

■ INTRODUCTION ■

A century ago, Australia began construction of its national capital. Since then, many hands have shaped Canberra. None, however, are more important than the contributions made by the capital's original designers, Walter Burley Griffin (1876–1937) and Marion Mahony Griffin (1871–1961).

The Dream of a Century: The Griffins in Australia's Capital explores the story of Walter and Marion's efforts to realise their winning design. The exhibition showcases material from the records of the couple's trans-hemispherical practice in the United States of America (1899–1917), Australia (1913–1935) and India (1935–1937). In 2006, the National Library of Australia acquired a vast collection from the children of the Griffins' Australian partner, Eric Milton Nicholls (1902–1965). Astonishing in size, scope and complexity, the Nicholls Collection was assembled over some 40 years and comprises over 2,500 items. It includes lecture and essay drafts, correspondence, newspaper cuttings and all manner of paperwork associated with an architectural office. This seemingly 'ordinary' ephemera puts a human face on the legendary designers and offers insights into the workings of their creative process.

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Marion M. Griffin
W.B. Griffin

cover images

WALTER BURLEY GRIFFIN (1876–1937) ■ CANBERRA, FEDERAL CAPITAL OF AUSTRALIA, PRELIMINARY PLAN, 1913 ■ (detail) ■ lithograph ■ nla.map-gmod34

MARION MAHONY GRIFFIN (1871–1961) after WALTER BURLEY GRIFFIN (1876–1937) ■ REVEREND CHEOK HONG CHEONG DWELLING, CASTLECRAG, SYDNEY ■ (detail) ■ c. 1921 ■ lithograph, ink, watercolour and gouache on silk ■ nla.pic-an23594241



MARION MAHONY GRIFFIN AND WALTER BURLEY GRIFFIN GARDENING IN THE BACKYARD OF 'PHOENIX', HEIDELBERG, VICTORIA ■ (detail) ■ c. 1922 ■ gelatin silver print ■ nla.pic-an24129941 ■

■ **CASTLECRAG** ■ Although demoralised that their long-standing dreams for Canberra had ended prematurely, the Griffins chose to remain in Australia and continue their private work, undaunted in their belief that development and conservation could go hand-in-hand. This was best achieved at their masterwork, Castlecrag, near Sydney. From 1920 to 1935, the Griffins—acting in parallel as landscape architects, architects, developers and residents—rehabilitated a bushland site, folding roadways and dwellings into the contours of a rocky waterside promontory. At Castlecrag, architecture gave deference to the natural world, awarding landscape primacy—at last realising the ideals the Griffins had first envisaged for Canberra.

■ **THE GRIFFINS AND CANBERRA, AFTER WALTER** ■

After Walter's government term, he and Marion continued to monitor Canberra's development. Walter's outrage over his forced departure melted through time. When interviewed in Canberra in 1926, Walter impressed the journalist as 'an artist, who takes a true artist's pride in the work which is being carried out even if it is not, in his opinion, the best that could be done'. The next year, Walter and Marion travelled to Canberra for the opening of Provisional (Old) Parliament House. Walter made his final visit in 1934.

■ **INDIAN SWANSONG** ■ By the mid-1930s, the Griffins had built works in New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia and Victoria. As the stronghold of the Great Depression lightened, however, commissions for new work dwindled. Through channels cultivated by an Australian then living in India, Walter won a commission to design a library for the University of Lucknow. As this substantial job required his physical presence, he travelled to India in 1935; Marion joined him the next year. They soon developed a flourishing practice. Walter now enjoyed a personal and professional renaissance. On 11 February 1937, however, fate intervened and Walter died of peritonitis, aged 60.

Profoundly bereaved, Marion returned to Australia some months after Walter's death. Soon finding life at Castlecrag too difficult without her husband, she decided to return to Chicago. Before doing so, however, she wished to see Canberra for one last time. In October 1937, Marion made a farewell visit and was pleased with what she saw. 'The development of Canberra', she told a reporter, had 'exceeded all her expectations' and 'there was no reason why Canberra could not become one of the most beautiful cities in the world'.

Symbolically, Marion's Canberra visit was her final Australian act. She returned to Chicago months later and died there in 1961, aged 90.

