

## News Update

July 1998

**Griffin Exhibition and book: *Beyond Architecture – Marion Mahony and Walter Burley Griffin in America, Australia and India*:** This long-awaited exhibition will open on 21 July at the Powerhouse Museum, 500 Harris Street, Ultimo, Sydney and continue to May 1999.

The exhibition will survey the lives and careers of the Griffins in the US, Australia and India from their years with Frank Lloyd Wright at the turn of the century, to their successful independent practice in Chicago, to the frustrations of the debacle over the implementation of their Canberra plans. It will cover their many projects – large and small, completed and unrealised – in Melbourne and Sydney, their grand vision for a community living in harmony with nature at Castlecrag, and the significance of their revitalised but short practice in India 1935-37. The Griffins' creativity extended beyond the introduction of new architectural and planning concepts – by challenging accepted opinion, by their uncompromising vision of a democratic society living in sympathy with the natural environment, they also articulated and anticipated many social and environmental issues of our time. (continued on p. 2)

***The Griffins' Castlecrag Today – Open Day Sunday 16 August*:** To celebrate *Design Week*, three of the unique houses designed by Walter Burley Griffin at Castlecrag will be open to the public on Sunday 16 August 1998 from 12 noon till 3pm. At the same time there will also be guided tours of this garden suburb with its many walkways, bushland reserves and contoured roads. (continued on page 2)

### Dates for your diary:

<b>Griffin Exhibition</b> (see above)	<b>begins 21 July '98</b>
<b>Cultural Connections talk</b> (see enclosed invitation)	<b>Saturday 8 August</b>
<b><i>The Griffins' Castlecrag Today – Open Day</i></b> (see above)	<b>Sunday 16 August</b>
<b>10<sup>th</sup> AGM with guest speaker Professor Paul Kruty from Univ. of Illinois</b>	<b>Tuesday 29 September</b>
<b>Symposium in Melbourne</b> (see inside) <b><i>The Legacy of the Griffins: America, Australia, India</i></b>	<b>1-4 October</b>

**Griffin Exhibition and book (continued):** The Museum has been given privileged access to previously inaccessible collections of archival material relating to the Griffins. The exhibition will be multi-media and include drawings, designs, paintings, photographs, furniture, light fittings and architectural elements, as well as objects and documents. Inclusion of Marion's superb tree drawings and paintings will record the Griffins' passionate concern for the Australian landscape and its preservation – decades before such concerns received widespread currency.

The exhibition was planned following the demolition of the Griffin-designed Pymont Incinerator in 1992 and the subsequent provision of funds by Sydney City Council. The Society has been involved in the preparation of the exhibition from the beginning, when it was instrumental in persuading Sydney City Council to seek funds from the developer who demolished the incinerator, so that an educational program could be developed, and subsequently through Committee members Anna Rubbo, Anne Watson and James Weirick.

In conjunction with the exhibition the Powerhouse Museum is publishing a book of interpretive essays by Griffin scholars on a range of subjects. Titled ***Beyond Architecture – Marion Mahony and Walter Burley Griffin in America, Australia and India*** (edited by exhibition curator Anne Watson), the book is available at a discount to those visiting the exhibition. (Powerhouse Publishing ISBN 1 86317 068 5, 192 pages illustrated in colour and black and white. \$39.95).

**The Griffins' Castlecrag Today – Open Day Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> August:** The Open Day is being organised by the Walter Burley Griffin Society Inc. in association with the Powerhouse Museum. Ticket costs for adults will be \$5 per house and \$3 per house for concession. Tickets will be on sale at the ticket booth at 140 Edinburgh Road, Castlecrag.

At 3.30pm the outdoor Haven Amphitheatre, designed by the Griffins, will host a short performance by Willoughby Symphony Orchestra, a talk by Professor Jill Roe on Marion Griffin and readings of letters written by and about the Griffins. The Amphitheatre event is free and refreshments will be available there. No parking is available at the Amphitheatre but a shuttle bus will run down to it from the ticket sales booth and from Castlecrag shops. In case of wet weather, the Amphitheatre event will be held in the hall of St James Church in Edinburgh Road.

