

(Melbourne)

The Age

March 9, 1963

LITERARY  
SUPPLEMENT



Walter Burley Griffin (1876-1937), the planner of Canberra.

GEORIST

# AUSTRALIA HONORS THE PLANNER OF CANBERRA AFTER 50 YEARS

**T**HE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT HAS ISSUED A COMMEMORATIVE STAMP HONORING THE planner of Canberra. It was the first occasion an architect has been so honored. Griffin was also the first American to appear on an Australian stamp. Although best known throughout the world as the town planner of Canberra, Griffin was, and is, known to Australians as a unique architect.

HIS FAME IN THIS REGARD is concentrated in three groups of the population. Laymen who lived in Melbourne between the years 1912 and 1930 still recall him vividly as a public figure. His work created public interest and to most people he was the first American they had met.

Most senior architects remember him as a distinguished colleague. Over the past 10 years a new generation of students has rediscovered and re-evaluated Griffin's work.

Apart from these three disparate groups Griffin's is now an unknown name, brought to notice only yesterday.

Walter Burley Griffin was born in Maywood, Illinois, in 1876. He belonged to a generation of vigorous Americans to come from the burgeoning Middle West of a rapidly expanding America then being developed after the Civil War.

He, almost alone in his generation, was to blaze a trail not only across the prairies of his native land but across to Australia and later, India.

He graduated from the University of Illinois as a Bachelor of Science and Master of Architecture. His first important position was that of a senior assistant to Frank Lloyd Wright.

It was to Griffin that Wright entrusted his practice when the exigencies of his private life caused Wright to leave America for Europe in 1909. Griffin's professional relationship, to Wright, has long been the subject of speculation.

Some years ago, just before his death, Wright described Griffin to his writer as a "talented draftsman."

Those who knew of Wright's reluctance to recognise genius in others can only deduce from this patronage that Griffin was, at least in Griffin's eyes, something much more than a draftsman.

In the early years of this century Griffin built up a successful and far-reaching practice. His buildings before he came to Australia were spread over many American States and can be found even in Germany. His work, while differing from the nondescript architecture of the period, was, like Wright's, markedly different from the early modern work then developing in Germany and France.

THE AGE Literary Supplement - Melbourne, Australia  
3/9/63 By NEIL CLEREHAN

Two main streams, one in Europe, the other and lesser in America, were slowly leading architecture back from the dead past. In America the new movement was homespun and called later "organic." Its buildings were romantic, involved and decorative. Monumentality was eschewed, and man himself was again the measure.

Unlike the European architects, Griffin, Wright and their master Louis Sullivan did not believe that the future lay in the machine. As America grew strong by machinery, it paradoxically developed an anti-industrial architecture.

In 1910 and half-way around the world, the young Commonwealth of Australia had selected Canberra as the site for a Federal capital and decided to hold a competition for a design of its layout.

When the competition was announced, the local architectural profession boycotted it because of the inadequate prizes and because the final judgment was in the hands of laymen.

Almost everything about the beginnings of Canberra was sordid. The beautiful site was selected only after unseemly picking between Victoria and New South Wales.

International architects were invited to enter the competition for its plan only because of a squabble.

As a later historian put it, "Canberra is the beautiful child, not of love, but of jealousy."

Walter Burley Griffin entered and won the competition in 1912.

The contest was described by a disgruntled native as "a competition of foreigners judged by mediocrities."

Petty, mediocre and inept may have been the background, but no one ever queried the excellence of Griffin's detailed and beautiful idea for the city. But as soon as it was studied by Government officials, it was criticised as "impractical" and "extravagant."

Griffin's plan foresaw an important group of buildings on each hill surrounding Canberra. These centres were joined by monumental boulevards.

Naturally in 1912 a town planner gave more emphasis to rail transport and ignored the motor car.

But apart from minor technical shortcomings which could be remedied, the Griffin plan was a masterpiece.

