

News Update

October 1993

## Marion Mahony Griffin's Gift: the Haven Amphitheatre

Fifty years ago, on 12th October 1943, the Deed of Gift was signed in which Marion gave the open air *Haven Scenic Theatre* now called the *Haven Amphitheatre*, to the community. Marion's enthusiasm and vigour for the performing arts was largely responsible for the creation of the amphitheatre and the many performances held there in the 1930s. No doubt she would be pleased with the many events and performances held there in recent years and the ones planned for the immediate future, which are:

**Sunday 14th November 4pm - Marion's Gift** - a celebratory performance event for the 50th anniversary of Marion's gift (see more details overleaf).

**Sunday 5th December 7.30-9pm - Messiah** - performed by the Willoughby Symphony Orchestra and Choir and a superb soprano soloist.

**Friday 24th December 7.30pm - Carols by Candlelight.**

## Willoughby's Heritage Future - A Seminar

This evening seminar will examine the conservation needs of the built, natural and aboriginal heritage in Willoughby City. It is being jointly organised by the Walter Burley Griffin Society, the Art Deco Society, WEPA, Federation of Progress Associations, and Willoughby Historical Society. Heritage Consultant **Meredith Walker** will chair the meeting and speakers will include **Prof. James Weirick**, Head of the School of Landscape Architecture at Univ. of NSW who will speak on the heritage of Walter Burley Griffin; **David Logan**, Manager of Urban Development and Conservation with Sydney City Council, who will speak about the heritage of Artarmon; **Dr Judy Messer**, Chairperson of the Nature Conservation Council who will speak on natural heritage; **Dr Val Attenbrow** from the Australian Museum who will speak on Willoughby's aboriginal heritage; and **Muriel Ryan**, formerly a senior planner with the Department of Planning, who will speak on planning controls.

Speakers will be 15 minutes each followed by question time, and supper will be served afterwards. There is no admission charge but donations will be gratefully received.

Willoughby is entering an exciting new era. The new Local Government Act places increased responsibilities on local councils to preserve both the natural and built environment. Willoughby Council is moving to meet this challenge. The Draft Consolidating Instrument, which will be on display for comment shortly in Willoughby Library, will replace all present Local Environment Plans in Willoughby. The display period is the opportunity for the community to influence the fine tuning of the document before it is finalised.

The seminar will be held at the Dougherty Centre, Viclor Street, Chatswood, on Tuesday 9th November 7.45pm (depending on the availability of the Draft Consolidating Instrument). Please confirm the date with Adrienne Kabos 958 2060, Gay Spies 958 5698 or Kerry McKillop 958 4516.

# Marion's Gift: 4pm 14th November 1993

A rich and engaging performance event for all ages to enjoy, celebrating the 50th anniversary of the gift by Marion Griffin of the Castlehaven Reserve and Amphitheatre to the community.

Free admission but please bring a plate of food to share for a light tea. Drinks and a memorable time provided.

**Extra Special Guided Bushwalk for Kids:** On Saturday 13th November a supervised bushwalk of the Castlehaven Reserve will take place as a lead up to the performance the following day. Treasures will be collected. All children are most welcome to join in the fun. Meet at Amphitheatre 2pm. Duration 2 hours.

We plan to create a centrepiece as part of the celebrations. Please feel free to bring an offering from the natural world - a rock, flower, feather, bush nuts or anything which for you expresses thanks and appreciation for the flora and fauna of Castlecrag.

NO PARKING AT THEATRE.  
A free bus leaves C/orag shops and school at regular intervals from 3.15pm.



