

## Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin: international modernists

Chicago architects Marion Mahony and Walter Burley Griffin landed in Sydney in 1914. They arrived in high spirits, having won the international design competition for Canberra three years earlier, and flush with the excitement of working in a fledgling modern democracy. They believed Australia was destined for greatness and that architecture would play a key role in achieving it. According to Griffin, Canberra was to be a 'city not like any other city in the world, not just a new city for a new nation – a democratic city for a democratic nation'.<sup>1</sup>

The Griffins were ardent environmentalists and saw the potential for an approach to nature that worked *with* the landscape rather than dominating it. Coming from Chicago, a city shaped by a rigid street grid, their design for Canberra proposed a new vision for Australian urban form. Their appreciation of the Illinois landscape transferred to Australia, and their interest in indigenous trees and flora was ahead of its time. Although their plans for Canberra were not fully implemented, they experimented with their utopian ideas in the Sydney suburb of Castlecrag. Here they designed roads that followed contours and houses with flat roofs, railing against suburbia's 'red clumsy roofs sloping to shed the snow that never falls'.<sup>2</sup> They also planted native species, injecting a progressive modernity into the English-garden approach that prevailed in Sydney. These modern concepts, some of which they had explored in their Rock Crest, Rock Glen project in Mason City, Iowa in 1912, were revolutionary.

Spirituality, or the quest for knowledge of higher worlds, was another aspect of their modern approach. Theosophy appealed to Chicago's architectural and artistic communities, offering a new way of thinking about colour, form and non-materialist and liberating forms of creativity. The Griffins grew up with liberal Protestant values and were influenced by the transcendental thinking of Walt Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson.

The Griffins appeared to slip seamlessly into a suburban Australian existence, living first in Sydney and then in Melbourne. However, their

Australian years were not without adversity and conflict, with Canberra and Castlecrag providing plenty of both. Despite the many obstacles they faced, they produced a significant body of work, published and gave lectures and were active in Sydney's cultural life. Of their 130 planning, architectural and landscape projects for Australia, 95 were realised. Built and unbuilt projects include the design for Canberra, five new towns, several suburban communities, three campus plans, industrial buildings (mainly incinerators) and commercial buildings.<sup>3</sup>

In 1916 they opened a Melbourne office where they re-created the 'little university'<sup>4</sup> that had been the hallmark of their time in Frank Lloyd Wright's studio in Oak Park, Illinois. The office produced a number of modernist buildings in Melbourne, including Newman College (1915–17) and the Capitol Theatre (1921). In 1919, working on weekends, the Griffins built Pholiota, their one-roomed house in Eaglemont which was radical in both plan and construction; they would use the same modern prefabricated cement 'knightlock' building system in Castlecrag.

In 1920, disillusioned by six years of political obstruction over Canberra, Griffin resigned as Federal Capital Director of Design and Construction. In 1921 the Griffins purchased 650 acres in Castlecrag and formed the Greater Sydney Development Association (GSDA). Their aim was to develop the spectacular peninsula, with its 6.5 kilometres of water frontage, as a model community. The GSDA placed covenants on building heights to maintain views, and provided pedestrian right of way between houses so that everyone could have access to the waterfront. They also designed and built the open-air Haven Scenic Theatre where Marion pursued her theatrical ambitions. Along with flat roofs, the Castlecrag houses introduced to Sydney light-filled rooms, well-designed but small kitchens, contemporary furniture, and careful planning of the natural landscape. From 1925 to 1936 the Griffins lived in the Grant House where Marion's 'tree portraits' were displayed on the walls.<sup>5</sup>

The Griffins connected with the theosophical community in Sydney. On 22 July 1926 they attended the launch of a 'Crusade for a Beautiful Australia' at the Sydney Theosophical Society's headquarters, Adyar Hall; the artist Thea Proctor and students of Antonio Dattilo-Rubbo and the Sydney Art School were also there.<sup>6</sup> However, it was Rudolf Steiner's breakaway religion of anthroposophy that the Griffins preferred, his occultism providing them with a way to 'revitalize their creativity and energy, to recharge the "authority from within" which was the essence of their life philosophy – and raise it to new realms'.<sup>7</sup> Marion joined the Sydney Anthroposophical

Society in 1930, with Walter following suit the following year.

Castlecrag became a centre of creative and artistic activity, led largely by Marion. Many writers have explored the Griffins' pioneering period there – during which they organised esoteric plays, musical evenings, reading groups and dance performances – and the way the bushland setting permitted this emergent modernism.<sup>8</sup> The artist and theosophist Frank Hinder, for example, thought that Lute Drummond's eurythmic dancing and the plays produced by Marion were 'highlights of the [Sydney] cultural scene'.<sup>9</sup>

For more than 20 years the Griffins made a substantial contribution to Sydney modernism through both their buildings and their engagement with social, political and environmental issues. Their 'little university' was the training ground for a number of Sydney moderns, including Henry Pynor, who went on to work in Moscow in the early 1930s and brought back news of Russian modernism. Their friendship with Augusta 'Pakie' and Duncan Macdougall, directors of the Rowe Street Playbox Theatre, brought them into further contact with Sydney's progressive community.

It is likely the Griffins met Dattilo-Rubbo and the soon to be famous Sydney moderns studying at his school.<sup>10</sup> One of Dattilo-Rubbo's many students was Roy de Maistre. When Pakie Macdougall opened her club at 219 Elizabeth Street in June 1929, de Maistre helped Griffin design two large rooms on its second floor. Pakie's Club became a meeting place for creative people and hosted monthly 'international nights' serving food from a chosen region; the Griffins attended an Aztec evening dressed in full costume. *The book of words*, a combined visitors' book and scrapbook, shows the importance of Pakie's Club for the Sydney moderns, its guests including the poet Mary Gilmore, the cartoonist Unk White and the writers Miles Franklin and Katherine Susannah Pritchard.

The Griffins' enthusiasm for Australia was tested by the difficulties they had in realising their ambitious projects for Canberra and Castlecrag. Griffin left Australia in 1935 when an opportunity arose, through his theosophical connections, to design a library in Lucknow, India. Marion left the following year, but with Griffin's sudden death in 1937 she returned to Sydney, sailing to Chicago in 1938. Over the following decade she wrote *The magic of America*, a more than 1000-page testimony to the Griffins' life and work, covering the Sydney interwar period in considerable detail. Her Australian leave-taking expresses her continued optimism for a world that is modern, democratic and spiritual: 'I left Castlecrag truly a bit of Paradise on Earth, to take on the next adventure ... to put my shoulder to the wheel of moulding the destiny of my country...'<sup>11</sup>



Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin,  
Castlecrag, 27 July 1930

Photo: Jorma Pohjanpalo  
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Interior view of living room of  
the Grant House, Castlecrag, c1922

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clockwise from above

Walter Burley Griffin-designed Pymont incinerator, showing sculptural details, c1935

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Dressed to go to Pakie's Club, Walter Burley Griffin (at left) and possibly Marion Mahony Griffin (right) outside the Grant House, Castlecrag, photographed by Rowland Herbert, date unknown

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A play in the amphitheatre, Doric temple, Castlecrag, c1930–37

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**Alison Rehfisch**  
Negroid ballet late 1920s  
linocut  
AGNSW



**Monte Luke**  
The dancers, *The Home*, September 1921  
AGNSW Archive