This did not stop, but rather encouraged petty criticism.

The Minister of Home Affairs, the expatriate Canadian King O'Malley, was influenced by this uninformed criticism and exercised the assured right of politicians. He set up a board of Government officials to comment upon and "improve" the chosen plan and even the runners-up.

The board not unexpectedly rejected all plans and evolved one of their own.

The new plan borrowed all the features of the Griffin plan, which were easy to copy and cheap to implement, but vetoed the Lake Scheme, which was Griffin's dramatic centrepiece.

The lakes remained out, and were only reinstated by a wiser Government 40 years later—and renamed, ironically, Lake Burley Griffin. Griffin had paid a brief visit to Australia, and, being an idealist, had spent more time admiring the Australian countryside than he did in the Federal offices in Melbourne.

He was sent a copy of the "improved" plan which he received, in Chicago, with something less than enthusiasm.

Meanwhile, back in Sydney and Melbourne, the architectural profession organised a protest which was backed by almost every practising architect and engineer. It was led by the vociferous publisher of the magazine "Building," George Taylor, and was heralded by the stirring, if premature, headline "Canberra Saved."

How Canberra was to be saved "or placed in the Way of Salvation" introduced the most fulsome architectural prose, unequalled until the arrival of the subdividers' literature of the late 1950's.

The petition was received favorably by Prime Minister Joseph Cook and Griffin was invited back to Australia and later appointed

Director of Design and Construction (graded by the Government as a part-time position).

The years between 1914 and 1920 until he resigned, were frustrating ones for Griffin. Australia's involvement in the Great War and continual political pickering caused Canberra's development to grind to a halt after an unpromising beginning. Griffin was continually hamstrung by departmental officers and his being a foreigner and a dedicated artist did not assist him.

He retired in 1920 when the Prime Minister (W. M. Hughes) attempted to renew his appointment under conditions which were unacceptable—and were meant to be. In six years, only £9000 was spent on our new capital.

Griffin returned to Melbourne to devote himself fully to his private practice which had been successful from his moment of arrival.

He lived for a time in Melbourne's first block of flats, Fawcner Mansions, now a nurse's home. Later, after he had planned Eaglemont with its unique road system and commons, he moved to Heidelberg.

He and his wife Marion Mahony, who was Wright's prize delineator, gathered around them a group of friends and admirers who speak glowingly of them today. They were vegetarians and Theosophists. They were simple, kindly and dedicated.

Griffin's major commissions still stand. For A. A. Lucas he remodelled the Australia Cafe, not yet a hotel. Later for the same client he built the Capitol Theatre and office building. The Capitol Theatre is still regarded as the finest cinema in the world. In an age which no longer needs large cinemas the fate of the Capitol is uncertain.

At present interested people are trying to have it preserved and converted for use by a National Theatre. It was Melbourne's first reinforced concrete structure and even the street canopy is concrete.

The engineering work was designed by John Monash.

Before the Capitol opened, a building collapsed under construction farther up Swanston Street. The owners of the Capitol had to take newspaper space to convince intending patrons that the Capitol was sound. To complicate matters, its opening attraction was a motion

picture called *The Ten Commandments*. That film, in addition to its obvious story, contained a modern fable concerning an engineer.

This engineer (impersonated by Mr. Richard Dix), heedless of the lessons contained in the other half of the film, cheated his client by using an inferior mix of concrete on a cathedral he happened to be building. As these things will happen, the cathedral collapsed and killed many of the congregation, including his old mother.

The Capitol Theatre endured some years of limited popular acceptance.

Griffin's Leonard House in Elizabeth Street, even by today's standards, is a rational, attractive solution to the problem of an office building on a confined city site. Its facade consists of the fore-runners of today's "curtain walls."

In 1916 Griffin designed the University's Newman College. His clients asked for a Gothic building, and were happy with the result, which was bad Gothic but very good Griffin. Despite unsympathetic additions and needless alterations, Newman College is regarded as one of the finest buildings of its type.

