chapman’s company ‘Land Limited’ to prepare the masterplan for this site. The plan was approved by a resolution passed at a regular meeting of Stroud Shire Council held on 6th May 1918 (see Figure 1). The new future urban settlement was given the name ‘Port Stephens City’.



Figure 1: The plan was signed off by Walter Burley Griffin, Landscape Architect and H. Sheaffe, Surveyor and Architect. NSW Stroud Shire Council & Land Ltd (1918). Plan showing 10 feet contours, Land Ltd's estate, Port Stephens. National Library of Australia

Marion Mahony Griffin credited her husband with the identification of the locality as one of only two 'natural seaports' in Australia. She wrote that *'in his innocence he interested a client, who was carrying on a considerable real estate business, in the opportunity offered at Port Stephens ... It was surveyed and staked out and the allotments rapidly sold'*.

The master plan to this unique site was Griffin's vision of an ideal city/town in 1918. It was the time of great city plans all over the world. In Australia the 1910s was a decade of extraordinary activity in establishing town planning as a vital social concern and issue for public policy¹. Planned private sector subdivisions of estates were popular for land sales in the 1920s, the planning era of the first draft bills to introduce town planning legislation.

In her typescript 'Magic of America'² Marion Mahony Griffin described Walter's most likely first encounter with Aborigines and their culture when working on the 'Port Stephens City' project:

"Then he was up there (surveying Port Stephens City site) he made the acquaintance of King Billy, an aboriginal who worked with the surveyors. Finding Griffin sympathetic King Billy talked freely with him and gave him much interesting information about the native plants. Through him Griffin learned how precise was their knowledge for King Billy could identify at a distance even a dead tree. The aborigines were interested, as Griffin was, in the character of the form rather than in the minute distinctions which the botanists as a whole center on which in fact gives them the ability to attach names but does not give them real knowledge of the plants they are listing. When Griffin asked him what he thought about the surveyors' setting fire to the bush before they surveyed it he said - "That is because they are cowards. They have no right to do this because it belongs to the birds and the animals as

¹ Freestone, Robert. 2010. Urban Nation – Australia's Planning Heritage. CSIRO Publishing & Australian Government Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Art.

² Griffin, Marion Mahony. The Magic of America: Electronic Edition. August 2007. The Art Institute of Chicago and The New-York Historical Society. 29 October 2008 <<http://www.artic.edu/magicofamerica/index.html>>

much as it does to them." The surveyors wore heavy leggings. King Billy went bare legged through the bush and had no fear. Contact with the ancient peoples should awaken us to the fact that they use a different kind of thinking from ourselves an experience which, if we were open minded, would lead us on to the investigating and mastering of that kind of thinking, to take as much pains as we have taken in the mastery of rational thinking in these modern times."

Griffin's plan for Port Stephens City has never been realised. In 1921, Walter and Marion started building their bohemian-flavoured community in Castlecrag, Sydney's lower north shore. The suburb, with similar topography as North Arm Cove, was dubbed 'Paradise on Earth'.

Current exhibition titled 'Paradise on Earth' at the Museum of Sydney explores Marion's collaboration with Walter Burley Griffin and key projects in Australia including Canberra, with a special focus on the life and community of Castlecrag. The exhibition is open until 18 April 2021.

The Competition is About...

- Promoting Australian planning cultural heritage – and the Griffins' legacy in Australia and North Arm Cove as a place of extraordinary national cultural heritage
- History of NSW planning and the role of governments, private enterprise, and communities within the socio economic and political framework
- Exploring the role of an architect in the last 100 years
- Exploring the past, present and future through interweaving environmental technological/ infrastructure, economic, social and design aspects, as architects of the past used to do it.
- Looking at our lives in relationship with our planet and proposing pathways to improved outcomes
- An exercise of planning for a new settlement within the existing NSW strategic planning framework
- Identifying challenges and finding innovative solutions on the following aspects:

Social

How do we build cohesive and sustainable communities? How are changing climate, pandemics and new technologies affecting the ways we live, work, learn, travel, and generally interact with each other? How could communities become more resilient to challenges like changing climate, changing world economies, future pandemics? What are the social challenges of North Arm Cove? What significance do built and cultural heritage have in contemporary lives?

