

## News Update

October 1997

### **“Marion Mahony Griffin: the architect as artist” - an illustrated talk by Anne Watson to be given at the AGM**

The AGM will be held on Tuesday 4 November '97 at the “Hillman House”, 40 Findlay Ave, Roseville, NSW.

Following at 9.00pm guest speaker Anne Watson, Senior Curator at the Powerhouse Museum will give her illustrated talk on “Marion Mahony Griffin: the architect as artist”. Marion's role as Walter Burley Griffin's partner and architectural collaborator is today acknowledged as an important and influential one. Her brilliance as an artist formed a major contribution to this role and has left us with a legacy of superb drawings ranging from architectural perspectives, to her 'forest portraits' and interior murals.

The “Hillman House” was designed by Viennese born architect Dr Henry Epstein in 1948 and is today one of the most intact examples of European Modernism in Australia. We are indebted to our member Terry Shimerda for kindly providing his house for the meeting. Terry has kept all the Hillman House's furniture and furnishings beautifully intact and he is obviously a connoisseur of fine architecture because he has recently bought two Griffin designed houses in Victoria - in Darebin Street, Heidelberg and the Wills House at Woodend. He will tell us about them at the meeting.

### **Weekend Tour of Canberra**

This tour is planned for April 1998 and Professor James Weirick has kindly offered to be our tour guide.

Accommodation is being arranged with the Canberra Hyatt and the bus will depart Sydney late afternoon on Friday 24 April and return late afternoon on Sunday 26 April. Full information will be sent out later this month.

### **“Walter Burley Griffin in America and Australia” - a USA exhibition of photographs by Mati Maldre**

to be held from 22 September to 10 October 1997 in the Buell Gallery, University of Illinois, Champaign, USA. The symposium “The Griffins in Context” will be held in conjunction with the exhibition from 2 to 4 October 1997 at the university's School of Architecture.

### **I N S I D E**

- **Griffin's first Australian home saved for posterity**
- **How the Willoughby Incinerator was saved in the 1970s**
- **Griffin's Gift to Castlecrag**
- **Capitol Theatre, Melbourne threatened**
- **USA photographic exhibition**
- **New book “The Early Canberra House” by Peter Freeman**

## **How the Willoughby Incinerator was saved from demolition.**

Article by architect David Don Turner who was Chairman of the RAlA's Environment Committee in the 1970s.

The story, perhaps, starts in the 1960s with renewed interest in Walter Burley Griffin's Incinerator, when two architectural students John Brandon and John Cook carried out a partial measured survey of the building in March 1964, which became the basis for a later student scheme in 1973. Then, in 1965, with the erection and opening of the Griffin memorial fountain at Castlecrag, and exhibition of about 100 photographs by Max Dupain, attention was particularly directed at the Griffins' work. This was followed in December that year by an article written by

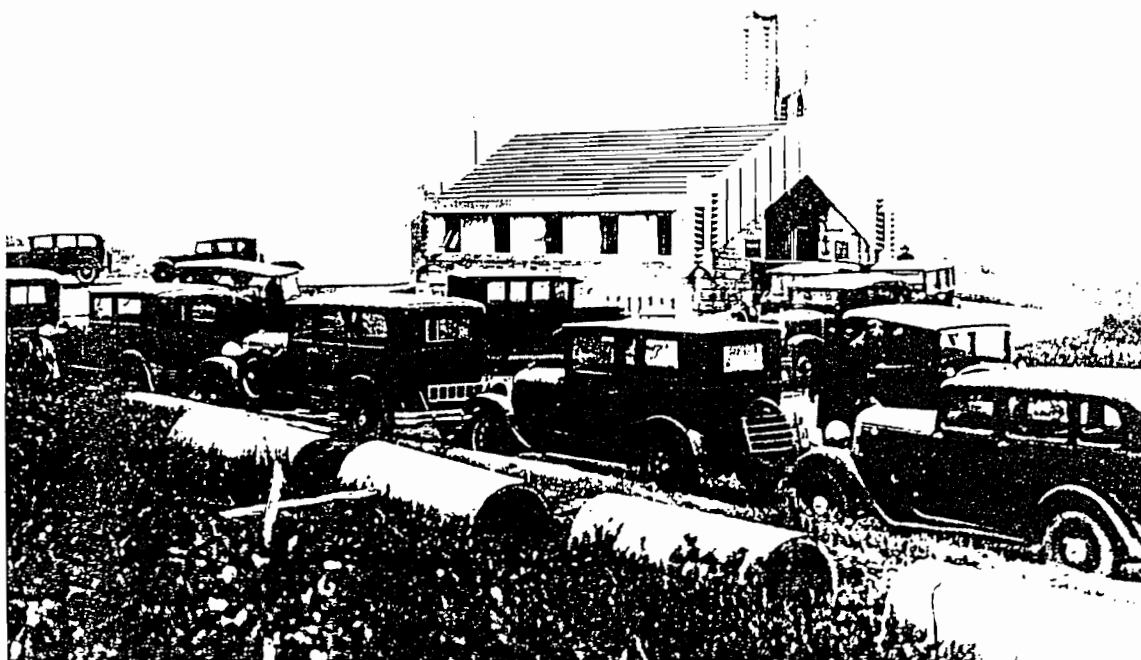
DW Campbell in the RAlA Journal, commending the alertness of some Ipswich architectural students in bringing to the attention of the public, the tender notice to demolish the Ipswich Incinerator, which was then saved and later converted into a theatre by the local Theatre Workshop and Arts Council.

