



Canberra Chapter

25 April 2023

The Secretary
The Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories
Parliament House
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I have planned a city not like any other in the world
Walter Burley Griffin, [*New York Times* 2 June 1912.](#)

Inquiry into ways to foster and promote the significance of Australia's National Capital.

In making this submission in accordance with the inquiry's Terms of Reference, the Canberra Chapter of the Walter Burley Griffin Society would like to begin by emphasising that

- (1) Canberra is the capital of Australia,
- (2) it was located here and designed to be that signifier of the nation's unity,
- (3) it is the centre of national public administration serving the people of Australia,
- (4) despite the separate developments since self-government in 1988,
Canberra remains the national capital in the national interest.

In summary, this submission argues that:

- (A) the role and actual influence of the national government over the national capital has become indifferent, minimal and uninterested, especially financially;
- (B) Policies of the ACT Government's planning neglect the principles of Canberra's origin;
- (C) Little official regard has been had for commemorating practically and visibly the "architectural parents" of Canberra: Marion Mahony Griffin and Walter Burley Griffin;

FOR THE FUTURE:

- (D) Additional responsibilities and functions are needed for the National Capital Authority, in order to counter points (A) to (C).
- (E) A Griffin Institute (as proposed in 2004) remains to be initiated.

(1) Requirements for the National Institutions to convey a dynamic, representative national story;

This representative national story (at least, involving the Griffins) is being variously developed in an uncoordinated manner by the private sector, as per the following four examples.

- (i) A mural of Walter and Marion on the Kingsborough apartments in Kingston was at the initiative of the private property developer in 2020;
- (ii) The "Walter" and "Marion" rooms at Regatta Point were at the initiative of the Grand Pacific Group in 2021.
- (iii) The privately-constructed **Griffin Apartments** on Constitution Avenue.
- (iv) The **Marion Mahony Griffin Garden** was recently planted on 14 February 2023, by Landcare ACT Group, Grevillea Park, Menindee Drive Barton

(2) *Maintaining the currency and vibrancy of Australia's national capital as a source of pride and international recognition;*

It should be noted that "Canberra" has become a lazy metonym used all too frequently by the media for alternatively commenting on the decisions of the National Government representing the Australian people. Recent additional references to "the Canberra bubble" have demeaned this city, its people and its purpose as the national Government for all Australians.

Any detailed consideration of the single focus on "Australia's national capital" does not reflect the duality of its governance since 1988. The federal Government has only a minority influence in the planning and development of "Canberra", through the limited influence of the National Capital Authority (NCA). Four examples of the negative consequences of this division follow.

(a) Lack of pride in maintaining commemorative designations

(i) ***Marion Mahony Griffin View***. In 2013, the-then ACT Chief Minister Gallagher unveiled descriptive signage about this View on Mt Ainslie. The signage is extremely important, as containing the basis of the design prize awarded to the Griffins. At its unveiling, [the-then Chief Minister observed](#):

"Marion's input into Walter's grand Canberra design was both crucial and seamlessly integrated. It is astonishing that her watercolours accompanying their entry capture the Australian landscape so faithfully when neither Walter nor Marion had ever been to Australia," the Chief Minister said. "The View is one of a suite of paintings that were listed in 2003 in the Australian Memory of the World Register, endorsed by UNESCO."

Last year, I noticed that the signage had both been vandalised and that the colours were badly faded. It was clear that no government maintenance was being undertaken. At the Society's initiative and to the ACT Government's credit, the ACT Government replaced the signage.

(ii) ***Marion Mahony Griffin View*** A key aspect of this is the vista down Mt Ainslie, over the War Memorial, down Anzac Parade, across Lake Burley Griffin and up to Parliament House. The unity of this View was knowingly disrupted in 2018 with the approval to demolish the gateway building Anzac Park East, which formerly anchored the bottom of Anzac Parade.

