

## News Update

March 1997

### Discovery tour - Sunday 13 April

A very early work from Griffin's Australian practice, a lost fragment from the Canberra drawings realised in the landscape in Sydney, has recently been discovered by Professor James Weirick. A bus tour to visit this work and other items of interest will be held on Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> April. Buses will depart from the Griffin Centre shops at Edinburgh Road, Castlecrag 1.45pm, return 5.30pm. Please bring walking shoes, your own thermos of tea or coffee, and picnic rug. Biscuits and cake will be provided. Cost \$10 per person, payable in advance to our Treasurer, Maggie Chambers, 7 Mackenzie Street, Lindfield 2070.

### General meeting - Tuesday 15 July

**Fallingwater - a house to be seen:** Sit back and enjoy a slide presentation and talk on this most famous house, *Fallingwater*, and also the more modest three-bedroom house *Kentuck Nob*, both designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. *Kentuck Nob* was recently bought from the original owner by the English Lord Palumbo who opened it to the public on 1 May 1996. The talk will be presented by Ben Gerstel of Ben Gerstel Architecture Pty Ltd of Castlecrag who made the pilgrimage in 1996.

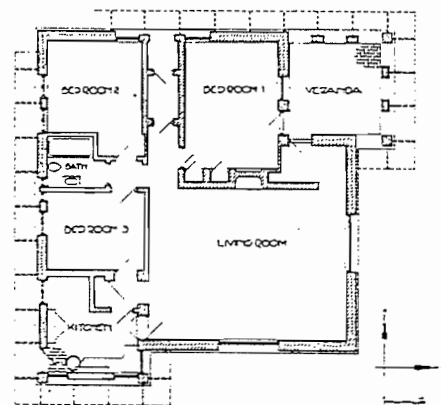
Please put the date in your diary as this will be the last newsletter before the talk. The Community Centre, down the long driveway at the corner of The Rampart and The Postern, Castlecrag.

### Sale of *The Cheong House* 14 The Parapet, Castlecrag

A rare intact example of Walter Burley Griffin's work at Castlecrag will be auctioned on 5 April.

The house was built in 1922 for the Reverend Cheok Hong Cheong, a prominent leader of the Australian Chinese community, and a shareholder in Griffin's company, the Greater Sydney Development Association which developed the Castlecrag Estate.

*The Cheong House*, as it is known, is built of local sandstone and is oriented towards the view looking east across the adjoining Lookout Reserve to Middle Harbour. The house has been in the one ownership for the last 57 years and the only additions have been a sandstone garage and a sympathetic laundry wing designed by Hugh Buhrich. The siting of the house and the neighbouring Griffin house, *The Moon House*, superbly illustrates Griffin's ideals of staggered setbacks to enhance amenity, views and privacy and his commitment to the subservience of buildings to the landscape.



▲ Plan of Cheong House redrawn by Ben Gerstel from plans held at Willoughby City Library.

The house retains most of its original details including its decorative crystalline stone voussoirs above the living room windows, its magnificent fireplace of massed sawn sandstone, pivoted planked doors, concealed picture rails, flared skirting boards, most of its exposed beam ceilings, bathroom and kitchen and also beneath the more recent paint are its original stippled paint finishes. Some of Griffin's original landscape elements also still remain in the garden including a Kurrajong tree, bougainvillea and stepping stones to the side verandah.

The house is one of fourteen Griffin-designed houses built in his model suburb of Castlecrag where Griffin planned the built environment to harmonise with the natural environment. Only a couple of the fourteen houses now remain intact and *The Cheong House* is one of those few. Its national significance, intactness and rarity make it most deserving of the best restoration practices.

The house is open for inspection on Wednesdays and Saturdays 12 noon to 1pm. For further information contact David Moran, The Professionals, Castlecrag tel 9958 0124.

