# A physical History

2.00pm - 3.00pm Session 2 The Griffins’ Archival Legacy

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# The Walter and Marion drawings of Canberra – a physical history

## Slide 1: Title Page

## Introduction

Good Afternoon

I was the conservator who was tasked with the work of conserving the Griffin Canberra designs in the 1980s and 1990s. This work allowed me to get very close to the drawings and I developed a great love for them. The work also involved a lot of background research into their nature and history.

I started at the National Archives in 1980 and I became aware of the drawings sitting in plan drawers in our building at Parkes. A set of Nissen huts where the National Gallery now stands.

## Slide 2: Nissen huts

The huts were not air conditioned and inside could get as hot as 35 degrees in summer. You could go home if it got over 30.

At the time the drawings seemed a little unloved and looked quite sad.

Not surprising when you consider their history.

I think you can learn a lot about the history of political attitudes to Canberra and the Griffin plan by looking at the history of the drawings.

To illustrate this I would like to give you a short history of the drawings and their travels and travails.

I should also say at the outset that the full suite of Griffin Drawings is currently on display at the NAA.

## Slide 3: Telegram

## The drawings – history

I’ll start my story in February 1912, at the close of the Federal Capital Design Competition.

The entries were unpacked and displayed in the ballroom at Government House. After the obviously unsuitable and invalid entries were removed a Departmental photographer copied the remainder.

## Slide 4: Judging

By good fortune, these photographs were retained and are now in the collection of the NAA. They reveal a lot of the state of the drawings at that time.

## Slide 5: Puncture damage to items 45, 46 & 47in 1912

These prints show that at this early stage some of the Griffin Drawings had already been damaged. Items 45, 46 & 47 are seen to have tears which are consistent with puncture damage. These are still the only major tears the objects have.

After Griffin’s win the drawings moved around a lot.

## Slide 6: Mr Macdonald drives the second peg

The drawings were moved first to the Canberra site for use by the Federal Capital Commission, then returned to Melbourne in early 1913 where they were stored in the basement of Government House. At around this time they were removed from their stretchers, rolled up and placed in galvanised cylinders for storage.

Later, the items were ‘cleaned’ (no details) and restretched at the insistence of Griffin who stressed that that the designs should not have been considered as plans, but as paintings, and treated as such, and stated that they should never have been removed from the frames.

In 1917 a set of slotted, zinc–lined chests was constructed to house the drawings. The same year the drawings were transported to Adelaide for exhibition at the Australian Town Planning Conference and Exhibition. Voices were raised in objection to this, fearing that the drawings may be damaged. It was decided that in future photographs would be sent in place of the drawings.

In 1925 the Secretary of the Federal Capital Commission, pointed out the historical significance of the drawings and stated that they should be stored with the Archives of the Commonwealth.

## Slide 7: Sydney Morning Herald

A piece from the Sydney Morning Herald of 1934 states that the Minister for the Interior (Mr Perkins) had handed over the original Canberra design (singular) to the Library at Parliament House.

From this time, documentary evidence about the drawings dries up and it was not until 1953 that they were heard of again.

It seems clear that the mid-century was a period where enthusiasm for the Griffin plan waned – as evidenced for the lack of interest in the drawings and their whereabouts.

In November of 1953a discovery was made in a Department of Works workshed in Kingston - 5 crates of plans from the Federal Capital Design competition.

## Slide 8: Inventory list

Now it has always been assumed that this discovery included the Griffin drawings. I have myself stated it as fact. However recently I’ve done a bit of research at the Archives and from the description of the discovered material it seems clear that the Griffin drawings were not included. The whereabouts of the Griffin items at the time is a mystery – the most likely location is the basement of Parliament House. We know for a fact that two of the Griffin items were definitely there at the time.

Nevertheless, the discovery of the material seems to have reinvigorated an interest in the Griffin drawings.

## Slide 9: Jim Gibbney and Peter Harrison

Mr Jim Gibbney of the Commonwealth National Library, Archives Division was concerned for the drawings and enlisted the support of Trevor Gibson, Head of Town Planning with the Department of the Interior, ACT Planning and Development Branch and Peter Harrison then Senior lecturer in Town Planning, University of Sydney. Gibbney and Harrison examined the Griffin Drawings at this time, they were on their original stretchers and some of them were hinged with removable hinges, and both thought their condition was ‘good’.

Peter Harrison was one of the key voices in reinvigorating the Griffin plan and was first chief planner of the NCDC, working there between 1959 and 1967. He is credited as one of the chief architects of the reinvigoration of Canberra that occurred at this time.

In 1955 Mr Harrison gave evidence to Senate Select Committee on the Development of Canberra. In his evidence observed that the committee did not seem to be taking the Griffin plan into account in their deliberations. He points out that there were no copies of the Griffin material in the committee rooms for reference purposes. On the morning he gave evidence he apparently took the Committee Chair to see the original Griffin drawings. Unfortunately he does not state where they were.

