



WALTER BURLEY GRIFFIN'S FISHWICK HOUSE

15 The Citadel, Castlecrag www.fishwickhouse.org

In 1912 the brilliant young Chicago architect, Walter Burley Griffin, won the international competition to design Canberra, the capital of Australia. He later established his "ideal suburb", Castlecrag, situated on a Sydney Harbour peninsula where he designed over 50 extraordinary houses. Only 15 were built; 13 survive.

The grandest, most elaborate and now carefully restored is his 1929 Fishwick house, which was ultra-modern and shockingly radical for its time. It is:

- recognised in a prestigious atlas of 20th Century architecture as highly significant and in the top rank of houses designed worldwide in that period (see footnote).
- widely acclaimed as one of the most prominent and important early 20th century residential buildings in Australia.
- a prime residential expression of Griffin's brilliance. A vivid demonstration of his ideas about what constitutes "good architecture" - principles which are increasingly being recognised as having great relevance to this day.
- a showcase for Griffin's fresh thinking, creativity and use of new techniques and materials, highlighting his introduction of modern architecture to Australia.

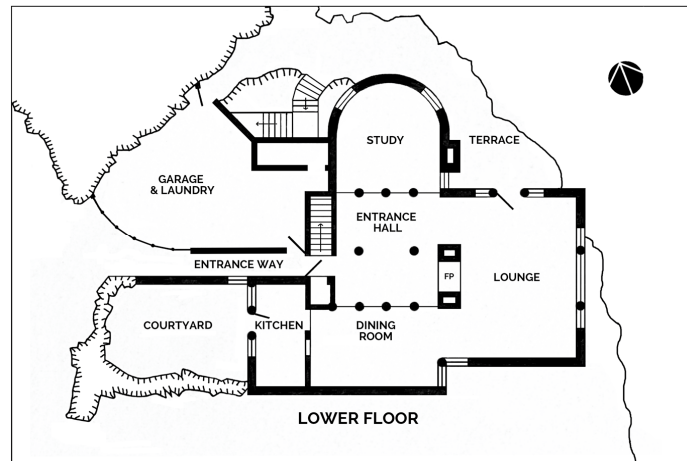
EXTERIOR OF THE HOUSE

The block is wedge-shaped and the house presents a forbidding, narrow façade to the street. Only from the cliff-tops of the neighbouring Tower Reserve can its size and bulk be appreciated. The building has been sunk into a natural sandstone shelf, the shape of which influenced its design. Note how Griffin integrated boulders and rock outcrops into the construction of the house.

DOWNSTAIRS ROOMS

Entrance Way. As you walk towards the light shining through one of Griffin's 13 characteristic diamond-shaped panes in the front door, it is as if you are in a mysterious tunnel. The ceiling is low, the passage narrow and the light subdued. The slightly claustrophobic effect is relieved by amber glass mirrored panels which reflect the available light and by small protruding green squares which catch your eye. The sunken courtyard off the kitchen can be seen on the right

Entrance Hall. Here Griffin devoted an unusual amount of space and effort to amplify the intriguing atmosphere which was established in the front passage. The low ceiling continues, and eight tree trunk-like pillars and rows of double doors define the area. Light filters through the amber glass doors and through three vertical glass wall panels but there is a glimpse of brightness and the awaiting view through the arched aperture in the fireplace. Above are two hexagonal ceiling light fittings. Griffin used four layers of paints, glazes and pigments to get the effect he wanted on the pillars (which are, in fact, spun concrete Humes pipes – an Australian invention). Note the false stair ends, creating an interesting design on what could have been a dull, rendered internal wall.



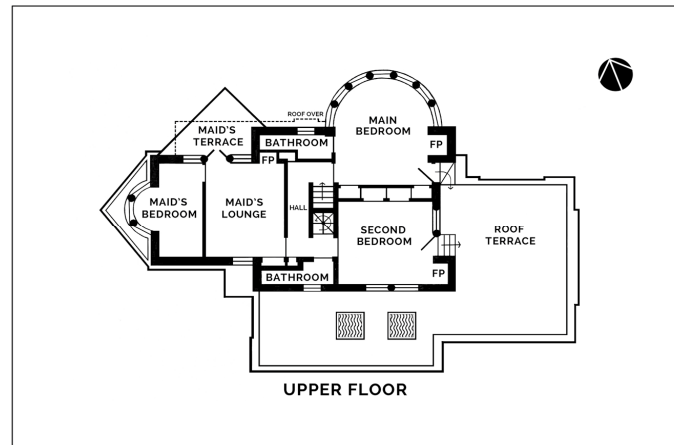
Lounge. Suddenly and dramatically the space and light increase and before you, framed by a picture window is a view of Middle Harbour with the Pacific Ocean beyond. Although the room is given great strength by its scale, exposed and tuck-pointed sandstone walls and use of pillars in the fenestrations, it is nevertheless dominated by the monolithic fireplace, illustrated in many books and magazines. People have been known to enjoy its warmth for some time before the curiosity of its flue design dawns on them: "*where does the smoke go?*". Its sandstone blocks are all hand-shaped; each shoulder block in the arch would have taken a stonemason about a week to fashion. The nearby chair, from Newman College in Melbourne, was designed by Griffin. Beyond the door is the terrace, one of the house's four external sitting areas.

