

News Update

May 2002

Griffin Incinerators in Victoria and South Australia restored for the community

In South Australia the Hindmarsh Incinerator has been restored externally and is now the centrepiece of a new housing development known as the Burley Griffin Estate. While in Victoria the Essendon Incinerator at Moonee Ponds has received a \$90,000 grant from the Victorian government's Public Heritage Program to reinstate the original design before it reopens as a community arts centre.

In Sydney there were once seven Griffin designed incinerators. Now there are only two - Willoughby and Glebe. Leichhardt Council is holding a public Information Night 6pm Wednesday 15 May at Benledi House, cnr Wigram Rd and Glebe Point Rd, Glebe, about Australand's proposal for Glebe Incinerator, sheds and surrounding development.

More details next issue.

Development proposed adjacent to Newman College, Melbourne

A 4 1/2 storey Academic Centre is proposed to be built behind Newman College Chapel, just off-centre with Griffin's central east-west axis of the Newman College site at the University of Melbourne.

The proposed Centre is an architecturally freeform design, with asymmetrical elevations, vaguely circular in plan. The main two floors are centred on an elliptical-shaped Reading Room with a mezzanine over. Tutorial rooms are placed around the mezzanine Reading Room.

It is believed that the new building will be clearly visible from most public spaces and many students bedrooms around Griffin's inner quadrangle. It will also be visible on either side, and possibly above, the College Chapel from the front gate. The Academic Centre is proposed to be 16.6 metres high, measured from the ground level of the Chapel.

Members who wish to object to the proposal, can write to Heritage Victoria, Level 22, 80 Collins Street, Melbourne 3000. An application for a Heritage permit will be considered on 23 May 2002.

Peter Y. Navaretti

Canberra following Griffin book launch and tribute to the author, the late Paul Reid Monday 27.5.'02, 6pm at RAI, Sydney

The handsome book titled *Canberra Following Griffin: A Design History of Australia's National Capital* with 200 plans and illustrations, has been published by the National Archives of Australia. Please see enclosed invitation to the book launch and tribute to the book's author, the late Professor Paul Reid.

A Vision Splendid opening address

The following are extracts from an address given by Anne-Marie Schwirtlich, Acting Director-General of the National Archives of Australia on the occasion of the official launch on 23 April 2002 of the exhibition, *A Vision Splendid: How the Griffins Imagined Australia's Capital* open until 1 September '02.

"Conceiving and planning Australia's capital 90 years ago was a feat of soaring imagination. I am struck by how extraordinary a talent such an enterprise required each time I drive past Lake George or visit places like Dalgety, Delegate, Lindhurst, and Tooma - all of which were considered possible sites for our national capital.

In 1911 the very young Commonwealth of Australia advertised an International Design Competition for Canberra. It attracted 137 entries from around the world and was won by a husband and wife team, Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin, who worked as partners in a Chicago architectural firm.

Their remarkable collaborative effort incorporated Walter's brilliant design, merging the city into a

landscape he had never actually seen, and Marion's drawings which transformed his intellectual blueprint into a visual experience.

It is not widely known that the Griffins were rather fortunate to finish their entry on time. For some reason, Walter, who for years had dreamed of working on such an ambitious project, was dilly-dallying with his design.

Marion, in her book *Magic of America*, recalls her exasperated outburst to her husband:

"For the love of Mike when are you going to get started on those Capital plans? How much time do you think there is left anyway? Do you realise that it takes a solid month to get them over there after they have started on their way? That leaves exactly nine weeks now to turn them out - Perhaps you can design a city in two days but the drawings take time and that falls on me. Nine weeks! It isn't possible to do them in nine weeks. I may be the swiftest draughtsman in town but I can't do the impossible. What's the use of thinking about a thing like this for 10 years if when the time comes you don't get it done in time? Mark my words and I'm not joking, either you get busy this very day, this very minute (with rising tones) or I'll not touch a pencil to the darn things".

Apparently that was just the gentle nudge needed because Walter started work that very day.

This exhibition is about relationships: that between Walter and Marion, that between their imagination and the landscape, and that between the Griffins and the Commonwealth bureaucracy.

The Griffin plans and drawings are among the most valued records in our collection. Some of the drawings have been seen previously in other exhibitions, but this is the first time that all 12 have been displayed together since 1912. Thanks to the fastidious work of our Preservation section, they are still today, most impressive works of art.

A Vision Splendid includes a wealth of information about, and wonderful images of, the Griffins, meticulously unearthed by our curator, Jay Arthur. Jay has researched and sourced material from far and wide, including Paul Reid's book, *Canberra Following Griffin*, which will be published and launched by the Archives next month. Thank you Jay for a rich and rivetting exhibition.

I think you'll agree when you wander down the hall that *A Vision Splendid* is exactly that. It's one of our most eye-catching exhibitions, and designer Iona Walsh has sensitively reconfigured the gallery to accommodate her sparkling design. Thank you Iona, I think Walter and Marion would appreciate the thoughtful presentation.

