

## News Update

June 2001

### **Griffin's plan for Canberra and its urban planning context - public lecture series by visiting Professor David Van Zanten - Melbourne, Canberra, Sydney 4 - 7 June**

To mark the centenary of Federation, the American Embassy has sponsored the visit of highly respected art historian Professor David Van Zanten of the Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois to give guest lectures on the Griffins' plan for the Federal capital. He will be giving these lectures in Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra.

David Van Zanten's Griffin talk is titled *What One Might See When Examining the Griffins' Canberra Plan* and examines the Griffins' plan as balancing at least three different conceptions of urban shaping current just after the turn-of-the-century.

David Van Zanten is author of *Walter Burley Griffin - Selected Designs* published in 1970 and most recently *Sullivan City* on the ornament of Chicago architect, Louis Sullivan.

At the time of printing the Melbourne lecture is scheduled for Monday 4 June possibly at the Capitol Theatre, and the Canberra lecture is scheduled for Tuesday 5 June. For further details on the Melbourne and Canberra talks contact Duncan MacInness at the American Embassy, Canberra on 02 6214 5966.

The Sydney lecture is fixed for Thursday 7 June, 6pm at the Royal Australian Institute of Architects, Tusculum, 3 Manning Street, Potts Point.

Cost: \$11 for Griffin Society members; \$15 non-members; \$7 concession. For bookings & information: 9356 2955 nsw@raia.com.au

### **Top USA award for *City of Dreams***

*City of Dreams*, screened on Australian ABC TV last month, has received a Gold Hugo - the highest

honour in the category of Documentary Arts/Humanities at the 2000 TV Fest - the Chicago International Television Competition annual awards for the best in international television. The Festival Director, Michael Kutza, advised that the work has been recognised in a competition entered by hundreds of television production companies from around the world.

*City of Dreams* will be listed in the official program book of the 37th Chicago International Film Festival. Congratulations to producer Gaby Mason and director Belinda Mason.

### **Castlecrag Fair, Sunday 27 May**

The Walter Burley Griffin Society will have a stand at this community fair that will be located at the corner of Edinburgh Road and The Postern. The Fair will open at 10.30am and will run until 3.00pm. Copies of *City of Dreams* videos will be available for purchase from the stand and will cost \$29 each.

### **Talk by *City of Dreams* director Belinda Mason, Sunday 3 June**

Belinda Mason will be guest speaker at the Castlecrag Progress Association Annual General Meeting on Sunday 3 June 2.30pm at Castlecrag Community Centre, corner The Postern and The Rampart, Castlecrag. Belinda will speak on the making of the film *City of Dreams*, with special emphasis on the Griffins' lives in Castlecrag as described in interviews for the film. Everyone welcome.

### **Overwhelming response to Griffin walking tour in Heritage Week**

Organised by the Walter Burley Griffin Society in conjunction with Willoughby City Council's Heritage Week celebrations for the Centenary of

Federation, this walk led by Professor James Weirick was sold out two months in advance. To cope with the demand, the Society put on another two guided walks on the same day, and organised yet another two tours for Saturday 30 June. Due to demand, what was intended as a single tour for 40 people has resulted in five tours for over 180 people.

The tours highlight the connections with the Federation story, and go through many of the

will be on the Griffins.

Admiration for Australia's achievements as a social laboratory in the Federation era was a significant factor in Walter Burley Griffin's decision to enter the Australian Federal Capital competition of 1911. In this lecture Professor James Weirick will reflect on the extraordinary projects which Walter and Marion subsequently realised in this country, across the fields of architecture, landscape architecture and



Professor James Weirick leading one of the three walking tours of Castlecrag in Heritage Week. In the background is the paper bark tree planted by Marion Mahony Griffin in Lookout Reserve, Castlecrag.

Castlecrag reserves and walkways, and past many of the Griffin houses including those built for prominent figures such as King O'Malley, Cheong Cheok Hong and Sir William Elliot Johnson.

The location and planning of the Federal capital was one of the contentious issues of the Federation story. Griffin envisioned 'a democratic city for a democratic nation' and admired Australia as a social laboratory, having high hopes for what it could achieve. The Griffins formed strong friendships with interesting people who held advanced political views including social progressive politicians. They were remarkable idealists and proponents for the bigger ideal of Australia.

**National Trust Centenary of Federation  
Lecture: *Walter Burley Griffin & a new  
Australian Architecture*  
Professor James Weirick Thurs 30 August**

To celebrate the Centenary of Federation the National Trust and the WEA have organised a series of 15 lectures examining various aspects of Australian culture from 1788 to 1901, one of which

city planning, and how they were imbued with progressive social and political ideals, combined with the spirit of modernity and great sensitivity to the Australian environment.