(iii) ***General Bridges' Grave in the Royal Military College***. This is the only visible single work of Walter Burley Griffin in Canberra, which he designed at the request of General Bridges' widow. There is no public signage to it near the main entrance to the College and there is only one sign at its Fairbairn Avenue entrance. Equally, there is no sign to the grave, on the left of the road up to Mt Pleasant. On contacting the RMC Commandant in June 2021 about such signages, I was advised it is the responsibility of the National Capital Authority. As General Bridges was the first Commandant of Duntroon and the only casualty of World War 1 to be repatriated to Australia, some greater interest in his gravesite had been expected.

(b) Dividing Canberra. Rejection of national heritage listing of Canberra recently because of not being supported by the ACT Government.

As a single entity and city, Canberra is being considered in slices that destroy the integrity of the planned national capital. As the most recent example, it is unfortunately notable that the ACT Government failed to support the federal heritage listing of Canberra in 2022. This was despite consideration by the National Heritage Council being:

Due to the similarities between the nominated areas, the Council chose to assess the nominations together as 'Canberra the Planned National Capital' (the **Place**).

The Council recommended placing Canberra on the National Heritage Listing, but the-then federal Minister for the Environment decided against the listing because of the ACT Government's opposition. The federal Minister did, however, list Lake Burley Griffin and the adjacent lands, including Scrivener Dam, Commonwealth Avenue Bridge and Kings Avenue Bridge, along with areas around the lake. Further details are set out in *Attachment 1*.

(3) *Raising the profile of Australia's national capital and its symbolic importance in reflecting the character, values and identity of Australia.*

Two examples (A) and (B) are provided instancing where this is not happening and three suggestions (C), (D) and (E) are made to raise this profile for the future.

(A) No Action on Proposed Relationship between Canberra and Lucknow, India

Walter Burley Griffin is buried in Lucknow and in 2020 his grave was renovated by a then-member of the ACT Assembly, Mr Deepak-Raj Gupta. Mr Gupta subsequently moved this successful Assembly Motion that (among other aspects) called: *on the ACT Government to:*

- (a) acknowledge the significant contribution to our capital and consider naming future public places, for example, street names after Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin; and*
- (b) investigate how we can see further recognition of Walter Burley Griffin's gravesite in Lucknow.*

A copy of the extensive and very positive Debate in the Assembly is enclosed. The ACT Government's response was to have named a street "Knitlock", which was a building brick-making system used in Melbourne and Sydney, but having no relevance to Canberra. The Chief Minister did not reply to a query by the Society in February 2021 about further action on this Motion by the ACT Government, despite a significant series of commemorative activities undertaken by the NCA throughout that year – the 150th anniversary of Marion's birth.

(B) Reduced National Profile by overlapping Federal/ACT Responsibilities,

This is despite the NCA's city-wide corporate aim: *To shape Canberra as a capital that all Australians can be proud of by ensuring it is well planned, managed and promoted, consistent with its enduring national significance.* The active role of the NCA needs to be expanded beyond its [current ideal role](#): *Australia's National Capital has a unique purpose, setting, character and symbolism, and it's important we make sure it continues to do so. Through the National Capital Plan, we ensure that 'Canberra and the Territory are planned and developed in accordance with their national significance'.* This planning is otherwise effectively limited to the "National Land" of the Parliamentary Zone and other very specified areas.

It should be noted that the National Capital Authority maintains a [current Heritage Strategy](#)

1.1 Purpose of the Heritage Strategy

This Heritage Strategy outlines the NCA's strategic approach to identifying, assessing, protecting and conserving Commonwealth and/or National Heritage values of places under its ownership and control. The strategy outlines the NCA's management context and how heritage has been integrated into its corporate management framework.....

Within the estate are 19 places included in the Commonwealth Heritage List (CHL). There are also two places included in the National Heritage List (NHL). Other places under the NCA's management have been identified as meeting the Commonwealth or National Heritage criteria and the threshold for inclusion in the CHL or NHL.

