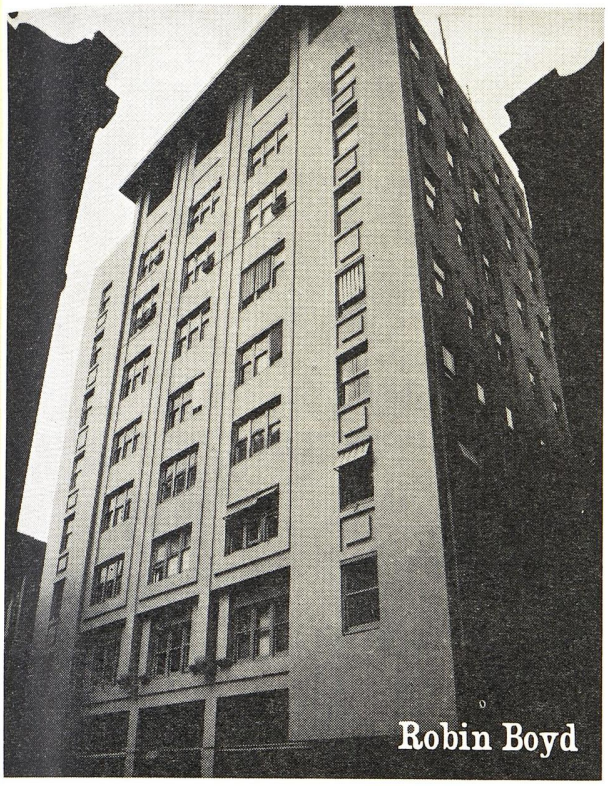


Robin Boyd

GRIFFIN IN MELBOURNE

Walter Burley Griffin (1876–1937) might be described as the brightest boy at Louis Sullivan's kindergarten, and the last graduate of the Chicago School. He was six years younger than Frank Lloyd Wright but regarded him as a contemporary. They shared an office for several years after 1900 and it seems certain that Griffin took charge of design at times when Wright was preoccupied with personal difficulties. In 1912 Griffin won the international competition for the plan of Canberra and went to Australia. To Wright's awful displeasure he took with him as his wife the star perspective draftsman of the office, Marion Mahony.

Today, of course, Griffin inevitably is measured against the acknowledged master, but in the early years of the century in Chicago there were some who saw the youngster Griffin as the more brilliant and erudite of the two. Griffin himself was genuinely modest, but if it came to a point he considered that he could do better than Wright. However, he never managed to get even as many opportunities as Wright did to prove his great talents. Canberra in his time was a fiasco. In Chicago, Sydney, and later in Lucknow where he died, he found modest success but also a good deal of professional frustration. His most productive period—his forties—and his most consistent run of sizeable commissions coincided in Melbourne during a ten-year period after he opened practice there in May, 1914.

For an artist at that time to be Down Under was to be down and out of the international picture. Thus the rest of the world knew practically nothing of this quiet American who won the competition for Canberra and then in pursuit of it disappeared into the bush. Yet in his Melbourne period he produced a family of buildings which might have created, had they been more accessible to the historians, one of the great reputations of the first half of twentieth-century architecture.

Griffin was a romantic idealist, the ideal being a civilization in which everyone lived at home with nature and each other. He wanted to help build an ordered environment of tranquil beauty in which men and women possessed of the same sort of goodwill that was natural to himself could live co-operative and creative lives. Architecture was essential to this vision, but it was not the dominating element. His second art, landscape architecture (he never called himself a town planner), was in fact of more visual importance. Like all great architects, he preferred trees. Intimacy with botany was one of his numerous academic accomplishments, or talents. He soon became an authority on Australian flora, and his own fingers were green. In his ideal community buildings would appear suddenly, like natural outcrops, as one followed gravelled paths round the contours through a supernatural landscape. Here and there a space would open wide to form a playground on a level plane, or an outdoor theatre where the ground sloped steeply enough. And here no doubt one would find the community repertory company in rehearsal of a play written by one's neighbour, or a small group deep in liberal discussion. Private property lines might be a legally necessary convention, but they would not be marked on the ground. If there were any fences, these would not be used for separating private titles; on the contrary they might run at right angles across property lines and were intended only to define or compose spaces visually. One of Griffin's first works in Melbourne was the planning of an estate directed towards this vision on the steep hilltop of the then outer suburb of Eaglemont, and his last major work in Australia was the much larger self-contained community of Castle Crag on the precipitous banks of a reach of Sydney Harbour.