Griffin laid out the Ranelagh Estate, Park Orchards and the Mileara area, West Essendon. He built flats (his best, "Langi," in Toorak Road) and many houses in Heidelberg, Toorak and Frankston. Many of his houses, indistinguishable from those of a younger Wright, are lovingly and carefully preserved today. Many have fallen into disrepair (vide the northernmost house in Kooyong Road).

He was never commissioned to build a building in his own Canberra, but Hotel Canberra, and even our own "temporary" House of Parliament owe an unmistakable architectural debt to Griffin.

In 1929 he moved to Sydney and tried to develop an "ideal" suburb at Castle Crag. But the depression had struck the building industry and, along with other architects, his creative abilities were limited. Through an interest in, of all things, the Reverberatory Engineering Company, which held patents on incinerator design, he was able to exist in the early 1930's by designing and building municipal garbage distributors in Sydney.

That at Pyrmont is one of his last

important designs. The municipal dump of Essendon still bears his touch as a bitter envoi to his life and work in Melbourne.

In 1933 he received a commission in India, and left Australia to live there. He designed a newspaper office, a maharajah's palace and the library at the University of Lucknow.

He died in 1937 in his 60th year. Some reports say he fell from a scaffold. Many architects would choose thus to go. But this report, often quoted, is incorrect. He died of peritonitis. Nobody speaks ill of Griffin. People, old now, can remember Griffin as their parents' architect. Senior architects remember him as their idol of student days.

The "Lucknow Pioneer," in an obituary notice described him as "too good for this world." The late A. S. Eggleston some years ago cleared up the position of Griffin's involvement in the extensions to Collins House in 1915.

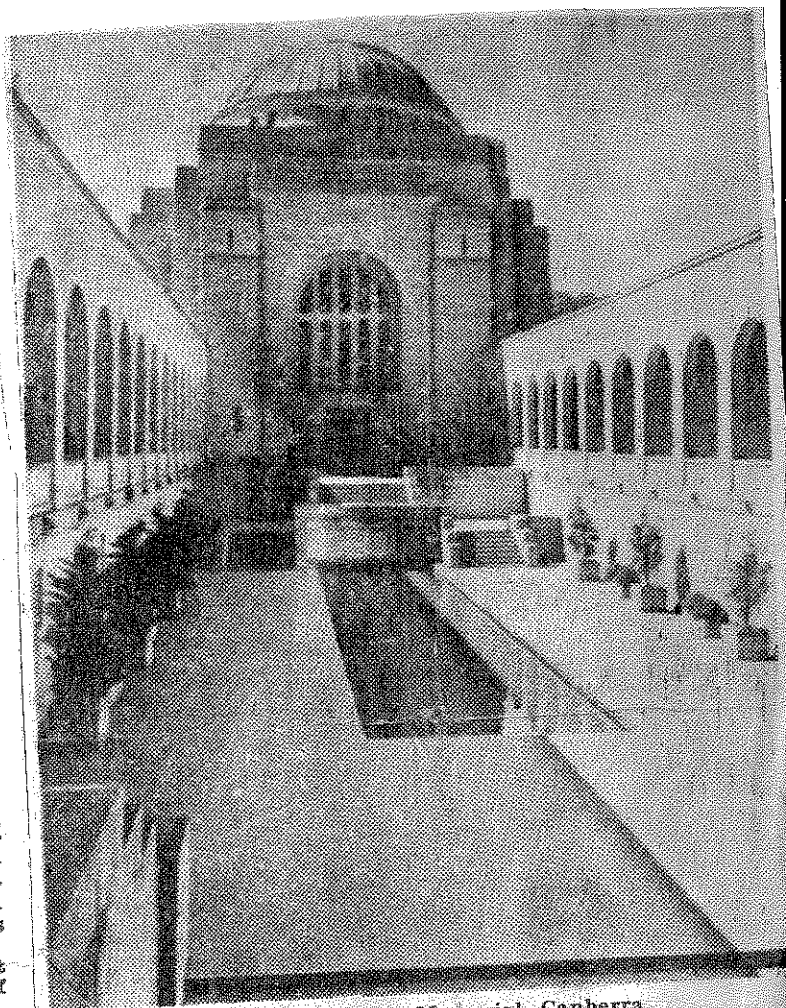
He was consulted on the design of Collins House "without fee or reward." The unique and welcome setback at street level (on the Little Collins Street facade) was his idea.

