

# THE GRIFFIN LEGACY CASTLECRAG HERITAGE



## Welcome to Castlecrag, a special place in Sydney

Castlecrag was developed as a model suburb in the 1920s and 1930s by the distinguished American architects Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin. Today, Castlecrag continues to demonstrate the Griffins' deep respect for the natural landscape and their ideal of a community living in harmony with this beautiful setting.

An architect and landscape architect of genius, Walter Burley Griffin was captivated by Sydney Harbour on his first arrival in Australia. He came in 1913 as winner of the international competition for the design of Canberra. In 1920, after Walter was forced to sever connection with the Canberra project, he and Marion poured their energies into designing a suburban development unlike any other in Australia. As a garden suburb in a forest setting, Castlecrag was designed to enhance the beauty of this Middle Harbour peninsula. The bushland and foreshores were retained by a subtle, sensitive subdivision plan which respected the landscape, and a residential community was established, distinguished by sympathetic, understated architecture which harmonised with its setting.

Walter Burley Griffin stated:

*I want Castlecrag to be built so that each individual can feel the whole landscape is his. No fences, no boundaries, no red roofs to spoil the Australian landscape: these are some of the features that will distinguish Castlecrag.*

Together with a group of prominent Australians, the Griffins formed the Greater Sydney Development Association Ltd ('GSDA') and purchased 650 acres (263 hectares) of land on Middle Harbour. The idealistic venture commenced with subdivision of the Castlecrag Estate, south of Edinburgh Road, in 1920 to which was added the Haven Estate in 1926.

## The Griffin legacy makes Castlecrag a special place

The Griffins designed a residential community inspired by the ecological and aesthetic qualities of the landscape – sandstone rock formations, indigenous bush, natural foreshore, creeks and waterfalls and, everywhere, a sense of the larger landscape, captured in magical glimpses of Middle Harbour. The Griffins’ genius was to see that the built environment could harmonise with this superb landscape - not destroy it. Castlecrag is different from any other Sydney suburb because key components of the Griffins’ vision remain in the original Castlecrag and Haven Estates, which now comprise the Griffin Conservation Area.

- Narrow roadways follow the contours in sweeping curves beautifully cut into the sandstone. At intersections, small ‘islands’ remain, where stands of indigenous vegetation create special gateways to each street.
- The Griffins’ numerous bushland reserves are intact, connected by a network of fascinating walkways. Neighbouring blocks of land without fences merge into this open space, creating the unique effect of houses nestling amongst sandstone outcrops and eucalypt bushland.
- Large native trees abound, many of which were planted by Walter and Marion and the early residents of Castlecrag who were inspired to follow their example. The Griffins recognised that the trees’ distinctive shapes enhanced the beautiful views and that their canopies were important in conserving the scale, atmosphere and ecological integrity of the bushland setting, just a few kilometres from the centre of the city.
- The Griffins dedicated the full extent of the Middle Harbour foreshore as public open space, for all to enjoy.

## Protecting the legacy

Unfortunately, over the past eighty years, some inappropriate development has taken place and the very distinctiveness of Castlecrag has been threatened. Over-scaled houses have been crammed onto blocks of land. High masonry and metal fences have been erected so that in places a “walled in” look has emerged. Water glimpses have been blocked and the park-like atmosphere compromised.

In the 1990s Willoughby City Council moved decisively to protect the unique Griffin heritage of Castlecrag. After extensive community consultation, the Council introduced heritage controls to conserve this special place. The Castlecrag and Haven subdivisions became the Griffin Conservation Area, a listed heritage item in the Willoughby Local Environmental Plan. Council’s detailed heritage protection instrument, Development Control Plan 19 (Heritage and Conservation) (‘DCP 19’), identifies the heritage significance of the Conservation Area and requires consideration and respect for the Griffins’ vision in all development applications. The Griffin legacy in Castlecrag is now acknowledged to be of national and international significance, to be conserved for future generations.

Maintaining such an important conservation area requires care to ensure its historical, social and aesthetic significance is not lost or compromised in any way. The controls in DCP 19 allow forms of development which conserve and enhance the Griffin legacy, and are thus opportunities to keep this a living legacy.

In particular, DCP 19 seeks to ensure that the “massing” of proposed houses or extensions is appropriate to the size and shape of the blocks of land; that walls and roof-lines are designed to reduce apparent bulk and to nestle within the tree canopy; and that fencing, garden structures and



set-backs from boundaries preserve public vistas of the landscape and harbour.

## What you can do to maintain the legacy

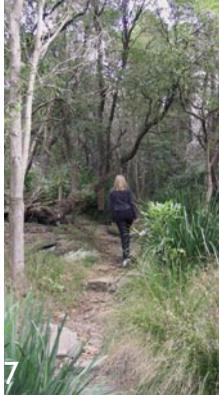
As a resident, you can further enhance the beauty and distinctiveness of Castlecrag by applying the Griffins' principles in the design and care of your house and garden;

- using building materials with textures and colours which blend well with the sandstone and native bushland.
- achieving a horizontal effect and avoiding large slab-like walls so that the construction harmonises with the terrain and does not dominate the natural features of the peninsula.
- planting indigenous trees and shrubs sensitively, thus contributing to the ecology of Castlecrag, preserving filtered views, and maintaining its bushland atmosphere.

