**Kylie Scroope – paper for *A Cultivated City: The Griffins in Australia's Capital***

**“An Architectural Tree”**

Like many great creative figures, the archival legacy of Walter and Marion Griffin is dispersed and fragmentary, perhaps reflecting a belief that the built output or finished products of their careers would be the most enduring and important testimony to their professional and personal partnership. Christopher Vernon has previously noted that “for designers, drawings and related documents are often considered but the means to an end…architects are notorious for destroying the records of their practice”[[1]](#endnote-1).

The National Library of Australia is one of a number of institutions in Australia and the United States holding archival material related to the work and lives of Walter and Marion. There are numerous Library collections containing Griffin related material[[2]](#endnote-2), and time constraints won’t allow a detailed review of all these collections today, so I will be mostly focussing on just two of the more significant collections - in particular:

* *The Papers of Peter Harrison;* and
* *The Eric Nicholls collection*.

Peter Harrison was a town planner, and is acknowledged as one of the earliest people in Australia to undertake serious study of the Griffins, starting in the 1950s. This subject knowledge was an important factor in his appointment as Director of Town Planning at the National Capital Development Commission in the late 1950s. In 1970 Harrison completed a Masters thesis on Walter Burley Griffin. Griffin's vision for Canberra influenced Harrison in his work for the NCDC during a period of major growth of the city, and in his later years as a Canberra planning advocate and activist.

The Griffin related material in Harrison’s papers was accumulated over a long period and spans the Griffins’ careers in the United States, Australia (principally Canberra, Melbourne and Sydney) and India. It includes correspondence and records of Harrison’s interviews with Griffin contemporaries; photographs of Walter, Marion and their work; articles and cuttings, extract copies from Marion’s memoir *The Magic of America,* and Harrison's own extensive research notes. Peter Harrison’s papers were acquired from his family after his death in 1990, and his book Walter Burley Griffin: Landscape Architect was published by the National Library in 1995.

While undertaking his research, Harrison also borrowed documents and photographs that had originally belonged to the Griffins, from Eric Nicholls.

Eric Milton Nicholls was an architectural associate and friend of the Griffins. He commenced working with Walter and Marion in Melbourne a few years after their arrival in Australia, and eventually became their business partner. In 1932 Nicholls moved to Sydney with his family to manage the office there and was in charge of the practice during the Griffins' absence in India. He and his wife Mary became active members of the Castlecrag community.

After Walter’s death in 1937, Nicholls continued the practice in Australia, and became custodian of the Griffin and Nicholls practice records. He also continued to assist Marion with managing placement of Griffin legacy material in various collecting institutions. Nicholls collection material found in the Harrison Papers at the time of processing by the Library was separated and returned to the Nicholls family in 1996, and eventually the Library acquired the Eric Nicholls collection from his children in 2006. So in many ways, the story of the Griffins archival legacy is a story that cannot be told without reference to Eric Nicholls and Peter Harrison.

The Nicholls collection comprises more than 2500 items and forms the foundation of the current Library exhibition *The Dream of A Century*. It is particularly strong in visual/pictorial material, including around 2000 photographs, as well as original drawings and sketches, maps, etc. The text-based records in the Nicholls collection include primary source documents, such as handwritten and typed manuscripts and a small amount of correspondence; as well as substantial collections of news clippings, published magazine and journal articles, etc.

The Harrison and Nicholls collections provide a broad context from which we can better appreciate the Griffins professional work, and gain a richer understanding of the attitudes and philosophies that underpinned it.

I will be focussing today on just a couple of aspects of Walter’s and Marion’s joint endeavours that are evident in these collections (particularly in the Nicholls collection). Both these themes also link directly to the Griffin’s views about democracy, and the potential for architecture and urban development to embody and reflect a social idealism that was fundamental to their design for Canberra. The specific threads I will be considering are:

* Their interest in the natural environment and how built or constructed elements could be integrated into the landscape; and
* Their conviction that well formulated architecture and urban settlements could play a fundamental role in changing society.