The 45 minute guided walks will cost \$5 per adult and \$3 concession and will leave from the ticket sales booth at 140 Edinburgh Road. For people purchasing tickets to the value of \$10 or more there is a special offer of a 10% discount for the just-released book *Beyond Architecture* published by the Powerhouse.

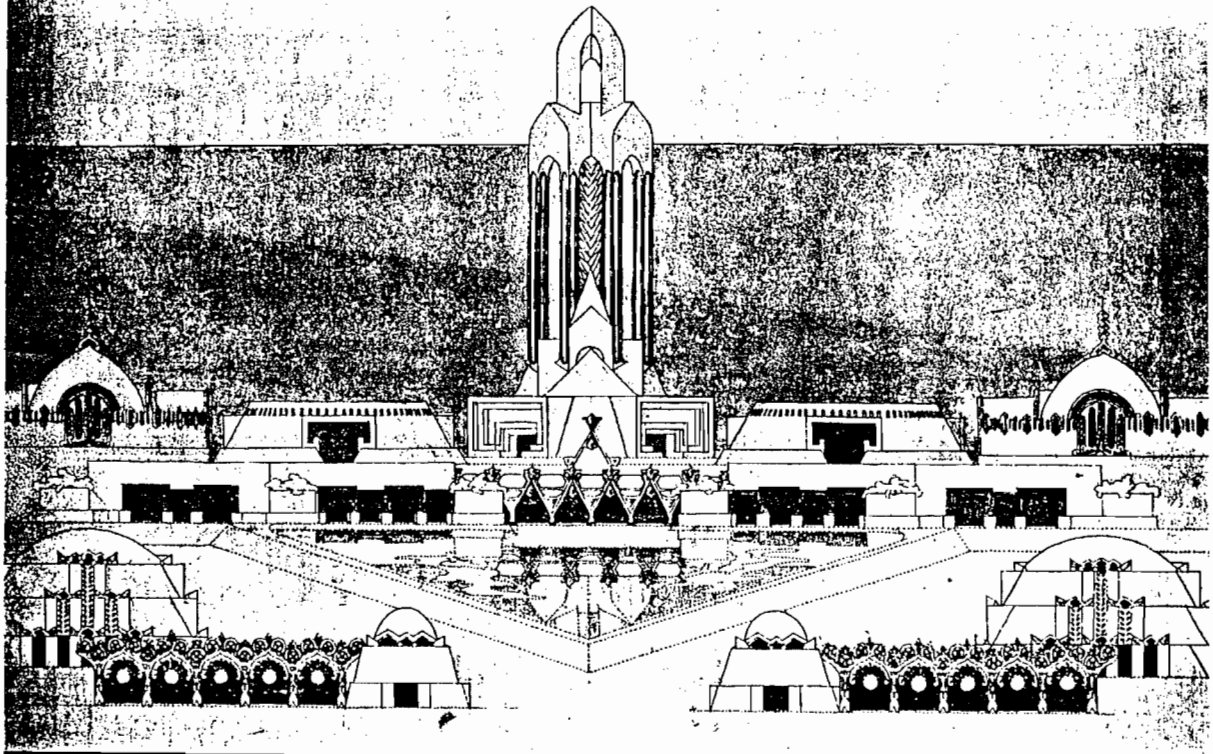
#### **Book review:**

***Two American architects in India: Walter B Griffin and Marion M Griffin 1935-1937***  
**Paul Kruty and Paul E Sprague** 1997, published by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA.

A fascinating book that examines in detail the Griffins' exuberant Indian work. In Paul Kruty's words, "Griffin's Indian adventure produced a renaissance in his career that, because of his untimely death fifteen months after his arrival, was also his final testament".

