

Designing Australia's capital city: the role of Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin

At federation in 1901 it was decided there should be a national capital for the whole of Australia. It took many years to decide on where this city should be but eventually the sheep grazing farmland in the Canberra district was chosen. This was originally the land of the Ngunnawal people, the indigenous custodians of the land who had lived in the region for thousands of years.

For the new national capital city that was to be built at Canberra, the government decided that an international competition should be held to attract the best design. There were 137 entries from around the world submitted when the competition closed in February 1912. The entry designed and prepared by the two American architects Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin was chosen as the winner.

It is not surprising that the Griffins' entry won the competition, since it was very carefully and thoughtfully designed with beautiful very impressive presentation drawings done on linen using coloured inks and gold paint.

Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony were both Americans. Walter Griffin was born in 1876 near Chicago, and Marion Lucy Mahony was born in Chicago in 1871. They both became architects and Marion was the first registered female architect in the world. While a few other women had graduated from universities as architects, Marion was the first woman to work as an architect in an architectural office. For about ten years she worked in the studio (or office) of Frank Lloyd Wright who was another American architect who designed many famous buildings in the United States. Walter Burley Griffin worked in Frank Lloyd Wright's studio also and that is where he and Marion Mahony met. Walter left there after a couple of years and set up his own architectural studio. He designed many houses, did the landscape design for numerous gardens and planned several suburban streets and subdivisions.

Walter Griffin and Marion Mahony both loved nature and did a lot of walking and canoeing together. They were married on 29 June 1911. Shortly after their wedding they began working on their entry for the Australian national capital competition. In just 9 weeks they conceived the design, planned the details and produced the plan and many beautiful illustrations and perspective drawings. When these were finished they sent them by ship to Australia.

After winning the competition, Walter Griffin was asked to come to Australia to supervise the work on the capital city. He arrived by ship in Sydney Harbour and loved the harbour and its beautiful bushland foreshores but was shocked by all the unattractive grid streets and red roofs that disregarded and destroyed the natural beauty of Sydney. Walter Griffin was appointed Federal Capital Director of Design and Construction and returned to the USA briefly before coming back to Australia with Marion Mahony Griffin. At that time she was just finishing the design of a large house for Henry Ford, the founder of the Ford motor car company.

For seven years Walter Griffin worked from an office in Melbourne supervising the work for the national capital. The street plan of Canberra is as Griffin planned it, but many other aspects that he designed for the capital city did not eventuate. From his office in Melbourne, he and Marion Mahony also designed many places for Melbourne including houses, Melbourne's Capitol Theatre with its spectacular interior, suburban subdivisions and also the towns of Leeton and Griffith.

The Griffins at Castlecrag, Middle Cove and Castle Cove in Sydney

Walter Burley Griffin had been enchanted by Sydney Harbour and its bushland foreshores ever since he arrived by ship from the United States in 1913 to supervise the work on Canberra after winning the international competition to design the national capital the previous year.

When Griffin resigned from working on Canberra in 1920, he and his architect wife Marion Mahony Griffin poured their energies into designing a suburb in Sydney that showed how roads and houses could be built in harmony with Sydney's beautiful bushland and harbour, unlike the red roofs and grid streets which disregarded and destroyed the natural beauty and which characterised Sydney at the time. The Griffins set up a company called the Greater Sydney Development Association (GSDA) and bought land at Castlecrag, Covecrag (now called Middle Cove) and Castle Cove in 1921.

Walter Burley Griffin designed over 40 houses for Castlecrag but only 15 were built mainly because of the Depression. He made sure that all the bushland near the harbour foreshore was kept as reserves for everybody to enjoy and that there were lots of other reserves or parks to preserve the major landforms and rock outcrops and for people to enjoy. Griffin designed walkways to connect all the reserves, and provided for a tennis court, an open air amphitheatre for plays, and at Castle Cove he designed the golf course. The houses were designed to harmonise with the bushland landscape and were built of sandstone, and a few were built of knitlock which was a concrete building block patented by Griffin that had a crushed sandstone finish. The roofs of the houses were mainly flat so as not to block the views of Middle Harbour from other houses. The roads followed the contours of the land and there were to be no fences so that everyone could enjoy the landscape.

Questions

1. Whose studio in America did Marion and Walter work in for a time ? _____
2. What was Canberra before the city was built ? _____
3. How many entries were there in the international competition to design Canberra ? _____
4. Where did Griffin have his office when he was supervising the work at Canberra ? _____
5. What two Australian towns did Walter Burley Griffin design ? _____
6. What year did the Griffins win the international competition to design Canberra? _____
7. What relationship was Walter Burley Griffin to Marion Mahony Griffin ? _____
8. At the time Walter Burley Griffin was designing Castlecrag, what type of design were most other streets in Sydney? _____
9. What is Covecrag called now ? _____
10. Some of the Griffin houses were built from a concrete building block with a crushed sandstone finish. What was this building block called ? _____
11. How many houses designed by Walter Burley Griffin were built at Castlecrag ? _____

Quiz questions

1. How many entries were there for the international competition to design the federal capital for Australia
 - 37
 - 17
 - more than 130

2. The beautiful presentation drawings in the Griffins' entry for the National Capital competition were drawn by
 - the Prime Minister
 - Walter Burley Griffin
 - Marion Mahony Griffin

3. How many houses had Walter Burley Griffin designed in the United States before winning the National Capital competition
 - 2
 - about 20
 - about 60

4. Black Mountain is at one end of Canberra's
 - land axis
 - water axis
 - parliamentary triangle

5. At Castlecrag, W.B.Griffin planned the roads and buildings to be in harmony with the Middle Harbour bushland landscape, so he designed the roads to follow
 - the contours of the land
 - a grid pattern
 - straight down the hillsides

6. The Griffins had a great appreciation of Australian flora. In his landscape plans Walter Griffin used
 - only exotic plants
 - mainly English plants
 - mainly native plants

7. Marion Mahony Griffin did many beautiful drawings of gum trees with their sculptural branches. She called these
 - tree portraits
 - tree sketches
 - photographs

8. Walter Burley Griffin left Australia in 1935 to design many important buildings in
 - Japan
 - India
 - New Zealand