There may have been in this concept little that was new or not to be expected from a liberal North American of the early century and an architect of the Chicago School. The remarkable thing was that a man holding dear this sentimental vision should fall in love with Australia (while never relinquishing his U.S. citizenship) and should choose to try to realize the vision in, of all places in the nineteen-twenties, Melbourne. Here he found a text-book example of non-co-operative living, with the world's greatest mileage of fences per head of population.

At that time about a million people lived in some two hundred thousand separate houses in what was already a giant sprawl of suburbs. The Norman Shaw brickwork and Art Nouveau fretwork of the houses must have distressed Griffin less than their gardens of annuals where nothing grew higher than the six-feet paling side-fences that guarded the privacy of each allotment.

Then why did Griffin choose Melbourne? Because he was a born crusader and saw in us potential material for salvation. He had no serious formal religion but he was moved religiously by an intense conviction in humanity and total democracy. And while he was theoretically involved with the concept of human equality he discovered that the most humble tradesman on an Australian building job took it for granted and practised it with sometimes devastating effect. One of Australia's few traditions was the idea of the noble common man, and in this it nursed a good deal of idealistic thought.

None the less, Australia also had a stiff conservative streak which was frustrating enough to her own native-born artists and exasperating to an eager newcomer. Griffin was always at loggerheads with the stodgy building regulations which were framed to protect the conventional suburban domestic image. He wanted to cut about three feet from the regulation ceiling height. He considered the laws which demanded double brick walls to be a conspiracy of the brick companies. The building authorities grew to dread his approach. Never angry, always impeccably polite, he slowly wore down most of their resistance. He patiently devised acceptable compromises such as a coved ceiling which gave his houses the regulation ceiling height in the centre and the low perimeter walls which were essential to his own horizontal image of domestic comfort. Soon after arrival he built, outside the regulations, a children's playhouse in a garden at Eaglemont. It was twenty feet square under a low pyramidal roof and had an alcove in each corner, for washing, cooking, dressing and sleeping. He called it jokingly the house of five rooms, each room being twenty feet square. Griffin and his wife Marion moved into it, and lived in it for years, to the great irritation of some neighbours and the local council.

The Griffins had arrived in Melbourne amid fanfares of publicity. He addressed the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects in 1913 and in the nine months before he opened practice he was approached by several of the most successful architects in the city and offered a partnership. He declined all such offers, but he did accept a commission from the architect A. S. Eggleston to consult on the design of a city office building. This was Collins House, 1, a ten-storey block facing narrow Little Collins Street. Griffin treated the façade in plain Chicago style with strong vertical supports holding recessed strips of windows and spandrils. He extended a few of the vertical members above the parapet and made them hold a sort of pergola or sunshade over the roof, and he added three odd little triangular balconies from the roof garden projecting out over the street. All this displayed to Melbourne for the first time, and at quite large scale, the character of Griffin's design: simple, strong, and likely to be decorated sparely but arbitrarily with chunky prismatic ornament personally designed for the occasion. Many who had been carried along by Griffin's reputation and personal charm were shocked by