The scene shifts to July 1971, when a letter was written by Richard A Miller, President of the Landmarks Preservation Council of Chicago, USA, urging Willoughby Council to save the Willoughby Incinerator, then in a poor state of repair. Professor Donald Leslie Johnson shortly afterwards wrote an article in the London Architectural Association Journal on the REICO Incinerators, relating how the twelve incinerator buildings (out of sixteen built) were designed by Griffin and his old friend Eric Nicholls, bringing

Griffin out of seclusion in 1929, and were carried out in many Australian cities and suburbs for the hard-selling client Nisson Leonard-Kanewsky, the machinery being designed by engineer J Boadle.

The matter was accentuated in January 1973 when three students of Sydney University, John Greenwood, Harry Hamor and Jenny Kerr wrote to the Council requesting a meeting with them to explain a scheme for restoration and conversion into studio workspace on the top floor and with living accommodation areas below including four bedrooms, and the existing hoppers being planted for an indoor garden. This included a request for a 25-year lease of the building, and their submission was supported by letters from the National Trust, and architects Robert Irving, Walter Bunning, Michael Dysart, Anchor, Mortlock, Murray and Woolley, and Phillip Cox. Letters were also separately written to the papers by James Weirick and Eva Buhrich calling for restoration, but all this was in vain as support could not be obtained from the majority of Willoughby Council. The Council deferred a decision until another site was found for 'night soil' disposal, the architectural graduates withdrew, and the Mayor Ald. D Warner issued a statement that no funds were available for restoration and the building should be demolished.

Two years later in April 1975 a building report was prepared by David Earle on behalf of the National Trust, supporting restoration by Council, and conversion to a community building or museum. In May, a plan was prepared by Hugh Buhrich and Unsen, Kerr and Harvey, architects, giving analysis of floor areas available when



Willoughby Incinerator probably at its opening in 1934. Photograph courtesy David Don Turner

machinery was removed.

The Council then decided to advertise whether any community organisation would be interested in using the restored building. However, no organisation had any funds for this purpose. A structural engineer's report was prepared for the Council in September, which in summary stated that the building should be waterproofed as water penetration was causing failure of the reinforcement.

Suddenly in October, Council's Community Affairs and General Purposes Committee recommended the building be demolished. This spurred action by people wanting restoration and a meeting was convened at the Buhrichs' house to form a trust to lease or acquire the building. A total of sixteen people attended the meeting which included Eric Kaye, president of the Castlecrag Progress Association; James Weirick, historian; John Morris, National Trust; and Robert Hughes, Time art critic. I had, for some time, been particularly interested in helping to save the building through my then role of Chairman of the RAI NSW Chapter Environment Committee and was elected Chairman for the Provisional Trust with Eva Buhrich as Secretary, and Dianne Street as Treasurer.

Letters were written to Willoughby Council requesting a meeting, with a reply on 23 October that the decision to demolish the building would be deferred for one month, the Council being prepared to accept an engineer's report on the stability of the building, and querying whether any financial assistance could be given to the Council.

I then obtained a report from Geoff Markham of engineers Taylor, Thomson and Whitting which stated that the building was not in imminent danger of collapse. Strong support was also obtained from Colin Brewster, President of the Australian-American Association, which was sponsoring a proposed exhibition of Griffin's work.

