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Castlecrag, a special place

In Sydney there are many peninsular suburbs which could have developed their own special character like Castlecrag did, but failed to do so. Castlecrag's special character and amenities are no accident.

Even though it is so close to the heart of a city of over four million people, Castlecrag has a strong sense of community, with a very stable base of long-term home owners, fourteen active community groups and a thriving local shopping centre. Its residents have banded together on important causes, often through the Castlecrag Progress Association which was formed in 1925. This group led the successful campaign against a plan to extend the Warringah Freeway along the northern escarpment, meeting a large bridge across Middle Harbour to Seaforth.

There is also a tradition of residents gathering simply to enjoy themselves. In 2000, the inaugural Castlecrag Community Fair was held, bringing together all of the community groups and almost all of the retailers and service businesses. Some of the community groups include the Haven Amphitheatre Committee which was founded in 1976, the Castlecrag Conservation Society founded in the early 1970s and the Walter Burley Griffin Society formed in 1988.

Much of Castlecrag's unusual layout, its preserved bushland and special character are due to Walter Burley Griffin and his wife Marion Mahony Griffin. These American architects came to Australia after winning the international competition to design Australia's national capital, Canberra in 1912.

The true genesis of Castlecrag was in the 1920s,

when the Griffins developed it to be a 'model suburb' in which the houses were to harmonise with the landscape. For a variety of reasons the venture failed financially, but the ideas and values of those who settled here made an impact which endures to this day. In recent decades, the important contributions of the Griffins to architecture and planning and their 'model suburb' of Castlecrag have become internationally recognised.

Castlecrag Library's 50th birthday gift

Castlecrag Library was officially opened on 3 November 1951 by the Deputy Mayor of Willoughby Council, Charles Braithwaite. To celebrate 50th anniversary of that occasion, the Walter Burley Griffin Society has given the Library a book *The Griffins in Australia and India: The complete works and projects of Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin* edited by Jeff Turnbull and Peter Y. Navaretti for its collection.

This superb 440 page book describes and illustrates the Griffins' 250 projects of their Australian practice that spanned twenty years from 1914 to 1935, and the 95 Indian projects designed in the two years from 1935 until Walter's death in Lucknow in 1937.

Griffin Federation Track turns 1

The Griffin Federation Track was officially opened in September last year, and was funded by a grant from the Commonwealth Government's Federation Community Projects Program awarded to the Walter Burley Griffin Society Inc., and by additional funding from Willoughby City Council (WCC). The track begins in Turret Reserve near the western end

of The Rampart, winds down through the bushland reserve being regenerated by WCC to Northbridge and then climbs up the steps to Tarakan Crescent and along the roads to Willoughby Incinerator designed by W.B.Griffin and E.M.Nicholls in Small Street. Follow the sandstone direction posts along the track's 1.9km length. Allow 1 to 1.5hours for the return walk.



Mr Joe Hockey, Member for North Sydney and Cr Pat Reilly, Mayor of Willoughby City Council cut the ribbon at the official opening of the Griffin Federation Track on 16 September 2001.

Roll the Presses: there's been a big upsurge in the release of books about the Griffins

When Walter Burley Griffin won the Canberra design competition and later locked horns with Federal bureaucrats, losing his job as Director of Design and Construction in the process, the newspapers and magazines of the day carried many reports and articles on him. It's fair to say that he then slipped into obscurity.

If the frequency of publication of books is an index of interest in a subject, then his star is rapidly rising again. In recent years, there have been no fewer than eleven books written about him or featuring his work. It's an astonishing fact that few, if any, Australians or people whose productive working years were spent here, have ever had more books released about them. Further, he's been the subject of three film and TV documentaries and two very successful public exhibitions. What's going on here?

The revival started slowly but has rapidly gathered momentum. Only two books were written about Griffin in the sixties, seventies and eighties. Here are the opening words on the flyleaf of the first of them, James Birrell's *Walter Burley Griffin* (see 2 below): "Perhaps it is not surprising that Walter

Burley Griffin's name lay forgotten in Australia until Canberra's fiftieth anniversary. He has, after all, been forgotten by most of the world". In his forward, Robin Boyd said "This book is an overdue record of a man who was at least a remarkable pioneer of twentieth century architecture, and was possibly one of the greatest architects of the century".

Both Birrell's book and its successor published eleven years later, Donald Leslie Johnson's *The architecture of Walter Burley Griffin* (4), make the point strongly that Griffin's contribution to modernist architecture in Australia was grossly undervalued. But Johnson's preface concludes forlornly "The very most this author can hope for is a better understanding of Griffin the architect". No improvement was in sight – Griffin's buildings were being demolished or altered without respect and it was seventeen years before the next book was released.

