

WALTER BURLEY GRIFFIN

In 1908, the Yass-Canberra district was selected as the site of the future capital of Australia. The government declared that the new capital would be 'the finest capital city in the world' and announced an international competition for the design of the city. More than 130 architects and town planners from Australia, North America and Europe submitted plans. In May 1912, the government announced that Walter Burley Griffin, a young American architect and landscape architect, had prepared the winning design.

Griffin was born in Chicago on 24 November 1876. He studied architecture at the University of Illinois and worked for some time in the office of Frank Lloyd Wright, America's most famous architect. In 1911, soon after he started work on his plans for Canberra, Griffin married Marion Mahony, another architect and a gifted artist in Wright's office. Marion worked with Walter on the design of Canberra and presented his designs in a series of vivid drawings showing a capital city nestled into the hills and valleys of Canberra.

Griffin's winning design showed a chain of lakes along the Molonglo Valley and a triangular framework for a central national area laid out along major vistas from Mount Ainslie and Black Mountain. On the southern side of the central lake, Griffin proposed a terraced group of government offices leading to the 'Capitol', his place of the people (now the site of Parliament House). Lower hills in the valley were reserved for other government and national institutions, a university, military college and municipal buildings, including a city hall.

Marion's drawings of the future capital showed that this would be a new type of Australian town plan, where buildings, roads and gardens could work together to make a picturesque and liveable city. It has been said that, of all the designs submitted in the competition, only Griffin's plan showed an artistic grasp of town planning. It was a simple but splendid concept, laid out in an attractive geometric pattern intricately developed from the topography of the valley, with long tree-lined avenues and boulevards integrated into the Canberra valley.

Griffin came to Australia in 1913. He was appointed as Federal Capital Director of Design and Construction in order to supervise the detailed planning of his modern city. But lack of money, the intervention of the First World War and bureaucratic obstacles made it difficult to realise his plan. Many of his main avenues and parks were laid out on the ground at that time but there are no buildings in Canberra designed by Griffin.

Due to many differences with the administration and his own uncompromising vision, Griffin left Canberra at the end of 1920 to work as an architect in Melbourne. His planning skills were called upon in designs for the New South Wales country towns of Griffith and Leeton, and he designed a wide range of private buildings in Sydney and Melbourne, including a university college, cinemas and office buildings. At Castlecrag in Sydney he designed and built the prototype of an idyllic suburban community using natural materials and his own system of prefabricated concrete.

In 1924 the government gazetted the Griffin plan for Canberra so that no changes could be made without the approval of the Commonwealth Parliament. This protection has



ensured that Canberra remains essentially as Griffin intended it to be — a logical expression of the site, and a city which fulfils a national capital's primary function as the Seat of Government. The strength of Griffin's design is also shown by the ability of the plan to adapt to growth and change without the loss of its character and meaning.

In 1935, Walter Burley Griffin was invited to India. He designed a new library and a number of other buildings in Lucknow. Griffin died there on 11 February 1937. His legacy to the world is his design for Canberra, one of the great planned cities of the twentieth century.

Roger Pegrum

Further Reading

- Paul Reid, *Canberra Following Griffin: A Design History of Australia's national capital*, National Archives of Australia, 2002
- Peter Harrison, *Walter Burley Griffin: Landscape Architect*, National Library of Australia, 1995
- John W Reys, *Canberra 1912: Plans and Planners of the Australian Capital Competition*, Melbourne University Press, 1997