6pm - 8pm Thursday 30 August 2001  
National Trust Centre, Observatory Hill  
Bookings essential. Cost \$15 including refreshments.  
For details of full Lecture Series see Course No:13HM038 National Trust "Reflections" magazine May edition, or contact WEA Sydney

The 15 lectures are grouped around five themes: History; Fine and Decorative Arts; Architectural History; Landscape; Building Restoration. The speakers are all recognised authorities in their fields. Some lectures will be held at the National Trust Centre, Observatory Hill and others at the properties which are the subject of the talk. Subscription includes a Federation Pass giving entry to the Trust's major Federation properties and is flexible - buy a single ticket, a series ticket for a particular theme or mix and match.

Single Ticket \$15. Multiple Subscription \$12 all tickets (more than one Lecture).

National Trust Members \$10 all tickets.

Most lectures include refreshments.

Bookings: WEA Sydney, Telephone: 9264 2781  
Facsimile: 9267 6988, Email: [HYPERLINK  
"mailto:info@weasydney.com.au" or  
info@weasydney.com.au](mailto:info@weasydney.com.au)  
(include your postal address)

For the six Australian colonies Federation was the culminating event of their 19th Century history which fused them into peaceful union and inaugurated the Australian nation. Commonwealth Government funding has enabled the National Trust to celebrate the Centenary of Federation with the restoration of ten of its most important historic buildings. Located throughout New South Wales, they were selected for their ability to reflect different aspects of the Australian story in the century leading to Federation.

### **Eric Pratten House sold**

This house and its magnificent large garden designed by Walter Burley Griffin and constructed circa 1934 at 29 Telegraph Road, Pymble, Sydney was sold prior to auction last month.

### **Images in Time: 80 years of the Griffin's Castlecrag - all day event + opening of Griffin Federation Track - Sunday 16 Sept.**

For the first time an outdoor exhibition of images of Castlecrag by some of Australia's leading photographers. Organised by the Walter Burley Griffin Society, the all-day event will be held along some of the roads of Castlecrag. Self-guided tours and catalogues will be available, and Professor James Weirick will lead guided tours placing the exhibited images in context in Castlecrag. There will also be screening of two Griffin documentaries throughout the day - the Australian *City of Dreams*, and the American *Walter Burley Griffin in his own right*.

The Griffin Federation Track that connects the Griffin Conservation Area, Castlecrag to Willoughby Incinerator will be officially opened at 10.30am. At the end of the day, the photographic images included in the exhibition will be auctioned.

More details in the next newsletter.

### **Griffin Conservation Area - the issue of fences**

Walter Burley Griffin stated that "People spend a lifetime trying to get a large piece of land, put a house on it, and plant it like a park. Few can afford to reach their goal. What I want to do is give everyone a chance to attain such a dream. I want Castlecrag to be built so that each individual can feel that 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." (Birrell, 1964; Leslie 1988)

The Development Control Plan (DCP) introduced for

the Griffin Conservation Area in Castlecrag in 1996 by Willoughby City Council, appropriately states "no fencing on boundaries adjoining reserves and walkways, landscaping used for privacy and acoustic screening." It is thus very disappointing that in the Council's review of this DCP the Council officers are recommending that 1700mm high "see through" fences be allowed on boundaries adjoining reserves and walkways. 1700mm is the height of an average man and as such is above eye level.

The committee of the Walter Burley Griffin Society has considered the issue and the needs of the residents in great depth, and firmly believes that the proposal of 1700mm high "see through" fences is unsympathetic and detrimental to the Griffins' concepts. The Society's recommendations to the Council have been and continue to be that if a resident insists that a fence is essential for young children or dogs then the only fence that should be allowed is a 1100mm high K-Wire fence.

K-Wire fences were used by Griffin to protect the young establishing plants from the cows that strayed from the neighbouring Warner's dairy. K-Wire is not costly and is still available, and is much less visually obtrusive than the average "see through" fence today. In 1999 heritage consultant Meredith Walker specified this type of fence for the Cheong House in the Griffin Conservation Area.

Some have argued that 1100mm is not high enough to keep dogs in, but 1700mm is still not high enough to keep some dogs in either. Some dogs can leap 2000mm easily. The heritage significance of the Griffins' plan of Castlecrag and its network of walkways and beautiful reserves (that Willoughby City Council are presently restoring and bush regenerating) is too great to be compromised by a few owners who at present have large leaping dogs.

To permit 1700mm high "see through" fences would turn the reserves into jail-like compounds, and would be most unsympathetic to the nationally and internationally significant heritage of the Griffin Conservation Area.

