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National Museum of Australia Review Secretariat
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Exhibition Proposal for Consideration by the Review Panel

In response to the National Museum's call for public submissions in the current review of its exhibitions and public programs, the Walter Burley Griffin Society Inc submits below a proposal for consideration by the Review Panel.

Introduction

Since its formation in 1988, the Society has worked tirelessly to preserve Griffin heritage in Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra and to promote understanding and appreciation of the Griffins' important contribution to Australian history. Some of the high-profile activities the Society has been involved in have included campaigns to preserve the Griffins' 'No 1 house' in Castlecrag (subsequently restored by the Historic House Trust of NSW), the Pyrmont incinerator, Sydney (subsequently demolished) and the Capitol Theatre, Melbourne (now owned and being restored by RMIT).

The Society has also contributed expertise to Griffin exhibitions and films, including most significantly *Beyond Architecture: Marion Mahony and Walter Burley Griffin in America, Australia and India* at the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney (1998) and the Film Australia documentary *City of Dreams* (2001). Most recently the Society has spearheaded efforts to prevent the dispersal by auction of the Eric Nicholls' archive (Nicholls was the Griffins' partner in later projects) in an attempt to preserve this extremely important collection of Griffin material for the nation.

Exhibition Proposal

Despite the wealth of material in public collections relating to Marion Mahony and Walter Burley Griffins' careers, and the success of past temporary exhibitions (most recently the highly-acclaimed *A Vision Splendid*

exhibition at National Archives), there is still no permanent exhibition devoted to the Griffins in any Australian institution. For this reason we would like to suggest that the National Museum of Australia, as the most appropriate national institution, considers developing a permanent display celebrating the significance of the Griffins' work in Australia in general, and in Canberra in particular.

Such an exhibition could draw on the National Museum's own collection, which includes the important Griffin-designed *Knitlock* machine for his patented *Knitlock* construction system, but also on material in other Canberra institutions (National Archives and National Library) and in state institutions such as the Powerhouse Museum, the Historic Houses Trust and the National Gallery of Victoria. The exhibition would provide a key national focus for the documentation and interpretation of the Griffins' careers and would also present an opportunity to document Canberra's early history through the remarkable integrated vision of the Griffins' Canberra plans.

The Society believes a permanent exhibition on the Griffins would have broad general visitor appeal and that the national scope and significance of its themes and content would be particularly relevant to the National Museum's frame of reference, as expressed in its Act. The Griffin story stretches over three decades of Australian history - from Walter and Marion's arrival to supervise the planning and construction of Canberra in 1914, to major projects in Melbourne in the 20s, to the development of their 'ideal' community in the Sydney suburb of Castlecrag in the 20s and 30s. It integrates design, architecture, landscape architecture, town-planning, social and political history in a unique way that will present many opportunities for public programs relevant to student and specialist audiences as well as the general public. The Griffins' story was not only one of architectural endeavour, but of two people with an uncompromising and startlingly modern vision of the relationship between society and the environment, man and nature. This vision was important in early 20th Century Australian history and remains relevant today.

Having said that, the Griffin story is also a complex one and this proposal can only be a notional outline. Should the National Museum wish to pursue this exhibition proposal further the Walter Burley Griffin Society would be happy to put the considerable expertise and experience of its committee at the Museum's disposal.

We trust you will give our proposal your consideration in the context of the current review and look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,

Ferry Whillop
for (secretary)

Andrew Kirk
President