

Features

Eminent citizens are advocating a forum for a wider public discourse, **DIANA STREAK** writes

A place for the people's voices to be heard

Tokyo and Kuala Lumpur each have one. Dublin and Ottawa are developing glittering new ones. But not Canberra – not yet. It may be 10 to 15 years away, but a group of distinguished citizens has thrown its weight behind a vision that could transform the landscape and psyche of the Australian capital.

It would be far, far more than a building – a national meeting place

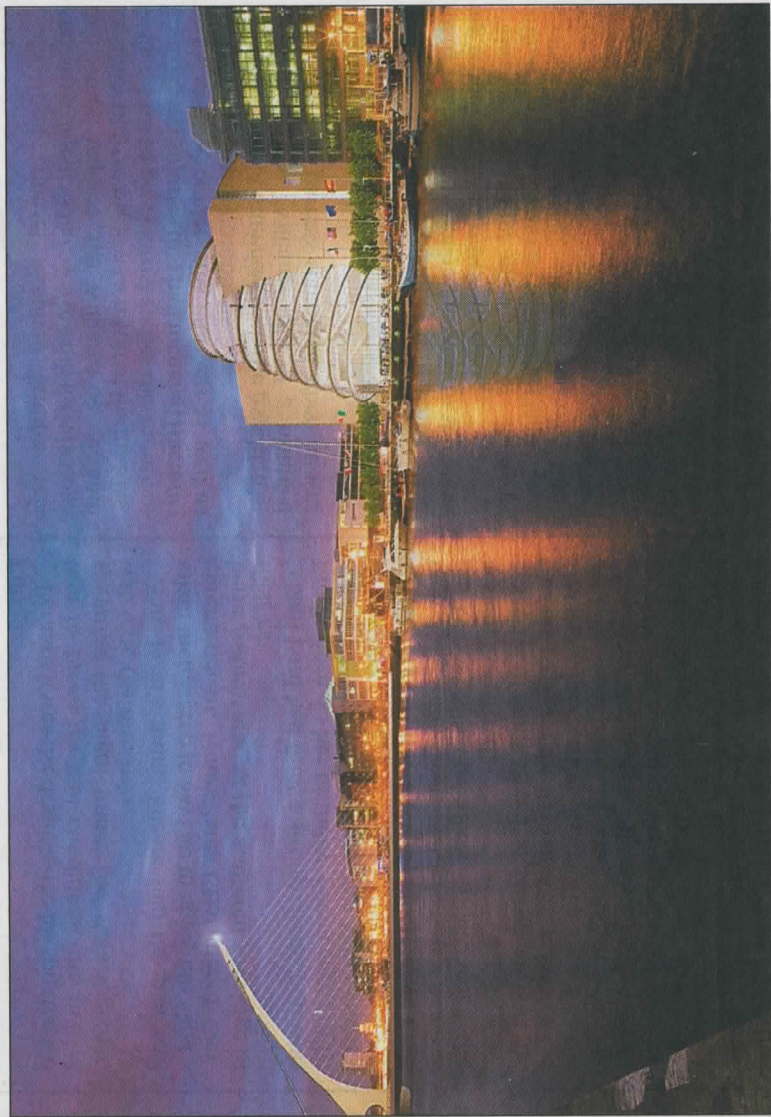
The Australia Forum is the working title of a world-class venue for significant meetings, dialogue, cultural events and other occasions of national importance in the capital. A decade of investigations has identified the need for a high-quality, secure venue which can cater for gatherings of international, national and regional scope.

The scoping document put out by the Canberra Business Council in December advises that respondents should, "Develop a comprehensive

the thousands of international participants. For example, he says, the next Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting is taking place in Perth.

Apart from the launch meeting in 1989, when prime minister Bob Hawke called for economic cooper-

another national institution and focus on the bricks and mortar, that could be one of the negatives. And I think maybe another negative is [people] still not fully comprehending the importance of a nation's capital, that although we use national in all our terms ... Canberra is



it would be far more than a building – a national meeting place on a grand scale that encapsulates the spirit of Western democracy. The people's forum – a place to meet, debate, celebrate and, at times, grieve.

The steering committee of six is headed by Dr Peter Shergold, formerly the country's most senior public servant as secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. It has some notable heavyweights – Dr Dawn Casey, director of Sydney's Powerhouse Museum and formerly director, National Museum of Australia; Professor Ian Chubb, Vice-Chancellor, Australian National University; General Peter Cosgrove, AC, MC, chair of the Australian War Memorial Council; Virginia Haussegger, ABC News presenter, journalist and writer; and Rupert Myer, AM, chairman of the National Gallery of Australia.