John McNerney, Commissioner of Land and Planning, Australian Capital Territory, and President Elect of the Royal Australian Planning Institute, has stated that "One of the fundamental ideals of Griffin architecture and land planning was to ensure a democratic and open relationship between public and private property which was embodied in prohibitions and restrictions on the public/private interface, primarily fencing, which remain to this day."

The ideal of the Griffin concept is to give the feeling of a continuous landscape even for small and quite humble blocks of land bordering reserves and walkways. This quality can be further enhanced by sympathetic informal natural bushland and plantings associated with such boundaries.

## News from America

The Walter Burley Griffin Society of America newsletter of Spring 2001 reports that the American Society will have its Second Annual Meeting in Evanston, Illinois with guest speaker architectural historian Paul Kruty, and a tour of the Carter House.

The newsletter has a fascinating article titled 'Long-span Framing in Early Prairie School Houses' written by Chicago architect John Eifler. Recent restoration projects carried out by Eifler have put him in the unique position of having literally 'deconstructed' (and subsequently reconstructed) three of the most important early houses of the Prairie School. Below is an extract from the article.

"In 1901-02 Frank Lloyd Wright and Walter Burley Griffin began to experiment with alternative wood framing methods to create large interior volumes. Both architects went to great lengths to design structures that resulted in broad, wide-span rooms. Restoration work undertaken during the past several years at three of the most important of these - Wright's Bradley House (1900) and Willits House (1902), and Griffin's Emery House (1903) - revealed creative and innovative approaches to framing that were not previously known and that shed new light on the beginnings of the Prairie house...

Griffin, as he approached the commission from his friend William Emery, was young and had no starting point for such interiors other than his exposure to projects in Wright's office. Like Wright, he was particularly interested in creating a living-room space of large volume; at the Emery House he proposed a dimension of approximately 22 feet by 27 feet.

"Griffin designed the Emery House at approximately the same time as he served as project architect for the construction of the Willits House during 1902-03. Although the planning and sequence of spaces of the house are quite different from those of the Bradley and Willits houses ...

"Single-span wood framing, comprised of common-dimensioned lumber, is rarely designed to span more than 18 feet. Griffin used deep trusses that actually defined the space or volume of the room. The centre of the living room of the Emery House is almost two storeys in height, yet the ceilings at the sides of the room are quite low, measuring only 7 feet high. The change in height is used to allow for substantial wooden trusses, approximately 5 feet deep, which span the long direction and rest upon piers at either end of the room...

The most interesting and curious aspect of these revelations on structure is the level of experimentation and innovation exhibited by both Wright and Griffin. Although the framing 'experiments' sometimes failed, or in the long run suffered from severe deflection, their very existence shows that the creative energies of the early Prairie

School architects was not limited to finding a new formal vocabulary but extended to all levels of building design and construction."

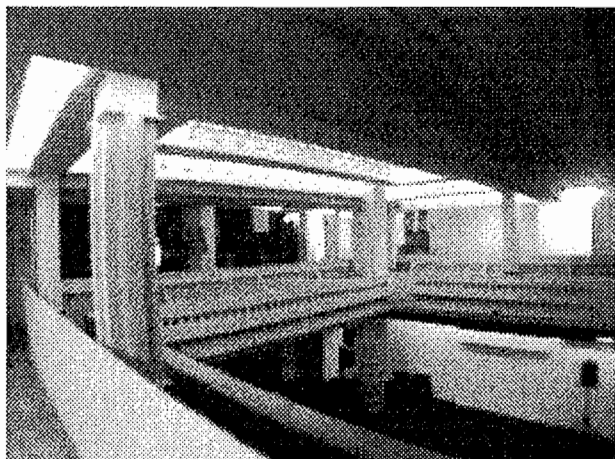
The book *Walter Burley Griffin in America* by Mati Maldre and Paul Kruty published by the University of Illinois Press and now available in paperback costs US\$34.95. [www.press.uillinois.edu](http://www.press.uillinois.edu)  
[uipress@uillinois.edu](mailto:uipress@uillinois.edu)

## Capitol Theatre, Melbourne

The magnificent Capitol Theatre in Capitol House, Swanston Street, Melbourne was bought by RMIT University two years ago. Since then RMIT has been carrying out restoration, including the restoration of the foyer ceiling over the void to the lower foyer (see photos below), and also upgrading for fire safety requirements of the theatre spaces.



ABOVE and BELOW: The restored foyer ceiling over the void to the lower foyer, Capitol Theatre, Melbourne photographed by Justin Coogan of MGS.



RMIT have established an excellent program where the university uses the theatre and its spaces from Mondays to Thursdays, and it is available for other community uses such as the Comedy Festival from Fridays to Sundays.

## Development plans for Capitol House

Above the Capitol Theatre in Capitol House, Melbourne until recently there were offices and workshops which were tenanted by jewellers and