■ **EARLY FOUNDATIONS** ■

In stark contrast to juggernaut Chicago, Walter and Marion were raised in bucolic hinterland suburbs in close contact with the natural world. In 1890, Marion departed to study architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Back home in 1894, she was now only the second woman in the United States to have been awarded an architecture degree.

■ **ASTONISHING CHICAGO** ■

Walter and Marion hailed from the bustling metropolis of Chicago, Illinois. Around 4,000 people called Chicago home when it was incorporated as a city in 1837. A decade later, its population had swelled to 30,000. In 1848, water transport routes expanded and, with them, the city's role as a trading centre. That year, a canal linking Lake Michigan to the Mississippi was also completed, enabling goods to be transported from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico. The year also saw Chicago's first railroad open; a decade later, the city was America's rail centre. Cattle operations followed the railroads' expansion west and Chicago's role as a hub made it the meatpacking industry's epicenter.

In 1871, the legendary Great Fire destroyed roughly a third of the city's centre—infant Marion was carried away from the devastation in a basket. But Chicago rose from the ashes like a phoenix; the disaster became a catalyst for rebirth and further growth. Chicago was soon a 'tumultuous place, building and rebuilding itself so fast that at times it must have seemed the entire city was under construction'. By the early 1880s, Chicago's population had jumped to over half a million and, by the turn of the century, the figure had more than tripled.

■ **PRELUDE TO A DREAM** ■

The national capital's genesis came on 1 January 1901, when six of Great Britain's self-governing antipodean colonies federated to form the Commonwealth of Australia. Walter had first learnt of the imminent Federation while a university student between 1895 and 1899. Predicting the need for a capital, he then resolved to build it. Unknown to him, though, it would be a lengthy wait. Nonetheless, Walter continued to vigilantly monitor the press for Australian news. More than a decade later, no less remarkably as anticipated, he gained the opportunity to do so.

On his first trip to Australia, Walter quickly grew enraptured with its landscape. Only weeks after his arrival, he judged in a newspaper interview that 'no tree equals the eucalyptus for embellishing the landscape'. The planting of foreign trees in place of the indigenous eucalypts 'is, to my way of thinking, a great mistake. "Foreign trees", he mused, 'were not so beautiful' and 'not so suitable'. Within this context, 'reflected his new conviction that eucalypts were fundamental to Australia's sense of place and he resolved to adorn Canberra with native flora. Marion, now experiencing Australia for the first time, soon shared Walter's esteem for the landscape.

Marion made her final presentation renderings of the city to Walter's satisfaction. 'The couple's designs—and they were certainly persuasive—at this, indeed, their visual allure is no less potent today than it was for the adjudicators in 1912. By contrast, Walter's staff at the Federal Capital Office recorded his road-building and planting schemes in what are known as working drawings. Compared to the finished gentry, fine-grained and by no means beautiful, they were, however, the sort of documentation required to construct the city.

■ **PRIVATE AUSTRALIAN WORK** ■ It is not widely known that Walter's work at Canberra was only a part-time job. His contract required him to allocate only half of his time—but undoubtedly all of his heart—to the capital; he devoted the remainder to private practice, working from offices in Sydney and Melbourne. He and Marion would go on to design more than 250 projects in Australia.

■ **AFTERMATH** ■ Walter's Canberra tenure proved short-lived. Political antagonisms and the First World War's financial restraints conspired against complete realisation of the couple's design. In 1920, Walter's official association with the capital ended controversially with the abolition of his position. Afterwards, a succession of advisory bodies usurped his singular role. The first was the Federal Capital Advisory Committee, established in 1921, charged with implementing the Griffins' design. Despite its mandate, the committee proceeded to graft its own divergent visions onto Canberra's original frame. The Griffins' Chicago-like urbanity would be invidiously transformed into a disparate collection of garden suburbs. Nonetheless, a version of the Griffins' design was gazetted—enshrined in Commonwealth law—in 1925. The plan, however, reproduced only the couple's street layout and omitted their designs' land-use allocations and symbolic content.

■ **THE DREAM** ■

Shortly after the Griffins' marriage, news that Australia had launched a design competition for its capital belatedly reached Chicago. Walter's opportunity had finally arrived. Yet, owing to the pressure of their 'paving' work, the Griffins did not begin their entry until November, finishing it near December's end. On 23 May 1912, in a decision inescapably influenced by Marion's exquisite renderings, the Minister for Home Affairs, King O'Malley, declared Entry No. 29 the competition winner.

