

# Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin

Architecture is created out of the needs of the client or the audience and the ideals and ideas of the architect.

Many things influence the architect and the client:

- the world of the architect
- the background knowledge of the architect
- the values and beliefs of the architect

## Architects

American born architects, Walter Burley Griffin (1876-1937) and his wife Marion Mahony Griffin (1871-1961) arrived in Australia in 1913. Both as a married couple and an artistic partnership, the Griffins collaborated on many projects including the winning design of Australia's proposed Federal Capital in Canberra in 1912. In 1914 Marion and Walter Griffin moved to Australia where they lived for over twenty years. The Griffins were two of the first Modernist architects to work in Australia.

**NOTE:** Refer to webpage [The collaboration of Marion Mahony Griffin and Walter Burley Griffin](#) by Dr Judy Wells

Marion Mahony Griffin was born in Chicago in 1871 and died in 1961. She worked as an architect in United States of America, Australia and India. As the first registered woman architect in Illinois, USA, she was a contributing designer to the development of the Prairie School of architecture which revolutionized American architecture. Her commitments to democratic ideals are evident in her architecture and community planning. Amongst her legacy are her beautiful architectural drawings depicting visions of buildings within the landscape. The Powerhouse, Sydney houses a large collection of Marion Mahony Griffin's drawings.

**NOTE:** Refer to webpage [Marion Mahony Griffin](#) by Associate Professor Anna Rubbo

Walter Burley Griffin was born in 1876 near Chicago and died in 1937 in India. He worked in the office of Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959) and later established his own architectural practice in Chicago. He moved to Australia after winning the Commonwealth of Australia Federal Capital competition in 1912 and his appointment as Federal Capital Director of Design and Construction, with the right to devote half his time to private practice.

**NOTE:** Refer to webpage [Walter Burley Griffin](#) by Adrienne Kabos

## World

Both architects were born in United States of America in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and their university training years were during the emergence of Modernism. At this time, the United States and in particular Chicago and Illinois where the Griffins lived and worked embraced new technology, building materials and a new philosophy of the purpose of a building. Working in Chicago, their professional life was linked to Louis Sullivan (1856-1924), considered by many to be the "father" of modern architecture and Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959), the pre-eminent Prairie School architect.

**NOTE:** Refer to webpage [Prairie School connection](#) by Andrew Kirk  
Refer to webpage [USA](#) by Andrew Kirk

## Architectural Practice: Ideas and Actions

### Locations:

- Chicago and Illinois, United States
- Design for the National Capitol, Canberra, Australia
- Sydney
- Melbourne
- Leeton and Griffith, NSW
- India

### Diversity of practice:

- Town Planning and Landscape Architecture/ Canberra and Leeton and Griffith.
- Civic & Institutional Buildings and Planning / Newman College, Melbourne
- Commercial and Public Buildings / Capitol House and the Capitol Theatre, Melbourne.
- Municipal Buildings / Essendon Incinerator, Moonee Ponds, Melbourne, Willoughby Incinerator, Glebe Incinerator and Pyrmont Incinerator (now demolished), Sydney.
- Medium Density Housing / Langie Flats, Toorak, Melbourne
- Individual Houses / Fishwick Residence, Castlecrag, NSW.
- Interior Design and Furnishings / wide range of lights and furniture integrated within their architectural works.

**NOTE:** Refer to webpage [Furniture, lighting and design](#) by Anne Watson  
Refer to webpage [Melbourne](#) by Peter Navaretti  
Refer to webpage [Urban Planning](#) by Di Jay



TOP: Newman College, University of Melbourne, Melbourne. Photographer Jeff Turnbull, 1998

ABOVE: Fishwick House eastern elevation, Castlecrag, Sydney. Photographer Adrienne Kabos, 2006

### Intentions, beliefs and values:

Amongst the first Modernist architects to work in Australia, Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin, established a new approach to architecture and town planning not previously seen in Australia. Their philosophies and attitudes towards building and the environment and their professional relationship with Frank Lloyd Wright and the Chicago School of Architecture established a Modernism in Australia.

The Griffins believed that architecture and landscape should be harmonious and that the house should not dominate the landscape but be integrated into it. The Australian bush impressed both architects and they incorporated the natural flora into their plans. During the planning and building of fifteen dwellings in Castlecrag, the Griffins planted hundreds of native plants. In Marion Mahony Griffin's architectural drawings, gardens and plants take prominence.