There is abundant evidence across numerous sources recounting the Griffins’ deep and abiding interest in nature. In his biography of the Griffins, Alasdair McGregor shows that this dates from both their earliest years, and that Walter and Marion’s personal and working relationship was cemented through canoeing trips they undertook together in Illinois in 1910.

For me, one of the most striking manifestations of this interest in the natural environment is the Griffins’ study and depiction of trees.

The Nicholls collection contains around 300 photographs of Australian trees. These tree-studies include photographs taken in various locations in South Australia, Tasmania, Victoria, NSW and at the Canberra site. Looking at these images as a group, it is easy to infer that they were used primarily as a visual reference, perhaps particularly by Marion, who incorporated trees as a visual framing device into her earliest renderings of architectural designs. As others have noted, Marion’s remarkable drawing skill was perhaps her greatest professional strength.

We can see that her ability to merge abstract designs and landscape compositions resulted in architectural renderings that were highly resolved aesthetically, and no doubt made it vastly easier for non-technical people to appreciate and value the underlying design.

It’s not clear whether the tree-study photographs were taken by Marion or Walter (or both), but what strikes me particularly about the photos is the diligence that is applied to naming the particular tree specimens and locations. These photos are much more than just a source of visual inspiration, they are also a comprehensive botanical record.

Complementing the photos, another remarkable inclusion in the Nicholls collection are the eight hand-bound ‘catalogues’ of plant listings, which Christopher Vernon has attributed to Marion (two of the catalogues can be seen in the Library’s exhibition). These typed catalogues are organised by colour, and provide detailed descriptions of the foliage and flowers, and growing requirements of hundreds of different plants.

We know from other archival sources that Walter worked very closely with Charles Weston in devising planting schemes for the new city of Canberra, and the Griffins were also apparently diligent contributors of seed stock for Weston’s tree planting program. From Melbourne, Griffin issued directives for planting the mountains and hills of the Canberra site according to a colour coded scheme. The catalogues would certainly have been useful in formulating these plans, but may have also been used for other projects. The care that has been taken in their presentation and binding is indicative of their importance to the Griffins.

The Griffins’ interest in integrating built form and the landscape is particularly evident in their work in Castlecrag, through the operation of the Greater Sydney Development Association, which was established in 1919, and is particularly well-documented in the Nicholls collection. Castlecrag was intended to be a ‘model’ residential development, incorporating a number of the Griffin’s core ideals, both in terms of preserving natural elements, and in enabling a more democratic society.

These ideals were expressed in a 1928 article titled *Building for Nature,* written by Walter for “Advance Australia”*,* in which he outlined ‘the relation between architecture and civilisation’. He observes that,

“in tribal or village communities…there were essential intermediate social units between the family and collective industry… these were the relationships that provided natural standards of conduct, …encouragement to free expression, and the growth of independent thinking as well as healthy outdoor living and human contact…These qualities [are] lacking in modern cities. Effort is being made in some parts to overcome this fatal deficiency…by making available common properties and common spaces …to the neighbourhood and the village”.

In another article about Castlecrag he wrote, “the Castlecrag idea is that houses should be subordinate to the landscape…The premise is that the indigenous shrubs, rocks and trees form a complete picturesque garden setting, better than any substitute that could be introduced or constructed”.

While I don’t have time to review Walter’s writings in depth today, I thought it might be interesting to share some of his titles with you, as evidence of the wide range of topics that engaged his attention. These range from the highly practical:

– e.g. *Standards for Furnishing*, *Sunshine in the Home* and *Segmental Architecture*;

to the more theoretical:

– e.g. *What is Town Planning*, *Interest and Single Tax* and *Towards Simpler Homes;*

to the deeply philosophical:

- e.g. *Building for the Future*, *Modernism*, *Occupational Conservation* and *Present Day Parks, Their Place and Purpose* (the latter is far more philosophical than the title might suggest).

There are many other projects and ideas that are revealed through the Library collections, and many of these are featured in the exhibition – they include early American residential projects, various urban design projects including plans for Leeton and Griffith in NSW, significant public buildings like Café Australia and the Capitol Theatre, their later work at Castlecrag and in India, and the remarkable incinerator designs, in which Eric Nicholls played an increasingly important and independent design role.

