Parliament House in Canberra is home to federal Parliament. Architects Mitchell/Giurgola & Thorp have created a building that is a meeting place for members of parliament and a symbol of Australia’s democracy. It is a place where decisions that shape the nation are made, a site for celebration, memorial and sometimes protest, and above all a building for the people.
Choosing a federal capital

Such was the rivalry between Sydney and Melbourne over which should be Australia’s national capital, it was decided to establish a new capital city. A provision was included in the Australian Constitution directing that the federal capital be located in New South Wales but not within 100 miles (160 kilometres) of Sydney. In the meantime, federal Parliament met in Melbourne at the Victorian Parliament House.

In 1902 the search for a suitable site began. At the time it was believed people function better in a cool climate, and sites with cool climates were favoured. The perfect site needed to have an adequate water supply and provide a setting for a garden city. Thirty five sites were suggested, including Bathurst, Bombala, Dalgety, Orange, Tumut and Albury, before Parliament chose the Canberra region in 1908. An international competition was held to design the new national capital and in 1912 it was announced entry number 29 from American architect Walter Burley Griffin had been selected as the winner. Construction of Canberra began the following year.

Plans for a permanent Parliament House stalled during World War I and, in 1921, the federal government decided to construct a provisional building. Designed by John Smith Murdoch, the first federal government architect, it was a modest and functional building with 184 rooms. At the time some people criticised its lack of grandeur, saying the building was not imposing enough for a Parliament.
The need for a new Parliament House

The new Parliament House replaced the provisional building. Always intended as a temporary home for federal Parliament, Provisional (Old) Parliament House remained in operation for 61 years. When it opened on 9 May 1927, there were 101 members of parliament — by the time the building closed, this number had more than doubled to 224.

Despite many additions and alterations, by 1988 the provisional building was completely inadequate for the needs of the contemporary Parliament. About 3000 people were crammed into a space originally designed for several hundred.

In 1978 then Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser unveiled plans to build a new Parliament House to be opened in 1988, the bicentennial year of European settlement. An international competition held to find a suitable design for the building attracted 329 entries. In 1980 it was announced a design by New York-based Mitchell/Giurgola and Thorp Architects had been chosen.

The new Parliament House has six times the floor space of the provisional building, now known as Old Parliament House, and is designed to last at least 200 years. On a sitting week it accommodates about 3200 people. This number swells to over 5000 when tourists and visitors, such as public servants or lobbyists who have business with the Parliament, are included.

‘This building will become for our nation both the forum for our differences and the instrument of our unity. A building for all Australians, a Parliament reflecting the diversity of our entire society and responding to the needs of the whole community’

Prime Minister Bob Hawke, in an official speech to mark the opening of the new Parliament House.
The design

The design is based on two huge curved walls, each 460 metres in length, which separate Parliament House into four main zones:

- the House of Representatives chamber and offices on the eastern side
- the Senate chamber and offices on the western side
- a central zone which includes ceremonial and public spaces
- the executive government wing on the southern end of the structure.

The incorporation of the building into the landscape is a key element of the design. It is consistent with Walter Burley Griffin’s vision for Canberra, which integrated the built and natural environment. Architect Romaldo Giurgola observed that Parliament House:

‘…could not be built on top of the hill as this would symbolise government imposed upon the people. The building should nest with the hill, symbolically rise out of the Australian landscape, as true democracy rises from the state of things’.

One million cubic metres of earth and rock were removed from the site to make way for the building. The central zone of Parliament House was then built into Capital Hill. It was placed within the two curved walls and covered over with grass to recreate the shape of the hill.
**The site**

In Griffin’s original plan for Canberra, Parliament House was to be built on Camp Hill, just below where it is now located. Griffin reserved the Capital Hill site for a ceremonial public building called the Capitol, which would celebrate the achievements of the Australian people. Its elevated position above Parliament House symbolised Parliament is accountable to the people, who ‘oversee’ their representatives.

However, Provisional (Old) Parliament House was built just beneath Camp Hill. It would need to be demolished if Griffin’s plan was followed. The federal Parliament considered both the Camp Hill and a lakeside site before agreeing to build Parliament House on Capital Hill.

