

# A Non-Standard Form of Living

Medium-Density Housing projects, the NCDC, and Canberra

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# A Non-Standard Form of Living

## Medium-Density Housing Projects, the NCDC, and Canberra

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1.

Alastair Greig, "The Accommodation of Growth: Canberra's 'Growing Pains' 1945–1955," *Urban and Environmental Program Working Paper No. 53* (ACT: Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University, 1996); Christine Cannon, "A 'Most Pressing Problem': Housing and the National Capital Development Commission 1958–1962," *Urban and Environmental Program Working Paper No. 66* (ACT: Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University, 1999), 1–2.

2.

Karl Friedhelm Fischer, "The Golden Age of Planning and its End: A Cultural Perspective on Canberra," *Ekistics* 52, no. 313 (July/August 1985), 290; National Capital Development Commission Act 1957, no. 11.

3.

Robert Freeston, "Shaping 'the finest city region in the world': Gordon Stephenson and Canberra's National Capital Development Commission 1960–73," *The Town Planning Review* 83, no. 3 (2012), 356.

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John Overall, *Canberra: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (Fyshwick, ACT: The Federal Capital Press of Australia Pty Limited, 1995), 62; National Capital Development Commission, *National Capital Development Commission First Annual Report* (Canberra: Commonwealth Government Printer, 1958), 6.

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Christine Cannon, "A 'Most Pressing Problem,'" 2.

The end of World War II did not improve Canberra's prospects for becoming a proud focal point of the nation. By 1945, Canberra was still a bush town with a population of 13,000 – the majority of whom were public servants and their families – isolated from the rest of the Australian metropolitan areas. Most of the public service departments and the bureaucrats were still unwilling to leave their comfort zones in Melbourne or Sydney. The shortage of housing and public services, associated with an over-division of authority and responsibility for control of the city, had hampered the growth of Canberra throughout the initial decade after the war, and ultimately contributed to the establishment of the National Capital Development Commission (NCDC).<sup>1</sup> This radical, all-powerful body corporate enjoyed planning conditions that architects and planners elsewhere could only dream of and was single-mindedly to "undertake and carry out the planning, development and construction of the City of Canberra as the National Capital of Commonwealth".<sup>2</sup> After the completion of Lake Burley Griffin and major civic buildings in the 1960s, the NCDC gradually transformed this isolated "bush capital" into a model metropolis of ideal concepts in planning.<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, Canberra experienced rapid population growth in the first postwar decade – an increase of 235 percent – and it was forecast to reach 100,000 by the mid-1970s, which would exceed the capacity of the Griffins' plan of 75,000 and even the expectations of the NCDC.<sup>4</sup> Providing living places for the incoming population along with thousands of public servants and their families on the waiting list was thus a top priority for the NCDC.<sup>5</sup> This, coupled with the change of the structure of this growing population, shifts in housing preferences, and other factors, prompted the NCDC to approach a "non-standard" form of living within the "orthodox" Australian suburbia: group housing schemes, or medium-density housing subdivisions.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the development of its new town structure – relatively self-contained satellite districts, neighbourhoods, and sites – also contributed to the metropolitan growth, which was different from the urban sprawl of Australia's coastal capital cities.<sup>7</sup> As a single authority charged with administering and developing the National Capital, the NCDC had all the powers it needed to avoid the muddle of collaboration and coordination between bureaucracies. This turned Canberra into an island of practice that reflects its architectural and planning ideology

– adopting non-standard development and housing models compared to other Australian cities and then creating a better human habitat for existing residents and the incoming population. Thus, this paper investigates various formative threads of group housing schemes and then discusses the complexity of the development of group housing in postwar Canberra. By examining the urban history of Canberra under the NCDC era (1957–1989), we ask: As a challenge to orthodox notions of Australian suburbia, did medium-density housing projects in postwar Canberra, offer an alternative form of living?

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NCDC, *National Capital Development Commission Fourteenth Annual Report* (Canberra: Commonwealth Government Printer, 1971), 1–2; K. F. Fischer, *Canberra, Myths, and Models* (Hamburg: Institute of Asian Affairs, 1984), 113.

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Robert Freeston, “Shaping ‘the finest city region in the world,’” 356–357.