Walter arrived in India in 1935 planning to spend just a few months overseeing the construction of the Lucknow University Library which he and his staff had designed and detailed in Australia. After his arrival in Lucknow, approval to begin building the library was delayed, but in the meantime Walter was commissioned by many institutions and individual clients including two rajahs and a Himalayan prince. The commissions included libraries, banks, a student union, a printing plant, government offices, numerous residences and residential additions, and over sixty buildings for the United Provinces Industrial and Agricultural Exhibition.

# Two American Architects in India



**Paul Kruty and Paul E. Sprague**

With so much work, Walter convinced Marion to join him, establish an office and train draftsmen. Sixteen of her magnificent ink and watercolour drawings of many of these commissions are reproduced in full colour in the book.

The book provides a fascinating description of Griffin's observations of and philosophical and architectural responses to Indian architectural traditions and building techniques. Griffin was concerned that the new architecture should reflect both the 'stamp of the place' and 'the spirit of the times'. As a result and as revealed in the book this brief period from 1935 to 1937 produced a fabulous array of highly creative decorated modernist projects that conveyed the verve and exuberance of this Indian adventure.

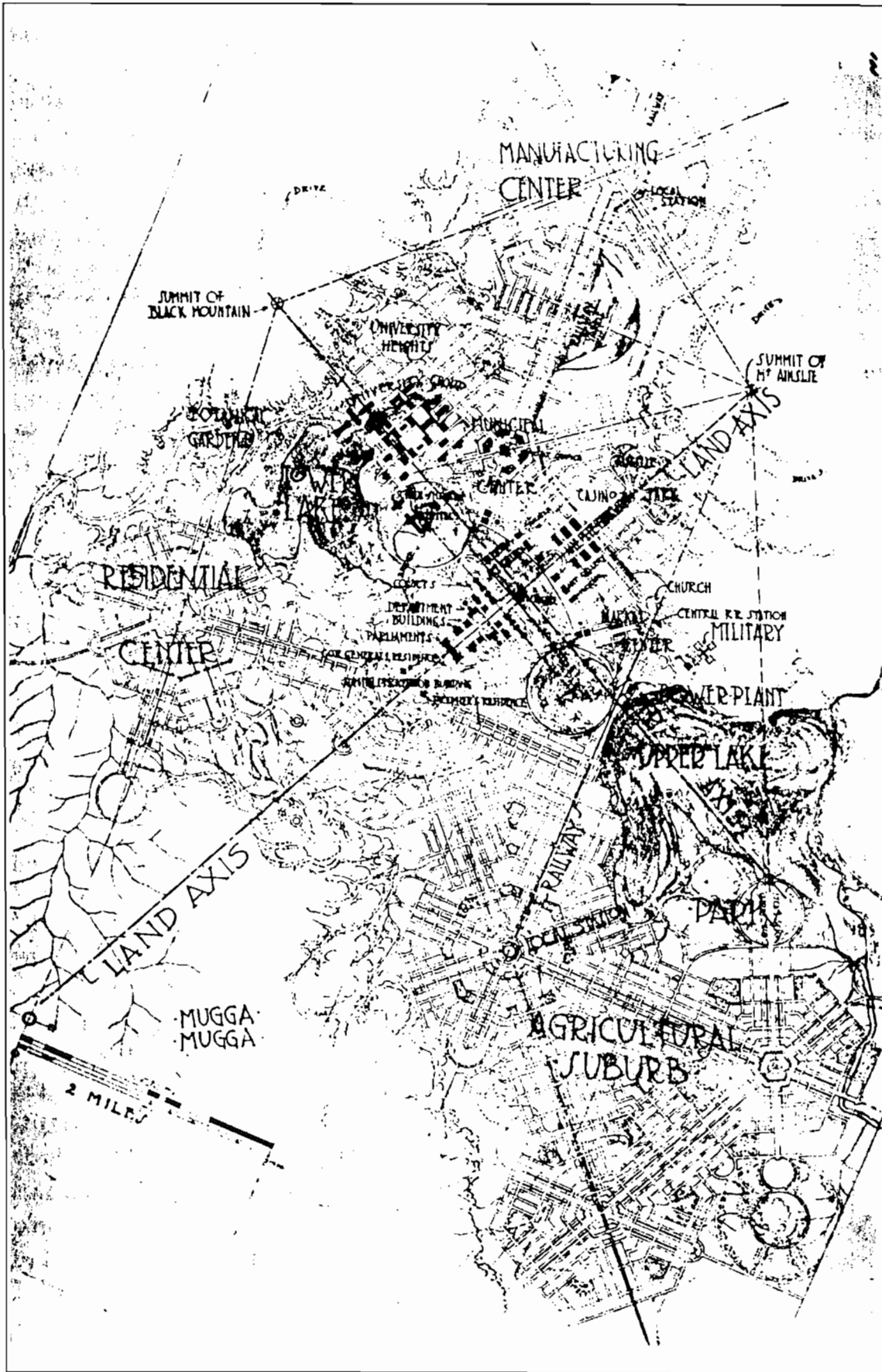
The book will be available from the Museum of Sydney Bookshop, corner Bridge and Phillip Streets, Sydney, tel. 9251 5988 to order.  
Review by Adrienne Kabos