On 27th November, the Town Clerk replied that the Provisional Trust could not be recognised unless established by residents or ratepayers of the municipality, with a report from the Deputy Health and Building Surveyor that \$125,000 was required for full restoration.

From that point, hope revolved around the possibility that the State Government would declare it a Historic Building taking it out of the control of the Council. The Provisional Trust had

become the actual trust on 15th November, and replying to the Town Clerk stated that final composition of the Trust awaited the State Government decision, and the actual cost of restoration could not be known in detail until scaffolding for inspection had been erected. Further support was received from architectural students at Sydney University circulating a petition for saving the Incinerator.

In April 1976 the exhibition was held in Castlecrag commemorating the centenary of Griffin's birthday in conjunction with American Bicentenary celebrations. With James Weirick and the RAI, we also compiled a list of buildings and addresses of Griffin's work and their condition, with some of these houses being open for public viewing.

On 5th May, another letter came from the Town Clerk stating that the Council had received a request from Moduline Project Services for a twenty-five year lease to convert the building to a high-quality restaurant for \$150,000, and this would include a record of Griffin's work being included within the building. The Trust replied accepting that as there were difficulties in finding funds for community use, converting to a restaurant was agreed, in principle, on the basis of adequate restoration work.

A meeting was held on site in August that year, when the Council then decided to proceed with the restaurant proposal. Even though this was not ideal, and the final restoration standard could have been better, the long battle to save the building had been won.

As a sad postscript, Eva Buhrich who, with her husband Hugh, had been for so long a fighter for restoration of the Incinerator, died shortly afterwards from cancer.

Editor's postscript: Willoughby City Council is to be congratulated on recently appointing consultants Trevor Waters and Meredith Walker to prepare a conservation plan for Willoughby Incinerator. Meredith and Trevor recently completed a conservation plan for Glebe Incinerator which is now the only other Griffin designed incinerator remaining of the six that were built in Sydney.

Restoration of Willoughby Incinerator has been completed and the head lessee is selling his leasehold title from Willoughby City Council that extends to the year 2029. It is hoped that there will be opportunities in the future for the community to use the incinerator rather than it being partitioned into offices as it was prior to the fire.

## **Griffin's first Australian home saved for posterity**

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On 23rd April 1997, Peter and Elizabeth Navaretti purchased Gumnuts Cottage, on Nepean Highway at the bayside town of Frankston, Victoria (Peter is a well-known Melbourne Griffin scholar and a member of our Society).

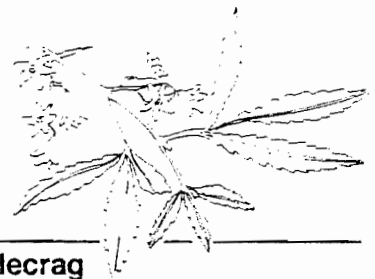
Gumnuts Cottage was Griffin's prototype experiment in Knitlock construction, his first use of the one-roomed house concept and his first fully designed and built house in Australia. In 1919 William A Towler, a friend, supporter and client of Griffin, offered his lots 44 and 46 of his 88-lot subdivision to Griffin to construct prototypes in Griffin's own Knitlock construction. The cottage which became known as Gumnuts was used by Walter and Marion Griffin as a weekend retreat cottage from Christmas 1921 until they moved permanently to Castlecrag in 1924. Gumnuts is therefore the first Griffin-designed dwelling built in Australia.

The cottage on lot 46 became known as Marnham and remained unaltered, except that the Knitlock roof tiles were replaced in the 1960s. Its floor plan was basically a mirror image of Gumnuts. Marnham was demolished in 1984, but most of its original joinery has been preserved and will be used to restore Gumnuts.

Although now built out by houses across the highway, the views of Port Phillip Bay from Gumnuts must have been spectacular, as it is situated facing the Bay of the top of Oliver's Hill.

It is significant to note that Walter and Marion's cottage called Pholiota in Glenard Drive, East Ivanhoe, Victoria, is of similar design. Only the entry alcove has been interchanged with the dressing alcove so that the front door faced the Lippincott's house on the adjoining allotment in Glenard Drive.

Gumnuts is a rare example of absolute simplicity in plan and structure. It expresses the very essence of domestic architecture and fuses the various parts of a house into a coherent and logical pattern. Because of the originality of the design and its method of construction, Gumnuts Cottage has been classified by the National Trust of Australia (Victoria) as of national significance and is being considered for registration by the Heritage Council of Victoria.



