

**Submission to the ACT Legislative Assembly
Standing Committee on Planning and Environment**

*Inquiry into the proposed nomination of the ACT
as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve*

**Walter Burley Griffin Society Incorporated
Canberra Chapter**

The Canberra Chapter of the Walter Burley Griffin Society Inc. (WBGS) supports the proposal to nominate Canberra and the Australian Capital Territory as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. The membership of both the parent body and of the Canberra Chapter has been widely canvassed. This submission is endorsed by the Management Committees of both the Society and the Canberra Chapter.

The proposal for UNESCO Biosphere Reserve status is emphatically consistent with the primary **aims and objectives of WBGS**, namely:

1. to commemorate and promote a better understanding in Australia and internationally of the lives, ideals, vision and works of Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin
2. to promote the preservation and conservation of landscape designs, buildings and other works designed by or having an association with the Griffins.

Specifically, the Griffin Plan for the National Capital furnished the basic blueprint for the building of the National Capital and basic ongoing criteria for the subsequent planning of Canberra. As well as being **a planned city**, Canberra has throughout its history attracted leading planners, administrators, scientists, scholars, writers and artists; it has a rich cultural, social and political history; and is routinely regarded, internationally at least, as **a model of planned development**, creative urban design and environmental management.

Since the acceptance of sustainable development via the Brundtland Report (1987), the Rio Conference (1992) and, in Australia, the adoption of the National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development in 1992, it has been mandatory to work towards the synthesis of economy, society and environment. **Thinking sustainably** has become imperative. This submission focuses on the enduring legacy of the Griffins in regard to the Plan of Canberra and the development of an economically, socially and environmentally **sustainable city**.

The ACT is endowed with an abundance of advantages in respect of becoming a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. The **natural** environment of the ACT is especially rich in its unique diversity of geology, hydrology, fauna, flora, topography, climate, beautiful vistas, open spaces and ecological systems. It has robust and efficient **institutions** with respect to democracy, administration, management, research, education, land tenures, a sustainable economy, rich cultural history, community ethos and strong values and traditions of the “Bush Capital”, “Garden City” and “city in the landscape.”

The Griffins' design for Canberra

In 2002 the OECD reported on Canberra as one of a select number of “renaissance cities” around the world. As a consequence, the ACT Government developed **The Canberra Plan** (2004) based on a sustainability strategy that encompassed the comprehensive integration of economic, social and environmental themes and plans. The preamble to The Canberra Plan states “Canberra was born of a vision and a dream. The vision was of Australia as a unified federation. Canberra was to be the embodiment of that unity – a new style of Capital City. Walter Burley Griffin’s inspired design gave life to the vision.”

Griffin’s winning design for the international competition in 1911 to design the new national capital is universally regarded as a masterwork of urban and landscape planning. As Federal Capital Director of Design and Construction from 1913 to 1920 his work provided the basic blueprint for the development of the National Capital. His 1918 revised plan was enshrined as the initial statutory Plan of Canberra gazetted in 1927.

Griffin came to Australia as a world renowned planner and architect who had conceived “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.” Griffin’s vision was that every citizen would experience the meaning of democracy through the public landscape. By simply moving about the city and engaging in everyday life, the powers and responsibilities of government institutions, together with the rights and responsibilities of each individual, would become manifest.

An enduring legacy

Today’s Canberra legacy of Griffin and his wife Marion Mahony Griffin has many facets that continue to inspire, nurture and uphold Canberra’s status as a great planned city. Fortunately, there is a rich literature and documentation of this legacy. As time goes on, the Griffin legacy continues to yield validation, insights, criteria and ideas for a sustainable future Canberra.

The significance of the Griffin Plan has been well understood by international and Australian planners, architects, landscape architects and scholars. It is also important to note that there is a growing literature on the contributions to the planning and development of the National Capital by successors to Griffin, as well as regarding the contributors to the unique concept of Australia’s National Capital, such as poets, writers, statesmen and artists in the period 1890-1910.

The leading American town planner Edmund Bacon, referring to the Plan of Canberra, wrote in 1968 an article entitled “Canberra as a statement of world culture” where he stated “I profoundly believe that Canberra belongs among the greatest creations of man.” Subsequently he devoted a chapter on “Griffin and Canberra” in the second edition of his book *Design of Cities* (1974).