Mitchell/Giurgola & Thorp’s design pays tribute to Griffin’s original vision. The flagmast traces the outline of the pyramidal ‘Capitol’ building from Griffin’s competition drawings. The grassed roof allows people to literally stand above their elected representatives.

Griffin used the land formations around Canberra as the basis for his plan for the city and to define symbolic axes. These included a land axis that runs from Mount Ainslie through Capital Hill, the site of Parliament House. The central zone of Parliament House was placed in line with Griffin’s land axis. It extends from the Forecourt to the ministerial wing, and links the people to the executive government.

The two chambers—the House of Representatives and the Senate—are located on a line known as the legislative (law-making) axis. It crosses the land axis in the Members Hall at the very centre of the building beneath the Australian flag, visible through a glass skylight. This intersection is half-way between the two chambers. It symbolically brings together the different elements that make up Australian democracy—the people, the members of parliament and the government—under the unifying symbol of the flag.

The Members Hall is a ceremonial space at the heart of the building. It is also an informal meeting place for members of parliament. In the centre of the hall is a reflective pool made from a single piece of South Australian Black Imperial granite. It is 3.5m² by 250 millimeters thick and weighs eight tonnes. The pool reflects the flag above. The sound of water trickling through the pool prevents the conversations of members of parliament from being overheard.
A place for the Parliament

The chambers
The two curved walls in Parliament House also separate the two chambers, a division that physically represents Australia’s bicameral parliamentary system in which laws can only be passed if both houses agree.

The House of Representatives and Senate chambers are the largest spaces in the building. Members of parliament meet in the chambers to debate bills (proposed laws) and represent the people from their electorate or state/territory.

There are 150 members in the House of Representatives; however, the chamber was designed to seat up to 240 members to allow for population growth and a consequent increase in the number of representatives. Similarly, while there are currently 76 senators in the Senate chamber, it is designed to accommodate up to 120 senators.

In both the House of Representatives and the Senate, the seats are arranged in rows in a horseshoe shape. This replicates the layout of the chambers in Old Parliament House.

The colours of the chambers are based on those used in the British Parliament, with red for the Senate and green for the House of Representatives. These traditionally rich colours have been adapted to reflect the Australian landscape. The green used in the House of Representatives and the red in the Senate are similar to the grey-green and red ochre colours of Australian native plants, such as eucalypts and wattle trees.

In both chambers:
1. Members of the government sit to the right of the Speaker (House of Representatives) or President (Senate), while members of the opposition sit to the left.
2. Members of minor parties and Independents sit on the benches at the curve of the chamber.
3. There is a seating area above the chambers called the press gallery, set aside for the media.
4. There are visitors’ galleries where members of the public can view proceedings.
5. There are sound-proofed sections in the public galleries for special interest groups.
6. TV cameras and microphones are used to broadcast proceedings.
Each chamber has a distinctive architectural style. In the Senate, this is based on circles and ellipses (breaks) and in the House, on angular shapes. The chamber ceilings provide a striking example of this contrast. It can also be seen in the rooftops of both chambers: the Senate has a circular roof and the House of Representatives roof is angular. The rooftops are finished with red terracotta tiles. This is a reference to the red-tiled rooftops of many Australian homes.

Both chambers have large central roof skylights which let in natural light during the day, and at night glow with the light from the chamber to indicate Parliament is sitting. In Old Parliament House, a red light on the roof above the Senate chamber and a green light above the House indicated when each chamber was in session.

In both the Senate and House of Representatives, the colours are a deeper shade at the floor level, which puts the focus on the participants in the chamber. The colour gradually lightens as it gets closer to the ceiling, where it combines with the natural light from the skylight to give the space above each chamber an airy, floating quality. The architects intended that this be a ‘metaphor for a free and open society’.

**Cabinet Room**

Cabinet is made up of the Prime Minister and senior ministers, and is the main decision-making body of the government. Cabinet usually meets in the Cabinet Room. This room is located on the ground floor of Parliament House opposite the Prime Minister’s office and close to the offices of the other ministers.