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## **Griffin's Gift to Castlecrag**

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Extract from a talk by Guest Speaker, Professor James Weirick, Professor of Landscape Architecture. University of New South Wales to Castlecrag Conservation Society Meeting 30/7/97

There is no question that the love of Australian bush throughout the nation is an expression of a new spirit, a new aspect of the Australian experience, which has become manifest in the past thirty years, for example, in the environmental movement, the use of Australian plants in parks and gardens, and the care of the bushland remnants within the metropolitan environment. The significance of Castlecrag is that in the development and special life of your extraordinary suburb, all this was anticipated in the 1920s. An aerial photo of Sydney Harbour shows an expanse of highly developed suburbs, fringed here and there with some surviving bushland on the waterfront. There is only one suburb where there is a fusion of these two conditions. This is Castlecrag.

The interlinked system of urban bushland reserves has recently been the subject of a major Plan of Management, prepared by Meredith Walker and Michael Lehany for Willoughby City Council under the provisions of the Local Government Act which requires councils to assess and actively manage their environmental assets. This long-overdue program of official action builds upon the dedication and commitment of a small group of people in Castlecrag who, for many years, have sought to understand, document and care for the bushland reserves of Castlecrag.

Walter Burley Griffin created a protected network of open spaces - which for a time was innovative and radically different from other suburbs. Griffin's great program, carried out by the Greater Sydney Development Association and other development syndicates which he formed, came to a halt in the Depression of the 1930s. By that time he had assembled a sufficient number of contiguous parcels of land to put in place a comprehensive environmental plan.

Land originally set aside for open space was given to Willoughby Council under a Deed of Trust in 1940, and basically nothing happened to

it, with some strange aberrations, until now, apart from the interest and enthusiasm of people in the Progress Association, the Castlecrag Conservation Society, the Amphitheatre group, and other local residents.

Marion and Walter Griffin brought to Australia a special vision from America - specifically, a vision from the American Midwest. They were both born in Chicago and spent their formative years of childhood on the suburban fringes of that great city. As a child, Marion lived in the far northern suburb of Hubbard Woods, after the great fire of Chicago. The place was distinctive because of its system of forested ravines, developed by the forces of erosion on the moraines and eskers of a glaciated landscape. This was Marion's adventure place as a young girl, as she played there in the intricate system of woodland dells which extended down to the shore of Lake Michigan. The feel of that quite intimate landscape was an enormous influence on her.

Walter grew up in the western 'prairie' suburbs of Oak Park and Elmhurst - which were being progressively developed across flat, open grasslands, dissected by entrenched streams lined with hardwood forests. The river valleys and their remnant vegetation were of great interest to Griffin. This subtle terrain mysteriously, almost imperceptibly, occupied a great divide with some rivers flowing north to the Great Lakes, others flowing south to the Mississippi River, creating the sense that this was the centre of North America.

When Walter Griffin and Marion Mahony entered the design field, Nature was to be their great source of inspiration. These young architects worked for Frank Lloyd Wright, and we have a sense that their work at that time was suffused with the 'Spirit of Nature' in the great tradition of the American transcendentalists, Emerson and Thoreau. This was combined with a search for pure form - a geometric, abstract ideal - inspired by the patterns of Nature. This love of nature was evident not only in their work, but also in their lives. They both became passionately involved with early conservation groups in the Midwest.

The field of conservation was beginning to take off at that time - the 1890s to World War 1 - as an intuitive, romantic counter movement to industrial development and as a rigorous program of action informed by the new science of ecology. One of the centres for this new science was the University of Chicago, where

Henry C Cowles founded the study of physiographic ecology. (His work was later to influence the significant research in the 1930s by Dr Ilma Pidgeon, who first studied the mosaic patterns of vegetation associations on the Hawkesbury sandstone in the Sydney region). Walter and Marion were involved in conservation campaigns inspired by Cowles' spatial concept of physiographic ecology and the related concept of ecological systems and climax vegetation developed by Frederic Clements. This led to the creation of the Cook County Forest Reserves, long championed by the architect Dwight Heald Perkins, Marion's cousin and first employer. From Christopher Vernon's research we also have documented evidence that Griffin led walks and 'native rambles' around Chicago for a group called Friends of our Native Landscape.

