



Parliament HOUSE

On a bright day during the summer of 1979 (it could not be any better considering its consequences), Sir John Overall – former head of the National Capital Development Commission (NCDC) – walked into our office ‘Mitchell/Giurgola Architects’ in New York. He proposed I be an assessor of the design competition for the ‘new’ Parliament House of Australia. I said: ‘I am honoured by such an offer, but I would rather enter the competition.’ Thus, my team became one of the 329 competitors for the design of Parliament House.

Like Walter Burley Griffin, before me, I had never been in Australia before starting work on the competition entry. However, in 1946, as a student of architecture I saw Griffin’s plan of Canberra. The magic relationship between geometry and land configurations of that plan, after that, often became the object of my architectural dreams. The brief for the design of the parliament compiled by the NCDC was possibly the best I had ever encountered in my professional career. I plunged into Australian literature rather than into guides and travelogues. Patrick White, Miles Franklin, Henry Lawson and Les Murray became my real instructors, while the sonorous voice and accent of Richard Thorp, the Australian in our office, produced the right atmosphere.

It was our inclusion in the short list of five selected architects to enter the second phase, that finally gave me the chance to step on the dry slope of the Kurrajong (Capital Hill). It was an unbelievably hot summer, at a time of drought, yet a crystalline air made distances illusive on the landscape. The spatial conception of the Griffin plan in its true dimension soon confirmed in my mind the validity of our solution.

In June 1980, the firm of Mitchell/Giurgola & Thorp Architects won the commission for the design of Parliament House. After the cheers stopped, we realised that we faced a daunting task. The building, comprising 224,000 square metres on 32 acres to house about 4,000 people and 4,500 rooms, was to be opened in January 1988 to celebrate the bicentenary of European settlement. But above all, the building was to be the tangible expression of the nation’s major democratic institution.

It is difficult to sum up in a few sentences the story of eight years of labouring. The spirit of solidarity among the makers, the enthusiasm, the goodwill, the energy and talents of all the participants in such an endeavour – from architects to managers, from artists to labourers, from politicians to public servants – made it possible to have the building available to the occupants at the set time.

The methodology adopted for the project was based on the so-called ‘fast track construction process,’ a method popular at the time but hardly ever used for buildings of such significant public use. Four elements constituted the project team: the Parliament House Construction



Authority, acting as a small executive managerial group; the architect and related consultants; the construction manager; and a project planner. All reported to a Parliamentary Joint Standing Committee, the Minister for the Territories and the Prime Minister. Thus, while construction continued throughout, from 1980 to 1985 the project was mostly 'design led' and, from 1985 to 1988, mostly 'construction led'.

Of major importance for the project was the art committee which began functioning at the very start. This committee assured the continuing, strong connection between architecture, the acquisition of a superb collection of Australian art and craft, and therefore, the presence of major art works available to the public at the opening of the building.

The Joint Standing Committee, attended sometimes in the wee hours of the morning by parliamentarians, periodically reviewed the project. Some displayed a good grasp of art and architectural matters; others showed a preference for objects of questionable value and taste, with at times catastrophic results.

However, Parliament House remains a building which, within the time constraints for construction, retains an internal logic of design together with an organic integration of architectural conception, art expression and construction.

Above all, the building is a public space very much in the spirit of Canberra, within its pliable and unfolding landscape, a place with an identity that does not remain merely subject to the moment.

Romaldo Giurgola

Further Reading

- Hiag Beck, *Parliament House Canberra: A Building for the Nation*, Watermark Press, 1988