## **Griffin's Canberra: the city that was never built**

Some 25 members of the Society experienced "**Griffin's Canberra**" through Professor James Weirick's wonderful guidance over the 1998 Anzac Day weekend. A number of the tour party commenced their Anzac day at the Dawn Service to enhance their appreciation of the impact of the *Great War*, which changed the Australian ethos and brought an early end to Griffin's hopes of realising his vision of a capital that served the aspirations of a new nation.

### ***The Vision***

The tour proper commenced on Mount Ainslie where we took in the grand vista that inspired Griffin's city planning concepts. Here we gained a sense of the landscape and the wonderful scenery that attracted people here. James Weirick pointed out that the great panorama that encapsulated the Griffins' winning entry was probably an outcome of their meeting with Miles Franklin in 1911. She had



Griffin's landscape plan for Canberra showing the axes lined up with Mount Ainslie and Black Mountain as submitted in the Federal Capital Competition, 1912. James Birrell, *Walter Burley Griffin*, Univ. Qld Press, 1964.

grown up in the Brindabella Mountains and would have been able to help the Griffins in Chicago to appreciate the dramatic sweep of the landscape. The Griffins were the only entrants to pick the powerful land axis from Mt Ainslie to Capital Hill, with a water axis at right angles stretching from Black Mountain to infinity.

**The Concept.** The city was conceived around this land axis and water axis. The lake was a stroke of genius, for it provided a means of dealing with the flood plain of the river, although bureaucrats resisted its construction for many years. Only when the lake filled did the city come together. Within the cross of the land and water axes, Griffin designed a triangle from the flagpole extending from Capitol Hill to City Hill and a point behind the Australia-America Memorial in Russell. Constitution Avenue forms the base of the great triangle.

With the lake and triangle, Griffin tackled the transport problem – it was a requirement of the competition to link Canberra to the mainline railway system at Yass. Griffin's solution was to bring a railway into Canberra adjacent to Northbourne Avenue, then to swing around along the base of his triangle in a deep cutting and a tunnel through Mount Pleasant. It would cross the flood plain on a causeway constructed to form an East Lake, which would be constructed using fill from the railway excavation.

**A Democratic City.** Griffin wanted a democratic city inspired by the new Federation. He was a follower of Henry George and was influenced by his ideas of land ownership. George proposed a tax on the land-value created by what the community wants to do – he deeply opposed land speculation. Griffin therefore saw Australia as a younger, purer version of American democracy. He saw Canberra as a positive idea; like raising the temple, building the capital would be a great project for the new Commonwealth. But the reality was that to most Australians, Canberra was a negative idea to deny advantage to either Sydney or Melbourne.