It is also notable that the Griffin legacy is an enduring and creative influence, as affirmed by the Griffin Legacy Project undertaken between 2002-2004 by the National Capital Authority and their 2004 publication *The Griffin Legacy*. The publication of Paul Reid's *Canberra Following Griffin* in 2002 similarly upheld and revived the Griffin Plan.

Griffin promulgated fundamental principles, inherent in his winning design for Canberra, his architecture, buildings, communal living, environmental ideals, writings and advocacy. The first may be described as harmony with and deference to nature, the teacher of the fundamental laws of life and provider of spiritual sustenance. Given their appreciation of nature gained in their formative Chicago years, both Walter Griffin and Marion Mahony transferred this interest to the characteristics of native vegetation in their new environment, particularly the Australian bushland. The Griffins acquired a good knowledge of the ecology and came to respect, conserve and utilize the Australian landscape in special ways. Here Griffin defined his objective as the "preservation of pristine loveliness." Their enthusiasm for indigenous trees and shrubs was far ahead of its time.

Second most important are the Griffins' democratic ideals, including self-reliance, independence of thought and productive discourse. Griffin's vision for Canberra sought to provide physical form and tangible reality to what he believed would become an ideal democracy in the new Australian Federation. The central triangle of Griffin's Canberra arranged the functions of government in relation to the life of the city to express the very nature and working of constitutional democracy. At one level, this exercise was a timeless, universal statement on the meaning of the democratic experience. But it was fixed in the Australian context by two devices: the alignment of the great triangle on the Australian landscape, the bushland reserves of Mount Ainslie and Black Mountain and the focusing of the avenues on the *Capitol*, a building that Griffin saw as uniquely expressive of Australia.

Third would be his devotion to "art" which he defined as "doing things right" – a pragmatic definition based on intelligent and informed creativity. His plans were an equation of site conditions and functions to be accommodated. "Form follows function and ...orderly cumulative ['organic' in his terms] growth is secured through thorough comprehensive systematic organization." His approach typified the resilience of and adaptation to nature that characterize sustainability processes.

From the material available to him in Chicago Griffin was able to grasp the significance of Canberra's regional setting; to completely visualize the site; to seize the strategic points; develop great vistas; adjust to subtle changes in relief; work with water, land and sky; and introduce as a common theme, the life-force of nature.

A fourth principle is Griffin's use of landscape spaces and vistas in setting out his organic city and National Capital. He crafted careful and symbolic relationships between built structures, demonstrating their affinity with the natural environment and enhancing natural landforms, particularly the vistas and their termination points. Scale, mass,

geometric design and horizontal built form were basic considerations whilst, in the words of Peter Muller (1976) "...creating a tapestry which would illustrate for all time the purpose for which this city was conceived, setting it apart from all other modern cities and making it truly, a work-of-art."

One of the benefits of proposing the ACT as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve should be to raise awareness about and enlarge the scope for drawing upon the Griffin legacy. The recent expansive and indiscriminate use of the Griffin "brand" by the NCA, architects, developers and entrepreneurs has produced widespread and unfortunate misunderstanding.

Griffin's Plan for Canberra and sustainability

Sustainability may be a recent term but many of its attributes were displayed by alert individuals and epistemic networks in the late 19th and through the 20th centuries, notably around 1900-1910 and in the decade after the Second World War. In this respect Walter and Marion were way ahead of their time. Considering their lives'-work, they present a framework through which sustainable development can be promoted and pursued. Theirs was a comprehensive approach and process that integrated economic, environmental and social objectives in adaptation to the practical imperatives they faced, based upon the best scientific data they could command and holding strong human, environmental and ethical values.

As Director of Design and Construction for Canberra until 31 December 1920, Griffin furnished a broad palette of sustainability, covering natural resource management, landscape enhancement, biodiversity, water and wastewater, economic self sufficiency, adequate infrastructure, public transport, community development, affordable housing. Detailed aspects of Griffin's plans for Canberra that illustrate principles of sustainability are summarized in the **attachment: Griffin's principles of sustainability**.