Technology/Infrastructure

How have advances in technology affected the relevance of Griffin's proposals? What are the lessons from the past? Can technology provide answers for the challenges of living in a changing world? What present and future technologies can assist?

Environmental

Walter and Marion Griffin imagined a place where natural and built environments exist in perfect balance to create a model settlement on the picturesque shores of Port Stephens Bay one century ago. Are we closer to that 'paradise' now? Is it still our collective goal? What do we learn from the past? What are the opportunities and challenges?

5 points of future-proof architecture

A2M Architects - Belgium Futureproof Design

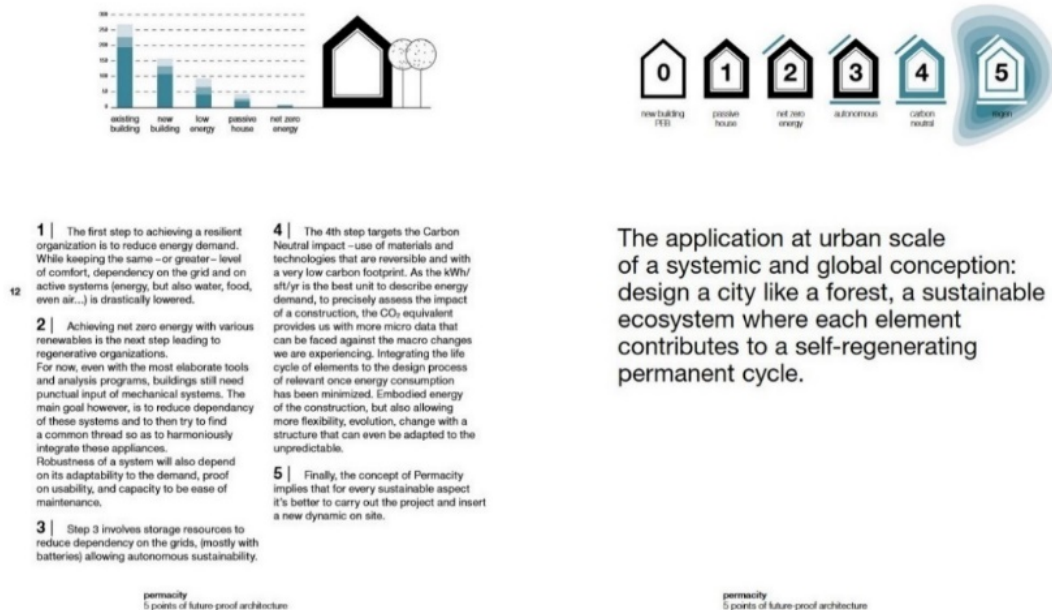


Figure 2 by A2M Architects, Belgium presentation at SPPHC conference by Sebastian Moreno-Vacca

Economy and governance:

Can we afford to live in better places? Is happier and safer life of better quality profitable? Should we expect it to be? Can citizens build their own 'better place' independent of the official State and local land and development governance? What form of collective and individual decision making, and financing would be needed? How do we achieve affordability of life? Would heritage assist or present an obstacle?

Green Zoning

Accelerating Smart Growth in Single Family Zones

by Matt Hutchins
CAST architecture

"How can cities that have green building codes have zoning bylaws that protect low-density single family housing?"