The experience of Nature played an important part in the Griffins' personal lives. Marion recounts their courting took place on extended canoe expeditions. Every weekend in the summer months from 1909 to 1911, Walter and Marion would explore the streams and rivers of Illinois, taking the train to another branch of the complex river system. They would paddle down that branch, thoroughly exploring it and on Sunday afternoon, would leave the canoe with a local farmer, to be picked up the following weekend to continue their journey. They married on one of these canoe trips, to the surprise of their families and friends.

These canoe expeditions led to an understanding of the regional landscape which was very important to the Griffins and their network of friends included highly motivated early conservationists, including the landscape architect Jens Jensen and Stephen Tyng Mather, one of Griffin's clients who was influential in the campaign to save the Indiana Dunes on the south-east shore of Lake Michigan. In 1916, Mather was appointed the first Director of the US National Parks Service.

This environmental idealism formed the basis of Griffin's practice in landscape architecture. In Chicago, he designed subdivisions which shared open space in the form of internal parks - radical at the time. In a project designed for a manufacturing plant in Decatur, Illinois, he planned a forest retreat for the recreation of the employees, with cabins sited as incidents in the woods. In Mason City, Iowa, he designed a garden suburb which dramatically emphasised the potential of rugged limestone cliffs.

These ideas would come together in Australia when the Griffins created Castlecrag. Of all Griffin's suburbs, Castlecrag is the only one where the existing forest canopy was kept intact. It is important to note that the ridge area of Castlecrag was already depleted by people taking bush rock and timber from the site, or stripping Christmas bush. The GSDA mounted a campaign to stop the pilfering, employed rangers from the outset and prosecuted a man for stealing bush sand in 1921.

The aim of conserving the significant landscape resources of this sandstone peninsula was original. No other development company in the history of this city has ever given such a fantastic gift to future residents: interlocked open spaces and over four miles of almost continuous open space along the foreshore.

Basically, five principles were involved in the Griffins' plan to preserve the natural resources of the sandstone terrain. On the Castlecrag peninsula this consisted of a continuous system of 'forest preserve' extending from the Tower Reserve and 'Edinburgh Castle' on the ridge down to the harbour foreshores.

The first principle was to conserve the significant natural assets of the site - the stream corridors, rock outcrops, major cliff lines, major stands of vegetation, the entire waterfront - in a series of reserves. Like Griffin's roads, the reserves were named after parts of a medieval castle, which relate in their mood and physical location to the landscape - The Gargoyle for example, literally being a mysteriously formed rock spout along the creek line. The second principle was to use the reserves to provide direct pedestrian pathways down the contours to complement the roads winding around the slopes.

The third principle was to site the houses as inter-related incidents in the bush, designed in harmony with the aesthetic qualities of the trees and rocks - but more importantly, in conservation terms, configured in a way to maintain the forest canopy and the indigenous understorey. If this intention could have been sustained, each room in each house would have had natural bushland views, and many would have had framed and filtered water views.

The fourth principle was for the reserves to provide endless opportunities for recreational activities - tennis, walking, children's play, community theatre. The local children played freely in the bush. Marion, conscious of the fact that the one thing they didn't have was an

orchard to raid, would leave bowls of nuts and fruit around the house for them to raid instead.

Finally, the fifth principle was predicated on the Griffins' belief that by sharing in the care of the reserves, good neighbourly relations would be fostered. A levy was placed on lot holders to maintain the overall network of open space.

So what has happened to the grand vision?

From the start there were problems. The Griffins thought it would be possible to live in the bush, in the Hawkesbury sandstone flora, without the more orthodox suburban gardens and lawns. They loved very much the curving form of the eucalypts and angophoras, the extraordinary profusion of understorey plants and the quality of light falling down through the leaves of the gum trees - the feeling of spirit animating the physical realm.

They thought it would be possible to maintain the bush as a matrix with houses dotted within, melding into the bush surrounds with minimal disturbance. They thought the inhabitants would be happy to live in a mutually-shared environment, where one space flowed into another across the sandstone terrain, without assertive boundary fences. However, much fragmentation has taken place.

The ridgetop had already been cleared and as the early photographs show, had something of a desert quality. Although replanted, the heathland vegetation could not be sustained and the surviving trees from this era seem to be non-indigenous Australian natives, planted for dramatic effect rather than ecological integrity.

