

THE PLANNER OF CANBERRA

Walter Burley Griffin, an American architect, won the international competition for the layout of Canberra in 1912. He settled for a while in Australia, where he designed houses, theatres and incinerators.

IN 1936, as a result of winning a competition for a university library in Lucknow, he migrated to India, where he died in 1937 after falling off a scaffold. He was 61.

Griffin started his career in Chicago. His influences were Richardson and Sullivan, the latter being the founder of what is called today the Chicago school, a breakaway movement from the traditional eclecticism of the time. Another great influence was Frank Lloyd Wright, his partner at one time, and his senior by seven years, although the author of this book tries to show that the influence worked the other way around.

The history of Canberra is fascinating. To start with, the competition was not approved by the Royal Institute of British Architects as it was not restricted to registered architects and the assessors were not specified. As a consequence, no British architect member of the institute could enter.

The assessors were divided in their judgment and finally the Minister for Home Affairs, King O'Malley, was called in to make the final choice. The first prize, £1,750, went to Griffin, the second, £750, to Eliel Saarinen, from Finland. He was the father of Eero Saarinen, one of the judges of our Opera House competition.

WALTER BURLEY GRIFFIN, by James Birrell.—University of Queensland Press. 203 pp. 105s.

Immediately after Griffin took up his appointment as Federal Capital Director of Design and Construction his troubles started. The Administrator and the Department of Home Affairs were hostile and tried their best to sabotage the scheme. A Royal Commission, set up in 1916, vindicated Griffin but did not alter the official attitude. Griffin's contract



BURLEY GRIFFIN, a photograph taken at the time he won the Canberra competition.

with the Government expired in 1919 and he left his Canberra appointment.

So the plans were laid aside and Canberra hibernated. Authority pursued the usual approach of improvising and absolving itself from responsibility by calling everything temporary.

It was not until 1956, when Sir William Holford, the world-famous town-planner, was called in, that the Griffin plan was rediscovered as being the solution to most problems of Canberra. In 1959 a National Capital Development Commission was set up to implement the scheme. It seems to be working in the right direction, although I find it disturbing that no mention of it is made by the author in his acknowledgments of generous helps.

Architecturally, Griffin belongs to the spirit which expressed itself after the end of the last century through the movements of Art Nouveau, Jugend style,

Secession, Stijl, etc. It is a spirit of romanticism, of rejection of historical styles, and search for the right contemporary expression of the architect. Rejection, of course, does not exclude discovery of new historical styles, and pre-Columbian architecture was one of the ingredients of Frank Lloyd Wright and Burley Griffin's architectural concept.

Griffin did exert a strong influence on Australian domestic architecture and so managed to delay the introduction of modern European architecture by at least 20 years—a good thing, maybe.

At their best, his followers understood his preoccupation with fitting buildings into the landscape, his feeling for local materials, his control of space. At their worst, they imitated his decorations, also shunned flyscreens. Either way, the houses suffered from too much architecture.

Already in the twenties, Griffin was an anachronism. World War I drained Europe of emotions. Romanticism was out. A simpler approach was needed. This simpler approach made itself felt slowly in Australia.

This book is a good summary of Griffin as an architect. I hope another book will follow to give us Griffin and his contemporaries as people. The relationship between Wright, Griffin and Marion Griffin, his wife, and former assistant to Wright, their impact on the intelligentsia of Melbourne, the reaction of a democratic country to the "democratic architectural principles" professed by the Griffins, all will make fascinating reading.

Both introductory and finishing chapters of this book, linking Griffin's work with the past and future, suffer from oversimplification which detracts from the balanced and well-documented treatment of the rest. Even so, one has to congratulate Mr Birrell for producing such a timely and essential book.

The book is well presented, although some of the drawings could be larger and the captions more readable. There is also some confusion on page 77 whether the designs were submitted before or after the judging of the competition. The price, 105s, is exorbitant.

—GEORGE MOLNAR.

Compare
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by GC
"in
The Nation"
16.5.1964

by
George
Molnar, the architect
NOT the
Andersonian
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