



THE GRIFFINS' CHANGING FORTUNES

Introductory Note: The [Introduction](#) section of this website contains an overview of the professional lives of Walter Burley Griffin and his wife Marion Mahony Griffin in the American Midwest, Australia and India. As well as describing their importance in the development of architecture, it makes reference to the many difficulties they encountered during their working lives. In Marion's opus "*Magic of America*", which she wrote after her return to the US Midwest following Walter's death, she described the "battles" they had with various authorities - politicians, bureaucrats, professionals and other naysayers - who could not, or would not, accede to their views on what constituted good design and architecture, how to build in sympathy with the environment and what was required to make a new community successful. After spectacular early successes they soon slipped into obscurity and remained virtually forgotten for three decades. [1]

Measured by the number of productions and events concentrating on their lives and works which were intended for non-specialist audiences, interest in them began to increase slowly in the 1970s and 1980s then suddenly accelerated in the mid-1990s. Remarkably, this upwards trend has continued decade by decade at an increasing rate. In recent times over 70 significant Griffin-focused publications, documentaries and exhibitions have been produced. This attachment traces the Griffins' changes in fortune and illustrates the degree to which interest in their contribution to architecture and their cherished ideas and principles has increased markedly. For detailed supporting data go to [.pdf Interest in Griffins Rapidly Increasing](#).

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Sudden Fame. Griffin's early career showed great promise. He was at the centre of America's most progressive group of stimulating architectural professionals while successfully building his own thriving private practice in Chicago. However, he was little-known outside the American Midwest. This changed overnight when he won the international competition to design Canberra. His success and details of his extraordinary plan for the city were reported in the nation's leading newspapers and he became in great demand as a speaker at professional architectural gatherings.

His fame preceded him to Australia; not only had he submitted a design which bore no similarity to those of other entrants, which mostly boasted grand boulevards, pompous buildings with marble columns and massive monuments, but also he was young, arresting in appearance and, amazingly, an American. Moving to Australia, he was instantly a celebrity and consistently sought out to design houses, civic structures and commercial buildings as well as a wide variety of projects in other fields ultimately ranging from cinemas and cafes to mausoleums, incinerators, sewerage vents and golf shelters.

As well as his superbly original design for Canberra, he drew up many other town plans including those of the NSW towns of Leeton and Griffith, which remain joined to Canberra by a busy highway named *The Burley Griffin Way*. The cachet of his name also attracted many opportunistic property developers who engaged him to design plans for their more "shady" developments, some absurdly grandiose in concept. One of these, on an isolated, uninhabited peninsula of land a half day's drive north from Sydney, purported to be the blueprint for Australia's very own Manhattan, complete with a large central park, international shipping docks and grand railway terminal. Most of these projects never materialised or were unrecognisably distorted.

Disillusionment and Disappointment. It soon became clear that Canberra's politicians and bureaucrats had no intension of turning Griffin's concept for a deeply symbolic city plan into reality. He patiently persevered but became increasingly frustrated and sidelined. The decline in his fortunes soon accelerated. Disappointingly, apart from the bare bones of his original street plan for the city, the only Griffin-produced objects in Canberra are the remains of an incinerator, two sewerage vents, a gravestone and a wooden parliamentary gavel. His frustration was not confined to the capital. Even though he had secured many commissions in Melbourne and Sydney, he became increasingly isolated by fellow architects who were professionally jealous of his initial success. [2]

After quitting his Canberra assignment, Griffin's attempt to create an "ideal suburb" in Castlecrag similarly frustrated him, progressively sapping his energy and resolve. Initially, his expectations and those of his investors ran high but soon his idealism was blunted by poor response to the development's marketing, resistance from the local council's planners and obstruction from banks, some of which refused to extend mortgages to potential clients. Further, these negative factors were exacerbated by the outbreak of World War I and the onset of the Great Depression. After designing the Fishwick house in 1929 and supervising its construction, Griffin completed only one other house in Castlecrag.

Moreover, outside their immediate circle, the personalities, beliefs and lifestyle of the Griffins were seen as overly eccentric. Their lack of acceptance by the city's cliquy Establishment left them on the fringes of society. However, socially they were at the centre of a small group of artists, writers, actors, musicians, dancers and other creative "bohemians" who convened at Pakie's Club - a Sydney hangout for the city's "Moderns". [3] To make matters worse, when he moved to Australia he intended to return to his Chicago practice and assigned a colleague to be its "caretaker" but it soon became apparent that this plan was unrealistic and his possible "bolthole" back to the US had closed.

Reinvigoration, then tragedy and obscurity. In the early 1930s a Castlecrag colleague alerted Griffin to a very interesting opportunity in Lucknow, India. It seems that his earlier fame and reputation had to a degree endured there. Journeying to India without Marion, he was asked by senior officials to design several civic buildings and these, in turn, led to commissions for grand houses for important regional dignitaries. Once again he began enthusiastically to make progress professionally, becoming sufficiently confident to ask Marion to join him in India. They left his partner Eric Nicholls to maintain the Sydney practice.

Responding to the local environment and culture, the Griffins were both highly stimulated again and designed an amazing variety of buildings including decorated pavilions for the Lucknow United Provinces Exhibition. [4] Following an accident, Walter died there in 1937. His grave remained unmarked until 1988. Marion returned to Australia then soon moved permanently to Chicago where she died in 1961. [5]

Their fame having faded, the Griffins became virtually unknown for some thirty years. Their legacy was neither appreciated nor apparent. They left no "school" of residential, commercial or public architecture. Griffin's most prominent non-residential buildings had no imitators and none of his houses could be seen as obvious precursors to later building designs.