INTO THE FUTURE

(C) A Heritage Management Plan for Canberra

However, the NCA's *Strategy* is predicated on places, sites, monuments and buildings all being listed on heritage registers. All the subjects are duly required to have Heritage Management Plans, approved under the federal *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 Act*. However, Canberra as the National Capital and the formal winning Griffin Plan are not on a Heritage register and are therefore not specifically incorporated in *The Strategy*.

If they were on, say, the National Heritage Register, the NCA would have to produce tri-annual reviewable Heritage Management Plans and allocate resources, strategy (and training programs) in the three yearly *Heritage Strategy*. This is yet further indication of how the national capital of Canberra and its heritage is being considered in slices that destroy the integrity of the planned national capital.

(D) A Virtual Griffin Institute based in Canberra - 2004 Griffin Legacy

In 2004, the National Capital Authority reviewed the implementation of the original Griffin plans and assessed them into four categories: (1) Realised or Reinterpreted; (2) Not Realised; (3) No Longer Relevant or Not Recoverable; (4) 21st Century Opportunities. Proposition 1 was "Protect the Griffin Legacy". Proposition 8 was "Promote the Griffin Legacy", with a key development being a "Griffin Institute – Permanent Exhibition and Archives" – the details are set out in *Attachment 2*.

This long-delayed implementation was raised with the University of NSW in March 2020, following its announcement the University would be expanding into Canberra and asking for its consideration of whether this expansion could include sponsoring the establishment of a new "Griffin Institute" in Canberra. The reply by the Vice-Chancellor was negative.

A similar proposal has since been raised in December 2022 with the National Archives, where much Griffin material can be found. It is yet to respond.

(E) Greater Artistic Recognition of both Walter and Marion

There is far greater recognition of the architect of America's capital, Pierre L'Enfant. In Washington DC, where the:

National Capital Planning Commission which oversees development in the city, says the Commission strives to fulfill L'Enfant's original vision while meeting the demands of a growing region. "We take [L'Enfant's plan] into account for virtually everything we do," he says. "I think he would be pleasantly surprised if he could see the city today. I don't think any city in the world can say that the plan has been followed so carefully as it has been in Washington."¹

As one further indication of the American respect towards L'Enfant, in 1909 [he was re-buried in Arlington National Cemetery](#), where his prominent white marble monument depicts L'Enfant's plan for Washington, D.C., with an epitaph below.

¹ **A Brief History of Pierre L'Enfant and Washington, D.C.** How one Frenchman's vision became our capital city. [Smithsonian Magazine, April 2008.](#)

By contrast with Canberra, the similarly-designed capital of Brazil, Brasilia, was awarded UNESCO World Heritage status in December 1987, some 27 years after its inauguration in April 1960². The work in Brasilia of its architect, Oscar Niemeyer, was recently described as “stunning modern architecture”³

Statues of both Walter and Marion would identify them in a relevant location such as the Parliamentary Precinct. Presently the statues in the precinct are of politicians: Sir Edmund Barton; Sir Robert Menzies; John Curtin; Ben Chifley; Sir John McEwen; Dame Enid Lyons; Dame Dorothy Tangney. Marion Mahony Griffin has been described as “the third great progressive designer of turn-of-the-century Chicago.”⁴ and statues would bring them together as they once were in life, now long separated in death.

This has been suggested to the National Capital Authority, but there has no recent indication of Government interest in such a proposal.

(4) Consider the importance of Australia's national capital in highlighting our sporting, cultural and tourism potential; and

When adequately financed, the current institutions such as the National Museum, National Archives, War Memorial, National Portrait Gallery and National Gallery are important drawcards. However, separate promotion is required to draw in Australians to visit their national capital and also take pride in what it has become.

(5) The needs of existing infrastructure and identifying future infrastructure needs to facilitate a), b), c) and d) above.

See the proposal in *Attachment 2* made to the National Archives of Australia, for a virtual Griffin Institute.

Yours faithfully

Peter Graves
Chair, Canberra Chapter
Walter Burley Griffin Society

² **BRASILIA. Preservation of a Modernist City.** [Conservation Perspectives](#), Spring 2013. The Getty Conservation Institute, Los Angeles.