Shergold says that in 2008 he was lucky enough to attend the Australia 2020 Summit in Parliament House, which brought together 1000 participants from across the nation and generated a similar number of ideas.

"It was a great occasion. Putting aside the fact that Parliament House is not designed to run such an event, even if it had been, it seems to me it would have been so much more powerful if that 2020 Summit had met in an Australia forum, a place to which the government and prime minister actually came down to the people's forum to be briefed on the issues.

"To me a forum captures a spirit and a vision which partly, of course, needs to be converted into bricks and mortar, that's the scoping exercise. But it's more a network of shared interests. One of the things that really interested me is that you could have such a national institution located in the capital but you could, with the technology we have, be connected with regional and rural Australia electronically."

December advises that respondents should, "Develop a comprehensive functional brief. Investigate the feasibility of a new national facility to meet the current and future needs. Prepare a business case demonstrating that the project proposal can achieve the benefits sought and detailing the likely costs and risks."

Shergold says, "What we have in mind is not only creating a magnificent piece of infrastructure for Canberra but also, really, a place for public discourse, which is where our national capital should be. What we are looking for is to start the work with this scoping study on a place in Canberra for another great national institution, which can be a place for public discourse, the big national conversations and international conversations – and I think it really is the missing piece of the jigsaw in Canberra as the national capital."

So why is Canberra so far behind in filling that gaping void?

"I think too often we start with the idea of the bricks and mortar and location, rather than the vision and values. So we have to get the scoping study done to capture what is the sense of what we want to create," Shergold says.

With a jaded voting populace and the limitations of a Parliament rooted in 19th-century traditions, Shergold and his team believes the time is ripe to reinvigorate the value and role of democracy in Australia.

"I do think, in the 21st century, Western democracies are trying to find ways to restimulate and re-engage a participatory democracy."

But there are other grounds for such a building. As a pivotal economic and political player in the region, it seems absurd that Australia's capital is incapable of hosting events such as Commonwealth Heads of Government or Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation meetings.

Apart from the lack of hotel beds, Canberra simply does not have a suitable or secure enough venue for

1989, when prime minister Bob Hawke called for economic cooperation across the Pacific Rim region, and 12 countries met to commit to future annual meetings, Canberra has never hosted APEC. Since then APEC, which now has 21 members, has met only once in Australia, in Sydney in 2007, when delegates shuffled around in those unsightly Drizabones. In November 2009 a record number of 10,000 delegates, political and business leaders and international media assembled in Singapore.

"However, this is just one example of how Canberra could become a true international city," Shergold says. "This would really put Australia at the cutting edge of what I think is going to be a 21st century movement to have such national and international meeting places which have a vision that goes beyond a convention centre, and I would point to places like Dublin, Tokyo, Ottawa and some of these other big capital cities which are developing very similar projects. I would like Australia to be, and Canberra to be, part of that international movement."

Among the stated requirements for the multifunctional building outlined in the scoping document, are to establish a landmark building of high architectural quality, commensurate with other national institutional buildings; demonstrate sustainability leadership in design and use; that the forum should be a centre unlike any other in the country; and that world-class standards should apply in design, security and delivery of services. It should also have capacity for adjacent hotel development and proximity to shops, restaurants and other tourist facilities and cultural attractions.

Shergold is conscious that it is precisely the physical aspect of the project that could distract people from its true purpose, which is why he is reluctant to name any proposed sites. "People might think it's just yet

ing the importance of a nation's capital, that although we use national in all our terms ... Canberra is synonymous with government, and we lose that sense of why, in fact, we have a national capital.

"There is also the challenge of having a federal structure. There is always a nervousness about building up the national capital too much, but it seems to me the Australia Forum would provide a heart.

"But it would also give the capability of engaging those large events in Canberra in a way that we can't now. I could imagine very big international events taking place, some may have industry focus, some may have arts focus. What the steering committee has in mind, though, is the underlying sense of national dialogue and national identity, that's where I think it fits with the performing arts. We won't, in Canberra, have an opera house, but what we do need is a place at which major national and international events, including arts events, can be held.

"What I really like is this sense of a developing national capital. We have these great national institutions, none of which is a white elephant. Every institution has served our region and our country well. The Australian War Memorial, the National Museum and National Gallery; people come here to visit them and they are enormously successful.

"But in a sense, what I would like to create is that idea of what a capital is – the heart of a nation – and I think that by having a heart of a nation that is simply the Parliament, you are only capturing one half of that."

The Australia Forum would symbolise that there are two sides to a democracy – the citizens' representatives and the citizens themselves.

■ Visit www.canberrabusinesscouncil.com.au for more details.

Meeting place: Dublin's Spencer Dock Convention Centre, an inspiration for the Canberra concept.