As interest in the Griffins continues to grow, their activities in locations other than Canberra will assuredly afford further illustration of sustainability philosophy and practices. The suburb of Castlecrag yields ample material on nature conservation and spirituality, social sustainability, economic efficiency and ways of individual and community fulfillment not dependent on the accumulation of material possessions. The National Museum of Australia has commenced a special study of Castlecrag in these respects; there is a considerable literature already from authors such as Professors James Weirick and Carrick Chambers.

ACT Leasehold and Statutory control systems

The ACT Leasehold system provides an ideal, potent institution for giving effect to sustainability objectives and natural resources management. There are no estates of freehold, whilst the people (both Australian and ACT constituencies) through the government are the ultimate landowners. Leasehold enables social, economic, environmental and land management objectives to be specified and achieved through

lease purpose clauses, rental, rates and covenants. In addition, particularly since the advent of self government in 1989, the ACT Legislative Assembly has enacted progressive and comprehensive statutes to meet contemporary demands for regulation and administration.

Conclusion regarding Benefits of UNESCO Biosphere Reserve status

The nomination and status would provide a structure, criteria and objectives for raising public awareness and focusing the attention of decisionmakers and interested citizens on issues of both the Griffin Plan and sustainable development for Canberra and the ACT and sub-Region. They should enhance conservation and development together with the most democratic, efficient and effective means of achieving the objectives.

Brett Odgers
Chair, Canberra Chapter
on behalf of the Walter Burley Griffin Society Incorporated

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Attachment

Griffin's principles of sustainability

There were many aspects of Griffin's plans and concepts for Canberra that are consistent with what today are called principles of sustainability. They can be summarised as follows:

Water recycling

Griffin recognised that water was too precious to waste. He planned that each valley of the national capital would be self-sufficient in terms of waste water treatment and recycling for landscape and horticultural use.

Biodiversity

Griffin's Canberra was to be a 'garden city' in which diversity of vegetation was a major feature. There were to be extensive parks and a variety of street trees were planted under his direction. An early priority was the establishment of urban forests, which contained a high proportion of Australian trees and supported the regeneration of the hills by temporary fencing to control stock and rabbits. . Protection of the water catchment areas by re-establishing forests to prevent erosion was also a high priority.

Nature and society

Griffin understood the special landscape of Canberra and was able to apply his principles of people and buildings developing in harmony with and enhancing the natural environment.

Economic sustainability

Griffin envisaged production horticulture to provide food for the community with market gardens located in the best soils within the city environs?. He also envisaged managed forests to sustain

construction of the city using the most advanced forestry techniques. He planned the provision of power by a hydro-electric power station at a dam on the Murrumbidgee River. Griffin's precept of local self-sufficiency was that suitable mixed industries should be nurtured to provide natural resources, materials and jobs, for example his forestry and the cork oak plantation experiments.

Transport

Griffin's Canberra was to have relatively densely populated residential suburbs with an efficient and extensive tram system utilising hydro-electric power. Everybody would live within five minutes walk of public transport. The national capital was to be linked to the main railway line between Sydney and Melbourne by a new line from Yass to Canberra and linking with to Cooma branchline at Queanbeyan. It would have had its main railway station in central Canberra on the northern side of the lake, with other stations located in the suburbs.

Social sustainability

Griffin planned a community environment that nurtured children and created safe, healthy and attractive environments for all citizens. He planned the schools to be at the heart of the residential suburbs, built at the centre of the hexagon street plans so that the children's space was safe at the centre of the community. In 1920 he designed cheap and attractive "artisans' cottages" for Canberra. He recognised that high-rise development caused congestion as in the American cities, and so planned Canberra "to have a horizontal distribution of the large masses for more and better air, sunlight, verdure and beauty." (p.30 *Walter Burley Griffin landscape architect*. Peter Harrison 1995, National Library of Australia).

The Griffins' work in Canberra, Melbourne and Sydney expounded ideals of community development as embracing collective and individual culture, physical and spiritual wellbeing, the arts, theatre, recreation and democracy. His Report Explanatory for Canberra emphasized the importance to society of respect for the constitution, stable democratic institutions and the history, heritage and prospects of the nation.

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