³ **16 Examples of Stunning Modern Architecture by Oscar Niemeyer.** [Architectural Digest](#), 25 March 2016.

⁴ *Rediscovering a Heroine of Chicago Architecture*, [New York Times 1/1/2008](#)

T.o R 2 - Preserving the City-Wide Status and Heritage of Canberra – the National Capital

Local organisations seeking this city-wide heritage listing have faced continual opposition. The ACT Government and Chief Ministers have persistently opposed National Heritage Listing of Canberra. In 2007, specialist research, professional initiatives and public seminars, and a Legislative Assembly Committee [report Number 30 of October](#), produced a strong nomination of Canberra and the ACT as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve., which was subsequently dropped by the ACT Government. The ACT Legislative Assembly in March 2020 rejected by a vote of 24 (Labor and Liberals) to 2 (The Greens) a motion to work with the Commonwealth for National Heritage Listing.

A UNESCO Biosphere Listing is akin to World Heritage Listing and particularly appropriate for the ACT. There are UNESCO Biospheres elsewhere in Australia and globally, cities are now lining up to nominate, which accords closely with the Heffernan focus on climate change, and indeed on the Griffins' own form with sustainable (social, environmental and economic) development. Canberra has earned consistent international acclaim as a planned city. The Griffin Plan was described as 'one of the treasures not only of Australia but of the entire urban world.' in 1992 by Professor John Reps. [Marion Mahony Griffin's twelve design drawings are included on UNESCO's Memory of the World Program](#), equivalent to the World Heritage Register.

The designs reflect the Griffins' understanding that the built environment should interact with the surrounding natural environment. Griffin envisaged urban density, people movement and public transport in a city of horizontal forms, of about 5 storeys, which preserve a sympathetic scale relationship with the natural landscape, its mountains and the vistas of them. National Heritage Listing status would raise expectations and aspirations. As the National Capital, Canberra is a work in progress. National Heritage Listing is an incentive which would enhance Canberra's potential and prospects domestically and internationally.

To ensure this character and aesthetic of Canberra is retained for future generations, it should not be eroded away by poor decision-making. Untrammelled unsympathetic development should not be permitted nor encouraged. The national government, the National Capital Authority and the ACT government need to respect and care for this unique inheritance of the Australian people and Canberra residents and allow only sympathetic development to maintain the Griffins' vision and maximise Canberra's potential.

In May 2015, the ACT Chief Minister Andrew Barr, wrote to the-then Federal Environmental Minister Greg Hunt asking him to reject the heritage listing submission to prevent additional "regulatory burden" from being imposed, and business confidence and investment from taking a hit. "Canberra's special place as the capital is already more than adequately protected through the oversight of the NCA and our own planning rules," said Barr.

This assurance by the Chief Minister proved illusory in 2018, when the National Capital Authority approved the demolition of Anzac Park East Building and actively disrupted the symmetry at the bottom of Anzac Parade of the **Marion Mahony Griffin View** from Mt Ainslie. It appeared that this decision was made with reference to developments on Constitution Avenue, rather than the totality of the MMG View down Anzac Parade and its contemplation of the city of Canberra, the national capital.

Lack of Follow-up by ACT Government affecting Canberra's Heritage.

