A century after Australia began construction of its national capital, Canberra, the city has become a symbol of the country’s development and identity. More important than the contributions made by the city’s capital designers, Walter Burley Griffin (1876–1937) and Marion Mahony Griffin (1871–1961), are the many ways in which the city’s identity continues to evolve and adapt to changing times.

The Griffin’s Australian Capital

The Griffin’s Australian Capital explores the story of Walter and Marion’s efforts to make the site of Australia’s capital. The exhibition showcases material from the records of the Griffins’ Australian architectural partnership, the Griffins and Mahony Griffin (1898–1912), as well as correspondence, newspaper cuttings and all manner in size, scope and complexity, the Nicholls Collection was assembled. Griffith’s Australian partner, Eric Milton Nicholls (1902–1965). Astonishing.

INTRODUCTION

(From detail)

At the turn of the century, the figure had more than tripled. By the mid-1930s, the Griffins had built works in New South Wales, one of the most beautiful cities in the world’. Walter practised as an architect and landscape architect. In 1906, Walter returned to Australia with Marion in 1914, now confronted with a reality. Working from the temporary capital of Melbourne, he awarded the formidable task of making the city his wife so beautifully portrayed.

ASTRONOMICAL CHICAGO

Walter and Marion hailed from the bustling metropolis of Chicago, Illinois. When Walter and Marion began their careers, Louis Sullivan (1856–1924) was already famous for his innovative approach to architectural design. Sullivan’s work was characterized by his use of structural steel and the integration of function and form. In 1890, Marion departed to study architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Walter returned to Australia with Marion in 1914, now confronted with the formidable task of making the city his wife so beautifully portrayed.

THE CENTURY OF DREAMS

The project of creating a new capital city for Australia was an audacious undertaking. The Griffins were tasked with designing a city that would serve as the national capital of the nascent Commonwealth of Australia. Walter had first heard of the envision project when he was studying between 1895 and 1899. Predicting the need for a capital, he then resolved to build a town. Unknown to him, the project had already been underway for some years. The Griffins continued to reside in the project as long as Marion believed. The Griffins' Chicago-like urbanity gravitated to the spectacle, an ideal ‘White City’ in miniature, poised to buttress the place.

THE CENTURY OF DREAMS

At Canberra, the Griffins employed reason with picturesque naturalism. At Chicago, the Griffins employed geometry to articulate the site’s latent geomorphic structure. When attending their grandchildren in the city, the couple would wander through the city’s streets and parks, marveling at the beauty of the landscape. They would often remark to each other how much the Griffin’s vision of a capital city for Australia had been realized.

THE CAPITAL’S SYMBOL

The Griffins organised the city centre’s plan to form a triangle, named for and geographically aligned with each outlying state capital. Walter and Marion were married in 1898 and together they produced a large number of designs for the city of Sydney. One of their most notable projects was the design of the Sydney Opera House. The Opera House was a significant achievement for the Griffins, as it demonstrated their ability to combine architecture and landscape in a single design. It was completed in 1932 and has since become a symbol of the city.

The Dream

Each time the Griffin’s marriage, many of the lessons Australia had learned during its colonial era were applied to the design of the new capital. The Griffins’ work was characterized by a commitment to the integration of architecture and landscape. They believed that landscape should be integral to the design of a city, not an afterthought. This approach was evident in their design of the Molonglo Valley, which they regarded as a key element of the Canberra plan.

The Winning Design

Most competition criticised the site’s landscape, pointing to its awkward topography and the need for extensive landscaping. The Griffins, however, saw the site as a unique opportunity to create a truly distinctive city. They developed a vision for a city that would be both modern and timeless, combining the latest architectural innovations with a respect for the landscape.

The Winning Design

The competition was a significant opportunity for the Griffins to showcase their ideas for the new capital. They spent many months working on their proposal, which included detailed plans for the city’s layout, buildings, and parks. Their design was based on a triangular plan, with the city’s main axis extending from the city’s hilltop to the waterfront. The Griffins believed that the city should be designed in a way that would respect the site’s natural features, and so they incorporated many natural elements into their design.

The Winning Design

Although they had won the competition, King O’Malley notoriously set to work making changes to the Griffin’s design. In 1913, the Griffins were appointed as the first architects of the new capital. They began work immediately, with the Griffins devoting all their time to the project. Their work was characterized by a commitment to the integration of architecture and landscape, and they worked closely with the city’s landscape architects to ensure that the city’s design was cohesive and harmonious.

The Winning Design

The Griffins’ design was ultimately accepted, and the city was named Canberra in March 1912. The Griffins’ design was a major departure from the traditional models of city planning, and it set a new standard for the design of capital cities. The Griffins’ work was widely acclaimed, and they are considered to be among the most important architects of the early 20th century. Their design for Canberra has stood the test of time, and it remains an inspiration to architects and planners around the world.
WALTER BURLEY GRIFFIN (1876–1937)

**CANBERRA, FEDERAL CAPITAL OF AUSTRALIA, PRELIMINARY PLAN, 1913**
lithograph
nla.map-gmod34 1914

**COMPETITION DESIGNS ON DISPLAY AT GOVERNMENT HOUSE BALLROOM, MELBOURNE**
1912
gelatin silver print
nla.pic-an24381832

**VIEW OF MOLONGLO RIVER, CANBERRA SITE**
between 1910 and 1927
gelatin silver print
nla.pic-vn3603884

**WALTER BURLEY GRIFFIN (1876–1937)**
**CANBERRA: PLAN OF CITY AND ENVIRONS**
1916
lithograph on linen
nla.map-nic11

**FAIRFAX & ROBERTS TROWEL USED BY KING O’MALLEY IN LAYING ONE OF THE FOUNDATION STONES OF THE COMMENCEMENT COLUMN OF THE FEDERAL CAPITAL CITY**
1913
copper with gold and ivory
nla.pic-an7754326

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