

WELCOME TO REID, our marvellous garden suburb.

Australia has no better suburban environment inspired by the Garden City movement. This has been achieved by the way the suburb was designed in the early twentieth century, planned with quality houses, generous space for private gardens, and parks for community recreation.

The conditions here were ideal for such an outcome, with virtually no constraints of space or land value when our national capital was planned by Griffin on its spectacular site. Although Griffin envisioned American-style residential areas, the planner who took over from him in 1921 and chaired the Federal Capital Advisory Committee, looked to England for inspiration. He was John Sulman, the leading planning educator in Australia at the time, who was familiar with the English Garden City movement, advocated in 1898 by Ebenezer Howard for ideal new communities planned to relieve congested conditions in English cities. From Howard's ideas came Letchworth Garden City in 1903 and Hampstead Garden Suburb in London in 1912.

Sulman realised Hampstead's ample provision of communal parks and avenues of trees along suburban roads could be studied to advantage, but its tight rows of two-storey houses would be unacceptable in Australia. Here the ideal was a detached single-storey house with a large back yard, so it is this type of housing which sets Reid apart from its English models.

Reid is the centrepiece of a set of precincts developed for the first permanent housing for Canberra in the 1920s. Taken as a whole, these precincts represent a remarkably cohesive ensemble of garden suburb settings. The first, Neighbourhood No 1 of 1921, each side of Doonkuna Street in Braddon, is much as Griffin intended in his 1916 plan. But the common space he planned behind the houses was rearranged by Sulman to be more visible and accessible in front of the houses, in the manner of garden cities. Such an arrangement is seen to greater effect in Dirrawan and Geerilong Gardens in Reid. Their origins are in the English village greens with carriageways, as are the central walkways leading to them, which provide a variety of experiences.

The flat land allowed formal rectangular planning within Griffin's broad layout in Reid, whereas the slopes of Red Hill produced streets with informal curves along the contours. There, senior public servants were provided with large blocks and distinctive houses, after a 1923 competition for their design. Those houses were required to cost a minimum of £1500.

Reid was for middle-range public servants, where the requirement was for houses of at least £1000. The cost of weatherboard houses around Corroboree Park in Ainslie, "for officers having small salaries and a family," could be as little as £700. This reflection of social planning in Canberra is another facet of Reid's heritage value.

In 1925 the Federal Capital Commission was established with broad powers to build Canberra in earnest. The Chairman, John Butters, announced in 1926 “Canberra is going to be the finest garden city in the world.” Its architects under Rolland designed houses influenced by related styles of the period – Georgian Revival, Mediterranean and Spanish Mission, but these are original designs, rather than pure examples of those styles.

Building continued in the 1930s under the Department of the Interior, and its architects Henderson and Whitley designed houses to complement those by the FCC, but with more Art Deco forms and details. We will be visiting an FCC house and a Department of the Interior house today.

Backyards were planned to be private, and garages were sited there so as not to detract from the street picture. Front gardens were intended to be semi-public to add to the aesthetic effect, blending into the nature strips, separated only by low hedges. Carefully chosen trees were allowed to grow free of power lines, which were consigned to the rear of properties. Sulman wanted formal plantings of single species of trees along nature strips. Charles Weston selected the species, with eucalypts along the perimeter roads, conifers on major through roads and deciduous trees, to provide greater intimacy and enclosure, on subsidiary streets.

Another important aspect of the Garden City movement seen in Reid is the provision for community facilities and recreation, first the Methodist church in 1928, then the tennis club in 1929. During the 1940s came Reid Progress Association and the pre school.

Taken as a whole, Reid and the other early precincts set the standard for later residential landscapes throughout Canberra. It took many years for hedges and trees to reach maturity, but by the time heritage legislation was enacted in the late 1970s, Reid, with well cared-for houses and gardens, was ready for recognition and protection. With the support of residents, Reid was one of the first entire urban precincts placed on the Register of the National Estate by the Australian Heritage Commission and Classified by the National Trust. The heritage values of Reid are now much appreciated by the broad community, and the precinct is protected under ACT heritage legislation.

The third house we are privileged to be visiting today is the Rectory of St John the Baptist, built in 1926 to a design by the Queanbeyan architect Wal Sproule. He had designed Queanbeyan’s Municipal Council Chambers in 1923 and was, in early 1925, the first architect of non-government buildings in the Federal Capital, such as the JB Young store in Kingston. Several of his houses can be seen in the Wakefield Gardens precinct in Ainslie. David Limburg, as an honorary architect, supervised the rectory’s construction and amended the design slightly. At the time he was on St John’s Parochial Council and was working for the Federal Capital Commission, drawing up the Sydney and Melbourne Buildings and designing the Albert Hall.

I hope you enjoy your afternoon in Reid.

Ken Charlton November 2016