

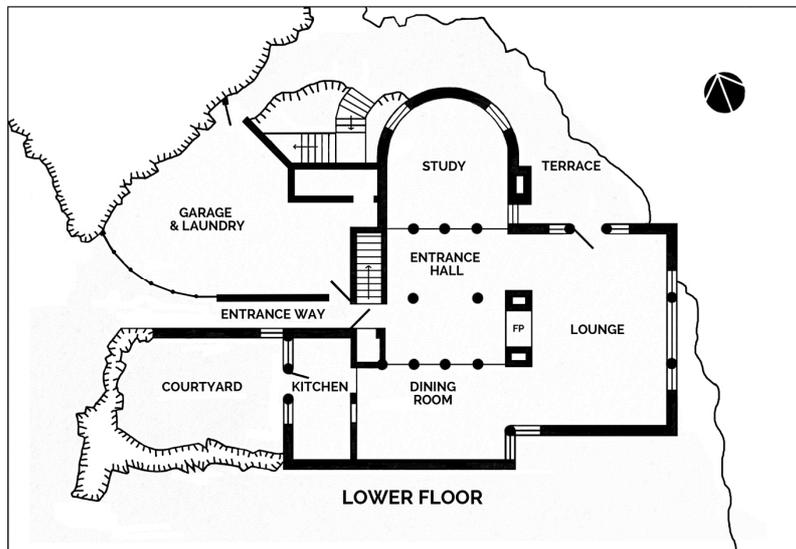


## ROOM DETAILS AND FEATURES

**Introductory Note:** The Architecture & Design section of this website provides general descriptions of the Fishwick house's interior living and external recreation areas but, short of visiting the building, it is only possible to fully appreciate the full extent of Griffin's creativity through a room-by-room description. The house has an extraordinary variety of spaces, all described below: 13 internal rooms, a large garage/laundry utility area and four very different exterior leisure areas. The descriptions are arranged in the order that visitors being shown around the house would generally experience. The website's Images of House section contains photographs of most of the features discussed. Reproduced here for ease of reference are the two PDFs "Lower Floor Plan" and "Upper Floor Plan".

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### LOWER FLOOR



**Entrance way.** Walking along The Citadel, the approach road to the house, visitors enter a deep, tightly curved cutting in the sandstone. The house suddenly comes into view, looming above the roadway. The progression from the roadway, along the entrance way tunnel of the house and then passing through the front door and entrance hall to the lounge has been described by Australia's foremost Griffin authority as *"one of the magical experiences of Griffin's Castlecrag"*. [1] The tunnel at street level is narrow and low-ceilinged, with its subdued illumination enhanced slightly by light shining through 13 diamond-shaped amber glass panels in the front door. The claustrophobic effect is relieved by 25 tall, thin, mirrored, amber glass panels. Intriguingly, these have small protruding green squares placed at the top and bottom. Off to the right is a small courtyard, sunk into the sandstone – a secluded place and one of the four outdoor sitting areas, each providing shelter under differing weather conditions. To the left is the large built-in garage and laundry.

**Entrance Hall.** Here Griffin devoted an unusual amount of space and effort to amplify the intriguing, subdued atmosphere which was established in the entrance way, increasing the realisation that this is a most unusual house. The entrance way's low ceiling continues into this room. Immediately striking are a "forest" of eight green-tinted, tree trunk-like pillars and eight amber glass doors which define the area. Light filters through these doors and three vertical amber glass wall panels but there is a glimpse of brightness and the awaiting view through the unusual arched

“window” cut through the central chimney mass. The pillars which dominate the room are in fact reinforced concrete sewerage pipes, an Australian invention of one of Griffin’s Melbourne clients, Walter Reginald Hume. In all there are 30 of these in the house used both structurally and decoratively. Scrapings revealed that Griffin applied four layers of paints, glazes and pigments to get the effect he wanted on the entrance hall’s set of pillars; those in other rooms generally have less complex finishes. When the doors on both sides of the room are opened a huge contiguous space is created, incorporating this room and the lounge, dining room and study. This provides an entertainment area of some 112 sq. metres (1200 sq ft), almost the entire lower level of the house.