Griffin's democratic city had its civic activities at the base of the triangle, served by the main railway station, the market place and commercial quarter of the city. He expected these two poles would grow toward each other and create a great street of enterprise. Across the triangle he planned a park as a great democratic space. The main national institutions would be located in this park. Thus the base of the triangle was a place of the people. The convergence of the avenues expressed the will of the people, with the Federal Government located on the southern shore of the lake. Between the people and the government, Griffin placed the judiciary. The present High Court, at least, is located in the right place according to Griffin's vision. Parliament was to have been located on Camp Hill. The bureaucracy would have been located between Parliament House and the lake. The buildings were to be linked by colonnades and a reflecting pool, creating a Court of Honour. The apex at Capitol Hill was to have the residences of the PM and the Governor General. The plan provided a diagram of representative democracy.

**An Australian City.** Griffin's plan expressed the Australian character. The great axis lined the city up with the bush – the primordial axis of the original Australia. Between the two official residences on Capital Hill, the Capitol was to be a national temple of Australian achievement, along similar lines to a Roman Capitol. This would be a place to hold national conventions, receive people in triumph and house the national archives.

### **The Outcome**

James pointed out that the Canberra that was built is a reflection of the values of Commonwealth public servants. It is only the shell of the Griffin idea. The basis for Griffin's Canberra was powerful, beautiful and never understood. People decided to do otherwise for the wrong reasons. As a result, the city did not come together as an expression of democratic ideals or as a place filled with everyday life. Decision-makers are isolated from the activities of ordinary Australians. The key elements that were achieved are the lake and road pattern. What is missing is Griffin's planned sense of land use. Even though Griffin's plan was not realised, the underlying beauty of his landscape ideas remains.

We learned much about the workings of the Federal bureaucracy and their success in blocking Griffin's ideas. The international design competition material went to the Department of Home Affairs, where officials convened and declared that all the competition designs were too expensive. They proceeded to draw up their own design, which was released in January 1913. This was the "official design" when the Foundation Stone of Canberra was laid in June 1913. It was a real "dogs breakfast" and generated a storm of protest around the world, backed by private architects in Australia. There was a campaign to bring in an outside expert to sort out the mess. It became an election issue.

Joseph Cook (Liberal) won the election, but with a majority of one and a hostile upper house. Thomas Mawson, a prominent UK architect, was invited as an independent expert to review the situation, but he received a better offer, to redesign Athens. Accordingly, Griffin was invited at the last minute.

Griffin arrived in August 1913 and went into conference with the Departmental officials on the plans. This resulted in a stalemate over 6 weeks, so the Minister (Kelly) stepped in and offered Griffin a 3 year contract to supervise construction. However, Griffin had to return to the US to arrange his affairs, and bureaucratic opposition was mobilised during his 6 months absence. Griffin returned to a difficult situation in May 1914. The double dissolution of Parliament resulted in an election in July 1914. The campaign was still in progress when war broke out. Labor was returned to power, but King O'Malley, who had become Griffin's supporter, was not elected to the Ministry. WO Archibald, who had been opposed to the whole idea of Canberra from the start, became Minister.

James Weirick's colleague at the University of New South Wales, Professor Paul Reid, concludes that opposition to Griffin was based on what the bureaucrats had in mind when they called for a competition. Scrivener, the Surveyor-General, knew the site in great detail. To him, it was an open treeless plain subjected to cold northwest winds. He always imagined a city concentrated in the most protected area – now Manuka/Kingston – behind Capitol Hill. Local opinion could not understand why anyone would want to develop on the north side of the river.

The foreshore East Basin of the lake became an industrial site. A powerhouse was sited here while the competition was being held to generate electricity to pump water from the Cotter River to Canberra. This was not shown in the competition documents. As Griffin predicted, this precinct stayed an industrial area.