Inspired by the prospect of conserving Griffin's Duncan House at Castlecrag, the Walter Burley Griffin Society was formed and six years later in 1994 it published *Building for nature – Walter Burley Griffin and Castlecrag* (10). While modestly produced, this is packed with information on Griffin's "garden suburb". Also in the 1990s, academics began to see that the Griffin story had many fascinating twists and turns – plenty of scope there for original research. The Society's book proved to be the first of six released in the decade.

In Australia in 1997, a previously unpublished Masters thesis written some twenty years earlier by Peter Harrison called *Walter Burley Griffin landscape architect* (3) was released. He had been Canberra's Chief Town Planner, an avid collector of Griffin material and a major contributor to the efforts of the growing number of Griffin scholars – some of whom effectively undercut his own plans to write a book. His thesis was heavily edited and published posthumously as a book by the National Library of Australia. Critics praise it as being more detached, evenhanded and comprehensive than its predecessors.

Meanwhile, American architectural historians had begun to explore a number of promising areas including the significance of Griffin in the development of the "Prairie School", Marion Mahony Griffin's role in Frank Lloyd Wright's practice (she was, by the way, the world's first registered female architect) and the nature of the working relationship between Walter and Marion. A book by Paul Kruty and prominent photographer Mati Maldre on Griffin's American work was

published in 1996 (6), and another by Kruty and Paul Sprague on his Indian work followed in the next year (5). From these, Griffin emerges as a highly original and significant architect who, surprisingly, even had influence over some aspects of Wright's work. Kruty even argues "Of all the architects of the Prairie School who were practicing at the turn of the century, only three stayed loyal to their ideals and fought to their dying days for their personal visions of modern architecture. Two of them – Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright – have been immortalised among the legion of great architects. It is time to accord Walter Burley Griffin a place near them".

The only good to come from the demolition of the Pymont Incinerator was the Sydney City Council's funding of a major exhibition on the Griffins at The Powerhouse Museum. Called *Beyond Architecture*, this showed the amazing diversity and creativity of their work with beautifully displayed plans, paintings, drawings, furniture, light fittings and textiles. The accompanying book (11) was sumptuously illustrated and proved to be amongst the museum's most successful publications. This was all well publicised and spread the Griffin story to the general public.

Being much less adept at self-publicity than many in their profession, the Griffins didn't leave an archive of drawings or a stirring and cohesive exposition of the evolution of their work. In an effort to correct this, in the late 1980s the architecture schools of the universities of Melbourne and Illinois set up an international Griffin exchange programme. The aim was to record all 437 projects on which they worked. A massive volume covering the Australian and Indian work (9) was released in 1998 and the American volume will follow soon.

Fanned by The Powerhouse success, what might be called the "popularisation" of the Griffin story flared up dramatically in the late 1990s. A locally produced film was shown continuously at The Powerhouse (14) and this was followed in 2001 by a Film Australia documentary called *City of dreams* (13), shown nationally on the ABC. The American aspects of Griffin's work, especially the intriguing relationship he had with Wright, were explored in the USA Public Broadcasting documentary *Walter Burley Griffin in his own right* (12). Large crowds began to show up at open days in Castlecrag organised by the Walter Burley Griffin Society, National Trust, Art Deco Society, Historic Houses Trust, Royal Botanic Gardens and Royal Australian Institute of Architects.

The release of new books continues. Already three containing aspects of Griffin's work have been released in the 2000s. Before his death in 2001, Paul Read, who had been Canberra's Chief Architect for fourteen years, wrote *Canberra following Griffin* (7) and this was released recently by the National Archives of Australia. It is a beautiful volume which has at its core the story of the corruption and reestablishment of Griffin's design principles for the national capital. An exhibition run in conjunction with the book launch was amongst the most successful ever at the National Archives of Australia.

The popularisation process also continues. There have been a series of well-written articles in the press and magazines (even in such obscure journals as the Subaru owner's magazine). In particular, following its restoration, Castlecrag's Fishwick house has been prominent. It was the featured house in the Sydney Morning Herald's Design Week supplement and was also lavishly covered in two recent "coffee table" books. Along with such landmark houses as Boomerang, Altona and Rona, it was beautifully photographed for *Private Sydney* (8) as one of 14 "truly inspiring" houses. It, and aspects of the Griffin story, also feature in *Eight Great Houses* (1), currently being released. The eight houses were selected by one of Australia's most prominent architectural photographers, Patrick Bingham Hall, as "a gathering of extraordinary houses...The heartfelt craft, honesty, and humanity displayed in these houses is a celebration of life itself".