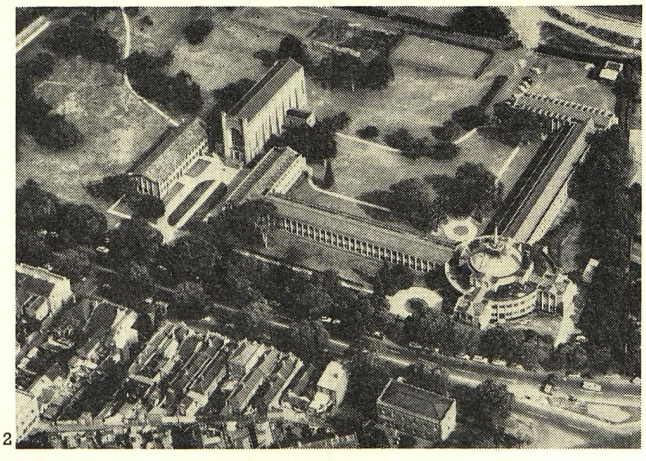
this first example of his work. *Building* magazine, which had supported Griffin strongly during his political difficulties in Canberra, was appalled. 'Freakish and faulty architecture,' it wrote in December, 1915. 'The attention of the authorities should be drawn to this danger. . . .' This was mild compared with later criticisms, when his clients also were berated for choosing him. Yet despite all opposition his private practice grew.

Griffin was retained by the Commonwealth Government at a thousand guineas a year on a half-time basis to develop the Canberra plans. He had rooms for this purpose in a Government building, and he did his private work in the next street, in an office at 395 Collins Street. The latter was a little American colony, at a time when Americans were hardly known in Australia. There were only four of them at first: Walter Burley and Marion Griffin, his brother-in-law Roy Lippincott—for whose children the garden playhouse had ostensibly been built—and George Elgh from the Wright office, who had helped on the Canberra competition plans back in Chicago on the promise of a trip to Australia if they won. The first Australian to join them was a young graduate dissatisfied with the training in Gothic and Classical details at Melbourne University: Edward Billson. Today Billson recalls an atmosphere of co-operative devotion to Walter and to the work, which lasted long into the night and sometimes through week-ends, for the Griffins had no time for clocks and no family to draw them home. Besides, Walter often worked a full day at the Government office and had to attend to his private work after hours.

Marion attracted Walter as an opposite. She complemented him in social contact as she did in the office. He was gentle, never angry; he recognized no enemies even among those, like Frank Lloyd Wright, who treated him most disgracefully. She was older than he, a relentless debater on her favourite subjects such as Single-Taxing, and a fighter for Walter's rights. He visualized form in three dimensions and was not interested in drawing, nor very good at it. She was the brilliant draughtsman of the perspectives which helped to make Wright's early reputation in Europe, and of the romantic visions which helped to win the Canberra competition.

Griffin lived for ideas. When he found the one he sought to solve a specific problem he would describe it with the help of the roughest sketches to the draughtsmen. The only exception to this which Edward Billson can remember was when Walter himself drew completely the façade design for the Chinese Nationalist Association building in Melbourne's Chinatown district. But then this was not an idea building; it was just the remodelling of an old member of a brick terrace. It was pure decoration, and Griffin, unlike Louis Sullivan, had no guilty conscience about his enjoyment of his own ornaments. In his early efforts to establish a practice while feeding five mouths he was pleased to accept a few unenticing remodelling commissions. As well as the Chinese building there was a big restaurant, the Café Australia, in 1916, and an enormous *Palais de Danse* in 1920 at the beach resort of St. Kilda. In all of these he relied heavily on ornamentation and in the last mentioned he even introduced, for perhaps the only time in his life, ornaments that could not be drawn with a 45-degree set square. Whenever he had the opportunity to create form freely, and whenever he was clearly most satisfied with the form he created, he would restrict the ornament in order not to sully the form. But he never could resist a little prismatic decoration somewhere.

His first big straightforward commission in Melbourne was Newman College, a new Roman Catholic college at the University of Melbourne, built in 1916. He planned it in two-storeyed wings



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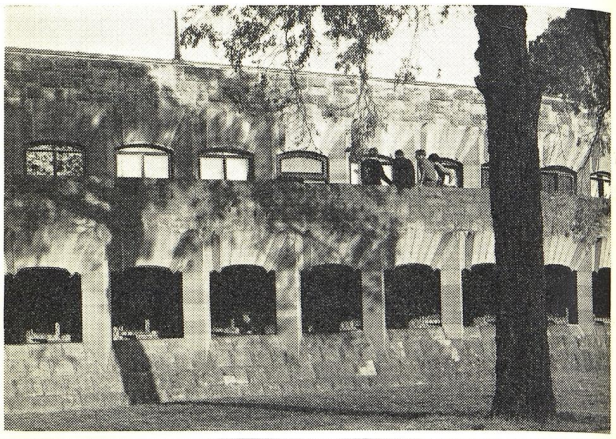