– Lloyd Alter, TreeHugger

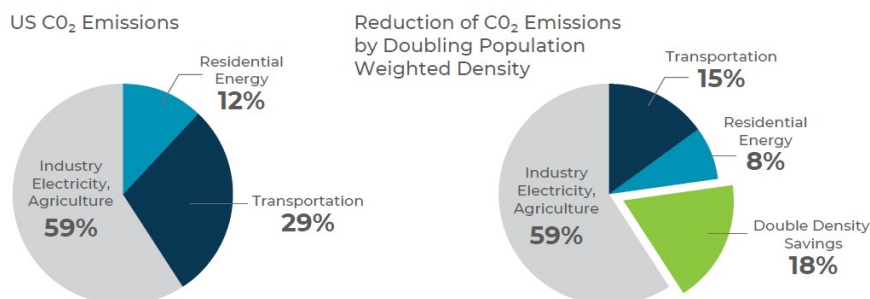


Figure 1: Reduction of U.S. CO₂ emissions by doubling population weighted density. Image by author.

Figure 3 by Matt Hutchins, CAST architecture

Urban Design

Can we measure the performance of our homes, buildings, neighbourhoods, communities, towns? How do we determine what is a 'better place'? Should we rely on legislation for determining better design?

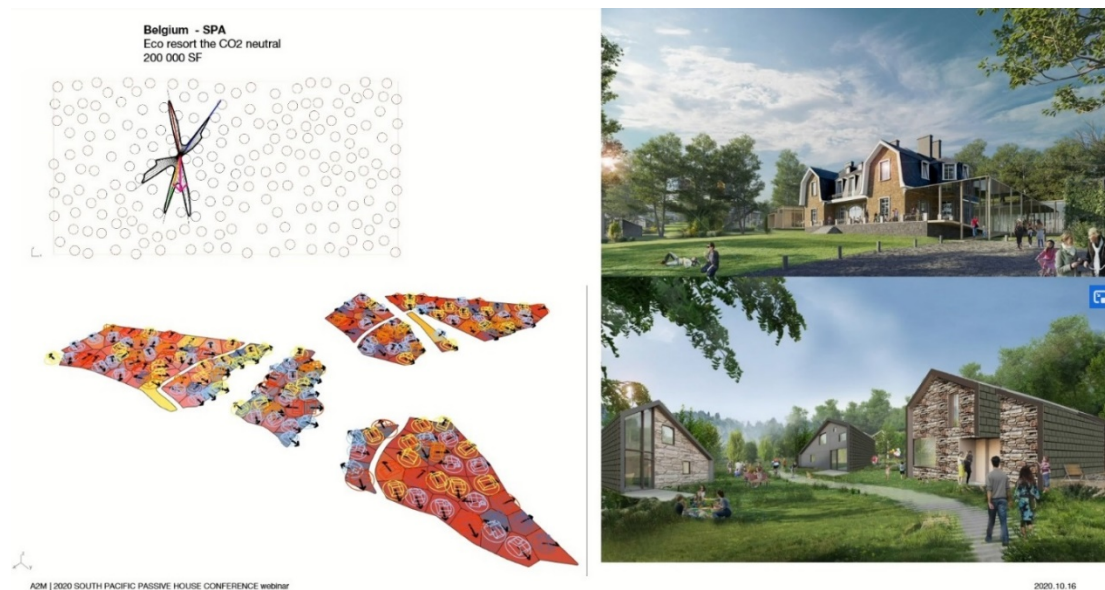


Figure 4 , Figure 5 - by A2M Architects, presentation at SPPHC conference by Sebastian Moreno-Vacca

- Competition is about an opportunity to have a say about the future.
- Understanding different professional fields
- Teamwork.
- It is an opportunity for young professionals to be introduced to the industry and hear from its representatives about trends in infrastructure, construction, economy, planning, heritage, environmental protection.
- It is about being introduced to some of the latest tools available in research and design of our living environment.

Working in multidisciplinary teams

Building a town takes more than just a master plan. Architects need to master collaboration with other professions and specialists. The best approach would be if that collaboration starts early, while studying and 'learning the ropes'.

Participants are required to work in teams and collaborate with Engineering, Economics and Social Studies students either as consultants or part of the same competition team. If students cannot form their own team, organizers will provide assistance.

The competition is open to students at any of the Australian Universities, from every age and cultural background, working in a team - preferably 5 members. Team will allocate roles of Urban Designer, Economist, Environmentalist, Infrastructure specialist and Community Builder to its members.