The Federal Capital Design Drawings discovered in the shed were transferred to Commonwealth National Library’s main repository. Some time soon after this most of the Griffin items joined them. In 1957 they were moved to plan cabinets in a non-air-conditioned Nissen hut in Parkes, ACT.

In 1961 the Commonwealth Archives Office was established as an autonomous unit and the drawings became part of its holdings. The selfsame Nissen hut was given to the new body as a storage area and the drawings remained there until they were transferred to the Archives‘ new purpose built archival repository at Mitchell in the early 1980s, where they remain.

We now come to the sad part of the story…

Soon after their ‘rediscovery’ in 1957, the Griffin drawings were sent to the Art Gallery of NSW for conservation treatment.

The conservation work was overseen by head conservator Bill Boustead.

Bill Boustead was apparently resentful about the job. He was very much a fine art conservator and from what I know of him somewhat Eurocentric. The Griffin drawings would therefore have seemed to him of little importance.

This would therefore explain why he treated them as he did: he cut off the tacking margins and the white border of the Triptych and mounted them directly on to masonite with paste. In Peter Harrison’s words – “Bill loved to slap things on Masonite”.

**Slide: The Triptych before and after**

If that was not enough, the drawings were again treated under Mr Boustead in

1965. This time he contracted the work out to a Sydney art framing company.

This work was probably to prepare them for an exhibition in the Albert Hall, Canberra the following year.

This time the drawings were removed from their existing mounts and pasted onto chipboard. A layer of cartridge paper was to be first pasted to the chipboard to act as a barrier.

Without being specific, the brief also stated that some drawings would require ‘soaking’ off their mounts and that drawings were to be retouched 'where practicable'. Stains, finger marks, dirt and mould spots were also to be removed. After treatment all items were to be placed in wooden frames.

This treatment description, which applies to all the items, is the only record we have of the conservation work that was carried out. It is not therefore impossible to determine exactly what was done to particular items, nor is it possible to determine the state of individual items prior to treatment. Of particular note here is that one result of this conservation work was that the three parts of the triptych were attached to a single piece of chipboard.

In the late 1970s the drawings again came to the fore at the Archives. The inadequacies of the earlier conservation work had been revealed and there was a push to get them ‘Properly’ conserved.

To this end a number of things were done:

The National Archives seemed concerned that no suitable conservator was available in Australia. They therefore requested advice from the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington.

Sense seemed to prevail and advice was also sought closer to home – from the NGA and the WA Museum. Luckily, at this point a new batch of young conservators was graduating from the CCAE and myself and a number of other graduates were appointed at the NAA. Eventually it was decided that we would be allowed to approach the conservation of the drawings ourselves.

17. SLIDE –THE TRIPTYCH IN 1912 AND IMMEDIATELY BEFORE CONSERVATION

In the late 1980s the decision was taken to again treat the drawings. This was largely to undo the poor work carried out in the past but also to get the drawings in a state where they were well protected so that they could be displayed safely.

Unfortunately little could be done about the materials that Marion used – watercolours and dyes are highly light sensitive, particularly when present as thin washes. It seems likely that they have faded a lot since 1912 – as you can probably infer from these two pictures. Particularly obvious is the fading of the right hand panel which is much worse than the other panels.

# Analysis

Before beginning treatment we had a good look at the drawings and carried out some analysis. The first thing we looked at was the cloth. There is a lot of mis-information out there about the cloth. It has often been reported that the cloth is silk. Marion did often work on silk, but our analysis has shown that the cloth is linen

We also were interested in the adhesive used in the conservation work of the 1960s. This was yellowing and showing signs of losing its strength. Out analysis showed that the starch-based adhesive had a large proportion of clay – typical of wallpaper paste.

21. ITEM 45 BEFORE TREATMENT

# Treatment

A variety of damage was obvious on examination. Including:

* Tears dating back to 1912
* Much scuffing, staining and finger marks
* Loss of gold in some areas
* A layer of fine black dust – typical of having been stored in the vicinity of a furnace. Possibly in the basement of Parliament House.

22. VARIOUS AREAS OF DAMAGE AND STAINING

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We decided to treat the drawings for the following reasons:

* The chipboard used to support the drawings was acidic (cold extraction pH: 5.6).
* Chipboard is known to give off formaldehyde vapours which help create further acid (also of concern for health reasons).
* The accumulated surface dirt was a conservation danger and visually distracting.
* The cartridge paper lining the chipboard was acidic. (cold extraction pH - 5.4)
* The starch adhesive used to paste the drawings to the chipboard was becoming brittle and losing its adhesive strength.
* All drawings had framing instructions written on the back in blue crayon. These were apparently written on to the drawings as part of the work done in the 50s or 60s. In many cases the writing was visible from the front. It was thought that if this writing were made accessible it may be possible to remove or reduce it.
* The triptych had not been properly aligned when it was mounted and parts of it overlapped. It had also lost its original dimensions and nature as 3 separate items.
* The chipboard supports made the objects extremely heavy.

