



DECLINE AND RE-EMERGENCE OF THE GRIFFINS

Introductory Note: The Griffins' story is one of early promise, outstanding achievement, rapid decline and gradual re-emergence. It can be told based on many themes: the conflict between modern and traditional architecture; the struggle of idealists in a competitive, pragmatic profession; the difficulties facing a highly-skilled woman in a male-dominated world; and how it took new arrivals to make Australians aware of the beauty and majesty of their own native flora and landscape. Their lives and works have been well documented in many books; for recommended reading see the [Books & Media](#) section. This outline describes their highly-variable fortunes in order to provide a background for the account of the near-parallel decline and re-emergence of the fortunes of the Fishwick house, for details see [Rise to Prominence](#).

It was soon after the Griffins won the Canberra design competition in 1912 and moved to Australia that the decline in their fortunes began. Disappointments, frustrations and even ridicule arose over Walter's efforts to keep developments in Canberra true to his vision. His attempt to create an "ideal suburb" in Castlecrag similarly frustrated him and progressively sapped his energy and resolve. Initially, Griffin's expectations and those of his investors ran high but soon his idealism was blunted by politicians and bureaucrats. His personality, lifestyle and beliefs, along with Marion's, were seen as eccentric, and their lack of acceptance by, and of, The Establishment, left them as members of society's fringe groups. After Walter died in India in 1937 and Marion returned to the American Midwest, their fame faded, and they became virtually unknown for some forty years. They left no "school" of residential, commercial or public architecture as a memorial; Griffin's most prominent non-residential buildings had no imitators and none of his houses could be seen as obvious precursors to later buildings or building styles.

Griffin had been a prolific and original architect who completed over 350 building designs on three continents, of which some 150 were built. His early career in the American Midwest showed great promise; he was at the centre of a progressive group of stimulating professionals and was building a very successful private practice. After winning the international contest to design Canberra and moving to Australia, he was consistently sought out to design a wide variety of buildings - from cinemas and cafes to mausoleums and golf shelters.

The cachet of his name also attracted many property developers who engaged him to design town plans, some grandiose in concept: one on an isolated, uninhabited peninsula of land a day's drive north from Sydney purported to be the blueprint for Australia's Manhattan. Most of these projects either never materialised or were destroyed. Disappointingly, the only extant Griffin objects in Canberra are the remains of an incinerator, two sewerage vents, a gravestone and a wooden parliamentary gavel. Once widely seen as a successful, highly talented, internationally famous and pioneering architect who starred on the lecture circuit, Griffin's star had rapidly faded.

In recent times, the Griffins have emerged from ignominy. Walter has been described as a significant figure in the development of architecture: the first internationally recognised architect to work in Australia, the "prophet" who introduced modern architecture to the country and a practitioner, thinker and writer whose ideas and principles on architecture, town planning and landscape architecture are still relevant.

Marion has emerged as a great designer, artist and social pioneer in her own right. Her importance in assisting Frank Lloyd Wright's march to international fame had previously been overlooked.

In the mid 1960s, after the Griffins had been virtually unknown for almost three decades, James Birrell, an Australian architect and town planner, wrote the first comprehensive book on the Griffins' lives and works. [1] Importantly, its preface was written by Robin Boyd, a very influential Melbourne architect and member of a prominent arts family who himself was emerging as the doyen of Australian architects. 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." [2]

It would be another decade before Birrell's book was followed by one from an American scholar, Donald Leslie Johnson [3] and in 1966 the Australian Broadcasting Commission released a TV documentary on the Griffins based on Johnson's research. [4] Sparked by these developments there was an increasing academic interest in both Australia and America. [5] With more attention from the press and a heightened public awareness of Griffin's role in Canberra, the number of Griffin-related "events" subsequently grew rapidly.

Footnotes:

1. *Walter Burley Griffin*. James Birrell 1964
2. Birrell *ibid*. Preface
3. *The Architecture of Walter Burley Griffin*. Donald Lesley Johnson 1977
4. Australian Broadcasting Commission *No Fences, No Boundaries* 1976
5. The idea of a Griffin Exchange Programme between Australian and American scholars was mooted in the early 1980s and became a reality a decade later with plans in place for a major international exhibition. For details see *The Griffins in Australia and India*. Peter Navaretti & Jeff Turnbull 1988. p xvii