Also, Griffin lost the campaign to prevent overhead electrical wires, which caused more loss of trees and more fragmentation of the canopy.

Then there was the introduction of the septic system. The GSDA had set aside certain lots as septic reserves - which began the enriching of the soil. By 1935, Griffin had to acknowledge that increased nutrient levels caused problems with weeds, even when there were only twenty families living in Castlecrag. Today we have much more scientific evidence of the sensitivity of Australia's sandstone flora to soil enrichment.

The Great Depression and World War 2 caused a significant interruption in the purposeful development of Castlecrag as a bush suburb. The GSDA survived these difficult years and in 1940 gave the reserve system to Willoughby

**Just released - "The Early Canberra House: Living in Canberra 1911 - 1933"**

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This book is compiled and edited by Peter Freeman and contains essays by nine specialist observers of Canberra and its evolution. An information sheet about the book states that it is "copiously illustrated with rare and hitherto unpublished architectural drawings of the early Canberra houses ..... drawn from private and public collections, particularly those of the Australian Archives in Canberra." The book is available by mail order for \$35 (\$29.95 plus postage and handling). Mail your cheque and details with address to The Early Canberra House, PO Box 3162, Manuka, ACT 2603. For further information telephone 02 6295 8799 or fax 02 6295 6517.

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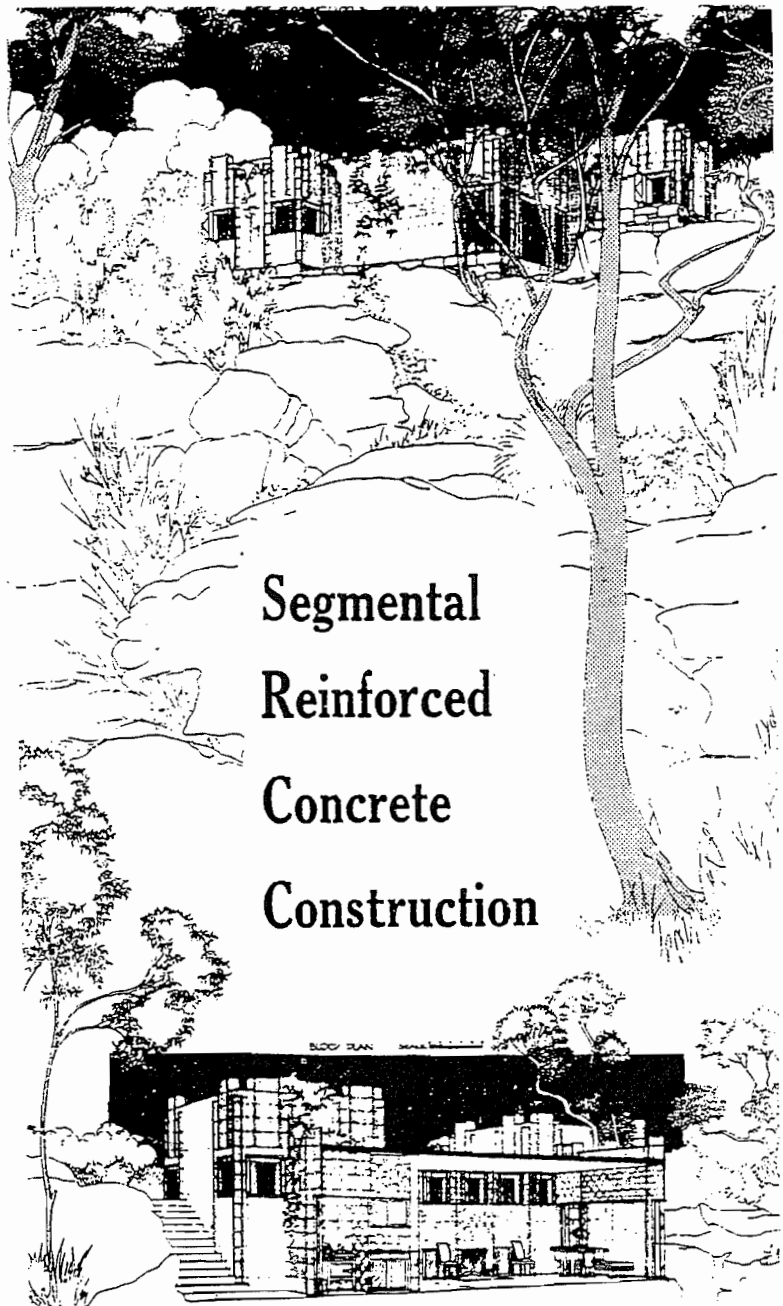
**"Segmental Reinforced Concrete Construction"**

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a brochure published by GSDA on Griffin's knitlock architecture has been kindly donated to the Society by Mary Lightfoot, niece of Louise Lightfoot architect and delineator who worked with the Griffins at Castlecrag.