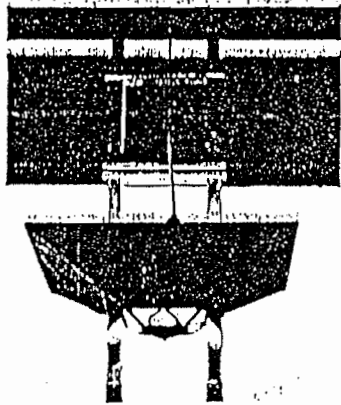
## GSDA No.1 Dwelling

In the latest newsletter of the Historic Houses Trust, the spring edition of *Insites*, there is an interesting two page article of GSDA No.1 Dwelling which discusses the "program of conservation and repairs, estimated to be in excess of \$100,000" and the designs by architect Bruce Rickard for three development options that were exhibited at the open day of the house last August. The article, written by HHT Senior Curator Sheridan Burke, also contains six delightful photographs of the house including one taken in 1930 and several from the 1950s. The cover of the publication has a wonderful photograph of Walter and Marion Griffin, courtesy of Mrs C Herbert. Copies of this issue of *Insites* will be available at the AGM on 17 October.

The conservation work on the house will begin shortly. Since August a fourth development option has been developed by Bruce Rickard incorporating some suggestions made by the public and the Society following the exhibition of the first three development options.

The Society is very grateful to HHT for allowing us to have our last general meeting at the house and to curators Sheridan Burke and James Broadbent for so kindly giving their time to be guest speakers and explain in detail the conservation work and development options. Following that meeting, the Society wrote a detailed response regarding the three development options which stated in brief that the proposed development envelope was not entirely ideal because it allowed the development to the same alignment from the street as the original house and would thus impinge on the relationship with the neighbouring Griffin house and also could result in the development bisecting the garden into a front yard and back yard. Griffin's original design had the garage somewhat removed from the house allowing it to be seen in the round.

Since then a fourth option has been developed and HHT has facilitated a meeting with representatives of the Society's committee and the architect. We are pleased that this fourth option has the front alignment further from the street and ways of freeing the south-east corner of the house are being looked at. As the *Insites* article points out, "The Trust is keen to negotiate with any genuine prospective purchaser to tailor-make the final design."



### FITTING LIGHTS

When the Walter Burley Griffin house was purchased earlier this year three distinctive timber light fittings designed by Burley Griffin remained *in situ*. The Trust has commissioned the reproduction of these lights for use in the restoration of the house and a limited number will be made in addition for sale to the public. Adaptations to table lamps are also possible. Please telephone 692 8386 for further information.

Courtesy: *Insites*



Jumpin' geriatric: 21

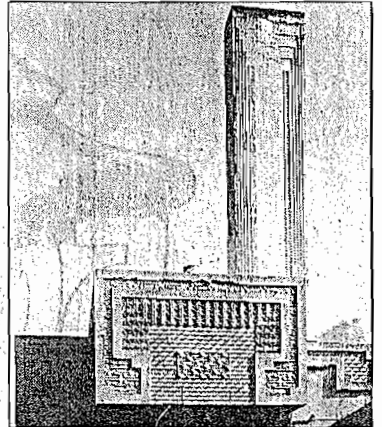
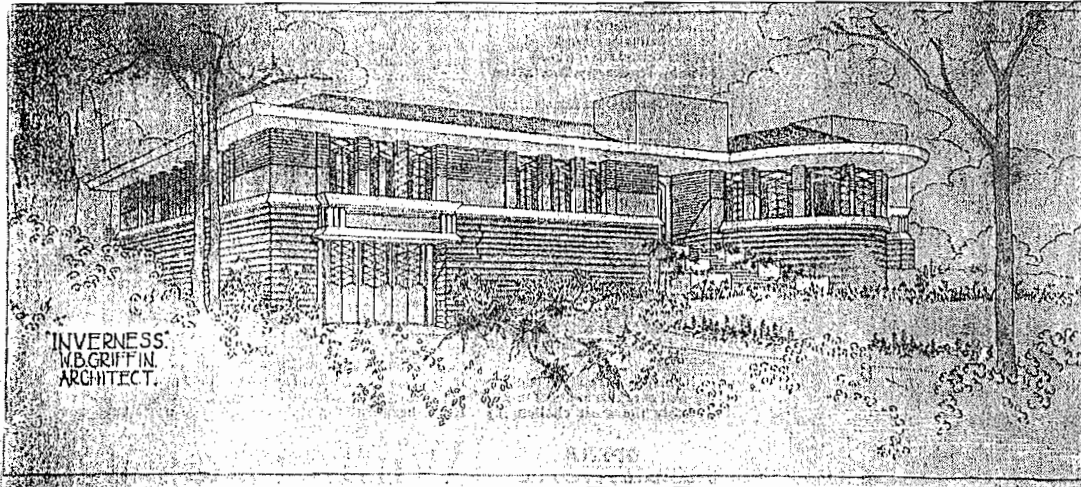
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# ARTS