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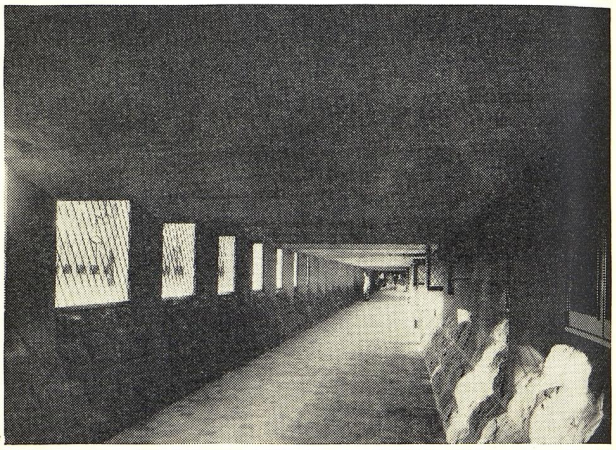

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NEWMAN COLLEGE 2, *Griffin's work on the right: two arms from the circular hub. The chapel (left) is where he planned it, but it is not his design. He intended a symmetrical plan about the chapel, reflecting the original wings.* 3, 4, *the open cloisters.* 5, *the refectory.*

spreading wide open arms from refectory and office hub, 2. A module of seven feet applied everywhere. The students' rooms in their long straight rows were approached from open cloisters, 3 and 4. Rough faced stone walls were built with a relaxed, if structurally redundant, batter. The refectory, at the centre of the hub, was roofed by a reinforced concrete dome with triangular ribs crossing on the soffit, 5. In places an opening was cut out below the crossing of two curved ribs, revealing a Gothic arch shape which gave symbolic satisfaction to the client. The dome was surmounted by a tall thin spire surrounded by twelve smaller pinnacles representing the twelve apostles. A gallery circled the refectory rotunda at first floor level, and through arches at intervals one looked down at the diners or up to the square lantern in the centre of the dome. Here in confined and curving spaces, and again outside in the long straight perspectives of the cloisters, Griffin displayed for the first time his fascinated ability with spatial patterns. As he developed this further in later buildings he was more inclined to allow the ornament to lapse.

Griffin had a number of shortcomings as a practising architect, not the least being his lack of concern for money. He would seek a design idea for a project patiently, but once he found it patience would desert him. The idea would consume him and the project. A module must be applied ruthlessly; a spatial pattern or structural theme had to be pursued to the last closet. When the idea had been developed to his satisfaction in his mind - and recorded on sketches, the intensity of his interest was inclined to diminish. He avoided the problems of site and administration as much as possible. He made few supervisional visits to the jobs. Building finish or craftsmanship had no special fascination for him. But he had one rare quality, invaluable for a practitioner, which made it possible for him to maintain always, in the very face of professional calamity, an indomitable will to experiment and a conviction that any invention was better than a convention.