The client, Mr. Arthur Baillieu, gave him a gold cigarette case for his efforts. The strange "battlements" at roof level were his solution for disguising water tanks. They were removed only four years ago.

The only voice to turn against Griffin in later years was that of "Building"—his champion in 1913. "Freak Architecture" was their description of the Vienna (Australia) Cafe, "Dangerous," was the Collins House overhang and in a biting attack on the designer of Newman College the small but vociferous magazine called attention to the "railway shed appearance of the dormitories."

Too late for Griffin but in time for a new generation of Australians, orderly development and beauty came again to Canberra with a new and farseeing Administration of the 1950's.

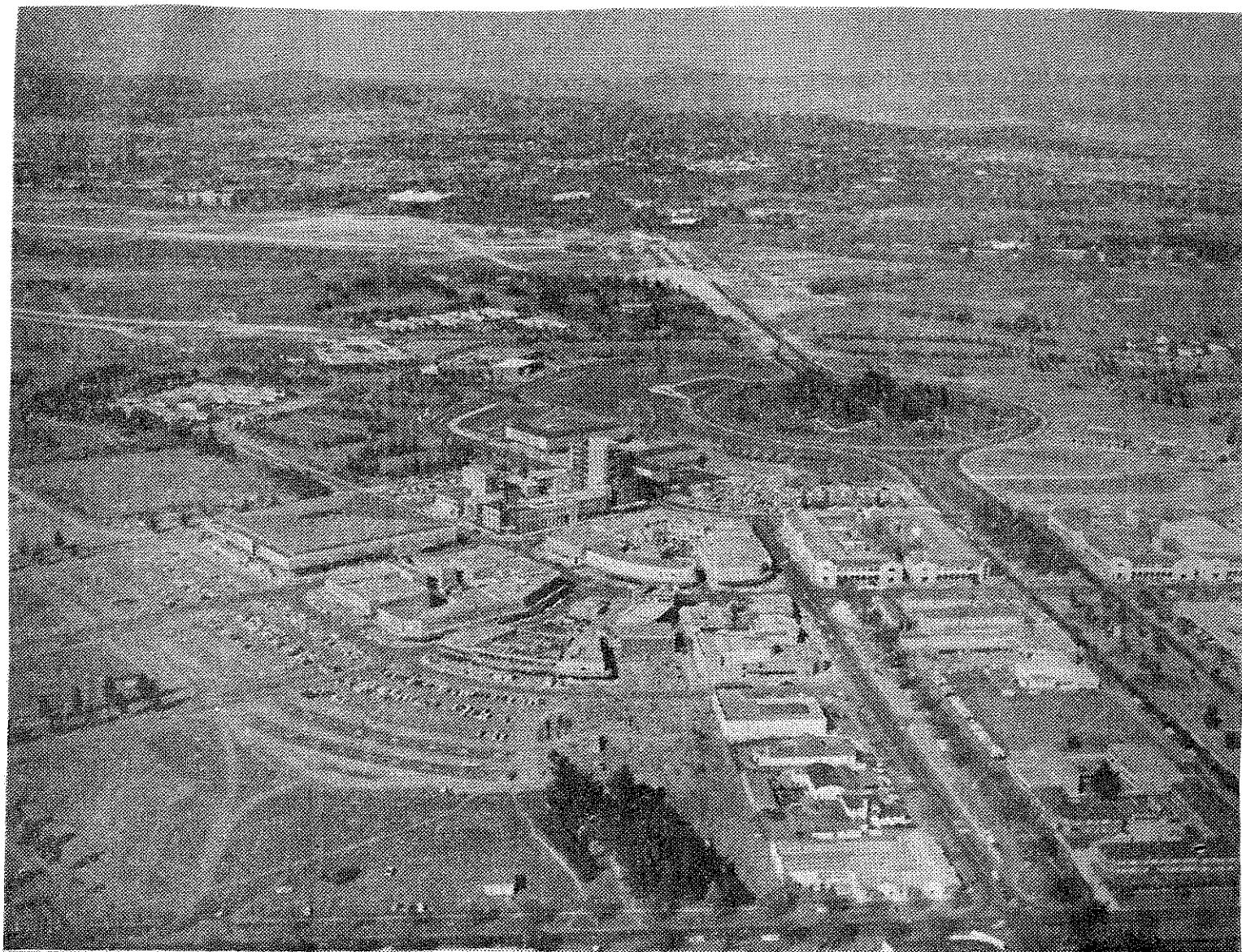
The waters of the Molonglo River are now flowing into Lake Burley Griffin and stamps bearing his likeness will soon be in all parts of Australia, Europe, India and the Middle Western States of America.