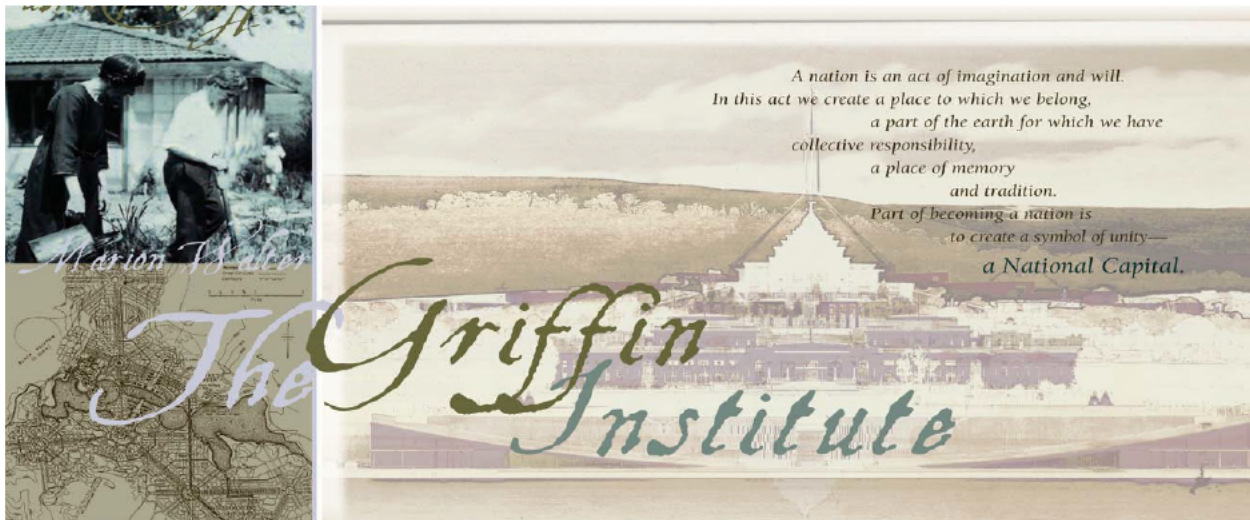
As indicated by the following example. the inadequacy of resourcing for the ACT Heritage Unit indicates the lack of ACT Government attention after such heritage listing. In 2011, the former Canberra City Garbage Incinerator was placed on the ACT Heritage List.

The Walter Burley Griffin Society maintains an interest in this incinerator because of the following:

The incinerator is of exceptional interest as one of the distinctive industrial buildings designed in the 1930s for the Reverberatory Incinerator and Engineering Company, particularly those by Eric Nicholls. Nicholls was a first-rate architect who learned directly from Walter and Marion Griffin and contributed much to the design of buildings for which Griffin is known.....The incinerator building, now within the Royal Canberra Golf Course in the Westbourne Woods arboretum, is used as a storage facility for the club's greenkeeper.

However, no follow-up was undertaken by either the Heritage Council or ACT Government. The Society had for many years been attempting to have the Royal Canberra Golf Club maintain this building in keeping with its heritage status. Under the *ACT Heritage Act 2004*, the Club has obligations to preserve the building in accordance with the incinerator's heritage values set out in the 2011 listing. It is also appropriate to note that the lease covenants require 'maintenance in good repair' and that the ACT Heritage Register entry is for *Canberra's Garbage Incinerator and its Immediate Surrounds*, presumably to see the building to full effect and integrity.

When the incinerator was recently viewed, it was apparent that all kinds of vehicles, equipment, materials and waste had been stacked untidily around the building. Via the Society's follow-up of January 2023, the Club was approached and has since responded positively to demonstrating its appropriate and on-going recognition and maintenance of the Incinerator's historical status and heritage listing.



PROPOSITION 8: *Promote the Griffin Legacy*

I profoundly believe that Canberra belongs among the greatest creations of man. And, if I may say so, Canberra is the most undersold work of architecture I know of.

Edmund Bacon, Executive Director of Philadelphia City Planning Commission, 1968

There is now a very high level of public interest in the life and work of Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin. An exhibition in 2002 at the National Archives of Australia, 'A Vision Splendid', which featured Marion's competition drawings, generated an unprecedented level of public and professional engagement. The listing of the 1912 competition drawings on the UNESCO Memory of the World Register has heightened interest, both in Australia and overseas.

The establishment of a Griffin Institute would provide:

- a central archive of Griffin documents, drawings and memorabilia;
- a library of published material concerning the Griffins, their life and work;
- facilities for scholarly research into the life and work of the Griffins, the history of Canberra (and other planned capitals) and other relevant design and town planning themes;
- gallery space for public exhibition of Griffin documents, drawings and materials; and
- a shop to market and promote Griffin material.