Ongoing opposition to Griffin and bureaucratic incompetence resulted in a Royal Commission into the Administration of the Federal Capital. The findings vindicated Griffin, but there were now no politicians to defend him. By 1920, the Minister for Home Affairs, Groom, told Griffin his contract would not be renewed. However, Groom ordered the Federal Capital Advisory Committee to implement the Griffin Plan. They responded by publishing the road plan in the *Government Gazette*. This meant that Canberra's roads were built to Griffin's plan, but little else.

### ***Griffin's Legacy***

The only identifiable physical structure designed by Griffin in Canberra is the monument to Major-General William Throsby Bridges above Duntroon. Bridges was the commander of Australian forces at Gallipoli and was killed in action on 18 May 1915. Griffin's design is a low form related to the landscape. The polished stone picks up the movement of clouds, the characteristic of the site that most impressed Griffin when he first visited the site in 1913.

Griffin also designed the Foundation Stone, unveiled by the Prince of Wales on 21 June 1920. This stone was to mark the foundation of Griffin's capital and was laid in the centre circle of Capitol Hill. The dot in the centre of the "O" is the spot from where the whole of Canberra was laid out. The stone has been relocated to the forecourt of Parliament House.

Griffin quickly fell in love with Australian plants. He came from an intellectual school that used the indigenous plants of Illinois for landscape work. However, he was not a purist in using indigenous species. He was more interested in the dramatic effect of plants. Archives have correspondence from Griffin to seed collectors around the world. One of his more bizarre ideas was to plant the four hills of Canberra with plants that have flowers of the same colour – one colour for each hill.

Griffin's idea for a Botanic Gardens was a giant Continental Arboretum stretching in an arc from Yarralumla to the University. Different parts would be planted to vegetation representing various parts of Europe. It was a response to the challenge of a bare landscape. Revegetation was a huge task. Griffin and the government horticulturalist, Thomas Weston, fenced off Black Mountain, Mt Majura and Mt Ainslie and removed the stock to allow natural regeneration of the bush.

The cork tree plantation west of Black Mountain was one of Griffin's ideas for productive horticulture within his arboretum. The first shipment of seeds from Spain was torpedoed during the War, but undaunted, Griffin obtained a second lot and planted these trees in 1918. The plantation is a genuine Griffin environment. He sought to generate a new natural environment within the Australian landscape. As we stood in the plantation, we gained a "sense of somewhere else".