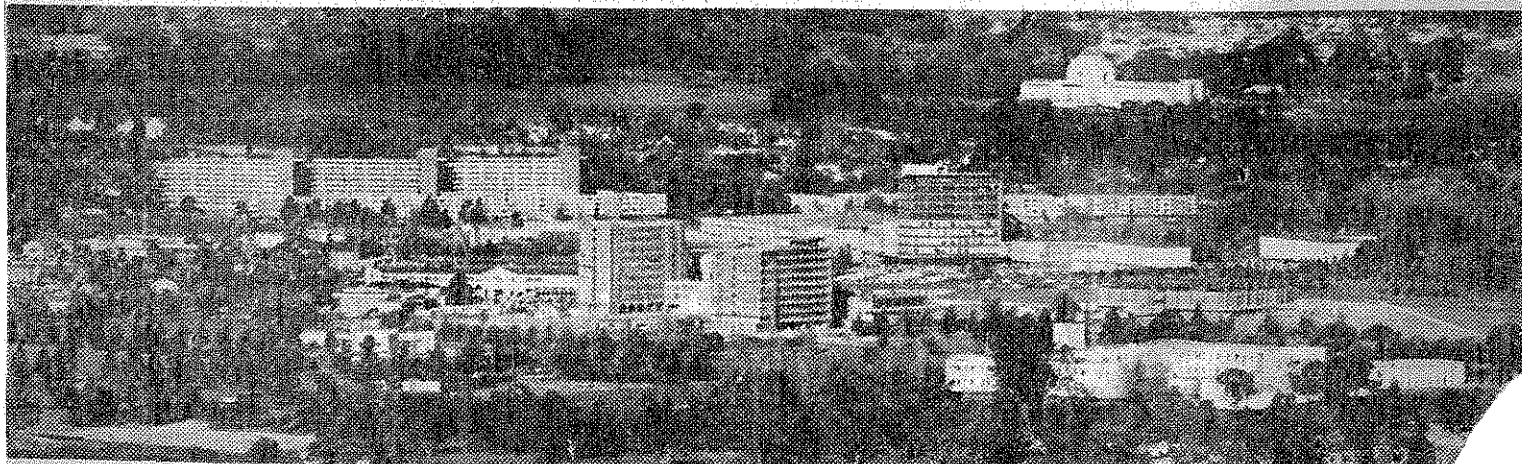
The National War Memorial, Canberra.







A view of Canberra looking to the south. The Civic Centre is in the foreground, with the site of the Canberra lake showing up as the cleared area running across the picture in the middle distance.



Canberra, looking to the north-east, with the Australian War Memorial, top right.