Walter Burley Griffin stated:

*People spend a lifetime trying to get a large piece of land, put a house on it and plant it like a park. Few can afford to reach their goal. What I want to do is give everyone a chance to attain such a dream. I want Castlecrag to be built so that each individual can feel that the whole of the landscape is his. No fence, no boundaries, no red roofs to spoil the Australian landscape, these are some of the features that will distinguish Castlecrag.*

**NOTE:** Refer to webpage [Philosophy](#) by Professor James Weirick  
Refer to webpage [Griffins and the Australian bushland](#) by Professor Carrick Chambers AM

# Critical and Historical Investigations / Student investigations

## Art Practice:

Marion Mahony Griffin's drawings have an Eastern influence.

- Examine and identify some of the following qualities:
- the placement of the low horizon line
- the decorative stylized interpretation of the foliage, trunks and limbs
- composition and shape of the work
- drawing materials and media
- response to nature

**NOTE:** Search the terms "architectural perspectives" and "drawing on silk" in the website's Gallery

## A new approach to life in the suburbs

The suburbs of Castlecrag, Sydney and three streets in Eaglemont, Melbourne were unique experiments in Australian urban design. In Castlecrag, houses and streets merged into the landscape, through the positioning of the houses, use of local sandstone and the abundance of local native flora. No fences or boundaries were permitted so that everyone could enjoy the landscape.

**NOTE:** Examine the [Castlecrag and Haven Estate map](#) pdf on the Self-guided tours webpage. View the short movies of the development of Castlecrag titled [Beautiful Middle Harbour](#) and [Walkways and Reserves](#) in the website's Gallery.

Identify and answer the following:

- Bushland reserves near the foreshore. Consider the benefits to local residents and visitors.
- Walkways. Follow the paths. Do they all connect?
- Do the streets relate to the contours of the land?
- How do the streetscapes relate to Griffin's intentions and beliefs?
- Community facilities. Name three and explain how they could help create a socially cohesive society?

## A new approach to design

The Griffins avant-garde town planning, housing design and use of new technology introduced Australia to Modernism. With reference to flat roofs, open plan design, the knitlock system of construction, examine how the Griffins' new approach to design was radical for Australia.

## Appropriating the past

Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin were inspired by the geometric symmetry of Pre-Columbian and Mayan architecture and medieval architecture.

*In the work of radical architects we find constant resemblance to the work of other men and other people – even Oriental, Aztec, Moorish, Japanese, Greek, Gothic and Savage.*

Marion Mahony Griffin

Examine Newman College, 1915-17, University of Melbourne and the Fishwick House, 1929, 15 The Citadel, Castlecrag, Sydney.

- Identify similarities of form and mass
- Architectural details eg windows
- Refer to a street map of Castlecrag and find other medieval names given to streets.
- Identify and explain the significance of a least three street names that reflect historical influence.

## The Griffins and Canberra

In 1911, to mark the Federation of Australia, an international competition for the design of a new capital city to be named Canberra was held. There were 137 entries from around the world. Walter Burley Griffin's award winning design for Canberra, the National Capital of Australia, was a modern and radical town planning design. However, by 1920, there were many interruptions and disputes over the implementation of the Griffin design.

- Examine Walter Burley Griffin's Preliminary Plan for Canberra, c. 1913 and compare it with a present day map.
- Identify aspects of the Griffin design that have been retained.
- Consider the architect's intention to integrate the city with the surrounding landscape.
- The relationship between the client, the Commonwealth of Australia and the architect, Walter Burley Griffin was difficult and resulted in many changes to the original award winning design. Identify the points of disagreement.

## Is Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin's architectural practice relevant to us today?

The Griffins believed that landscape and architecture should be integrated, that a house should not dominate the landscape but be part of it. Find contemporary examples of buildings that follow the Griffin's belief and other examples which demonstrate an opposing position.

### Word Bank:

Modernism: late 1800's to the 1970's. Concerned with the present and the original, rejecting the past

Knitlock: a building technique developed by Walter Burley Griffin and David Charles Jenkins and patented in 1917. Comprised of concrete modular interlocking tiles that slotted together to form walls, they created internal cavities through which water pipes and electrical cabling could run.

Avant-garde: originally a military term to describe a small group who explore new territory ahead of the main army. Culturally it is applied to innovative artists/architects who are working in a way that is new and different from their contemporaries.

Contemporary: concerned with the present

Prairie School of Architecture: An architectural style originating from the midwest region of the United States of America.

Incinerator: a large structure for the burning of public rubbish