Earlier I mentioned that this exhibition is about relationships, including the one between the Griffins and the landscape. Walter Burley Griffin and Marion

Mahony Griffin vibrated with idealism and planned a city that was to be sensitive to the environment and that would represent and nurture a democratic society. I should like to leave you with a quote from Marion that gives you a flavour of this passion:

City planning as founded by Mr Griffin, was not a mechanical drafting board affair later to be imposed upon the earth destroying whatever got in the way of the abstraction. In planning Canberra, every detail of the natural conditions was thoroughly studied in order to preserve them. Such reverence for our Mother Earth is acutely necessary now for the rate of destruction is increasing so rapidly. And the continent of Australia would do well to learn this lesson from its capital."

Address by Sir William Deane, Governor - General of the Commonwealth of Australia, on the occasion of the opening of the Future Canberra conference, Canberra, 10.5.'01

"I acknowledge the traditional custodians, the Ngunnawal people, upon whose ancestral land we are gathered.

It was on this day, 10th May, in 1901 that Lord Hopetoun delivered the first Governor-General's opening speech in the first Session of the first Parliament of the Commonwealth. In accordance with Westminster tradition, the Governor-General outlined the legislative programme of the young Nation's first Government including the introduction of a Bill to regulate the Public Service of the Federation. He continued:

"Steps have already been taken to cope with the difficult matter of selecting the federal territory, within which the capital of the Commonwealth is to be built [and] which, it is hoped, will be of a size ample for all public requirements, and of which the climate, accessibility, and natural beauty will give promise of a seat of Government worthy of the new nation."

Today, exactly 100 years later, as we gather for this Centenary of Federation *Canberra Future* Conference, it is appropriate that we look back to celebrate the achievements of the past as well as forward to identify and face the challenges of the future.

In these opening comments I propose to share with you some personal reflections about some aspects of that past.

First of all, a generalisation. It is that our first Commonwealth Government's hopes for a future capital of the Commonwealth seem to me to have, by and large, been spectacularly fulfilled. The Australian Capital Territory is a place of great natural beauty. The city which has been erected as our country's National Capital is one of the world's great planned cities. In itself, it is the symbol of our Federation and of our democracy.

Many individuals have contributed to the development of Canberra. But one stands out above all others as the individual whose vision, intelligence and imaginative capacity did most to shape this city. That person is, of course, Walter Burley Griffin. It is appropriate that, at the commencement of this Conference, something should be said about him for it is largely upon his planning that Canberra Future, as well as Canberra Present, will stand.

Walter Burley Griffin was an associate of the great American pioneer of modern architecture, Frank Lloyd Wright. In 1911 he married the gifted architect and draughtswoman, Marion Mahony. In 1912, Griffin's plan, complemented by Marion's wonderful perspective drawings, won the international design competition for the new Australian Federal Capital.

The design was a truly remarkable one. As the National Capital's Chief Town Planner for almost 20 years, the late Peter Harrison, wrote: "On paper anyone could understand it; on the site it was hard to forget".

But that apparent simplicity hid the complexity of extraordinary ideas. There were the basic geometrical forms: the triangle, with the capital - now the Parliament - the Civic Centre and the defence headquarters at its three points. There was the bisecting cruciform, inspired by the plan for Washington. At either end of the north-south axis stand the Parliament and the Australian War Memorial. Part of the axis is Anzac Parade. The east-west axis is formed by the Lake that now bears Burley Griffin's name. That Lake, formed by the damming of the Molonglo River that flowed through the Canberra plain, was not filled until some 50 often troubled years after the design was first accepted. But when it was, as the architect Robin Boyd, observed, it brought the whole design to life "and the faith of many friends of Canberra ... was justified".

In my view, what distinguished the plan above all else were Griffin's remarkable instinct for both space and the protection of the natural environment: the way the city sits within - and, viewed from above in the daytime, largely disappears or merges in - the surrounding hills and the landscape. The whole concept of Canberra as the garden city is very much at one with Griffin's vision in those regards. We owe and will continue to owe him much.

I must confess that, in my enthusiasm for Canberra, I speak not so much as Governor-General or as a temporary resident of "Yarralumla" facing eviction but rather as one who has known and loved this city for as long as I can remember.

My parents with their young family reluctantly moved to Canberra from Melbourne in 1933 when I was two years old as a consequence of the transfer of the Patents Office. That was a mere 20 years after

Burley Griffin had arrived on the Canberra sheep paddocks to supervise the construction of his winning design for the new National Capital. They had been difficult years in terms of politics and personalities, of war, of stop and start, of Griffin's own tragic departure and of the appointment of the Federal Capital Commission to oversee the construction and opening of the new Parliament House in 1927. The Commission was very capable but, perhaps reflecting the wishes of the government of the time, was somewhat inclined towards controlling people's lives. It was, for instance, only in 1928 that a prohibition on the sale of alcohol - "stagger juice" as King O'Malley called it - was removed.