Re-emergence. In the mid 1960s, James Birrell, an Australian architect, academic and town planner, wrote the first comprehensive book on Griffin's life and works. Importantly, its preface was written by Robin Boyd who himself was emerging as the doyen of Australian architects and is still very highly regarded. Boyd was glowing in his praise of Griffin and stated:

"He was a great pioneer of modern architecture in his own right...capable of outstanding brilliance in conception when the occasion permitted. He was... cheated by the Depression, and by premature death. Nevertheless his monuments remain in the plan of Canberra and in about a dozen buildings...which were as good as anything in the world at the time, and sometimes perhaps the best of their time, and have weathered with credit the critical test of nearly half a century...This book is an overdue record of a man who was at least a remarkable pioneer of twentieth century architecture, and was possibly...one of the greatest architects of the century. May it help to bring protection to the few of his architectural monuments that are still standing." [6]

It would be another decade before Birrell's book was followed in 1977 by a further general book on Griffin from an American scholar, Donald Leslie Johnson. [7] His research had also formed the basis of a TV documentary on the Griffins released nationally by the Australian Broadcasting Commission. [8] Johnson soon followed-up with a book on the sources of Australian modernism which was unequivocal about the significance of Griffin's pioneering role: "*An Australian domestic architecture began with Griffin's Castlecrag houses*". [9] For more on his role in the birth of modern Australian architecture and the central place of the Fishwick house in this nationalistic awakening go to [.pdf House as Emblem of Griffin's Modernity](#).

In the early 1980s the momentum of the Griffins' revival began to accelerate markedly. Australia's Consul-General in Chicago and the heads of architecture at the Universities of Illinois and Melbourne laid the plans for a Griffin Exchange Programme to promote academic research on their works. This was enthusiastically launched and in the early 1990s the Programme initiated the exhibition "*Building for Nature*" which toured Australia in 1992. International symposia followed in Urbana, Illinois in 1997 and 1998. The initiative also resulted in publication of comprehensive catalogues of their works in America, Australia and India. [10]

While the earlier books had been produced for general release, it was most notable that in the mid-1990s interest in the Griffins' works and lives spread much more widely, embracing a populist approach. Sydney's Powerhouse Museum, which is Australia's principal technology and design institution, launched "*Beyond Architecture*", a public exhibition on the Griffins with an excellent accompanying book. This was one of the museum's most successful ventures. There were a number of well-publicised concurrent events such the *Sydney Morning Herald's* promotion of *Design Week* in a special supplement which featured a double page spread on the Fishwick house, the renovation of which, coincidentally, had just been completed.

Interest in the Griffins continues to increase strongly in both Australia and the US. There are now thriving Walter Burley Griffin societies in Australia and the US. Central to Griffin's re-emergence is the recognition that he was a significant figure in the development of modern architecture in both countries, but especially Australia. While his physical legacy is modest, his ideas and principles on architecture, town planning and landscape architecture are still as relevant today as they were a century ago, especially for emerging architects seeking a solid philosophic grounding for their work. Similarly, the important part Marion played in Walter's success is now being increasingly recognised as is her importance in assisting Frank Lloyd Wright's march to international fame. She has emerged as a great designer, artist and social pioneer in her own right.

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Footnotes:

1. For a very detailed and interesting account of the careers and personal struggles of the Griffins see *Grand Obsessions - The Life and Work of Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin* Alasdair McGregor 2009
2. The website of the Walter Burley Griffin Society provides a good overview of the professional difficulties faced by the Griffins in Australia. See the [Links](#) section.
3. The book "*Sydney moderns: art for a new world*" D Edwards & D Mimocchi Art Gallery NSW 2013 makes many mentions of Pakie's Club in central Sydney as a meeting place for the city's "bohemian" set. Its essay "*Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin: international modernists*" by Associate Professor Anna Rubbo says "*for more than 20 years the Griffins made a substantial contribution to Sydney Modernism through both their buildings and their engagement with social, political and environmental issues*". p144. It is notable that, coincidentally, Griffin and some other denizens of the club began to re-design its interior in June 1929, the very time he began work on the Fishwick house commission.
4. The book *The Griffins in Australia and India* Turnbull & Navaretti 1998 documents the 95 projects they designed in India. Included are "*gorgeously ornamented pavilions*" for the United Provinces Exhibition in Lucknow, a residence for the Prince of Nepal, a palace for the Rajah of Jahangirabad and other more mundane buildings such as a medical college, bank and gentlemen's club. Few were built, none survives.

5. It is ironic that Marion Mahony Griffin is buried in Graceland Cemetery which calls itself "*the resting place of who's who of Chicago's most outstanding architects*". Also buried there are Sullivan, Burnham, Root, van der Rohe, Adler, Le Baron Jenney and other local luminaries.
6. From Robin Boyd's preface to *Walter Burley Griffin* James Birrell 1964
7. *The Architecture of Walter Burley Griffin* Donald Leslie Johnson 1977
8. *No Fences, No Boundaries* Australian Broadcasting Commission Film documentary 1976
9. *Australian Architecture 1901-51: Sources of Modernism* Donald Lesley Johnson 1980 p109
10. The planning of a major international exhibition also sparked the preparation of a catalogue raisonné of the Griffins' US projects: *Walter Burley Griffin in America* Maldre & Kruty 1995. This was followed soon after by an exhaustively researched cataloguing of their other projects: *The Griffins in Australia and India* Turnbull & Navaretti 1998. Scholars have identified some 125 projects by the Griffins in the US, 250 in Australia and 95 in India.