**Lounge.** After passing under a low bulkhead, suddenly the ceiling height increases and the light brightens, revealing the largest room in the house. It is dominated by a huge fireplace of finely-finished sandstone, its face measuring 2.8 by 2.2 metres (9 ft x 7 ft). Visitors have been known to enjoy its warmth for some time before the curiosity of its design dawns on them: there appears to be no chimney. This is because the fireplace has a large arched void in its centre. In fact, smoke is drawn sideways through flues which rise on both sides of the arch before joining higher up in the mass of the fireplace. Its sandstone blocks are all hand-carved. It is estimated that each shoulder block in the arch would have taken a stonemason about a week to fashion.

The wall opposite the fireplace is dominated by its large “picture window” with its excellent bushland and harbour views. This is flanked both sides by casement windows as is the glass door to the outside terrace, so the lounge is very bright during daylight. At night its atmosphere is enhanced by bulkhead lights concealed on either side of the fireplace.

**Dining Room.** After circling the central fireplace one is led to the elegant dining room. Two fish pools set into the ceiling were the most intriguing features. These delighted Fishwick but presumably algae growth, decaying leaves and fish droppings must have de-romanticised the effect of the filtered light because in the 1930s they were replaced by skylights.

It is noticeable that the care taken to shape and finish the internal exposed sandstone blocks had not reached the same level as elsewhere. Block sizes are uneven, many have large faults and cracks in-filled with mortar and stonemasons’ chisel marks carry evidence of their greatly varying skill levels. This apparent carelessness is explained by a letter from Fishwick to James Weirick. [2] It seems that he and Griffin decided that the walls, which were to be rendered, should be tuck-pointed instead, thus allowing the intriguing faces of the large stone blocks and the handwork of the craftsmen to be exposed.

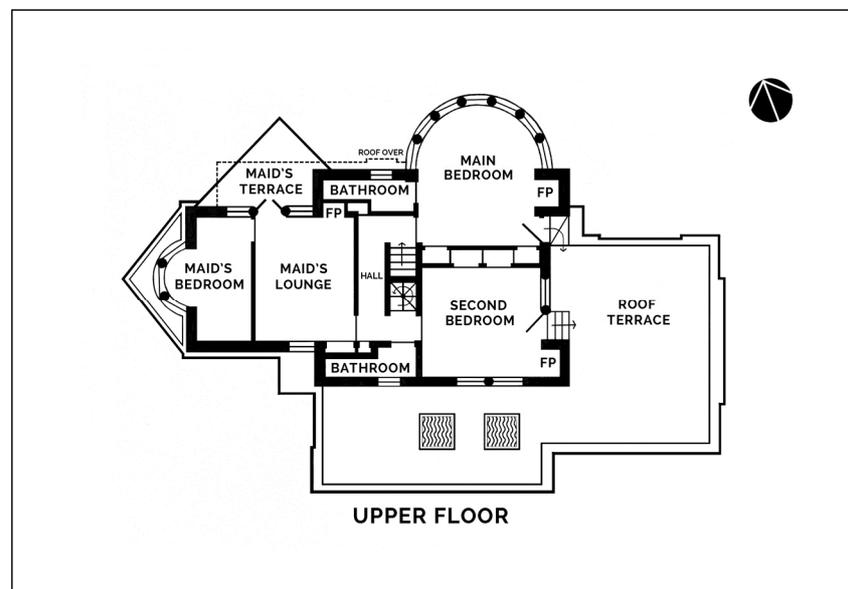
At the end of the dining room are three identical wooden doors. One is the entry to the small kitchen; the door on its left concealed the original servery from the kitchen. The other door was added later and conceals shelving for glassware.