27 July '93

12 The Sydney Morning Herald

The Sydney Morning Herald



An exciting gift . . . the newly attributed Griffin house, in a drawing by his wife, Marion, and the Pyrmont Incinerator.

## Reconstructing Griffin

**I**N Chicago, there is a Walter Burley Griffin Place, and streets where his houses are not only immaculately maintained, but proudly display plaques with the architect's name and date of the house's construction.

In Australia, particularly in Sydney, Griffin — like Joern Utzon after him — was the eccentric foreigner, a bit strange really, a bit too much the non-conformist for local tastes.

Having won the international competition to design Australia's national capital in 1912, the Chicago architect was informed in 1913 that construction had begun — but not to his design.

Instead, a scheme dreamed up by public servants seemed more practicable. Griffin fought back and with the support of Australian architects, was finally invited to Australia, but the battles over Canberra were long and bitter.

He finally left the Canberra project in 1921 and worked in both Sydney and Melbourne until 1936, when several commissions took him to India where he died less than 12 months later.

In Melbourne major buildings such as Newman College survive, though it was never completed to Griffin's plan. In Sydney, however, too many of his buildings have been neglected, "renovated" or simply demolished, even in the suburb of Castlecrag which he created out of a ravaged wasteland. Years ago, his famous Paris

The work of Walter Burley Griffin, the American architect who designed Canberra, is receiving recognition after years of indifference. **GERALDINE O'BRIEN reports.**

Theatre was reduced to rubble. Last year, his Pyrmont Incinerator — described in James Birrell's book, *Walter Burley Griffin*, as "one of the most dramatic buildings ever built in this city" — was demolished after years of neglect. "Compensation" of \$300,000 was paid by the developer, Meriton, to Sydney City Council.

Now, however, there are signs that Australia is beginning to revalue his work: two Australian institutions are collaborating in a major international exhibition of his work, scheduled for 1996, and only last week, a "new" Griffin house, previously attributed to his associate, Eric Nichols, joined the catalogue of his Sydney works.

Last week the Powerhouse Museum was offered a "presentation drawing" done by Griffin's wife, Marion Mahoney Griffin, of a house in Killara, usually listed as Nichols's work.

The drawing, donated to the museum by Ewen Cameron, whose father had commissioned the house in the 1930s, clearly attributes the house to Griffin.

For David Dolan, the museum's senior curator of Decorative

Arts and Design, the gift is exciting, partly because it confirms Griffin's authorship of the design, but also because it is one of the very few paintings on linen done by Marion Griffin in Australia which survives here.

The Griffin marriage was very much a partnership. She was often described as both vigorous and forceful, in contrast to Griffin's more reserved nature. Marion Mahoney would have needed those qualities. She was only the second American woman to graduate in architecture and joined the office of Frank Lloyd Wright — no recent personality himself — where she met her future husband.

According to Birrell's book, Wright valued her drawing skills and she prepared most of the drawings of his early work, which in the years before World War I, were exhibited in Paris, Vienna and Berlin.