While it is one of the few rooms in the building that has no natural light, the Cabinet Room does not resemble a bunker. Rather it has a simple ‘leanness’ that is intended to represent democracy. The architects compared the room, with its smooth, understated and elegant surfaces, to a large passenger ship.

There are over 2700 clocks in Parliament House, fitted with two flashing lights which call members of parliament to the chambers. One light flashes green for the House of Representatives and the other flashes red for the Senate. They let members of parliament know when a session of Parliament begins, a vote is to be held or if they are needed in the chamber for other business. When the lights are activated, the sound of a bell rings through loudspeakers in the building.
The ceiling in the Cabinet Room is finished with timber marquetry panels inlaid with eucalypt leaves, which were designed by Adelaide artist Tony Bishop and made by craftsman Michael Retter. Hidden among the leaves is a cicada, a dragonfly and a blowfly. Despite these ‘bugs’, the room is highly secure and is regularly swept electronically because the Cabinet discuss confidential and secret matters which affect the nation. Tony Bishop believes his ‘bugs’ add a touch of Australian larrikinism and informality. He likes to imagine a minister in the debugged Cabinet Room ‘looking at the ceiling, only to find that after all the effort there were still bugs there’ (*Weekend Australian*, April 16 1988).

**Committee rooms**

Parliament House contains 19 committee rooms. Although these rooms are parliamentary spaces, they are not used for debating or voting on law-making. A parliamentary committee is made up of a small number of parliamentarians with a specific task— generally to gather information related to a bill (proposed law) or an issue of community concern. Both the Senate and the House of Representatives have a range of committees, including joint committees.

The largest of these rooms is the Main Committee Room. It is the only area in the executive wing with a gallery that is open to the public. Like other major spaces in the building, it features a central skylight and timber-panelled walls. The room was designed for committee meetings, hearings, public conferences and televised press conferences.

1: A Cabinet meeting  
2: The Cabinet Room  
3: The marquetry panels in the Cabinet Room  
4: A ‘bug’ in the Cabinet Room  
5: The Main Committee Room set up for a parliamentary role-play
A Parliament for the people

“We built an example of democracy where the people who visit the place are as important as the politicians within”

Richard Thorp, architect.

The Forecourt

The Forecourt, which is the main entrance to Parliament House, is designed to invite people into the building to observe the democratic process. A large open space, it is framed by two walls that appear to be outstretched as if in a gesture of welcome.

The Forecourt is paved with stone and red gravel, with a large ceremonial pool at its centre. In the middle of this pool is a granite mosaic created by Indigenous artist Michael Nelson Jagamara. The mosaic sits on an island symbolising the Australian continent.

The natural colours and hard surfaces of the Forecourt evoke the ancient land, while the mosaic refers to the Indigenous presence in Australia. The Forecourt space represents the period in the country’s history before European settlement.
The Great Verandah

The Great Verandah has a screen wall made up of 22 columns and is topped by a glazed glass roof. The screen wall is clad with slabs of Italian Carrara marble. Each of the 40 millimetre-thick slabs was cut from the same cliff face.

The Great Verandah pays tribute to the tradition of the verandah in Australian homes, which gives shelter from the sun and rain, and is where guests are welcomed and farewelled.

The white of the marble and the design of the screen wall recall the white façade of Old Parliament House with its series of oblong windows. This visual link is further emphasised when the two buildings are viewed together from the north and it appears that Old Parliament House sits within the curved

A stainless steel coat of arms, created by Sydney sculptor, Robin Blau, is set into the Great Verandah. Measuring four by four metres, the work is based on ‘rarrk’ or crosshatching, a style of painting from Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory, which was developed many thousands of years ago. Like the Forecourt mosaic, it alludes to the ongoing presence of Indigenous people in Australia. Blau also created a coat of arms for the executive wing entrance. Both works were a gift from the Parliament and people of New South Wales.
The Foyer

With its marble surfaces and soft lighting, the Foyer is designed to be a cool and tranquil space in contrast to the open and often sun-drenched Forecourt. Natural light filters from windows and skylights through 48 columns clad in grey-green marble. The columns create an impression of spaces opening and closing, just as if walking through a forest. The ‘forest’ of columns divides the Foyer into small bays in which people can assemble.