To promote heritage conservation, Council provides a free heritage advisory service and sponsors biennial heritage awards. These recognise residents' activities which enhance or maintain the significant qualities of heritage buildings and conservation areas. To assist owners of heritage properties listed on Council's Local Environmental Plan, the Land & Property Information office can provide a "heritage restricted valuation" for land tax and local rate purposes.

## Join in community activities - share the vision.

Residents' appreciation and enjoyment of this delightful area were central to the Griffins' vision. The Griffins created a vibrant community with activities available to all. As well as the network of reserves and walkways, a tennis court was built



in the Cortile Reserve in 1928. In 1934, the open-air Haven Amphitheatre in The Scarp was constructed for community plays and events. After World War II, the Community Centre and Library were built in The Postern. The Castlecrag Progress Association formed in 1925 with the Griffins as active participants, the Haven Amphitheatre Committee formed in 1976, the Castlecrag Conservation Society formed in 1977, and the Walter Burley Griffin Society formed in 1988 are other leading community groups that conserve the Griffin heritage.

As a consequence of Castlecrag's remarkable social history, there is an unusually strong sense of community and creative achievement in the area with residents participating in and supporting a myriad of local activities. The Griffin story is marked by two special memorials, the abstract bronze fountain by Bim Hilder at the entrance to the Sortie Port, and the bust of Walter Griffin by Judith Englert-Shead at the shopping centre.

Please take a walk around Castlecrag. Enjoy the beauty of the bushland setting. Appreciate the uniqueness and foresight of the Griffin plan. Admire Griffin's architecture, that of his partner Eric Nicholls and many other distinguished architects who have been inspired by the suburb's special qualities. Join in community activities and experience the neighbourhood spirit of this special place.

## Castlecrag is a suburb unlike any other in Sydney. It is a garden suburb of world significance.

Below: Castlecrag peninsula. The Griffin Conservation Area is bounded to the north by Edinburgh Road and includes all the streets named after parts of a castle, the location of which relate physically to the dramatic topography (see approximate location highlighted). Ikonos image provided courtesy of Raytheon Australia Pty Ltd. Includes material © Space Imaging LLC, all rights reserved.



## Selected publications and videos:

- Local Environment Plan 1995, Willoughby City Council.
- Development Control Plan 19 (Heritage and Conservation), Willoughby City Council.
- *Building for Nature: Walter Burley Griffin and Castlecrag*, Walker, M., Kabos, A., and Weirick, J. (1994) Walter Burley Griffin Society Inc.
- *Walter Burley Griffin landscape architect*, Harrison, P. (1995). National Library of Australia.
- *Beyond Architecture: Marion Mahony and Walter Burley Griffin in America, Australia and India*, Watson, A. (editor). (1998) Powerhouse Publishing - Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences.
- *The Griffins in Australia and India*. Turnbull, J., and Navaretti, P. (1998) Melbourne University Press.
- *Castlecrag Walk* (a self-guided walk brochure), (1999) published by and available from Willoughby City Library.
- Video: *City of dreams: the collaboration of Marion Mahony and Walter Burley Griffin*, Mason, G. (producer) (2001) Film Australia for ABC TV.

All are available for loan from Willoughby City Library, Victoria Avenue, Chatswood and Castlecrag Community Library, The Postern, Castlecrag

## Images

- Cover:** Part of the Griffin legacy, foreshore bushland at Castlecrag. Photographer James Smallhorn, Willoughby City Council, 2003.
- 1** Marion and Walter Griffin (centre) outside the Grant House with Louise Lightfoot and Walter's father George Walter Griffin in the late 1920s. Photographer Rowland Herbert. Courtesy Cherrilyn Herbert.
- 2** and **10** the Sortie Port and The Rampart streetscapes.
- 3** Turret Reserve, The Rampart, 2004.
- 4** Wilson House, one of three Griffin houses built in The Barbette, Castlecrag. Photograph 1930s. Courtesy Deirdre and Ivor Morton.
- 5** Children's playground and tennis courts in Cortile Reserve, 2004.
- 6** Willoughby Symphony Orchestra plays at the Haven Amphitheatre as the huge puppets of Marion and Walter Griffin look on. Griffin Festival 1995.
- 7** Walkway between The Parapet and The Rampart, 2004.
- 8** Photograph of Marion Mahony Griffin's 1920s drawing on silk of the Cheong House, Castlecrag, illustrating the primacy of the landscape. Courtesy Marie Nicholls and Max Dupain.
- 9** and **11** Marion Mahony Griffin and Walter Burley Griffin at Castlecrag, 27 July 1930. Photographer Dr Jorma Pohjanpalo, Helsinki, Finland. Courtesy National Library of Australia.

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Castlecrag Progress Assoc.    [www.castlecrag.org.au](http://www.castlecrag.org.au)  
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