She continued the practice after her marriage to Griffin in 1911, with most of the drawings in black-and-white on paper, but with "presentation drawings" for clients often executed in colour on linen, as in the "Inverness"



Walter Burley and Marion marriage was very



Mahoney Griffin . . . their much a partnership.

drawing given to the Powerhouse.

Somehow, though, the clients didn't always get to keep them because when the Griffins left Australia for India in the mid-1930s, a goodly number of the drawings went with them and most are now housed in the Chicago Institute of Arts.

The Inverness drawing — which features an Australian native garden framed by some rather Art Nouveau eucalypts — will be included in an exhibition of Griffin's work on three continents which is being prepared by the Powerhouse Museum.

The exhibition is a joint venture between the University of Melbourne, the University of Illinois and the Powerhouse, with support from the Australian Embassy in Washington and \$143,500 from the City Council's "incinerator funds".

Opening in Sydney in 1996, it will tour to Melbourne, then Chicago, and possibly the US West Coast, and will include many of the 400-500 projects estimated to have been designed by Griffin (not all of them built) in America, Australia and India.

The project also includes publication in 1995 of a *catalogue raisonné* of Griffin's work and a book commissioned from NSW University's Professor James Weirick, and Peter Navaretti and Jeffrey

Turnbull of Melbourne University on the Pyrmont Incinerator (again partially funded by the City Council's compensation money).

According to Melbourne University's Professor Haig Beck, Griffin, with Wright "one of the most important early modern architects in the world, spent 20 years working in Australia yet has been sorely neglected here."

"It's time a little hero-worship wouldn't go astray."

In a more modest but significant way, the NSW Historic Houses Trust is also celebrating Griffin, by commissioning award-winning architect Bruce Rickard to design an addition to the Griffin house in Edinburgh Road, Castlecrag, which the trust bought earlier this year.

With its Griffin-designed light-fittings; exposed beams and three-panel doors (even some of his original kitchen cupboards remain), the house was probably the last intact remaining in Castlecrag after the Duncan house was dwarfed by "additions".

The trust, rather than adding another house-museum to its property portfolio, bought the house to conserve and on-sell, hoping to prove that historic houses can be adapted, with integrity, for contemporary living.

Mr Rickard is preparing two options for the trust — one which

will use the existing garage (joined to the house by later occupants) as a mediating point between the original and an extension.

The second proposal, his preferred option, sees the garage demolished except for its original Griffin wall, which is incorporated into a second, separate suite of rooms set along the boundary.

This would allow Griffin's original symmetrical window-patterns to be restored and the house once again to be seen as a three-dimensional object in a landscape setting.

"I don't think this job calls for 'making a statement,'" Mr Rickard said last week. "There are two Griffin houses side by side here and this 'addition' wants to be fairly subdued, quiet, restrained."

The strict budget given him by the trust is in keeping with Griffin's philosophy: these were not "rich people's houses"; the Edinburgh Road house was in fact the "demonstration house" for the Castlecrag development and Griffin himself lived there for some months.

Mr Rickard envisages his extension as "a fairly livable little house", in bagged brick which will attempt neither to recreate nor compete with the original.