The floor is geometrically patterned in white marble and black limestone. The limestone, which is about 345 million years old, contains small marine fossils.

Two staircases, made from solid blocks of marble, lead people from the Foyer to the first floor where the public has access to the House of Representatives and Senate chambers.

The walls in the Foyer are topped by marquetry panels designed by Adelaide artist Tony Bishop and made by Sydney craftsman Michael Retter. The 20 coachwood timber panels are inlaid with designs of Australian flora. They include plants that are 200 million years old and species, such as wattle, waratah and eucalypts, noted by botanist Sir Joseph Banks when he came to Australia in 1770. The panels on the north wall of the Foyer depict plants used by Aboriginal people for food and medicine, such as yam, quandong and bunya pine.

Each of the coachwood panels is trimmed with jarrah. The flora inlays are made up of 5000 pieces of timber which include Queensland walnut, poplar, kauri pine, camphor laurel and Australian red cedar. For the architects, the panels symbolised ‘the unknown exotic land to which the colony had come as well as the proximity of this space [the Foyer] to the outdoors.’
The Great Hall

The Great Hall is a large space designed for ceremonial and other official occasions. Described as a ‘warm timber envelope’, it features a central skylight, and floor and wall panelling made from various Australian timbers. Known as the room of the land, the Great Hall conveys a sense of how the physical environment has shaped Australia.

The centrepiece of the Great Hall is a tapestry based on a painting by celebrated Australian artist, Arthur Boyd, of a dense eucalyptus forest in the Shoalhaven area of New South Wales. This landscape was the inspiration for many of Boyd’s paintings. By depicting a detailed section of the forest rather than a panoramic view, Boyd gives the impression the landscape has no beginning or end. This suggests connections with the landscape around Parliament House and throughout Australia.

The tapestry, which measures 20 metres wide by nine metres high, was woven by the Victorian Tapestry Workshop, who worked closely with Boyd to interpret his design. Fourteen weavers spent nearly two years making the tapestry in four separate panels. On average, each weaver completed one square metre every five weeks. Boyd’s painting is on permanent display at Parliament House.

Art in Parliament House

Parliament House has a large collection of Australian art, including more than 60 major works commissioned for the building. The architects worked with artists and craftspeople in the early stages of the design process to integrate the works of art with the architecture. According to the Parliament House Construction Authority:

‘... works of art and craft were to be understood as ‘voices’ within the building capable of expressing the diverse character and identity of Australia... the presence of the works was a critical aspect of creating a sense of resonance in the building with past cultural tradition’.

Today, the Parliament House Art Collection is made up of over 6000 works of art and heritage objects. The collection includes works of art by major Australian artists and is an important representation of the nation’s artistic expression. Many of the artworks are rotated around various locations within the building.
The flag

Perhaps the most identifiable symbol of Parliament House is the distinctive flagmast and flag. The Australian flag, which is flown over Parliament House 24 hours a day, seven days a week, marks the exact centre of the building. The flag is about the size of the side of a double-decker bus, measuring 12.8 metres by 6.4 metres. The flagmast is 81 metres high and weighs 220 tonnes, making it one of the largest stainless steel structures in the world.

The flag is changed every four to six weeks. Fourteen flags are rotated regularly so they wear evenly. It takes three people to raise and lower the flag. A hydraulically-operated cage called the Alimak is used to transport two people 60 metres up the flagmast to a platform, while below one person controls the winches used during the operation. The Alimak doesn’t remain vertical for the whole journey, but follows the 45 degree angle of the flagpole, which means the occupants spend part of the journey almost lying down. For safety reasons, the flag can’t be changed if it is too windy or stormy.
More information

**PEO resources**

**Videos**

**Fact Sheets**

**Other resources**

**Parliament of Australia**
www.aph.gov.au

**Parliament House virtual tour**
virtualtour.aph.gov.au

**Museum of Australian Democracy at Old Parliament House**
Old Parliament House
moadoph.gov.au/collection/the-building

moadoph.gov.au/learning/school-resources

**National Capital Authority**
Fact Sheets: The Siting and Naming Canberra and Parliament House