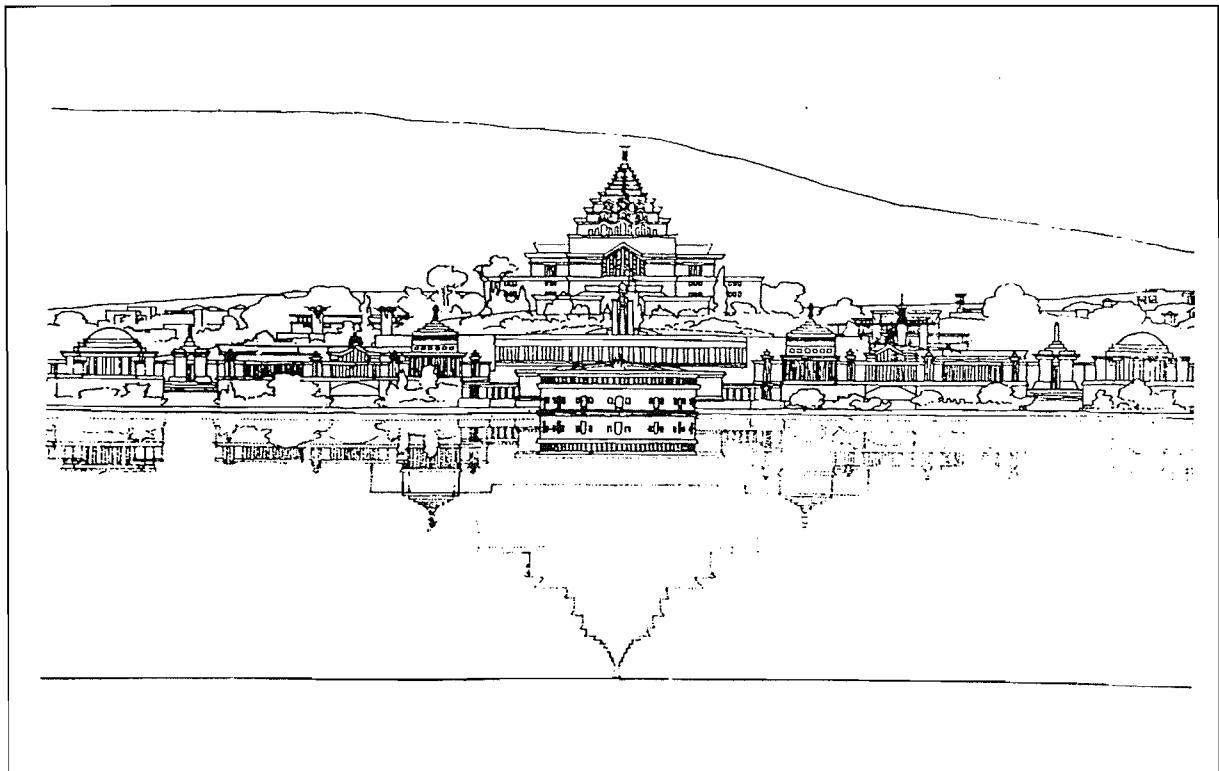
Another "Griffin space" was the Redwood Grove east of the airport. The trees were planted by Weston at Griffin's order. This site was to be the edge of the planned East Lake. Its establishment shows the breadth of Griffin's thinking across the whole landscape of Canberra, despite his lack of funds to do things. The plantation symbolises Griffin's links with a circle of people who were concerned with the natural landscape. Redwoods were part of the ideology of the US National Parks movement. In Chicago, Griffin had been friendly with businessman and conservationist Stephen Tyng Mathe, who was appointed Director of the US National Parks in 1916.

Residential streets in the suburb of Reid retain some of Griffin's intended character. Griffin and Weston planned each street with its own species of tree. Booroondora Street is lined with Igerian oaks, while Corong Street features Atlantic cedar trees. Griffin wanted streets 100ft wide and houses built to the street front – the public domain – while backyards served as the private domain. He planned parks behind the houses, as in Castlecrag, but this was too radical for the time, and Griffin's successors turned these around, creating subdivisions around public 'greens'.

### **Black Mountain**

A visit to Telstra Tower provided an experience of Canberra's cold northwest winds, but also the opportunity to gain further insight into the importance of Griffin's land and water axes.

**Griffin's Lake System.** Griffin read the terrain like the palm of his hand – he designed a three-dimensional city with a water axis at the lower level. However, the present lake system differs from Griffin's intention. He wanted formal foreshores at the centre and more informal lakes to the west and east to establish contrast between the formal and informal parts of the city.



Detail from Marion Mahony Griffin's colored rendering, "Southerly Side of Water Axis, Government Group", for the Federal Capital Competition 1911. From Paul Kruty/Paul Sprague, *Two American Architects in India*, p.38.

**Canberra's Axis.** Griffin planned the main road and railway along what is now Constitutional Avenue, then cross a causeway to the south side. This would provide the main thoroughfare between north and east. There was to be a series of bridges across the lake to give resilience to the transport system. The vista from Black Mountain featured the suburb of Yarralumla laid out to Griffin's grid pattern and aligned to Black Mountain. Haig Park, the heavily vegetated windbreak laid out by Griffin's successors, is aligned to Mt Ainslie, while MacArthur Avenue is aligned on Black Mountain.