Consideration of all these points led to the decision that to ensure the long term preservation of the Griffin drawings they needed be removed from their chipboard supports.

24. SLIDE – CLEANING

# Cleaning the drawings

As a prelude to removal from the chipboard all the Griffin drawings were first surface cleaned using Mars Steadtler erasers. Care was taken to avoid the painted areas and the faint pencil lines that remained in some areas. Cleaning removed much of the accumulated dirt on the surface, much of which appeared to be soot, perhaps from a boiler in some basement where they were stored.

# Removal from the chipboard

To remove the drawings from the chipboard required a bit of thinking. The obvious way to release starch paste is through the use of water. Unfortunately application of water was not possible because firstly, some of the colourants were water soluble and secondly, it was possible that the areas with gold paint would absorb the water at a different rate to the rest of the cloth and that the cloth would therefore tend to pucker around these areas. The use of chisels to pare down the chip board was also attempted but very quickly rejected as being labour intensive and too dangerous.

25. SLIDE – REMOVING THE OBJECTS FROM THEIR BACKING

The method which proved effective was to take advantage of the lucky fact that the conservators in the 1960s had added a layer of cartridge paper between the object and the chipboard. It proved fairly easy to split the paper down the middle.

Using a 23 cm–long icing spatula with a slightly sharpened tip the paper was deliberately split and the spatula was worked through the paper. The method proved to be successful, leaving the friable central gold bands undisturbed.

With a great deal of care and a few grey hairs the spatula was worked under all of the friable gold paint and the drawing was free. This was extremely nerve wracking and required a surprising amount of strength

26. SLIDE – REMOVING THE PAPER AND ADHESIVE

# Removing the paper and adhesive

The next phase of the treatment involved the removal of the remaining paper and adhesive from the back of the drawings. This was done in small sections using swabs.

During this process it was possible to clearly see the framing instructions written on the reverse side of the drawing. These were written in either crayon or heavy pencil. Luckily the process of cleaning away the starch adhesive largely removed the instructions.

27. SLIDE – AN INTERESTING DISCOVERY

An interesting discovery was made on cleaning item 41. On the back of the item were two images of other items, printed from Marion’s lithographic plate. Perhaps she reused a trial piece in the interests of economy.

28. SLIDE – MENDING TEARS

# Mending the tears

Mending of the tears was done using a high grade polyester cloth and a conservation grade adhesive called BEVA 371. The cloth was painted with the adhesive which was allowed to dry. Then patches were cut out of the cloth using pinking shears. The patches were carefully applied using a heated spatula.

# Mounting

In choosing a system for this two factors were taken into account, firstly that the mounting method selected should be as simple and non-invasive as possible and secondly, that the system should match as closely as possible, the original used by the Griffins.

The cotton support for the drawings was found to be quite strong and a full lining was thought unnecessary. It was therefore decided to strip line the drawings and attach them to wooden strainers.

29. SLIDE – PREPARING THE STRAINER

Strainers were constructed of ash with recesses cut in them to take a piece of 5 mm acid-free Foam-cor\* - so called ‘blind-strainers’.

To attach the drawings to the strainer 100 mm–wide tacking margins were cut from the same polyester as used for mending Again these were adhered using Beva and a tacking iron.

30. SLIDE – ATTACHING THE ITEM

The drawing was then attached to the strainer using a staple gun and copper staples and strips of cover weight acid-free paper were used to protect the tacking margin from the staples.

The Griffin items when they arrived in Australia were not in frames – probably one of the reasons they got torn and stained. To protect them we decided to frame them in basic, unobtrusive frames. The drawings were placed in simple pine frames with a semi circular profile. The frames were limed and varnished with an acrylic varnish. They were glazed with Perspex, and a spacer was inserted to separate the Perspex from the drawing.

Since the triptych had lost its original size and parts of its original gold border due to the conservation work of the 1960s, this was reinstated in the mounting process.

This involved once again treating it as three individual pieces.

31. SLIDE - THE MOUNTING SYSTEM USED FOR THE SECTIONS OF THE TRIPTYCH

When mounting was complete, the three strainers were placed in a single frame. To simulate the effect of the missing cloth borders, and to disguise the unsightly tacking margins, they were covered with a window mat of a similar tone to the bare cloth of the drawings. The edges of the window were painted gold to simulate the effect of the original gold border which was mostly lost.

32. SLIDE - ITEM 45 COMPLETED

# Conclusion

Microfading

In recent years there has been a growing level of interest in the material associated with the 1912 Federal Capital Design Competition. This has come to a crescendo this centenary year. This includes not only the Griffin material but all entries in the competition. When viewed as a whole this group of drawings presents a unique view of the state of urban design before the First World War.

The drawings are as good as they can be given their sad history. Unfortunately they are still too sensitive to be exhibited for long periods, or under harsh lighting.