Dining Room. The most intriguing features here were the twin "fish pools" in the ceiling through which light once filtered onto the dining table. These delighted Fishwick but, presumably, algae growth and other detritus must have spoilt their effect because in the 1930s they were replaced by skylights. If required, the axis of the entire ground floor can be shifted by opening all of the glass doors creating a space reaching through the forest of pillars to the end of the study.

Kitchen. Griffin's attitude to kitchens is legendary. He told a client, who had protested that a proposed kitchen was too small, that in the USA transcontinental railway travellers were all fed from one tiny galley. Because of its poor condition, this is the only room in the house which has been rebuilt. However, the basic design of the cabinets and bulkheads has been retained and almost all the brass knobs are original. Beyond the kitchen is a courtyard cut out of the bedrock.

Study. This room did not exist on the original plan. It replaced planned radio and telephone booths - a planned vacuum cleaner cupboard was also abandoned. Being sunk into solid rock, the room is snug in winter and cool in summer. Note the intriguingly shaped windows and the thickness of the walls.

UPSTAIRS ROOMS



Main Bedroom. Griffin swung seven double windows between pillars to create a very unusual semi-circular room which receives the sun all day. Its elegant fireplace is the simplest of the four in the house. The windows have no beading; a broken pane requires rebuilding the entire frame. The missing 168 Y-shaped wooden glazing bars were rebuilt. The furniture, like much in the house, was custom-built to cope with its design peculiarities. There is a fine view over Griffin's Buttress and Tower Reserves.

Bathroom. Some of Griffin's most idiosyncratic design ideas are here. Note the sunken, end-on bath, needing no shower curtain, and the intriguing window design. Toilet cisterns for both bathrooms were originally mounted on the roof, flushed using a chain coming through the ceiling. The showerhead and tiles are original; replacement tiles fortunately being found surrounding the abandoned fish pools.

Hall. The unusual skylight again incorporates Griffin's diamond shapes. The six photographs showing the house when new are from glass negatives discovered in the NSW State Library. Note Fishwick's animal skins and mounted heads. The 1960s photograph featuring the niece of Griffin's company secretary is by Max Dupain. The spiral stairs led to a planned upper roof garden which was never developed. The small cupboard under the stairs has the only example in the house of pin-hinged doors, commonly used by Griffin.

Second Bathroom. The second bathroom is similar to the other with its end-on bath. The tiles are also original, replacements being found concealed behind a cupboard.

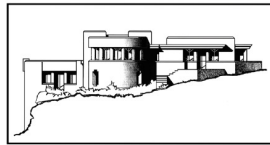
Second Bedroom. Again, the fireplace is the distinctive feature of this room. Griffin faced it with ceramic tiles with a South American Indian motif (possibly foreshadowing the use of Mayan design elements in some of his incinerators). The hearth tiles in this and the other upstairs fireplaces are of glass. Beyond the door is the main deck. The house commanded 270 degree views from here when it stood in splendid isolation for some 20 years.

Maid's Lounge. This and the third bedroom were the maid's quarters with their own entry and patio. The moulded concrete fireplace shows Griffin's ability to produce a dramatic effect with a simple, low-cost design. The ceiling light, produced by the NSW Historic Houses Trust, is a reproduction of a Griffin design.

Maid's Bedroom. This is the smallest room in the house but Griffin showed his originality by designing a semi-circular nook under a cantilevered slab to produce a charming room. There is an elevated garden beyond the windows. The sun on the Australian bush probably inspired the colouring of the pillars.

HISTORY

Most of Griffin's Castlecrag houses were small and built speculatively for his property company investors or designed for clients of limited means. By the late 1920s his venture was failing; the Estate attracted very few independent purchasers and most blocks stood undeveloped. He must have been delighted when Thomas Fishwick, the South Africa-based local manager of a large English manufacturing company, Fowlers, engaged him to design this house. It was built in 1929 for £3000, a very substantial sum on the eve of the Great Depression. Fishwick was an ideal client, being wealthy and progressive. This, Griffin's only two-storeyed Castlecrag house, was to be his second-last commission and by far the grandest. Fishwick returned to South Africa after just a few years; since then the house has had only two more owners.



TECHNICAL NOTES

This is the Australian house which most vividly demonstrates Griffin's design principles and his powers of innovation and creativity. Sunken into bedrock near the street, the building crosses then overhangs its platform so that it appears to rise from the sandstone. Its profile is highly articulated but its basic structure is simple: five reinforced concrete slabs are suspended between locally quarried stone block walls. These constitute most upper level ceilings and floors, others being made of timber. Its plan is based on a four-foot grid and embodies many elements which were then startlingly new but common now, such as L-shaped open plan living areas built around monolithic fireplaces and split-level rooms. Unlike most of Griffin's buildings, the fabric of the house is virtually unaltered. Almost all the brass hardware, ceramic tiles, coloured glass, woodwork and concrete detailing are original. Previously in very poor condition, the house underwent a major restoration of its structure, fixtures, finishes and furnishings in the mid-1990s supervised by a heritage architect. Concurrently its badly damaged landscaping was rebuilt and a native garden established.

Footnote: Reference Phaidon Press UK's "20th Century World Architecture", 2012. See house's website for more information on its prominence, significance and architectural qualities. It includes over 150 images from 19 professional and specialist photographers, cinematographers and artists who have worked in it. It also documents some forty design elements evidencing Griffin's ingenuity and creativity.