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A block of land called Hope: The fight to revive Walter Burley Griffin's lost city

The visionary architect dreamed of a New York City in Australia, but the site of his dream became a financial nightmare for many.

Jade Hasan
FEBRUARY 11, 2021

Aerial view of Griffin's lost city, Canberra, as it looks today, looking towards Lake Burley Griffin. Credit: Getty Images

I was envisaged as the New York of Australia more than a hundred years ago. Now, a group of architects, planners and mum and dad investors are working together to turn the tiny town of North Ainslie Cove in Port Stephens into the next Canberra or Canberrang.

A masterplan for the new town dreamed up by Canberra architect and urban planner Walter Burley Griffin, famous for designing the bushy capital of Canberra and the ever-human suburb of Castlecrag on Sydney's north shore.

Under the outline of the Griffin masterplan from 1918 are the words in spidery cursive, "It looks like a lost Mayan city," says architect Tatiana Harris-Stewart. "It looks like a mishmash that is not a grid, that follows the topography, but there are no houses."

Harris-Stewart, a planner, and her husband, Alan Stewart, an architect, have been working on the masterplan for Canberrang since it first hit the market last year for "Back to the Future" – a proposal to finally bring Walter Burley Griffin's dream of New Stephens City to life.

Below: Interactive image via Google **above** The original Walter Burley Griffin plan

Mid Coast Council has sold residents that developing the area would be prohibitively expensive, but the Stewartes envisage a sustainable and regenerative bush-like community that would reduce their carbon footprint. It will be off the grid, reduce carbon emissions, and manage water use and sewage using grey water and other systems.

Over the years, many have bought into the North Ainslie Cove dream only to lose hope and money. Located about 300 kilometres north of Sydney and on the northern shores of Port Stephens, it is a paper subdivision, perhaps the largest in NSW.

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Of the 5500 lots there, about 3000 are used-to-be-urban. That means the remained 2000 remnants of these non-urban blocks can't build on the land. They can't even stay on the land other than to keep cattle or cows, and that is limited to non-conservation eighth, and only 10 days a year.

Many thought without knowing they couldn't build on the land. And most didn't know that they would have to pay council rates, despite the absence of electricity, water, Residual roads or drainage.

Walter Burley Griffin. Credit: Getty Images

Over the years, "desperate and disillusioned owners" of more than a thousand lots of non-urban land stopped paying rates. These properties were acquired by council in lieu of outstanding rates.

There are only a few thousand houses that are zoned residential in North Ainslie Cove, which doesn't have town sewer or a shop.

These homes have seen prices rise. Because of their scenic value, land prices have increased from $100,000 to $300,000 in the last decade, with the blocks sharing those that are zoned non-urban. A non-urban block, zoned RU2 Rural Landscape, has a land value of $52,500, according to the Valuer General. In contrast, the land on the lot next to it, zoned RU5 village with a detached homes, is valued at $165,000.

The owners of the non-urban lots say the capital costs of the infrastructure needed to develop their blocks, which they expect to fund, would be more than covered by the increased value of the land.

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Stella Maris Carrera, and her husband, Manuel, bought into the North Ainslie Cove dream in 1997, paying $12,000 for a small lot with water views.

After seeing an advertisement promoting it as a "piece of paradise", the couple, then in their 40s, visited the site.

"It was a lovely place, it was flat land, near the water, and near the highway. We fell in love," said Carrera.

The Carreras thought it was the ideal place to retire, and were told council planned to revisit its rezoning by 2016.

Port Stephens
Nelson Bay
Anna Bay
Shoal Bay
Tomaree National Park
Fingal Bay
Fern Bay
Boat Harbour
Soldiers Point
Salamander Bay
Tanilba Bay
Mallabula
Karuah
Swan Bay
Tilligerry Habitat
Tomaree National Park
Port Stephens Koala Sanctuary
Anna Bay
Nelson Bay
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Mallabula
Karuah
Swan Bay
Tilligerry Habitat
Port Stephens Koala Sanctuary
Tomaree National Park
Port Stephens
Nelson Bay
Anna

disaster. It's just mostly ugly, empty space. One year I went through a phase of doing Lonely Planet guide walking tours of Australia's capital. Only 20 of the buildings were worth a very pleasant few hours stroll around interesting cities. All, except Canberra, which is a spread out desert of boredom, by and large. Designed for cars, basically. The government buildings are pretty much, hideous. The nicest buildings there are the embassies.

So, yeah, I wouldn't be touting his name to promote this ill-considered development.

Time to buy back these bush blocks, the development of which will cause bristlecake environmental destruction AND create high bushfire risk houses, and just turn it into a park.

REPORT 2

DaveB 3 DAYS AGO

Used to work with a guy who bought one of those lots on North Arm cove many years ago, with a view to building on it when he retired. He of course paid rates on the land. He died about 20 years ago. Sad.

REPORTED 1

Eric Olithwaite 3 DAYS AGO

I've always been fascinated by Environa, near Queanbeyan, another grand plan for a development which never eventuated.

REPORTED 2

Col Hewer 3 DAYS AGO

Is that a high-speed railway shown or just the regular slow-coach we have now? What do you mean there will be no rail connection!

REPORT 2

Brave New World 3 DAYS AGO

The merits or lack thereof of yet another big development on the central coast aside, the elephant in the room is the fact that Sydney is bursting at the seams and what if there are no jobs for the people who'd live there. Unemployment is already quite bad on the central coast. Residents in this area "city on the coast" will either have to struggle on unemployment benefits whilst paying off their mortgage or endure an hours long daily commute to Sydney.

REPORT 4

C and S 3 DAYS AGO

North Arm Cove is 45 minutes north of Newcastle, at the bottom of the Mid North Coast. So nowhere near the Central Coast. Plenty of opportunities for employment / business in the area.