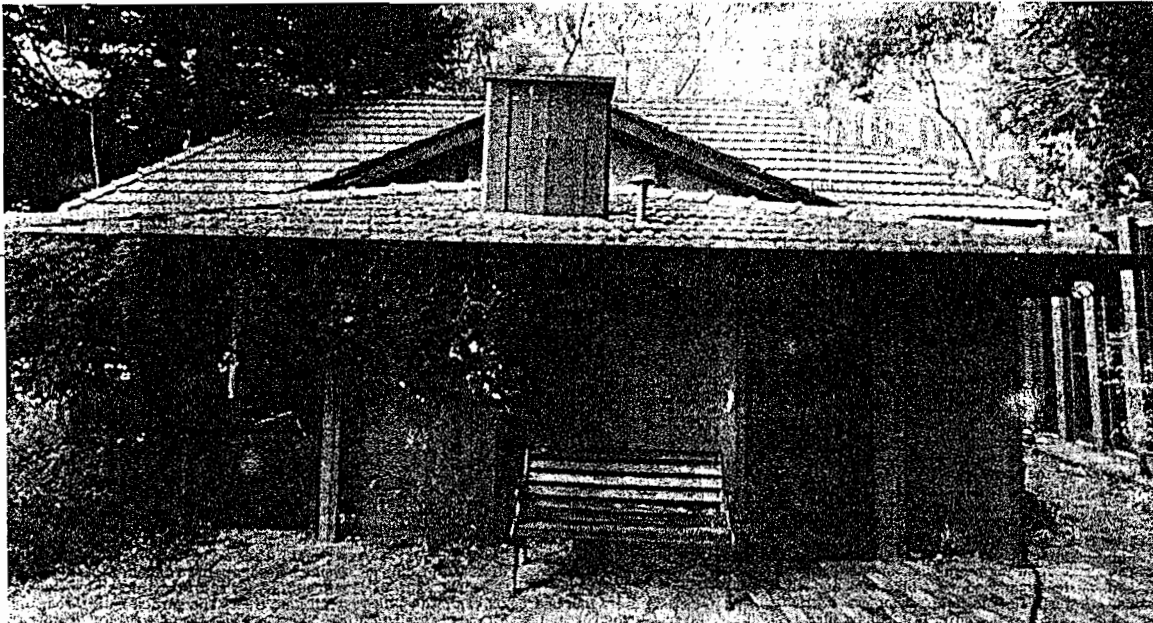
Ideally, too, he would like to see the garden — now planted with jacarandas, liquidambar, camellias and other exotics — to be planted with the natives for which Griffin, years ahead of his time, had such admiration.

It was years before many Australians could see what Griffin saw in 1913: "The gum tree, instead of being one continual monotony, has strongly appealed to me. It's a poet's tree . . . a wonderful tree — a decorator's tree. Its foliage is beautiful and varies a great deal and its bark and twigs have a beauty all their own."

As, indeed, did Griffin's idiosyncratic work.

An Open Day will be held at the Edinburgh Road house on Sunday from 10 am. Mr Rickard's proposals will be on exhibition.

Picture: MICHAEL CLAYTON-JONES



ABOVE: Phollota, as it is today, at the rear of Mr Derek Viner's home in Glenard Drive, Heidelberg.

# The 'mushroom house' that Walter Burley Griffin built

For two years the designer of Australia's national capital and his wife lived in a four-square cottage in Heidelberg. JENNY BROWN reports.

BELOW: Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahoney Griffin; they didn't need a 10-square house to live comfortably.

EVERY so often engineer Derek Viner will look out of the window of his Glenard Drive home in Heidelberg to find people milling around outside, peering uncertainly at the house and the plaque that attests to the fact that in the early 1920s Walter Burley Griffin, architect of Canberra, and arguably one of the most important influences on Australian buildings of the 20th Century, lived there.

What the tourists see is not the modest but radical little four-square house that Griffin built for himself and his wife, Marion. That tiny little abode, so appropriately called Phollota, or the mushroom house, has been absorbed into the rear of the house.

Today, Mr Viner uses Phollota as a lounge room. And while he appreciates its historic value and harmonious proportions, he finds it vaguely astounding that two people managed to live in it. "But," he muses, "there is a lot to be said for simplicity and they were undoubtedly a couple of romantics."

Tiny alcoves in each corner that are more like step-in cupboards once designated a bathroom, a kitchen, a sleeping alcove and entry hall. In the centre, where the roofline rises to a bipped peak, was the sitting room with a small open fireplace.

The walls, built of a concrete block called Knitlock, which Griffin patented, have been much painted over. But from scraping back the layers, Mr Viner surmises that each block was once a different earthy color and perhaps speckled with gold flecks.

