



INNOVATIVE AND ULTRA-MODERN IDEAS

Introductory Note: The common reaction of visitors to the house is that every room contains elements which are wholly unexpected. Some features demonstrate Griffin's unusual approach to solving problems or using materials in new ways while others are far from being utilitarian; he frequently treated materials, space or light in ways obviously intended solely to delight the viewer. Others are surprising because they are so off-beat; seemingly adopted purely for their novelty value.

Listed below are some forty design elements which would have been seen by a visitor to the house in the late-1920s as highly innovative or ultra-modern. The first two segments include those to do with the design and construction of the house; followed by five more segments, each concentrating on different groups of rooms or living areas.

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House Plan & Layout

Location of kitchen. Kitchen at front rather than rear of house reversed Australian norm of having main social rooms at front and utility rooms at rear. Also gave main entertainment areas access to best views. Most Griffin's Castlecrag houses have this plan.

Lower level space flexibility. By closing eight pairs of glass doors in entrance hall the four lower rooms functioned as separate areas. Simply opening all doors changed axis of lower level by 90 degrees and created very large open space - about 80 percent of entire lower floor area.

Step-down study. Very early example of split-level living area. Not included in original plan. Excavation allowed higher ceiling than in entrance hall. Stepping down and closing all four sets of amber glass doors created secure, cosy atmosphere.

Complex study windows. Unusually deep with complex fanned design; needed because of tightly curved walls. Also allowed maximum light to penetrate thick stone walls.

Pillars framing windows. Most rooms in house have windows enclosed by thick, richly decorated concrete pillars. Broke monotony of walls' flat surfaces and echoed forest of pillars in entrance hall.

Light penetration through three skylights. Light illuminating entrance hall initially enters through clear glass roof skylight; then passes through four amber glass panels above main stairs defined by supporting beams with diamond-shaped end pieces; finally transmitted through three amber glass panels slotted into wall between stairway and entrance hall.

Spiral stairway to top deck. Moulded concrete stairs and counter-weighted metal door were only access to uppermost level of building. Tight curvature minimised space required.

Maid's bedroom alcove. Maid's bedroom plan included semi-circular alcove with lowered ceiling. Increased apparent size and depth of room and avoided "boxy" feeling.

Separate maid's entry and quarters. Allowed comfortable and spacious second living area. Ensured privacy for resident family.

Construction Materials & Techniques

Under-floor packing to floor board level. Mix of sand, cement and bitumen tamped-down hard between joists with floorboards resting directly on top of mix had three aims: to repel termites, to stop water seepage and rot and to produce temperature lag - warmer in winter and cooler in summer.

Trapezoid flooring joists. Allowed tighter compression of sand, cement and bitumen under-floor packing mix.

Waffle moulded ceilings. Use of coke breeze as filler in moulding reinforced concrete slabs. Allowed construction of low cost, lightweight spans across very large room dimensions and aided insulation of roof.

Exposed stone wall blocks. Rough-finished sandstone block faces showed stone masons' varying carving techniques and different skill levels. Also added interesting texture to internal stone walls.

Lounge and dining room tuck-pointing. Late decision not to render interior sandstone walls left large gaps visible between rough-shaped blocks. Required use of very wide tuck-pointing mortar to cover uneven surfaces and gaps. This was applied roughly for interesting "rustic" appearance.

Entrance hall pillars. Eight tree trunk-like pillars supported sections of upper building structure. Also used throughout building as window framing. Thirty installed in house. Of prosaic origin: are in fact spun concrete sewerage pipes, an Australian invention. All were richly decorated and amongst most admired features of house.

False picture rails. Rooms had deep groove or moulded plaster rail two metres above floor. This horizontal element defined Griffin's desired aesthetic of having three visual bands: ceiling and walls above it were to be light-coloured and smoothly textured to represent sky; wall surfaces below it at direct view level to be of roughly textured materials in organic tones; floors to be of dark timber or brown-toned carpets providing feel of solid grounding.

Y-shaped window bars. Upper windows contained 168 customised window bars fixed directly to panes. Added great character to building but proved costly to replace because windows of varying dimensions required each set to be custom-made.

Sliding glass garage doors on curved hanging rail. Permitted doors to hang in an arc and be concealed along garage wall when open.

Living Areas

Four differently designed fireplaces. Two bedrooms and both lounges had visually arresting fireplaces. Each designed to generate a different reaction: massive, dominating form in lounge; elegant and understated in main bedroom; decorated and mysterious in second bedroom; complex, unusually shaped and intriguing in maid's lounge.