Sadly, there is very little directly personal material about the Griffins in the Library’s collections. In many ways, the Griffins remain rather enigmatic figures - although much more is now known about the scope of their professional output than was previously the case, there is still frustratingly little we know about them as people (although Alasdair McGregor’s book has redressed this balance more recently). To me, they invariably come across as very earnest and serious (or sometimes eccentric) figures. No doubt this can be attributed in part to the challenges and opposition they faced, particularly in Australia, with a public dialogue that seemed to frequently place them on the defensive. However, there are occasional brief glimpses of a lighter side to their lives as well, and for me, these personal glimpses are among the most intriguing material within the Library collections.

For instance, we can see images of their own homes, first at ‘Pholiota’ in Melbourne, where they lived in the early 1920s, and later ‘The Grant House’ in Castlecrag, where they lived from about 1925. Both houses reflect their design ideals.

Pholiota (a type of mushroom) was a compact, open plan building (in essence a single room dwelling), built using the Knitlock system, and nestled within a flourishing garden. Their home at Castlecrag provided a setting for community activities – these are recorded in photographs within the Nicholls collection and encompass performances in the open air Haven Theatre, and Christmas celebrations. Many of the Griffins’ ideas and aspirations that were frustrated or impeded in Canberra seem to have come closest to being realised in Castlecrag, and we see them in photographs looking comfortable and at ease.

In conclusion, to return to my ambiguous title, and the topic of trees – I’d like to finish with an extract from another of Walter’s writings, which can be found in the Nicholls collection. The article is undated, but was most likely written around 1934, only a few years before Walter’s death. This article appealed to me because it uses a more poetic and less formal language than some of the other writings, and also because it seems to encapsulate Walter Burley Griffin’s view that his designation, and work as a landscape architect was his most important (I have paraphrased slightly to maintain continuity) – the title is *An Architectural Tree*:

…the landscape architect sees in all plants the possible adaptation of their texture, colour and silhouette…to induce sublimity, serenity, freedom or other feelings appropriate to any given situation. In appraising Australian fauna on my arrival twenty years since, certain particular species…suggested immediately vast, new and unique opportunities for landscape architecture. Richness of colour and exquisite texture they certainly had… but additionally this almost exclusively ligneous and evergreen plant world possessed at the same time the grade of form of nude deciduous woods, and the penetrating sunlight with deep set shadows picked out the most lace-like sculpture that could ever give pattern to formal backgrounds of wall or pavement… Luxuriousness was exemplified in the smooth angophora, strength in the Port Jackson fig, delicacy in the lemon scented gum, whilst a subtle balance of perfections was to be found in the prickly paper-barked tea tree. The final word in soaring stateliness however was left for a specimen of cypress pine... [in] the Melbourne Botanic Gardens”[[3]](#endnote-3)

It seems highly appropriate that one-hundred years on we can see Griffin’s tree ‘obsession’ coming to fruition with the opening of the National Arboretum in Canberra, and fitting too, that the next exhibition in the Library’s program will be *City of Trees* – featuring artist Jyll Bradley’s exploration of Canberra’s tree-scapes.

1. Quote from May 2007 article about the Eric Nicholls collection, by Christopher Vernon in *The National Library of Australia News* magazine see - <http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/131760/20120120-0944/www.nla.gov.au/pub/nlanews/2007/may07/story-2.pdf> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Some other NLA collections with Griffin related contents include *The Donald Leslie Johnson collection of Walter and Marion Griffin documents*; *The Papers of Rowland Herbert; The Papers of Edgar Deans;* Jorma Pohjanpalo collection of photographs of Sydney and Queensland, and *Records of Pakies Club.* [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Quote from typescript article by Walter Burley Griffin, titled *An Architectural Tree* from the Eric Nicholls collection (NLA MS9957; folder 36). The article is a single page of typescript, undated, and no indication if it was ever published.   
    [↑](#endnote-ref-3)