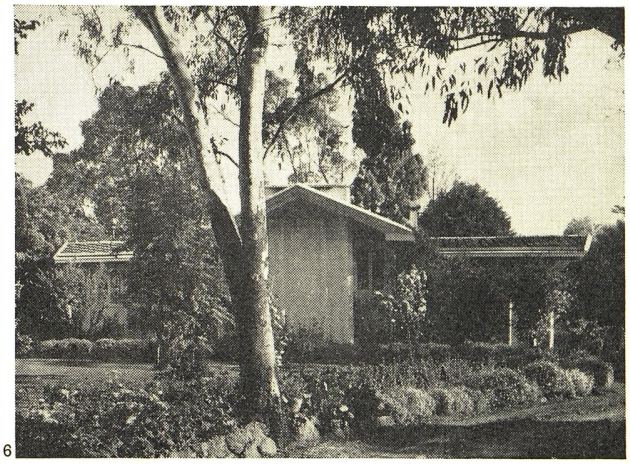
This happy quality was an incapacity for worry. When his little inventions went wrong, as they did fairly frequently for want of thorough investigation—he was so sure of his hunches—he rejected personal involvement and he would never allow any blame to rest on the design idea. He would not pass the blame specifically to any other person, but he wrote off any minor practical shortcomings of his buildings against the unco-operative and contrary nature of the building industry as a whole, and especially perhaps to the 'she'll do, mate' attitude of the Australian carpenter. So he persisted in such devices as using four-inch nails as pivots for hanging casement sashes and strange devices for fastening cupboards or for constructing doors. He felt somehow that one of his obligations for the privilege of being an architect was to design everything anew in every building from the ground up. Thus he was led to the development of the structural system which he patented under the name of Knitlock.

Knitlock was based on a series of interlocking precast concrete blocks for walls and another for roofs. They were erected almost dry. Griffin intended them to be so easily handled and foolproof that any handyman could use them to erect his own house. (The do-it-yourself movement was already well established in Australian suburbia in the 1920s.) Knitlock was remarkably similar to the concrete block system used by Wright in the USA at the same time, which has given rise to a good deal of speculative comment about the origin. Edward Billson, who detail-designed the whole Knitlock patent system, knows that it was devised by Griffin painstakingly from first thoughts, whatever the stimulus. The basic Griffin block was plain and twelve inches square. Two of them, locked back to back with staggered joints, made a wall two inches thick. At every third block horizontally the wall thickened into a vertical rib in which reinforcing rods were threaded. Windows were fitted where required between the vertical ribs. The roof-blocks or tiles were also square, but were laid on the diagonal. The two lower edges of each tile had downturned flanges which fitted over the upturned upper edges of the tiles laid below them.

Knitlock ran headlong into trouble with the building authorities, and many municipal councils never accepted it. But Griffin succeeded in convincing a few councils, including that of the rich suburb of Malvern, and went on to use Knitlock in a dozen or so houses, small offices, and pavilion structures. The modular ribs and low-pitched diamond tiled roofs gave these buildings a sedate and unmistakable character. It would have been impossible for the most inexperienced amateur or cynical builder-designer to make a bad house of Knitlock without deliberately distorting it. Two or three of Griffin's exercises in the system in 1923, including the Paling and Salter houses in Toorak, 6, deserve listing among the finest house designs of the century. Yet they are mentioned in none of the histories; even the Australian Raymond McGrath forgot them when he compiled his book *Twentieth Century Houses* in London in 1934. Two little holiday cottages above the bay at Frankston, called by Griffin 'The Gumnuts' and based on the original children's garden house, still stand as little gems of integrated design in the pure Knitlock form.

Griffin's best known and most popular building was the Capitol theatre, 7. It was one of the super cinemas of the era, combined with shops and office space and built in the heart of the city between 1922 and 1924. In designing it he made some daring innovations and took some perilous risks. His task was to combine on the narrow city site a cinema seating two thousand, full theatre stage facilities, shops at street level, grandly spacious foyers, and a heavy stack of office floors rising above to the 132-feet height limit then in force. The intricate interlocking of functions that he planned called for structural gymnastics, including offices suspended on tensile droppers from giant beams spanning the width of the site, and one major internal lattice beam through which one walked to the dress circle. All of this was in reinforced concrete. He believed in the organic nature of monolithic construction and never employed steel frames. No permit for the building as a whole was ever issued by the city authorities. The bewildered and sceptical inspectors reluctantly passed it floor by floor as each alarming element was completed.

