



News Update 36

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Canberra following Griffin book review

Paul Reid, *Canberra following Griffin: A Design History of Australia's National Capital*, Canberra, National Archives of Australia, 2002.

The selection of Canberra as the national capital site was a compromise. Because of the jealousies between the two largest states, New South Wales and Victoria, the federal Parliament took eight years to decide on Canberra and another four to select a plan for the development of the site. In this handsomely produced book, based on sources in the national archives, the late Paul Reid writes with affection and passion of how the dream of Walter Burley Griffin for a national capital to reflect what he saw as the democratic aspirations of the new Australian nation was also subjected to compromise and finally to transformation.

The story of the politics of the international competition to find the successful architect for the national capital has been rehearsed in various ways in recent years. Reid reinforces the views of James Weirick and others that working from a political framework of mid-western American progressivism, Griffin designed an organic city formed around a triangle aligned to the mountains surrounding the site. He was able to do this by understanding the topography of the Canberra site despite having never visited Australia.

It was this dream from a distance that ultimately led to compromise. Having carefully researched the archives, Reid demonstrates how those who claimed local knowledge of the environment and climate of Canberra had their own plans which were at odds with Griffin. Where he had designed a capital city north of the Molonglo with the apex

of the triangle being a Capitol building across a series of connected lakes, Charles Scrivener, the Surveyor-General who had surveyed the site in 1908-09 and thus claimed local knowledge of climate and environment, conspired with others in the new Australian bureaucracy including David Miller, the secretary of the Department of Home Affairs, to ensure that a residential city should be built south of the river near what is now Manuka. The decisions were made even as Griffin was being declared the future architect of Canberra. Once he arrived in Australia, he was forced to compromise on a number of fronts ultimately leading to his decision to resign as Federal Capital Director in 1920.

Canberra after Griffin thus became the child of various government advisory bodies and departments. The organic design of Griffin to create a national capital to symbolise the workings of democracy was transformed into the early twentieth century ideal of planning a garden city. While the concept of the Griffin triangle remained, its purpose was changed. When the Menzies government in the 1950s finally committed new resources to developing Canberra the claims of a new car age helped to create a city of suburbs. In the end, even Griffin's vision of the Capitol on the hill became our modern Parliament House.

Just as we still owe much to Griffin, so it is the legacy of Paul Reid that he has left the nation this wonderfully illustrated text of how our national capital was conceived and then created. Those interested in the story of Griffin and Canberra finally have what may be the most significant if not the final word. \$90 rrp.

Professor Geoffrey Sherington
Chair of History of Education, University of Sydney

Women Architects in Australia 1900 – 1950 book review

“Women Architects in Australia 1900 – 1950” is written by Julie Willis and Bronwyn Hanna, and published by the RAI A.

Julie Willis was commissioned to write the book by the RAI A /ACI Sisalation scheme – Julie having won a RAI A Sisalation Scholarship. Bronwyn Hanna contributed to the book through the work of her doctorate. Both women now work at universities and teach, research and write about Architectural History.

Julie and Bronwyn have produced an accessible biography of women architects in Australia during the first half of the 20th century. Each biography is a well researched story of a woman’s life and how architecture featured in that life. Out of these well rounded stories come the themes of half a century of women’s working lives in Australia. It is much more than a story of the architectural profession. Short, insightful essays with tempting titles such as “Social Expectations and Choice: Marriage and Practice”; “The students’ View: A wolf in Sheep’s Clothing?” show the depth of thought and reflection that have gone into the book. The biographies and essays combine to give us an intensely revealing commentary on life and work in Australia. The book is written concisely, clearly and with humour. It is well organised, relevantly illustrated and has a good index, making it a delightful reading experience.

One of the pithy essays is entitled: “Woman Architect Training Woman Architect”. It tells the story of Louise Lightfoot who graduated from the University of Melbourne in 1923. During her architecture course she was articulated to Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin, working with them full time upon completion of her studies. The authors claim that “this is the first recorded instance in Australia of a woman training under another woman

architect”. When the Griffins moved to Sydney in 1925, the 54-year-old Mahony Griffin asked the 23-year-old Lightfoot to accompany her, and Louise worked on the Castlecrag project with the Griffins until the end of 1928. Lightfoot wrote of her experiences with Mahony Griffin:

“I had never felt quite at home with (Mahony Griffin)...She was a remarkable woman, her husband’s devoted and capable executrix and the supervisor of his young draftsmen. She was my instructress: and I still hear the sound of her ring scratching the paper as she rubbed out mistakes in my drawing. “Keep your mind open to the inspirations of the Creator” she would advise, “and then I will come and pick it to pieces”. (from Lightfoot, “With the Burley Griffins”, p.1)

The book is the first to be published in Australia on this topic and one of the first accounts of a nation’s early women architects to be published anywhere in the world. Judging by the passionate discussion that emerged following the talk by Elizabeth Farrelly, this year’s winner of the RAI A Marion Mahony Griffin Award, at Tusculum on 14th October last, the complex issue of women architects and how they balance their personal lives with their chosen profession is alive and well and in need of further analysis. Can we have the second volume –“Women Architects in Australia 1950-2000” – soon! \$49.50 rrp

Anne Warr
Heritage consultant, North Sydney.

Both books are available from RAI A bookshops, Museum of Sydney Bookshop, Bridge Street, Sydney, and Blues Point Bookshop, McMahons Point, Sydney.

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Please make cheques payable to

Walter Burley Griffin Society Inc. and post to

The Treasurer c/- 140 Edinburgh Rd, Castlecrag, 2068



MEMBERSHIP

The Walter Burley Griffin Society Inc. was established in 1988 and aims to create a greater awareness and appreciation of the Griffins’ design, architecture and planning, and thereby encourage the conservation of their internationally significant work. The Society produces a newsletter and organises guest speakers. If you would like to join the Society in Australia fill out the form opposite.

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