



HOUSE AS EMBLEM OF GRIFFIN'S MODERNITY

Introductory Note: This website's [Prominence & Significance](#) section outlines three factors underpinning the rise to prominence of the Fishwick house. One is the important place it holds in the birth of modern architecture in Australia. It describes that a strong case can be made that it was Walter Burley Griffin who brought modern architecture to the country. It also notes that in order to illustrate that point, especially to the general public, the majority of well-respected writers and documentary producers on Griffin have chosen to feature the Fishwick house in their material.

This website is undertaking further research into this complex, possibly controversial subject and will be developing an attachment which will address it. This will be completed in the near future. Meanwhile for interest, below are relevant quotations and further information. Go to [Books and Media](#) for details of the source material.

In 1950 Melbourne architect Robin Boyd, acknowledged as Australia's first architectural historian and still regarded as the doyen of the profession, pronounced Walter a "*prophet*" of the modern movement and a "*great pioneer of modern architecture*".

Robin Boyd's *Forward to Walter Burley Griffin* Birrell 1964.

In 1968 John Freeland, then Professor of Architecture and chairman of the faculty at the University of NSW, described the attitudes of post-war architects and students: "*to them ... Griffin assumed the proportions of a deity*".

Architecture in Australia: a history Freeland 1968. p247

In 1977, in his book *Australian Architecture 1901-51: Sources of Modernism*, which remains the only work concentrated solely on this subject, academic historian Donald Lesley Johnson wrote: "*It can no longer be assumed that architecture's modern movement in Australia began, as so often suggested, in the early 1930s. It began when Walter Burley Griffin started his practice at Melbourne*".

Australian Architecture 1901-51: Sources of Modernism Johnson 1980. pp35, 131

In 1914 Griffin, who was then well-known internationally because of his own Canberra design success just two years earlier, visited a number of major cities in Europe in order to set up an international competition to design a new parliament house for Canberra. His aim was to establish a judging panel comprising outstanding authorities and to agree on the assessment criteria for entries. In Vienna he sought out Otto Wagner, who was then unquestionably the continent's most eminent progressive architect. Together they drew up a most impressive shortlist of panel candidates and drafted an announcement statement which was undoubtedly modern. It specifically stated that "*every architectural style or traditional detail is forbidden*". Unfortunately, with the onset of World War I the project was abandoned.

Eminent expert on the Prairie School architects, Professor David Van Zanten thoroughly researched and documented Griffin's European trip. See *Drawing the Future*. Van Zanten 2013. p33

Griffin unreservedly rejected the progressive architects' emerging "modernist" style. He believed that houses should be much more than "*machines to live in*" as Corbusier had described his own contemporary houses. Griffin accused him of "*forgetting that humanity requires a satisfaction of all fundamental desires and sensibilities, spiritual as well as physical and intellectual*". To Griffin, decoration, use of lighting, colour and especially imaginative manipulation of space, were all legitimate contributors to the atmosphere of a well-designed house. He argued that it is essential "*to include romance into our physical surroundings*".

Griffin quoted in *The Writings of Walter Burley Griffin* Ed Dustin Griffin 2008. pp408-409

Griffin held strongly to the belief that no architectural project should be constrained by the tenets of any style or school of architecture. To him, good design required fresh thinking in order to satisfy the needs of the client and produce a building designed to be in sympathy with its surroundings, respect nature and be attentive to the interests of the community. This meant that simply dropping a building of pre-conceived form into the landscape was the antithesis of good architecture.

For more on Griffin's central beliefs, most of which remain of great relevance, go to [.pdf Griffin's Ideas & Principles](#)

Since the house's major restoration in the mid-1990s, in Australia there have been 25 significant Griffin related "events" - writings, documentaries and the like - which have been produced for the general public rather than a specialised audience. In three-quarters of these the house was chosen to play this role with just one or two other Griffin houses. Significantly however, in almost half the house was featured alone.

For details of the events go to [.pdf House as Vehicle to Griffin's Ideas](#).