



GRIFFIN'S COMMISSION: MOST OPPORTUNE

Introductory Note: In 1929, against a gloomy background, a highly favourable set of circumstances aligned to provide Griffin with one of the best opportunities in his career to demonstrate his creativity and innovative architectural and design skills. The report on the house in the NSW Heritage Register states: *"In a number of important respects, it demonstrated the culmination of the development of Griffin's design and landscaping ideas".* [1] The Fishwick commission came at a most propitious time, as detailed below.

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Despite gaining international fame in 1912 for winning the international competition to design Australia's national capital city, during the following 17 years Griffin's career faltered as he suffered many set-backs. Increasingly frustrated during the early 1920s by being caught in an imbroglio over Canberra (caused mainly by local politicians and bureaucrats) he quit his involvement with the city's development.

By the mid-1920s, despite completing some acclaimed commercial and residential buildings, the growth of his local private practice had also slowed. His progressive approach had generated controversy and major commissions began to elude him. Further, the development of Castlecrag had stalled, his "ideal suburb" being only partially realised.

In general, prospects were poor. The country's building sector was struggling, the impact of World War I on Australia's economy had been substantial and the effects of the approaching Great Depression were beginning to be felt. Also, the unplanned closure of his Chicago practice meant that a possible "bolt-hole" back to the American Midwest had been removed.

Despite the setbacks, criticism and local conservatism, Griffin remained confident in his own ideas which embodied his most cherished design philosophies. This assignment allowed these to be vividly demonstrated. In particular, five aspects of the commission were greatly in his favour.

Challenging, but stimulating building site. Fishwick's chosen block was one of the most expensive on the Castlecrag Estate. It sat high on the spine of the suburb's peninsula and sloped steeply through five levels of natural terracing towards the harbour. While being a difficult site to build on, its position allowed a panoramic outlook across placid waterways, natural bushland and rocky outcrops to the distant Pacific Ocean.

The site itself was a source of a prized building material: under a very shallow covering of soil was the same beautiful honey-coloured sandstone bedrock which early Australian architects had quarried to construct the city's many grand public buildings. No doubt the positioning, shape and terrain of the site stimulated Griffin's creativity; he took advantage of a sandstone platform at the very top of the block and positioned the building as close to the road as possible, in effect "wedging" it into the land's most narrow segment.

Ideal client with unusual brief. Fishwick was a wealthy expatriate on assignment to Australia who required a large house. It had to be suitable for entertaining and provide live-in quarters for a maid. Even though Fishwick was raised in England, he was international in outlook, well-travelled and had made South Africa his permanent home. He was also an independently-minded person with an appreciation of new technology who was amenable to Griffin's iconoclastic ideas. For more information about him and his decisions concerning the house - many aspects of which are odd - open [pdf Thomas Fishwick's Puzzling Investment](#).

Local experience. In deciding on the building's design and method of construction, Griffin was able to capitalise upon the experience he had already gained building houses in Castlecrag, the structures of which varied greatly. He had built twelve, mostly from local sandstone, and had designed many more during the previous nine years. Some of these had large rooms with steel-reinforced concrete slab ceilings, so he was well-acquainted with the primary construction methods and materials he was to use. However, when building most of the previous houses, restrictive budgets had restrained him from demonstrating the full potential of his technical and creative skills.

Favourable time in career. Presumably in an effort to induce prospective buyers to buy property and live in Castlecrag, Griffin spent a good deal of time producing many speculative building designs and plans. Almost all of these unbuilt projects were for very large houses occupying sloping blocks; indeed, two of them were for two-storey buildings on blocks of land adjacent to the Fishwick house. No doubt he must have felt some frustration in being unable to bring them to fruition; however, designing these unbuilt houses gave Griffin many opportunities to explore various approaches and this experience was brought to bear in planning the Fishwick house.

Comfort in handling large, complex commissions. From his early career experience in Frank Lloyd Wright's practice in Chicago and from developing his own successful practice there, Griffin was very comfortable with designing large houses for wealthy clients; generally these were very successful projects. Dustin Griffin, his grand-nephew and a prominent American academic and historian commented: *"It is notable that some of the houses widely regarded as Griffin's best are the biggest ones, from the 1903 Emery house to the 1912 Melson and Blythe houses [all in the USA], and the 1929 Fishwick house."* [2]

Given this set of favourable circumstances, Griffin was able to deliver Fishwick an outstanding building. Paul Kruty, America's leading Griffin scholar says of it:

"The Fishwick house at Castlecrag is one of the most important buildings produced during Griffin's Australian career and certainly his finest residence from this period. It easily stands comparison with his American residential masterpieces, including the Ralph Griffin, Carter and Ricker houses and, above all, the Melson house." [3]

James Weirick, leading academic and acknowledged world authority on the Griffins' lives and works described the Fishwick house simply: *"One of the best things he did"*. [4] The Historic Houses Trust was equally unequivocal: *"[it] is recognised as one of the most important 20th-century houses in Australia"*. [5]

Footnotes:

1. NSW State Heritage Office State Heritage Register - *The Fishwick House* p6
2. Professor Dustin Griffin *The Writings of Walter Burley Griffin* 2008 Introduction p.xxxvii
3. Paul Kruty Emeritus Professor of Architecture University of Illinois. Testimonial for NSW Heritage Office 2004
4. From an interview quoted in *Eight Great Houses* Guy Allenby 2002. p30
5. Historic Houses Trust of NSW *Members Newsletter* Spring 2009