

Goodbye to the Griffin house

Murray Griffin says farewell to the family home, jointly designed by Roy Lippincott, and Walter and Marion Griffin.

Even the original purchase of the vacant block at 21 Glenard Drive, in the Melbourne suburb of Eaglemont, was a Walter Burley Griffin and Lippincott collaboration of sorts.

Walter Burley Griffin designed the Glenard Estate near the Yarra River in Eaglemont for developer Peter Keam, with a curved and flowing layout.

He then purchased Number 21 Glenard Drive from Keam in May 1917 for sixty-one pounds, twelve shillings and one penny. But he did so only as an intermediary.

The land title that bears his signature shows he immediately transferred the property to his sister Genevieve Griffin Lippincott, who was married to Roy Lippincott.

Roy Lippincott at the time was working in Walter Griffin's studio, which Walter ran in conjunction with his wife and fellow architect Marion Mahony Griffin.

I don't know why Walter chose to be the go-between in purchasing the land for his sister. Perhaps it was payment for her occasional stints helping to run Walter and Marion's Sydney office.

Nor do I know for sure why they chose to buy 21, of all the lots on the estate.

Perhaps it was because the site is one of the few flat blocks of land in the estate. However, I suspect it was because of its proximity to two river red gums.

The one at the front – on the boundary of the neighbouring property – is still alive. The one at the back is now an imposing remnant, its hollow trunk reaching almost as high as the top of the house, and annually serving as a nesting site for wood ducks.



Lippincott House circa 1920, National Library of Australia nla.obj-150259242-m

On the site, Roy Lippincott and Walter and Marion Griffin – no doubt with input from Genevieve – designed the most marvellous two-storey house, with a soaring roof line (dramatically echoed in the living room fireplace), wide eaves, bold and oversized bargeboards, and splayed brick lower walls with patterned brick columns rising from them.

It also has a band of windows running almost the entire length of the house (a design element advocated by Walter Burley Griffin in an article called "Sunshine in the Home"), which provides a strong sense of the house's setting from every room.

Although it's called Lippincott House and was first owned by Genevieve, Walter and Marion sometimes stayed there too, including while building their house on the neighbouring site – the tiny, open-plan home called Pholiota.

Pholiota consisted of one room with a number of alcoves that had curtains to separate them from the main room when required, and the flooring was simply bricks on the ground.

Given the intense nature of Walter and Marion's relationship (Marion once advised a niece that a husband should be an opponent "worthy of her mettle") I think it's a safe bet that a drawn curtain in the tiny confines of Pholiota often wouldn't have provided enough distance.

Each of them at times would no doubt have been grateful for the opportunity to slip next door to 21 – either for some quiet time, or to play with Genevieve and Roy's three young daughters.

The Lippincotts moved to New Zealand in 1922, after Roy won a competition to design the Arts building at Auckland University. Walter and Marion about two years later also left Melbourne, heading to Sydney, where they would focus their attention on Castlecrag.

For me, Number 21 as it is today reflects a larger collaboration than just Roy, Walter, and Marion.

My grandparents – the dashing handsome artist Vaughan Murray Griffin and his beautiful, vivacious wife Norrie Hinemoa – lived in the house for decades from 1939 onwards, raising two sons there – my beloved late father Garry, and his brother Nicholas (who grew up to be an architect).

My grandfather is best known for his glorious linocuts of Australian birds, as well as his drawings and paintings from his three and a half years as a prisoner of war in Changi, which strikingly capture the suffering of his fellow prisoners.

Walter and my grandfather weren't related, despite the shared surname, but they knew each other. They met while my grandfather was still a young man, because his parents had commissioned Walter to design a house for them in Darebin Street, Heidelberg, when he was still living at home.

Walter paid particular attention in his design of the Darebin Street house to ensuring my grandfather's room had plenty of light for his artistic endeavours, and Walter and Marion were frequent visitors to the Darebin Street house.

My grandfather subsequently visited and stayed with Walter and Marion in Sydney, and they also had some important common interests.

One of these was Japanese print-making. For Marion, it shaped her approach to preparing her beautifully rendered drawings and watercolours for Frank Lloyd Wright and, subsequently, her drawings and watercolours for Walter.