In the words of Marion Griffin, from 'Magic of America'³:

³ Griffin, Marion Mahony. The Magic of America: Electronic Edition. August 2007. The Art Institute of Chicago and The New-York Historical Society. 29 October 2008 <<http://www.artic.edu/magicofamerica/index.html>>

*“It was Walt who in the necessarily **united professions of Architecture and Town Planning** carried on the work of Louis Sullivan in raising architecture in America and the world to professional standards in creative design and in really solving problems. Through such seed the break-away from the bondage to tradition has become an established thing in America and bit by bit we see signs of his work in Town Planning coming to fruition in practice there, the standard for which was set in the Canberra design in 1912 which laid the foundation for community planning. Recently Walt said to me that he had as yet seen nothing done in Town Planning that was not laid down in the Canberra plan, and he was constantly on the lookout.”*

What is in it for you?

- Presentations and talks from experts on their sphere of specialty: the Griffins’ Heritage and relationship with Australian natural environment; basic information on advances of various aspects of urban infrastructure; basic information on Net Zero projects and goals and beyond Zero tendencies; basic information on current planning framework for the village of North Arm Cove and its community.
- Experience working in an interdisciplinary team, solving real life problems.
- One on One Mentoring sessions for individual teams in final stages before finalising their submissions.
- Prizes, Recognition, rewards, and opportunities for engagement with the industry for furthering careers.
- All submissions will be published online
- Best entries will be offered opportunity in shaping future conversations on international level through the 2021

Timeline

LAUNCH OF THE COMPETITION:	19 th November 2020 - the Festival of Urbanism organised by the University of Sydney and the Halloran Trust
INITIAL BRIEFINGS, PRESENTATIONS BY EXPERTS:	1 st December 2020 – 12 th December 2020
ONE ON ONE MENTORING SESSIONS:	18 th January 2020 – 30 th January 2020
DEADLINE FOR SUBMISSIONS:	15 th February 2020 (C.O.B)
ANNOUNCING WINNERS:	5 th March 2020

Submissions

- The Minimum:
 - One A1 equivalent electronic page with appropriate drawings (plans, sections, 3D visualisations)
 - Narrative about research findings in individual roles of not more than 5 pages per role
 - Live presentation to the judges of 15-20 min maximum
 - Both should cover results of research of all team members, their multidisciplinary roles.
- Other additional means of presentation, animations, video that best explain the ideas, are encouraged

Judging Criteria

Entrees will be evaluated on the following criteria:

- **Innovation quality** that respond to the competition objectives and highlight new ideas and approaches to building future cities
- **Research comprehensiveness** – addressing a wide a range of factors affecting urban development

- **Sustainability approach** – addressing energy efficiency and other environmental factors
- **Design quality** with new approaches to the development of architectural/urban form.
- **Feasibility solutions** demonstrating understanding of economic forces
- **Collective Effort** where each of the issues (environmental, urban form, economic, infrastructure and social) has been examined with the nexus to others
- **Individual Contribution** – quality of the individual role within the team
- **Clarity of presentation** – understandable and well-illustrated graphically.

Prizes

The First Prize

- \$2500 Cash Prize
- 50% discount on Passive House subscription for full time students.
- A copy of unpublished book on Passive House
- Annual membership for WBG Society
- Recognition on our social platforms with commentary from the Judging Panel

The Second Prize

- \$1000 Cash Prize
- 50% discount on Passive House subscription for full time students.
- Recognition on our social platforms.

The Third Prize

- \$500 Cash Prize
- 50% discount on Passive House subscription for full time students.
- Recognition on our social platforms.

The Best Individual Role Effort

- One full scholarship for Passive House Academy
- A copy of the book 'Visionaries in Suburbia'
- Recognition on our social platforms.

All participants will receive certificate of participation and all submissions will be published in online competition proceeds. Jury members will be providing commentary on winning submissions as well as selected other works.