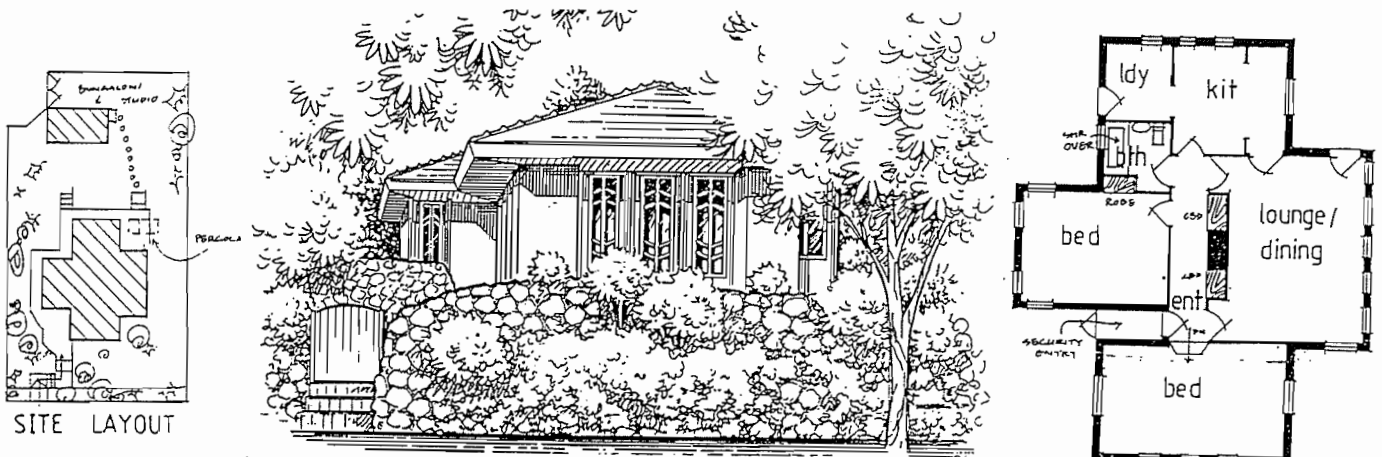


▲ Cheong house drawing on silk. Courtesy Marie Nicholls.

## Sale of Griffin-designed house in Heidelberg, Victoria

Society member Steven Barlow has kindly sent us the advertisement for a Griffin-designed house at 52 Darebin Street, Heidelberg, which is for private sale.

The advertisement states: *This delightful original display of architecture and advanced design for its era sits on an elevated block overlooking the village of Heidelberg and the southern vistas beyond. Comprising entrance alcove, kitchen, lounge room, 2 bedrooms, central bathroom and separate laundry. An abundance of glass throughout takes full advantage of maximising natural sunlight. Indicative of Walter Burley Griffin design is the low stone fence at the front illustrating his preference for house and garden to blend in with the landscape. An exciting chance to purchase a piece of architectural history.*



Mr. Barlow writes: *An external inspection about a year ago showed the house to be in very poor repair, with sagging eaves, broken windows and a jungle for a garden threatening to push the house over. The real estate sketch is, perhaps, somewhat deceptive. As I'm sure we would all want it preserved, its fate may be of interest to members.*

The house is for sale through Miles Real Estate, Ivanhoe - Rosanna. Elisse Farquhar 0419 335 812.

## Plan of Management, Griffin Reserves, Castlecrag

A draft Plan of Management for the Griffin Reserves at Castlecrag has been prepared by consultants Meredith Walker and Michael Lehany for Willoughby City Council. The Council is to be congratulated on this initiative. The draft plan will go on display for public comment at Willoughby City Library in Victoria Avenue, Chatswood in the next few weeks.

Griffin designed Castlecrag with a superb system of interconnected open spaces so as to preserve the native flora and many of the significant landforms, and to provide recreational areas and pedestrian access. The reserves, pathways and road islands are an integral element of Griffin's internationally recognised design for Castlecrag. The consultants have prepared an appropriately detailed Plan of Management covering all these aspects, identifying significant vegetation and landforms and is sympathetic to the many environmental and heritage issues.

## Griffin and the town planning of Leeton and Griffith

by John R Newland

In 1914, Walter Burley Griffin was engaged by the Water Conservation and Irrigation Commission (WC&IC) to prepare plans for the extension of Leeton town and the new town of Griffith. Leeton was named after the Minister for Public Works, CA Lee, and Griffith after Arthur Griffith, also a Minister for Public Works.

The Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area (MIA) and associated works, construction of which commenced in 1906, was the largest government-sponsored irrigation scheme in the world at that time. Initially, responsibility for management of the scheme was vested in the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Trust, but the vastness of the task was beyond the competency of the Trust. Accordingly, the WC&IC was established on 1 January 1913 as a statutory body to handle all relevant matters pertaining to the MIA and for the construction and management of future irrigation areas and districts.

An initial task of the WC&IC was to address the inconveniences, lack of amenities in the MIA and other shortcomings which had received very little consideration under the Public Works Department regime. These included the creation of new business enterprises to handle and market produce, processing facilities, shops, power generation, water supplies and sanitation, urging railway extensions to the MIA **and** the creation of permanent townships.