For my grandfather, Japanese prints influenced the design of his linocuts, each of which he produced by gradually carving into a single block of linoleum, rolling on a different coloured ink after each set of cuts, and pressing each iteration of the inked block onto the same run of paper, using the heavy press in his studio upstairs at the Glenard Drive house.

Another common interest was Rudolf Steiner and Anthroposophy. Marion joined the Anthroposophical Society of Australia in 1930 and Walter joined the following year. My grandfather's interest in anthroposophy had started earlier, in about the mid-1920s.

Walter and Marion became heavily involved in the Anthroposophical Society during their time in Castlecrag, attending lectures and becoming involved in Anthroposophical festivals. For my grandfather, anthroposophy triggered the Journey series of prints and paintings, in which he explored the spiritual world that he believed permeated our physical world.

Perhaps the most important shared bond of all was their attitude to nature.

For all three – Walter, Marion, and my artist grandfather – nature was the well-spring of human creativity, and connection to the natural world was essential for human happiness.

Walter believed the object of design is to "harmonise art with nature", and he and Marion were fascinated by Australian plants.

They were also dismayed by the casual lack of regard that Australians often showed to their natural environment.

After Walter had carefully designed the Glenard estate to protect its mature eucalypts in small reserves, they learned when in Castlecrag that Heidelberg's council had sold these trees for a pound each to be chopped up for firewood.

For my grandfather, it was essential that art have a link to nature. He loved going out into the bush and "golden paddocks" in the area around Eaglemont, which had earlier been an inspiration for the Heidelberg School of artists, and also took inspiration from landscapes in other parts of Victoria.

I spent many happy days at the house visiting my grandparents.

I'd head upstairs to spend time with my grandfather in his paint-spattered realm upstairs, his pictures stacked haphazardly against the walls, where we would chat (never about the war) as he either painted or worked on his linocuts.

Or I'd spend time with him in his vegetable garden, the seedlings planted according to the phases of the moon, and a large copper vat full of water and cow manure that he'd collected from the river flats stewing on the garden's perimeter.

I also adored my grandmother – the daughter of actors and with an actor's sensibility herself – stylish, strong-willed, a wonderful cook, and with an unforgettable laugh.

She too loved the house and its unique design – reminiscing to one journalist that when they first moved there visitors would "howl with laughter" at the number of windows.

She also loved the neighbourhood of the Glenard estate, which at various times counted among its residents mudbrick home pioneer Alistair Knox and his wife Mernda, journalists Fred Aldridge and Alan Nicholls and their respective families, and modern Australian furniture pioneer Fred Ward and his wife Elinor.

At my grandmother's behest, there is a plaque on some rocks on a small, grassy roundabout in front of 21 that simply reads:

"Walter Burley Griffin lived in Glenard Drive. He planned this subdivision in 1916. For this we are grateful."

I had many more happy times at 21, which continued when the house eventually became the home of my parents, Janet and Garry, who also lived there for many decades.

During that time, my father followed in the footsteps of his father, and of Walter and Marion, by devoting many hours to protecting the river flats below the Glenard estate.

This year, after so many decades of the house being at the centre of the Griffin family, it's time for us to say farewell to 21, and the house will be sold. My sisters and I are leading lives that – for various reasons – mean that soon none of us will call it home.

But it will always be part of us.

Reviewing a 1934 exhibition by my grandfather, Arthur Streeton called his work "modern, original and beautiful".

Anyone who sees the house that Lippincott and the Griffins designed will regard these descriptions as apt for the building itself.

But for me 21 Glenard Drive is also something else.

It is a reminder of generations of people who recognised the importance of love and art, and who understood the need for a deep connection to the natural world that surrounds us.

21 Glenard Drive was part of the 2023 Open House Melbourne program, with three sold-out tours held. A special separate tour for members of the Walter Burley Griffin Society was also conducted. An exhibition of artist Murray Griffin's work is currently on show at Gallery 257 in Ivanhoe. The house is currently for sale through Miles Real Estate in Ivanhoe, through an expressions of interest process.