OBJECTIVES

- Promote the *Griffin Legacy*.
- Foster an understanding of the unique professional and artistic contribution of the Griffins.
- Provide a permanent archive and exhibition of the Griffins' philosophies, beliefs and cultural values.

STRATEGIC INITIATIVES

GRIFFIN INSTITUTE – PERMANENT EXHIBITION AND ARCHIVES

- Establish the Griffin Institute as a major centenary initiative to commemorate the 1911–12 competition to design Australia's capital city.

NATIONAL CAPITAL AUTHORITY PROMOTIONS

- Prepare further publications on the *Griffin Legacy*.
- Generate education and community programs about the history of town planning and the development of Canberra as the National Capital.

NATIONAL CAPITALS ALLIANCE

- Foster exchange with other National Capitals, and their planning and cultural development agencies, through the National Capitals Alliance (between Canberra, Washington, Ottawa and Brasilia).

Source: [The Griffin Legacy](#) (2004: 191).
National Capital Authority, Canberra

There is no centralised “Griffin Institute” site for the interested observer’s easy access and comprehensive understanding of the Griffins. Currently much material is dispersed as follows.

National Museum of Australia

It exhibits various **Knitlock** artifacts, including a brick-making machine.

National Library of Australia

The NLA maintains the important Collection of Eric Nicholls, who was Walter’s colleague and then partner from 1929. The extensive Collection consists of about 2500 drawings, lithographs, photographs, transparencies and postcards; 487 negatives; b&w ; 35 mm. 264 negatives : glass, b&w The finding aid: **Guide to the Papers of Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony collected by Eric Nicholls** is online at <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-251880603/findingaid>. The Eric Milton Nicholls collection, showing many digitised photographs of works attributed to Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony is online at <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-150140881>.

There are three further reference areas. The Guide to the Griffin and early Canberra Collection = <https://www.nla.gov.au/collections/guide-selected-collections/griffin-and-early-canberra-collection>. The Guide to The Donald Leslie Johnson collection of Walter and Marion Griffin documents = <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-248969925/findingaid>. The work of Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin in Melbourne, 1975 by Wolfgang Sievers = <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-143532157>. At just one institution, these listings demonstrate how dispersed are such materials on the Griffins.

Castlecrag, Sydney – a suburb developed by the Griffins in 1920s

The legacy of the [Griffins’ vision in Castlecrag](#) can be experienced in the physical environment of the streetscapes and landscapes, in the reserves and walkways, and in the buildings and the amphitheatre. It is evidenced also in the community’s memorials to Walter Burley Griffin — the planting of trees along Edinburgh Road by the Progress Association and Marion after Griffin’s death, the Bim Hilder fountain at the intersection of Edinburgh Road and Sortie Port and the bronze sculpture of Griffin outside the Griffin Centre shops.

Griffith and Leeton, New South Wales

For Leeton, Griffin proposed a new town centre around a prominent hill. Leeton got its circular street pattern and water towers, the first of which was completed in 1915, with their classic Griffin features. Griffin’s road pattern was adopted for the town of Griffith, proclaimed in 1916, but the scale of the centre and its architecture fell far short of the early vision. While the local economy has enjoyed economic prosperity in recent years, the town population in 2005 was barely half that envisaged by Griffin and Wade in 1914. Coloured perspectives on silk were also prepared for each town, the Leeton one rendered by Marion Griffin and these were mounted in fine cedar frames for exhibition.

Griffin Literature

There is a rich database for those seeking greater in-depth understanding of the architectural principles of the Griffins and their later lives. Especially notable are those of Assistant Professor Christopher Vernon at the University of Western Australia, who teaches design and the history and theory of landscape architecture. He is a leading authority on the lives and works of Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin, widely lecturing and publishing on the subject. More broadly, his research focusses upon architecture and landscape as collective expressions of identity, especially within the context of designed national capitals such as Canberra, New Delhi and Brasilia.