The Commission prepared some early town planning designs for Leeton. However, their vision was a grand one and they engaged Walter Burley Griffin to translate their vision into the new towns to service the Scheme. For the Commission's fledgling township of Leeton, Griffin proposed a new town centre around the prominent hill. Two water reservoir towers on top of the hill were to provide a main entrance to the town. The towers, the first of which was constructed in 1915, are crowned with a typical Griffin geometric decorative embellishment.

For the main administrative centre of Griffith, Griffin followed similar design concepts to those applied for Canberra, with circular roadways around the prominent hill, but in this instance the landscape effect was to be achieved by the main irrigation channel producing "a sweeping curve round the central portion of the city and by the two enlargements of the waterway."<sup>i</sup> Government buildings would be located on the central hill, "where these most important structures of the city will command the commercial axis and dominate the vistas from every other direction... The central group thus governing the public architecture of the town as well as its affairs comprises the headquarters of the irrigation district the Town Hall, the court house, and subordinate public offices."<sup>ii</sup> Unfortunately, these magnificent buildings never came to fruition, although the street layouts of both towns are essentially those proposed by Griffin in his original town plans.

The original plans were drawn by Griffin's office on tracing lines in black Indian ink (being for the reprographic production of *heliographic* copies or blue prints for issue to the field for construction)<sup>iii</sup>. After registration with a drawing number, the lines were retained in the plan room repository for future reference and storage. Coupled with preparation of the linen plans, the Griffin office also prepared two coloured sketches done on a silk material (the colouring being done by Mrs Griffin) - one being a scene of Leeton looking towards the two water towers, the other being an aerial view of Griffith. These coloured sketches were later presented to each of the local WC&IC offices. They were mounted in fine cedar frames for exhibition.

I entered the WC&IC in 1966 as an engineer engaged on construction scheduling and cost estimation of new capital works and preparation of tender documents. Over the years I obtained a great knowledge of Commission works and of its personnel. In 1986, I was seconded to administration of the Heritage Project for the then new Department of Water Resources.

The Heritage project was responsible for the collection of all the photographic records, cine films and video tapes, together with the artefacts and memorabilia of the Commission's history. This was expanded with the inclusion of oral history recording of WC&IC personnel. Sometimes a real treasure was discovered. One of these was in late 1988, when I was made aware of the Griffin drawings and sketches. I suggested that as these original items were of such heritage significance, they ought to be recalled to head office for forwarding to the State Archives Office of NSW for permanent retention and preservation. After some anxiety by local officers, they eventually "agreed" to surrender them. I arranged for these to be photographed and a number of full-sized prints made.



Illustration of Griffin's concept for the central plaza of Leeton. Reproduced from *Irrigation Record* Vol.3 No.5 May 15, 1915. Unfortunately, only the water towers (in the background) were constructed.

As a gesture, one of each reproduction was placed in the original frame and represented to the local offices. So well done were the quality of the prints, that they were quite difficult to discern from the originals when remounted in their frames. In April 1989, a small ceremony was held in the foyer of the NSW Parliament House where the original Walter Burley Griffin lines and coloured sketches were presented to the State Archives Offices of NSW for their preservation. This was one event of which I felt extremely proud to have achieved and I express my humble appreciation to those who were eventually made to "see the light" as well as to the chief officers of the Department of Water Resources for their interest in the Commission's heritage.

#### Editors' postscript:

#### *Leeton on the Move*

The Leeton community is taking new civic pride in its Walter Burley Griffin heritage, which has been identified in a recent study commissioned by Leeton Shire and its committee called *Leeton on the Move*. Volume 1 of the study was completed last August and it was prepared by consultants Richard Ratcliffe and John Armes and Associates. Griffin's plan for the town was completed in September 1914 and has been closely followed with a few minor exceptions.

The study also identifies the considerable Art Deco architectural heritage in Leeton. Richard Ratcliffe, landscape architect and heritage conservationist, states that "unlike other towns throughout the country which have lost their stock of buildings of this style, lack of development pressure has meant that Leeton has retained almost all of the buildings of this period.....It could be described as the Art Deco capital of Australia." Co-ordinator of the *Leeton on the Move* Committee, Sue Gavel, has kindly offered to provide information and to show any of our members visiting Leeton around the town.

<sup>i</sup> Griffin, WB, "The city plan of Griffith", *Irrigation Record*, 15 June 1915.

<sup>ii</sup> Griffin, WB, "The city plan of Griffith", *Irrigation Record*, 1 June 1915.

<sup>iii</sup> Professor James Weirick advises that the drawings were prepared by Roy Lippincott, Walter's brother-in-law, probably at the office at 183 Greenwich Road, Greenwich in Sydney.