Selected books

- 1) Allenby, Guy, and Bingham Hall, Patrick. ***Eight great houses***. Pesaro Publishing, 2002
- 2) Birrell, James. ***Walter Burley Griffin***. University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 1964.
- 3) Harrison, Peter. ***Walter Burley Griffin landscape architect***. National Library of Australia, 1995.
- 4) Johnson, Donald Leslie. ***The architecture of Walter Burley Griffin***. Macmillan, Melbourne, 1977.
- 5) Kruty, Paul, and Sprague, Paul. ***Two American architects in India***. University of Illinois, School of Architecture, Urbana, 1997.
- 6) Maldre, Mati, and Kruty, Paul. ***Walter Burley Griffin in America***. University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1996.
- 7) Reid, Paul ***Canberra following Griffin***. National Archives of Australia, 2002
- 8) Rethmeier, Willem, and Reed Burns, Jenna. ***Private Sydney***. Scriptum Editions, 2000

9) Turnbull, Jeff, and Navaretti, Peter. **The Griffins in Australia and India.** Melbourne University Press, 1998.

10) Walker, Meredith, Kabos, Adrienne and Weirick, James. **Building for nature: Walter Burley Griffin and Castlecrag.** The Walter Burley Griffin Society Incorporated, 1994.

11) Watson, Anne. **Beyond architecture: Marion Mahony and Walter Burley Griffin in America, Australia and India.** Powerhouse Publishing - Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, 1998.

Selected film & videotape

12) Davis, Alison (producer). **Walter Burley Griffin in his own right.** WILL TV< USA, 1998

13) Mason, Gaby (producer). **City of dreams: the collaboration of Marion Mahony and Walter Burley Griffin.** Film Australia for ABC TV, 2001

14) Phillips, Kathleen (producer). **Beyond Architecture.** Powerhouse Museum, 1998

Griffin Reserves Discovery Walks

Willoughby Council conducted walks through the Castlecrag Reserve system on Sunday 22 September, as part of its Spring Festival activities. These interpretive walks aimed at increasing resident appreciation and understanding of the Griffin Estate and showcased the bushland regeneration work undertaken by committed residents.

The guided walks around Castlecrag have proven to be popular with the local community. This year two walks were conducted with both filling up quickly. Participants walked through the walk and reserve system seeing how elements of the Griffin vision have survived, the problems that

these areas have faced, and what the community and Council are doing to preserve Griffin's legacy.

Change is taking place throughout the public places of Castlecrag. You may notice that the bushland character of the suburb is slowly being revived. From road islands to neighbourhood reserves locally native plants are being propagated and regenerated. Weeds are being reduced and in many places the bush is springing back to life. Walkers saw wildflowers in Casement Reserve, once smothered with weed such as mother of millions, Grass Trees on road islands that were once turf, and beautiful remnant trees providing a dappled canopy above.

The rainforest atmosphere and the magnificent natural rock escarpments, all recently unveiled under layers of rubbish and weeds, proved Embrasure Reserve to be a hidden highlight of the walk. Historical photos from Tower Reserve revealed the massive change in the area over the past sixty years, but a short walk across the road to the lookout on Castlecrag's Northern Escarpment revealed one of Sydney harbour's most beautiful unchanged bushland landscapes.

If residents would like more information on what Council is doing throughout the Castlecrag Reserve system contact Council's Landscape Architect, James Smallhorn on 9777 7710. If you would like to join one of Castlecrag's six BushCare Groups contact Council's BushCare officer, Mandy Wilson on 9777 7718.

MEMBERSHIP FORM

Name: _____

Address: _____

_____ Postcode: _____

Phone: _____

Date: _____

Amount enclosed: _____

Please make cheques payable to
Walter Burley Griffin Society Inc. and post to
The Treasurer c/- 140 Edinburgh Rd, Castlecrag, 2068



MEMBERSHIP

The Walter Burley Griffin Society Inc. was established in 1988 and aims to create a greater awareness and appreciation of the Griffins' design, architecture and planning, and thereby encourage the conservation of their internationally significant work. The Society produces a newsletter and organises guest speakers. If you would like to join the Society in Australia fill out the form opposite.

Individual	\$ 25pa
Student	\$ 5pa
Individual overseas	\$ 35pa
Community organisations	\$ 50pa
Business organisations	\$ 50pa