**Kitchen.** Griffin’s attitude to kitchens is legendary. He told a client, who had protested that the proposed kitchen was too small, that transcontinental railway travellers in America were all fed from one tiny galley and so the kitchen he designed would be quite adequate. Because of its poor condition the room had to be stripped and rebuilt in the late 1970s. However, the basic design of the cabinets and bulkheads has been retained and almost all the brass knobs are original. It is notable that the kitchen opens to the courtyard which faces the road - reversing the almost universal practice of having the main entertaining rooms at the front of the house and the utility rooms at the back.

**Study.** By continuing across the entrance hall one is led into the study, the room described by many as the most pleasing in the house. Being sunk into solid rock, this room is snug in winter and cool in summer. However, it did not exist on the original plan. Presumably Griffin and Fishwick saw the wisdom of excavating the underlying rock to create an extra room, thereby putting the space below the main bedroom to good use. This decision created a very early example of a “split level” living area. However, the room’s walls have solid rock behind some lower sections and this caused severe damp problems. The solution was to completely tank the floor and lower wall surfaces with a modern epoxy barrier.

With the walls being so thick and curved, Griffin was forced to design two highly unusual windows which fan out into the window bay. These are considered to distinguishing symbols of the house.

## UPPER FLOOR



**Main Bedroom.** Immediately off the landing of the stairway is the main bedroom, another extraordinary space. Here Griffin swung seven double-casement windows between pillars to create a very unusual semi-circular room with 180-degree bushland views over Griffin’s Buttress and Tower Reserves. The room is north facing, so the array of windows allows sun penetration all day. The windows are not identical in width; the three most northerly are progressively slightly wider to capture light and wider views. The elegant fireplace is the simplest of the four in the house and the unusual colours of its sandstone blocks - muted shades of cream, brown, orange and purple - probably inspired the finish on the window pillars. The hearth tiles in this and the other two upstairs fireplaces are made of glass. A small set of stairs leads up to the large roof terrace with its spectacular views of Middle Harbour and beyond.

**Main Bathroom.** Having an en suite bathroom in a private house would have been almost unheard of in 1920s Sydney. The room includes some of Griffin’s most idiosyncratic design ideas. Its sunken, end-on bath needs no shower curtain. It has a small, protruding bay which houses the hand basin flanked by windows which could be opened to keep its mirror from misting-up. The toilet cisterns for this and the 2<sup>nd</sup> bathroom were originally mounted on the roof and were flushed using a chain coming through a pipe. This, of course, allowed rain to drip onto anybody

enthroned below. Some of the room's original green floor-to-ceiling ceramic tiles had been broken over the years; fortunately they were able to be replaced by identical tiles discovered in the recesses which housed the dining room's fish pools. The room originally had cork tiles, now replaced. There is also a built-in storage cupboard with very narrow shelves intended for small personal items such as cosmetics and toiletries.

**Upper Hall.** There are three amber glass panels on the wall of the staircase leading to the upper hall. The ceiling above has a frame which incorporates a diamond-shaped decoration - a common Griffin motif. Yet another skylight with clear glass is above this. As a result, outside light which finally reaches the entrance hall has passed through three separate sets of glass. Off the upper hall is a set of small, moulded-concrete spiral stairs leading to a planned garden on the house's highest roof. This was never developed. The small cupboard under these stairs has the only remaining example in the house of pin-hinged doors, commonly used by Griffin.

**Second Bedroom.** In the corner of this large room off the upper hall is the room's most distinctive feature - a fireplace oriented at 45 degrees to the room's walls. This is capped by a jutting moulded concrete cube which is decorated by an unusual row of coloured ceramic tiles with a South American Indian motif, unlike any others used in Griffin's houses. Despite being examined by many respected Griffin scholars, the source and significance of these tiles remain a mystery. They possibly foreshadow his later use of Mayan Indian design elements in some of his incinerators. The moulded concrete mantle with its surrounding sandstone blocks form a simple, striking composition and make an interesting contrast to the equivalent fireplace in the maid's lounge. A small set of steps leads up to the roof terrace.