Mary is currently researching and writing a book about her talented and remarkable aunt who later became a leading force in Australian dance.

Mary reports that the Melbourne dance company "Natya Sudha" led by Tara Rajkumar will perform a dance tribute to Louise Lightfoot in several Indian cities including Delhi and Banglor this next month.



Council. Three years earlier, Griffin had died in Lucknow, India. Marion, who was with him at the time, returned briefly to Castlecrag but left in 1938 to live in Chicago.

Without the Griffins, Castlecrag was subject to a considerably different kind of development, yet many of its subtle and idiosyncratic qualities have managed to survive. Some of the post-war architects were able to reinterpret the Griffin philosophy and demonstrate an empathy for the immediate environment, most notably, Bill Lucas in his own house of 1953 and neighbouring houses on The Bulwark. Unfortunately, this type of architecture has proved to be the exception to the rule, so we began to have fences, driveway and all sorts of additions imposed on Castlecrag's distinctive environment.

However, the network of reserves and the surviving canopy of the urban forest has maintained a bushland atmosphere, if not sustainable bushland, despite depredations and a degree of neglect. The Plan of Management documents this condition and sets out what is to be done.

These days, conservation is about active management, not just preserving parcels of land. The sense of bush flowing through everybody's property has gone. The system of reserves that Griffin designed is highly modified and at this stage will need a very active form of management. I hope that it will lead to a plan of action which will be sustained over a long period of time.

It is vital for new residents to share in this level of understanding.

It is in everybody's interests to conserve the indigenous vegetation of the Hawkesbury sandstone which is now rare in Sydney's residential environment. As Professor Carrick Chambers has argued, only the indigenous vegetation can conserve the filtered views that are the truly magical legacy of the Griffins' Castlecrag - to value this unique flora in cultural terms in addition to its profoundly significant natural values.

In my view, it is unfortunate that some people feel the need to place high fences around their properties and discourage walkway access close to their houses. In the Griffin spirit, I believe people feel safe where a degree of openness and transparency is maintained. The whole community benefits from the freedom which flows from an open network of open space, with safer walking access for residents and bushland

views for houses overlooking the reserves.

The current interest in building large houses causes fundamental planning problems for all waterfront areas, where it does not seem possible to overcapitalise these properties. The result, as the Griffins foresaw, is the despoliation of the very landscape and waterscape that has attracted development to these areas in the first place.

What you have in Castlecrag is so rare and distinctive and it seems inconceivable that anyone would seek to destroy it - yet the emergence of a 'pro-development' lobby under the rubric of property rights has been a troublesome factor in the social life of your district in recent years. The value of this group has been to focus the strength and resolve of all citizens committed to the Griffin view of Nature and the conservation ideal. Standing behind this moral and ethical campaign are the physical achievements of the conservation groups. To maintain the integrity of the Sydney bushland is not an unachievable quest. Much has been conserved by local people, for example the active management of the Harold Reid Reserve, the regeneration work that has taken place above Sugarloaf Bay, and the restoration of the Haven Amphitheatre. Everybody who has walked through these areas can see what is possible. I place faith in there being enough vision and support for the long-term conservation of Castlecrag's natural assets. The Plan of Management for the Griffin Reserves commits Willoughby City Council to the campaign. Castlecrag is recognised internationally as an example of planning with nature. It is a living monument to the Griffins and to the generations of residents who have shared their love for this special place and acted accordingly.

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### **Capitol Theatre, Melbourne threatened**

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The Capitol Theatre designed by the Griffins and built in Swanston Street, Melbourne in 1922 had its picture theatre tenant vacate in mid Sept.

Peter Navaretti reports that a feasibility study is presently being carried out by prospective tenants who wish to strata title the theatre as a catering venue which would inevitably lead to destruction of its magnificent and spectacular interior.

Peter also reports that Friends of the Capitol Theatre has been set up and they are searching for a tenant who will lease it as a theatre.