## **Prominent Canberra Buildings**

The tour covered a number of significant buildings, of which our understanding was greatly enhanced by James' insight. They included:

**Provisional Parliament House.** The building is a great achievement of John Smith Murdoch, the Government Architect – a wonderful building. It is in the *Dominion Style* of architecture, which was influenced by the stripped classicism of Edwardian England; the public buildings of Pretoria, Ottawa, New Delhi and Salisbury (Harare); and in its interior details, the Arts & Crafts movement. The furniture shows a strong Griffin influence. Many of the designers in the Canberra system respected Griffin and were influenced by his ideas. However, by putting the Provisional Parliament House in the wrong place – just in front of Griffin's intended site on Camp Hill - the bureaucrats threw the whole of Griffin's concept out of its intended integration.

**Canberra (now Hyatt) Hotel.** This building, designed by John Smith Murdoch, clearly incorporates Griffin ideas. Built on the horizontal, the bungalow-style single-storey pavilions arranged around courtyards, incorporate strong Griffin features and are probably Griffin designs. The scheme seems to have been modified by Murdoch, who added the two-storey buildings to increase accommodation. The 1980s extensions at the back are very sympathetic and constitute one of the better modern buildings of Canberra.

**The War Memorial.** James Weirick regards this as the most important building in Canberra. The Government initiated a design competition for the building in 1920. The jury could not decide on the winner and two contestants, Emil Sodersteen and John Crust, were invited to proceed with the project. They jointly worked on a number of revisions to the design over several years and it got better each time. The most significant change was to rotate the building 90° to line up with the land axis. The building is in Sydney sandstone (the grey military colour) with a green copper roof, so it has the colours of the Australian bush. The recessed dome represents Constantinople, the 'objective' of the Gallipoli campaign, and the domed buildings of Damascus and Jerusalem. The building expresses the 'clean war' of the desert, not the grim horror of the Western Front. Its location at the bottom of the hill symbolises the landing at Anzac Cove, but also provides a magnificent setting. It sits quietly, powerfully in the landscape against Mt Ainslie. The entrance is small and dramatic – provides human scale – and opens into deeply moving spaces and symbolism. From the steps of the Hall of Memory, one looks down Griffin's land axis to take in what the soldiers have died for – the democracy of parliament and the Australian bush/landscape behind. The building provides the authentic Australian overlay to Griffin's idea. The recent inclusion of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier fits very well into the theme.

**Griffin/Nicholls Incinerator.** The incinerator was built in 1938 to Nicholls/Griffin design – Nicholls would have been primarily responsible for this building, it is one of the last of a long line of incinerators designed by the partnership. The building has historical and architectural significance. It is one of the few Griffin/Nicholls incinerators in an unaltered state and is located in the original Weston tree plantings (1912). Its strong rectilinear forms in brick with reinforced concrete lintels and hoods, makes this an outstanding example of the Sullivan/Griffin inheritance in Griffin's city.

**Sewerage Stack.** This stack from the main sewerage line adjacent to the incinerator bears Griffin elements to the design. However, Griffin was opposed to the project for a grand, citywide conventional sewerage system.

**New Parliament House.** The architect, Giurgola, understood Griffin's concept for the site and found a solution to the decision of putting Parliament House on Capitol Hill by incorporating it into the hill – this is the outstanding feature of the concept. The Pyramidal central element is the crowning idea, but the design is clumsy.

## **Conclusion**

James summed up the tour with the statement that enough has been realised of Griffin's Canberra to let us see something of what was intended. The Australian overlays on an American idea are interesting. Now, urban design in the Central National Area is responding in some measure to Griffin's ideas, particularly in the redesign of the Russell Defence Offices and the Museum of Australia on the Acton Peninsula. However, in other areas, the principles for which Griffin fought are continuing to be eroded, for example in the weakening of the leasehold system of land tenure. In a nutshell, Australia would have been infinitely poorer had not Griffin come here to try to implement his vision.

*Report by Bob McKillop.*