The interior decoration was probably the work of Marion Mahony Griffin, overshadowed in history by her husband but, in fact, his collaborative partner, often responsible for the fabulous interiors of his more famous buildings. The extraordinary auditorium of Griffin's Capitol Theatre in Swanston Street exemplifies Marion's challenging tastes.

Although the Griffins lived at Heidelberg for only two years, Mr Viner wonders if Phollota reflected a famous architect of reduced means. But, according to Peter Navaretti, research assistant with the Griffin committee of Melbourne University's school of architecture, this was not the case.

"This was Griffin saying that he didn't need a 10-square house to live comfortably and adequately. He's

saying that this is all a married couple without children require."

The Griffins, who came to Australia in 1912 after Walter won an international competition for the design of the national capital, Canberra, stayed for 24 years working on a diversity of private commissions in Melbourne and Sydney while negotiating the bureaucratic obstacle course that made Canberra such a problematic undertaking.

In that time they realised some 80 buildings, among them Newman College and the famous cluster commune at Castlecrag in Sydney, as well as two remarkably modern "garden estates" — Glenard, where Phollota is situated off the Boulevard, and Mount Eagle, which meanders along the heights above Heidelberg Road.

Forty other buildings and landscape plans failed to come off the drawing board of a man Mr Navaretti would like to see elevated into the forefront of international architectural history, 56 years after his death.

"Genius" is the word Mr Navaretti feels is wholly appropriate in the light of Walter Burley Griffin's achievements.

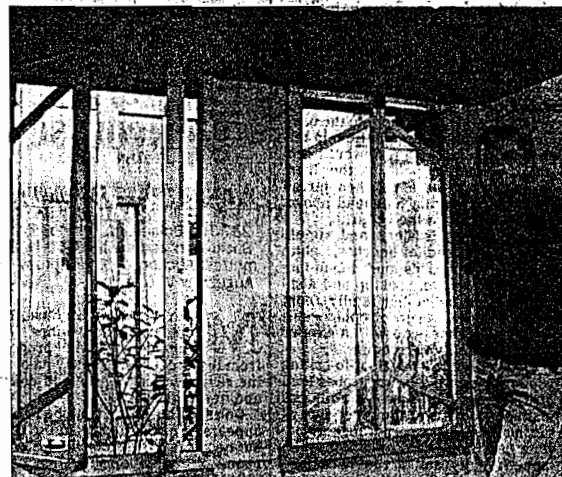
Before they came to Australia, the Griffins both worked in the Chicago studio of Frank Lloyd Wright, founder of the influential Prairie school of architecture. Many of Griffin's early American buildings align with Lloyd Wright's spartan principles, although, later, the pupil was to denounce the master.

Mr Navaretti is one of a growing band who believes Griffin deserves to be reassessed and recognised as at least the equal of Lloyd Wright. "In some ways he was ahead, but no one has ever bought this up."

To address the oversight, which perhaps results from Griffin's work being in two different hemispheres, the schools of architecture at Melbourne University and the University of Illinois are cooperating on a new appraisal of the architect and his place in building history.

"We are putting together a catalogue and resume of Griffin's work," says Mr Navaretti. Volume one is due out in 1994, with volume two planned to coincide with a travelling exhibition being planned by the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney and scheduled to take in Australian capital cities during 1996 before moving on to Chicago and New York.

In the meantime, a living exhibi-



Mr Derek Viner inside Phollota, now his lounge room.

tion of Griffin's visions exists in Heidelberg. The two estates that he planned and laid out in 1914 reflect his notions of a suburb that was dedicated to many ideals, among them democracy, an appreciation of inherent landscape beauty and open spaces that were safe, aesthetically pleasing and that could be shared by all.

At both Mount Eagle and Glenard, Griffin curved the roads, kept all of the trees he could and placed parks in the middle of the housing subdivisions. Unfortunately, fences have changed the fabric of the common ground, but for the rest, these first-ever garden estates in Australia remain true to the expression of his genius.