■ **PROFESSIONAL BEGINNINGS** ■

When Walter and Marion began their careers, Louis Sullivan (1856–1924) and his protégé Frank Lloyd Wright (1867–1959) were at the architectural vanguard. Eschewing the Columbian Exposition's neo-classical buildings, Sullivan and Wright were on a quest to develop a modern American architecture, one which drew its inspiration from the natural world. Walter and Marion soon took up the cause. Sullivan became their intellectual mentor and Wright their employer. Marion joined Wright's practice in 1895 and Walter followed in 1901. With Wright, Marion cultivated her talents, producing renderings and decorative designs; Walter practised as an architect and landscape architect. In 1906, Walter established his own practice.

The Chicago to which Marion and then Walter arrived had already gained international prominence as a city of architectural innovation—most dramatically signalled by its skyscrapers. A few years earlier, in 1893, the city had hosted the World's Columbian Exposition. The enormously successful event not only marked Chicago's cultural arrival but also put the city on a global stage. Walter and Marion both gravitated to the spectacle, an ideal 'White City' in miniature, poised at Lake Michigan's edge. They were not alone. On one day, more than 700,000 people flocked to the fair. Walter later claimed his exposition visits—no doubt happy experiences for a 17 year old—were the inspiration for his ambition to become a landscape architect.

■ **INNOVATIVE CHICAGO** ■

Walter, too, chose architecture. He had hoped to study landscape architecture, only to discover that no such course then existed. In 1895, Walter began studying at the University of Illinois, some 200 kilometres south of Chicago. There, he complemented his architecture classes with ones in landscape gardening and forestry. Graduating in 1899, Walter returned to Chicago to start his career.

■ **THE CAPITAL'S SYMBOLISM** ■

The Griffins organised the city centre's plan to form a triangle, its points aligned with local summits. Concentrated within the triangle and its immediate environs, public edifices are distributed in keeping with a systematic political symbolism. Near the triangle's base, cultural institutions line the central basin's northern margin. Here, set within expansive 'public gardens' are the zoological garden (with aquarium and aviary), natural history and archaeology museums, graphic and plastic arts galleries, a theatre, opera, stadium, aquatic garden and plant conservatory, gymnasium and baths. At the foot of Mount Ainslie, a pleasure garden, or casino, overlooks the precinct.

Crowned with a city hall, the hill at the triangle's north-west point became the nodal focus of a municipal centre. Here, a gaol, criminal and civic courts, bank and offices, exchange and offices and a post office ring the city hall, with a mint and printery nearby. Beyond this centre, the Griffins have positioned the university and hospital. Another hill punctuates the triangle's north-east point, becoming the city's market centre. Along with a railroad station, it includes market buildings and a power station. Adjacent ridges become platforms for a cathedral

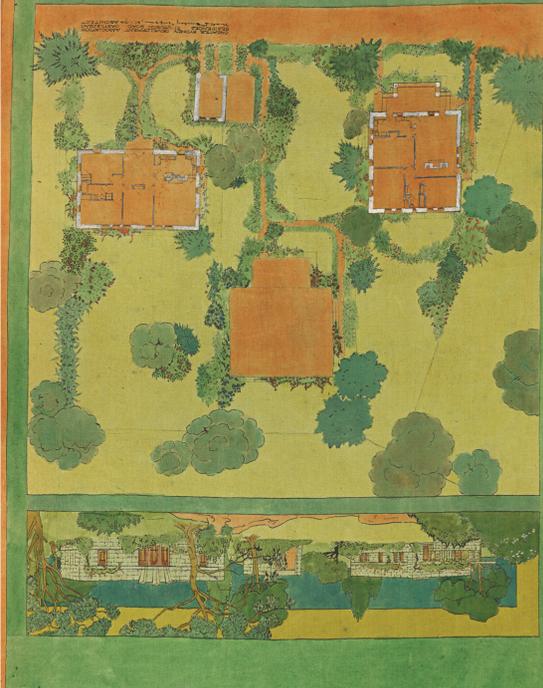
and a military college. A secondary municipal axis links the market centres and the network of cultural institutions symbolise the people.