The interior of the auditorium, 8, was the climax of Griffin's Melbourne era. At the outset one of his clients showed him a handful of coloured crystals he had picked up in Vienna. He wanted a ceiling



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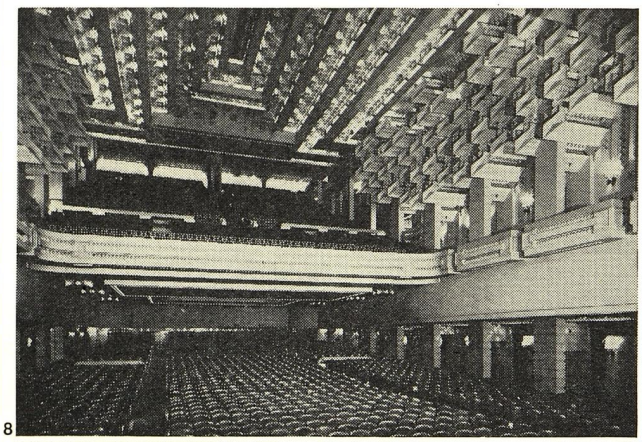

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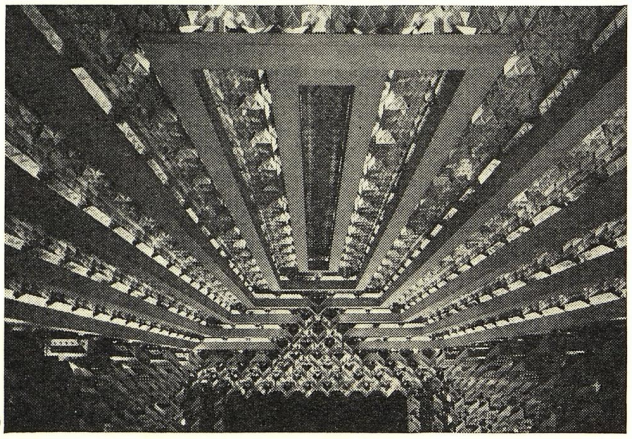

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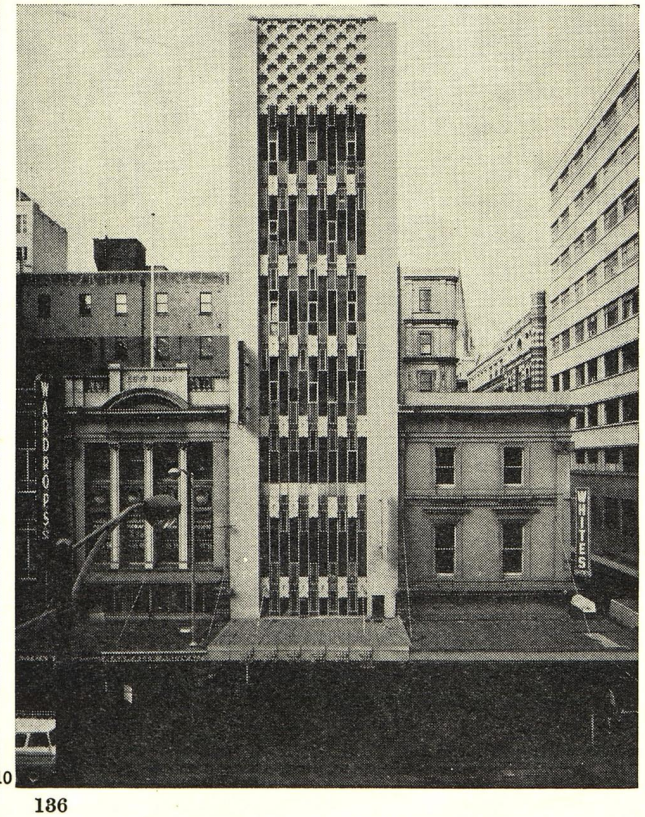

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like that. Griffin accepted the idea with enthusiasm, but he saw the crystals enlarged a hundred times, and, to be practical, made of plaster, but transformed by crystalline light. His idea was to paint the white plaster with the glow of thousands of primary coloured lights—red, blue and green—concealed in projections of a ceiling intricately broken to give acoustical diffusion. A sort of prismatic torpedo shape some ten feet long became the basic element, cast in fibrous plaster and repeated scores of times. These projected from the upper part of the walls like horizontal stalactites, and above them the ceiling itself rose in a hollow pyramid of wide white solid bands separated by strips of prismatically textured plaster, 9. Six thousand coloured globes were concealed in the solid torpedoes and bands, and each was controlled by rheostat from a light-organ console backstage. The ceiling came alive between movies, the 'paint' continuously changing colour, flooding and retracting between the bands, spotting and diffusing in new shades, then glowing as a mysterious fluid white made up of all the lights together.