Amber lighting in entrance hall. During daylight hours light entered large entrance hall in five ways. Through: front door, glass doors to study and to dining room, three glass panels in stairway wall, and arched pane above fireplace - in all through 32 amber-coloured glass panes and just one of clear glass. Additional light available after dark from two large octagonal lights recessed into ceiling, also both with amber glass.

Picture window in lounge. Easterly window framing expansive harbour view was very large for the time. To open could be raised upwards into moulded concrete void which also enclosed large counterweights. Emphasising panorama below, uncluttered sash design chosen over casement windows used elsewhere in house.

Split flue from lounge fireplace. Intriguing to visitors: “where does the smoke go?” Also draws very effectively. Allows semi-circular void to be cut into fireplace. This gives glimpse of view on entering through front door and allows light coming through picture window to be visible from street.

Dining room fish pools. Twin pools with transparent bases in dining room ceiling allowed viewing fish from below. Produced what Fishwick described as “delightful rippled light on the stone walls”. (From letters of Thomas Fishwick to James Weirick 1972.)

Dining room servery. American oak door in dining room concealed servery from kitchen. Design was identical to door into kitchen.

Maid’s lounge utilities cupboard. Cupboard in maid’s lounge provided space large enough for concealed wash basin and implement storage. Also had full-length mirror behind door.

Bedrooms

Built-in wardrobes. Very early adoption - most contemporary houses had free-standing stained timber wardrobes. Fourteen different sized built-ins designed into all but three rooms of house.

Interlocked adjoining bedroom cupboards. Both main and second bedrooms each had two large cupboards for clothes. Additionally, second bedroom had two deep, wall-to-wall storage spaces elevated above both its clothes cupboards. These six large cupboards interlocked and effectively formed a sealed bulkhead 760 mm (2ft 6in) thick which made a very effective noise barrier between bedrooms.

Semi-circle of main bedroom windows. Seven windows arranged in a 180 degree semicircle allowed northern sunlight to penetrate room throughout day. Are not identical in width; three most northerly are progressively slightly wider to capture light and best panorama of native garden and Buttress Reserve.

Maid’s bedroom window box. Moulded concrete “prow” surrounding curved exterior stone wall of maid’s bedroom produced extremely wide and deep elevated window box.

Maid’s bedroom bulkhead. House’s steel-reinforced concrete slab which protruded externally to produce “eyebrow” over maid’s westerly windows also extended internally becoming ceiling in maid’s room semi-circular alcove. Then protruded further into room as cantilever for indirect lighting. Shape of internal element defined room’s sitting area.

Bathrooms

Main bedroom's en-suite bathroom. Very early example of now commonplace feature. Also had sunken bath, built-in cupboard with narrow shelves for personal items and windows allowing ventilation across face of mirror to prevent misting.

End-on baths. Outstanding feature of both bathrooms. Allowed planning of narrow rooms. Obviated need for shower curtains.

Toilet cisterns on roof. Both bathrooms had cisterns concealed above ceiling and activated by pull chains penetrating through top roof slab. Pipes were concealed behind walls. Eliminated flushing noise and removed unattractive plumbing.

Kitchen & Utility Rooms

Naturally ventilated cooling cupboard. Air was piped from kitchen's adjacent courtyard through a specially designed food storage cupboard to an elevated external vent.

Drying rack in front of kitchen window. Permitted rapid, natural drying. Shown on plan but no evidence of having been built.

Double kitchen sink. Very early example of now commonplace feature.

Provision for appliance storage. Plan of entrance hall showed two appliance booths and one cupboard to house telephone, radio and vacuum cleaner. These demonstrated Griffin's enjoyment of new domestic technologies. Decision to build study forced abandonment.

Built-in garage. Very early example of car parking space integrated into building. Was capable of accommodating two cars. Allowed sheltered access to house.

Skylight. To help illuminate large garage/laundry/utility room a reinforced glass panel was set into a square void on the maid's terrace above it. Made foot trafficable by setting 25 glass bricks into a steel supporting grid. Badly damaged by rust and was replaced.

Outdoor Areas

Multiple outdoor recreation areas. House had four easily-accessible outdoor living spaces suiting different weather conditions, each with its own ambience.

- Courtyard off kitchen. Sunk into natural stone; secluded, cool and shady in summer.
- Large rear terrace off lounge. Surrounded by gardens and good for entertaining.
- Small terrace off maid's lounge. Sunny and protected in winter. Quiet and private.
- Roof terrace off main and second bedroom. Large, open and airy with spectacular panoramic views.