**Second Bathroom.** Equal in size to its en suite equivalent off the main bedroom, this bathroom is similar in layout and also has an end-on bath, but this one is not sunken. Also, the toilet, basin and other fittings were scaled down relative to those in the main bathroom, as befits children and the maid. The room's floor-to-ceiling yellow ceramic wall tiles are original; however, when its water pipes needed replacement many were broken. Fortunately, as with the en suite bathroom's green tiles, they were able to be replaced by identical tiles discovered behind a cupboard during the kitchen renovation.

The room's toilet cistern was also concealed above the ceiling. It was wholly encased in a very large accessible chamber within one of the house's prominent sandstone sections which rise above the uppermost roof level. This is visible on the PDF "Griffin's Elevations of House". This chamber also provided access to other water, gas and venting pipes.

**Maid's Lounge.** A door off the upper hall leads to the maid's lounge. This room's most unusual and distinctive feature is its moulded concrete fireplace. Many architects are intrigued by its simple yet powerful prow-like design; conceptually, its concept was shaped by planes intersecting a cube. This amply demonstrates Griffin's ability to produce a dramatic, elegant yet low-cost design. It is a large room in which the maid could have privacy, with such comforts as a wash basin concealed behind the wardrobe's mirrored door, double doors leading to her own small terrace with its external stairway. This was one of the few rooms in the house which had central lighting. The current hanging light fitting is a reproduction of one which Griffin designed for an earlier house.

**Maid's Bedroom.** This room is small in area, but because Griffin incorporated a semi-circular nook with three protruding casement windows under a cantilevered slab, it feels much larger than it actually is. The slab conceals indirect lighting and its exterior section forms a semi-circular protrusion above an elevated garden. The windows provide it with pleasant views of the neighbouring property's garden and over Griffin's natural bushland "island" in the loop of The Citadel.

**Garage and Laundry.** Despite the fact that the house is positioned as tightly as possible into the narrowest part of its wedge-shaped block, Griffin managed to provide it with a very large, multi-purpose utility area, functioning effectively as a garage, laundry and workshop. It is nine metres west to east and seven metres north to south (30 ft x 22 ft). The car entrance is wholly integrated within the house, a most unusual feature for its time, and yet it is barely visible at street level when approaching the house. Griffin achieved this by positioning the room behind a high, jutting section of the natural stone. The area has a set of six articulated sliding glass doors which hang from a curved rail, providing a very wide car entrance. When open, they are concealed along the wall of the entrance way.

Because this utility area was mostly formed by cutting deeply into the block's platform, two of its walls are of natural sandstone. One of these has been partially rendered to prevent seepage, but in many places the beauty of the local stone remains visible.

## EXTERIOR LEISURE AREAS

The house can satisfy a great variety of outdoor entertainment and leisure needs. It has four outdoor sitting areas which vary greatly in size, aspect to the weather, privacy and atmosphere; all have external lighting as does the native garden.

**Courtyard.** This area off the kitchen is completely surrounded by stone: a front wall, a natural outcrop and two of the house's walls. One of the walls rises to the full height of the house - some 5.5 metres (18 ft) - and provides welcome shade from the northern sun in summer. Originally the excavation creating the courtyard was just a few metres from the kitchen door but to increase its usable area it was later extended almost to the street.

**Terrace.** Originally curved and narrow, this area off the lounge has been extended to provide a large, sheltered sitting area and fringing garden with bushland and harbour views.

**Roof Terrace.** Formed from the ceiling slab of the lounge, this open, sunny area is accessible from the main and second bedrooms and provides wonderful uninterrupted views of Middle Harbour and beyond to the Pacific Ocean.

**Maid's Terrace.** Accessed either through double doors in the maid's lounge or by sandstone steps from the garden, this small area faces north and is shaded by a large overhanging section of the roof slab. Being sheltered from most winds, it is a delightful winter sun-trap.

### Footnotes:

1. *Walter Burley Griffin - A Re-View* James Weirick 1988. p11

2. Letters from Thomas Fishwick to James Weirick 1972. Courtesy of James Weirick.