Those who knew Griffin best invariably speak of his gentle strength and integrity, and are inclined to ascribe a Christlike quality to him, and to remark that he was too good for this world. Yet he was not foolish in his humility. The Capitol was erected on a cost-plus-profit basis and not unexpectedly was subject to improvisations and improvements along the way. When the structure was at its most promising stage, a shell awaiting finishing trades, while the prefabricated torpedoes were building up mountainously in the plaster workshop, Griffin received a stunning blow. Costs were rising relentlessly and his client, A. J. Lucas, was counselled by others to the effect that the impractical and arty architect was squandering his money. Griffin received out of the blue a letter dismissing him from the project. He filed the letter. A few days later he called on his ex-client and explained that he had an idea to improve the building. Mr. Lucas reminded him that he was no longer the architect. Griffin dismissed this notion. He said that the idea would return several thousand pounds annually by increasing the rentable area. Lucas repeated that Griffin was sacked, but with less conviction. Griffin showed him the idea: offices could be suspended round the perimeter of the auditorium outside the plaster ceiling. This was agreed, and the letter of dismissal was never mentioned again.

Griffin's last important building in Melbourne was Leonard House, 10, a beautiful miniature curtain-walled office block completed in 1925. It was a project which began with Leonard Kanewski, the owner, borrowing £1,500 from his architect to finance his purchase of the land. While Leonard House was building the Griffins made plans to move to Sydney to develop Castle Crag. The office continued in the charge of E. M. Nicholls, but the practice trailed off sadly into the Depression. After Griffin left, his personality and reputation soon faded from Melbourne memory. The estates he planned filled with ordinary suburban houses and high fences, and the community playground spaces he left at the rear of properties filled with weeds. Knitlock was used a few times by ex-members of the office, but no outsiders took it up, and no handyman did it himself. The Capitol theatre management continued to paint the ceiling with light for many years, but changing the coloured globes from the catwalks behind the plaster was a slow job, and they had other worries: parking and television. Some years ago the coloured globes were replaced by white ones, and no one played with the rheostats any more. In February, 1964, the cinema closed. Now a shopping arcade is being driven through the stalls. About 1950 the spire and apostles on Newman's dome gave trouble and were removed.

But gradually Melbourne's appreciation of Griffin is growing again. The official revival in 1956 of the Griffin plan for Canberra, the naming of that city's artificial lake 'Lake Burley Griffin' and the appearance of Griffin's head on a postage stamp, all reflected a revival of interest. Every threat to a Griffin building arouses voluble and partly effective opposition. There is still hope that the Capitol theatre will be reopened soon, in a shallower version above the arcade. His best house, the Salter House, in Glyndebourne Avenue, Toorak, appears to be safe now after a scary episode, and the spire and apostles are to be replaced on Newman College under the direction of the present rector, Father Michael Scott. The first of a number of long-promised biographies of Griffin, that by James Birrell,* appeared in 1964.

Griffin did not bring the first breath of modern architecture to Melbourne. When he arrived two men at least were practising original architecture far removed from the traditional spirit, both ten years older than Griffin: the somewhat antic Art Nouveau man, Robert Haddon, and the erratic but advanced Functionalist, Harold Desbrowe Annear. But Griffin accelerated development beyond the normal Australian rate for progress in the first half of the century. His influence was partially direct, his personality and works acting on his Australian colleagues—Billson, E. M. Nicholls, Frederick Ballantyne and others—whose work for some years was strongly coloured by his approach. This influence faded in time, but for years longer his work remained a healthy irritant to the architectural establishment and an inspiration and stimulation to young designers. And today Melbourne claims him as her own.

* *Walter Burley Griffin*. By James Birrell. University of Queensland Press. Price 105s.