At the time my family arrived in Canberra, Griffin's city still lay lightly, as a kind of sketch plan, on the landscape. And the Commission had been replaced in 1930 by an Advisory Council which consisted of the Permanent Heads of the Public Service departments responsible for Canberra and three elected representatives. It was, of course, advisory only to the Minister, who was quite able to - and frequently did - ignore its advice. The Council remained in existence, with some changes to its title and constitution, until 1985. It is one of those ironies that so puzzle and delight historians that for well over the first half century of its life, the National Capital of our robust Australian democracy itself lacked even the forms of any effective local representative government. Indeed, it had not been until 1949 that the residents of the A.C.T. had any representation at all in the Commonwealth Parliament and then only on a restricted voting basis until 1966.

Time precludes me from tracing the various steps leading up to the introduction of the current system of self-government. It is now a matter of history that the first general elections for a representative ACT Legislative Assembly took place in March 1989. Those who were living here at the time still recall the ballot paper, almost one-metre wide. The Australian Electoral Commission has generously lent me this copy. It lists no less than 117 candidates for the 17 seats. The parties include the "Sun-ripened Tomato Party", "Party Party Party" and "Surprise Party".

It took almost two months after Election Day to determine the results of the election. At least four people were returned on ostensible platforms of abolishing self-government. Fortunately, for both our nation and its capital city, it did not happen.

Fortunately also, and without implying any view at all about the qualities or abilities of any particular government or member of the Legislature, representative government in the Territory has progressed so well in the years since that first election and is now so well established that it would be inconceivable for there to be any serious

prospect of its abolition.

So it is that you come to this *Canberra Future* Conference with a Canberra Present largely based upon and reflecting, the vision of Walter Burley Griffin and enjoying full representative government. As well as being the National Capital, the city is increasingly emerging as a significant economic centre and transport hub. It is a Canberra Present of which, I believe, all Australians can and should be proud. That is not, of course, to say that Canberra Present cannot be improved. Your Conference's title implicitly invites you to identify existing deficiencies and the best ways of addressing them. More importantly, it invites you to look up from solving existing problems and to focus upon what might be: upon not only the actual but also the ideal; upon questions of what future change could and should mean - not only for the local communities but for the nation. In other words, the title invites you to be not only practical but also imaginative and even visionary.

Finally, ladies and gentlemen, let me congratulate all responsible for the planning, financing and organising of this Conference. I add my welcome to Canberra to all who have come from other places. I wish you well in your discussions and deliberations and trust that your participation in the Conference will be both stimulating and rewarding."

Wingecarribee Council Building

The Eric Nicholls-designed Wingecarribee Council building of 1954 was the subject of community concern some years back when there was a development application for its use as a Macdonald's fast food outlet. I visited Mittagong on 16 April and called on the Berrima & District Historical Society, which uses the main downstairs section for its archives and offices. I am pleased to report that the building has been saved for community purposes and is looking in excellent shape, with cleaned exterior sandstone and freshly painted feature walls and trimmings.

At the BDHSociety, I met with Leah Day and purchased a copy of her book, *Mittagong's Picturesque History*, Mittagong Publishing, 1996. The book provides some interesting background to the building that may be of interest to members of the WBG Society. The Mittagong School of Arts Hall was constructed in 1911, utilising sandstone blocks obtained from demolished buildings at the Fitzroy Ironworks (1848-1910). These works were Australia's pioneer iron-making venture, but unfortunately only some foundations remain at the Mittagong site.

The decision by Council to build the new administrative building on the premier site at the junction of the Hume and Illawarra Highways was a controversial one, as it involved the remodelling of the School of Arts Hall and its incorporation into the new complex. Jack Renshaw, I noted, opened the new building in 1954.

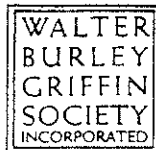
When the Council moved to a new building, the future of the Nicholls-designed building was under threat. Local agitation resulted in Council classifying the building as operational in June 1994, but it guaranteed to protect part of it for community use in 'a goodwill gesture' towards to Mittagong community. A community consultative committee was established to manage the building. A feasibility study determined that, with the assistance of Federal Government funding for restoration, the building could be restored and rejuvenated. Funding for full restoration had not been obtained by 1996, and there was some doubt about its viability.

I noted a business-like man taking notes about the condition of the sandstone during my visit, so perhaps there is action on that front? The old arts hall is now the 'Playbox Theatre' and the board outside announced that the next production there would be by the local Shakespeare group on 26-27 April 2002.

Bob McKillop

News Update editors Adrienne Kabos (02 9958 2060) and Kerry McKillop (02 9958 4516). Contributions are welcomed.

MEMBERSHIP FORM



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Please make cheque payable to
Walter Burley Griffin Society Inc. and post it to
The Treasurer at 15 The Citadel, Castlecrag, NSW 2068.

The Walter Burley Griffin Society Inc. was established in 1988 and aims to create a greater awareness and appreciation of the Griffins' town planning and architecture and thereby encourage the conservation of their internationally significant work. The Society produces a newsletter and regularly organises meetings with 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 \$ 25pa
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