At the basin's southern edge, the area rising to the triangle's apex becomes the government centre. Set within a topographicaly articulated hierarchy, a symmetrical building ensemble accommodates houses of parliament rest atop Camp Hill. Mount Kurrajong is the triangle's apex. Amid its slopes, official residences of the Governor-General and Prime Minister express the executive. Occupation of Mount Kurrajong's summit, however, was awarded not to the government but to the people. Here, at the highest elevation within the city's centre, the Griffins have positioned the 'Capitol', a ceremonial building to enshrine Australian achievements.

Mount Kurrajong, now renamed Capitol Hill, is circumscribed by four concentric boulevards, named Capitol Circle and National State and Australia circuits—symbolic of features 'canonised' from their Board plan, a tortured amalgam of features 'cannibalised' from theirs and other submissions. Indeed, when Canberra's construction began in March, it was to the Board's, not the Griffins', layout. In July, Walter voyaged alone to Australia, 'determined to persuade the government to restore the couple's design. The ultimately met with success, departing in October as Australia's Federal Capital Director of Design and Construction. He was due to return to Australia in six months.

■ **THE REALITY** ■

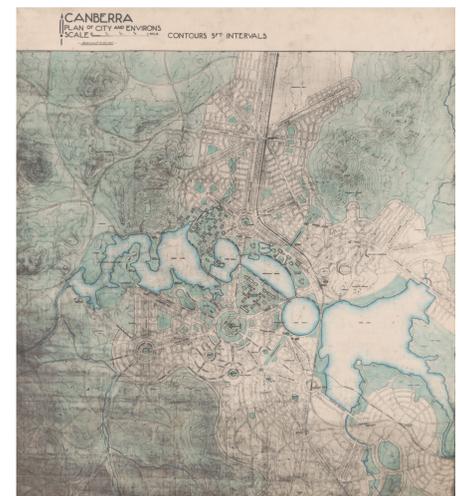
Walter returned to Australia with Marion in 1914, now confronted with the formidable task of making the city his wife so beautifully portrayed a reality. Working from the temporary capital of Melbourne, he awarded priority to road layout and planning; building work to be constructed afterwards, inserted within this structural template. The circumstances of the future city's windward site also mandated advance planting. This was no wilderness; ring-barking and overgrazing had left the once-forested slopes largely denuded and the riverbanks eroded.



Attributed to MARION MAHONY GRIFFIN (1871–1961) after WALTER BURLEY GRIFFIN (1876–1937) ■ GREAT BRITAIN DEVELOPMENT ASSOCIATION DWELLINGS NO. 1 AND NO. 2, PLANS OF RESIDENCES, EDINBURGH ROAD, CASTLECRAG, SYDNEY ■ 1922 ■ lithograph, ink, watercolour and gouache on silk ■ nla.pic-vn660155

CANBERRA
Summit of Black Mountain
 2658 ft
FEDERAL CAPITAL
 OF
AUSTRALIA
PRELIMINARY PLAN

Feet 0 400 800 1200 1600 2000
 Scale 1600 Feet to an Inch.



images, left to right, clockwise

WALTER BURLEY GRIFFIN (1876-1937) ■ CANBERRA, FEDERAL CAPITAL OF AUSTRALIA, PRELIMINARY PLAN, 1913 ■ lithograph ■ nla.map-gmod34 1914

COMPETITION DESIGNS ON DISPLAY AT GOVERNMENT HOUSE BALLROOM, MELBOURNE ■ 1912 ■ gelatin silver print ■ nla.pic-an24381832

VIEW OF MOLONGLO RIVER, CANBERRA SITE ■ between 1910 and 1927 ■ gelatin silver print ■ nla.pic-vn3603884-s4

WALTER BURLEY GRIFFIN (1876-1937) ■ CANBERRA: PLAN OF CITY AND ENVIRONS ■ 1916 ■ lithograph on linen ■ nla.map-nic11

FAIRFAX & ROBERTS ■ TROWEL USED BY KING O'MALLEY IN LAYING ONE OF THE FOUNDATION STONES OF THE COMMENCEMENT COLUMN OF THE FEDERAL CAPITAL CITY ■ 1913 ■ copper with gold and ivory ■ nla.pic-an754326

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 CANBERRA



Walter Burley Griffin 1913