REPORT

bellup 3 DAYS AGO

North Arm Cove is on the lower end of the Mid North Coast, not Central Coast. It comes under Mid Coast Council which is another problem altogether.

REPORT

View more replies

Lex 3 DAYS AGO

If only we'd had our own New York - instead of squat, boring, facility-deprived brick veneer housing estates eating up the bushland & plantering almost the entire Sydney Basin.

REPORT 18

Panalan 3 DAYS AGO

Castlecrag fragmented a beautiful piece of natural bushland. There are barely any mammals left in that area because they keep getting run over. Any roads will do that. Its a fallacy that if you leave a few trees you do not disrupt the native fauna and fauna that live there today. The Port Stephens proposal is even worse. It is a connected piece of natural bushland.

REPORT 11

Lindy B 3 DAYS AGO

Hold on! In Castlecrag there are swamp wallabies, echidnas, possums -brushers & ringtails, bandicoots, lyrebirds, powerful owls, a myriad of birds...reserves and still a lot of bushland surrounding the peninsula.

REPORT 2

Hya-Who 3 DAYS AGO

There's a place called Hope in Arkansas. That's where Bill Clinton is from.

REPORT

Kel 3 DAYS AGO

"Bought"?

Long term leases.

REPORT 1

Lindy B 3 DAYS AGO

The designer would have been Griffin's wife Marion Mahony (Griffin)!

REPORT

Preston 3 DAYS AGO

Funny how Australia's most famous planners (Seidler) and architects (Griffin) are also the most unsuccessful. I don't know much at Castcrag, but Walter Burley Griffin's design tied to Canberra's failure as a city Garden city spread make relevant street life and effective public transit difficult to say the least. Maybe it will work well at the scale of a small town. But the Griffins probably don't deserve their fame, based on the example of Canberra at least.

REPORT 13

Sausagerollonaroldtheatuse 3 DAYS AGO

I think Canberra is nice. I wouldn't call it a failure. People have different tastes.

REPORT 21

Youjustneverknow 4 DAYS AGO

Exactly

REPORT

Ghandi 3 DAYS AGO

The Burley Eis concept was very much pie in the sky ideology. After nearly 100 100 years the planning is still unsuccessful and I suspect in another 100 years it will be no better.. The Romans had a far better concept of city planning which is seen to be successful wherever it was applied

REPORT

Eric Olithwaite 3 DAYS AGO

Garbage. Residents of Canberra love the place. Critics usually haven't been there for decades. If you gave me a house in Sydney or Melbourne I wouldn't live there. Canberra has most of the advantages of a big city with none of the disadvantages. It was voted the most liveable city a few years ago.

REPORT 2

View more replies

Joe 3 DAYS AGO

Interesting situation. If these lots are rezoned for residential development there should be some form of value capture tax to recoup the massive increase in value from a government decision.

REPORT 9

Greg M 3 DAYS AGO

Don't forget that people have been paying rates on this land for absolutely no return from government so if that is the case why should government benefit from that.

REPORTED 14

Joe_Zephyr 3 DAYS AGO

I bought mine before 1985, so when I sold it there was no capital gains tax. The profit worked out at the equivalent of approx 5% interest every year for almost 40 years :)

REPORTED 2

Fintan 3 DAYS AGO

Some how you get the feeling that ideas of vision, hope and innovation don't exactly fit with NSW planning. A truely new model of housing and community would be a revolutionary idea, but rather I think this idea will and authorities scurrying for their rule books. So much for vision ...!!

REPORT 11

41 Mclaren 3 DAYS AGO

If only North arm cove had LNG or was suitable for mining or fracking , be done already, but since its about people , no way.

REPORT 2

dargie 3 DAYS AGO

Yep.Either a messed-up version of the plan , or won't happen at all.After all , this is NSW where there has to be mega-bucks for developers for any scheme to get up.

REPORT 1

TheBoulter 3 DAYS AGO

Please do not forget the towns of Griffith and Leeton as part of Town Planning and building legacy of Water and Marion Burley Griffin.

REPORT 12

Crankyas 3 DAYS AGO

People always over look that the NSW regional city of Griffith was also designed by the Burley Griffins...
They must have liked circles , the plans are all very similar.

REPORT 3

41 Mclaren 3 DAYS AGO

thinking outside the Box/grid?

REPORT 5

Uem 3 DAYS AGO

Uem, it looks like reasonably unpolit bush and I would think koala habitat. If these creatures had a say they would Hope that the development never goes ahead.

REPORT 33

Panalan 3 DAYS AGO

Agreed

REPORT 3

PopulationPanic 3 DAYS AGO

Koalas don't vote. We'll keep knocking down their habitat until they're all gone.

REPORT

Trump 2020 3 DAYS AGO

Looks like it's a great time to buy in.

REPORT 2

Kel 3 DAYS AGO

Long term leases.

REPORT

Oracle 3 DAYS AGO

Looks better as bushland to me...

REPORT 29

bob 3 DAYS AGO

everywhere looks better as bushland until it burns ,most probably because of lack of management , however all the growth envisioned by the 'powers that be' that is not us , has to go somewhere - they probably would have been better to put NSW's second airport at williamtown and develop the hunter river valley , it is much bigger than sydney basin .

REPORT 1

PrivateCitizen 3 DAYS AGO

If it is bushland, with no houses, and it burns, so what?

REPORT

Alan Jones' Butler 4 DAYS AGO

Yes, and most houses will be under water come the next flood in the Hunter.

REPORT

Marie Anderson 5 DAYS AGO

Classic; a council dragging its heels for half a century or more - what a surprise.

REPORT 1

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