

Walter Burley Griffin and the design of Canberra

Walter Burley Griffin was the original designer of Canberra. He won the Federal Capital Design Competition, launched by King O'Malley, Minister for Home Affairs, in May 1911.

Burley Griffin had developed in a professional environment of radical European and North American architects. He was greatly influenced by the City Beautiful and Garden City movements which dominated town planning in the late 19th and early 20th century. Scholars have also detected a strong classical influence permeating Burley Griffin's design of Canberra.

Burley Griffin's wife, Marion Mahony Griffin, also an architect, collaborated with him on the design competition entry, and is known to have prepared the design drawings that accompanied the Burley Griffin entry.

The design for Canberra

Burley Griffin (entrant 29) was one of 137 entrants in the Federal Capital Design Competition. His original design drawings (on cotton cloth) as well as those of three other entrants noted by the judges – D Alf Agache (rated third); Griffiths Coulter and Caswell, an Australian firm (rated first in a minority report of the chairman); and Eliel Saarinen (rated second) – are held by the Archives in record series [A710](#). Photographic copies of some of the other unsuccessful competition entries received are also held in series [A763](#).

Director of Design and Construction

King O'Malley, as Minister, appointed a Departmental Board to oversee construction of the National Capital, based on the winning design. Disapproving of adaptations made to his design, Burley Griffin lobbied for his engagement to personally oversee construction. He was appointed Federal Capital Director of Design and Construction in October 1913 and the Departmental Board disbanded.

The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works, which first met in 1915, had regular references to examine aspects of the early construction of Canberra, and Burley Griffin frequently appeared as a witness. Committee reports and transcripts of evidence of hearings for the 1915–20 period are in the bound volumes of Parliamentary Papers. A [typed transcript of evidence](#) given by

Burley Griffin to the Committee hearings on Grading and Survey of Canberra Streets (which is annotated, probably in his hand) is held by the Archives in series AA1964/71.

Opposition to Burley Griffin

Burley Griffin's position as Director of Design and Construction was challenged by his critics. Accusations of poor administration and delays in construction led to the Royal Commission on the Federal Capital Territory. The Royal Commission, which reported in February 1917, confirmed Burley Griffin's appointment.

With the decline in wartime spending, work on the capital slowed. Burley Griffin's contract was due to expire in December 1919, however it was extended monthly until December 1920. Changes in government administration led to the establishment of the Federal Capital Advisory Committee, from which Burley Griffin was excluded because he rejected the conditions of appointment.

Records held in Canberra

Federal Capital Design Competition

Title or description of record	Date range	Series number
<u>Drawings submitted in the Federal Capital Design Competition</u>	1912	A710
<u>Photographic copies of unsuccessful designs submitted in the Federal Capital Design Competition</u>	1912	A763
<u>Design of the lay-out of the Federal Capital City of Australia as projected by the Departmental Board</u>	1912	A767

Appointment as Director of Design and Construction

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
<u>Proposed appointment of Commission to control the Federal Capital Territory</u>	1910–51	CP487/6, 10
<u>Agreement between Minister of State for Home Affairs and Walter Burley Griffin</u>	1913	A110, FC1913/2427
<u>Walter Burley Griffin – letter dated January 1913 re his plan</u>	1913–16	A110, FC1916/186

Design maps and plans

Title or description of record	Date range	Series number
<u>Walter Burley Griffin's plan of an arboretum</u>	1915	AA1966/33
<u>Plan of city and environs</u>	1918	A9332
<u>Contour map of Canberra, dated and signed by Burley Griffin</u>	1919	AA1964/66

Administrative records from Burley Griffin's period

Title or description of record	Date range	Series number
<u>Correspondence files, Federal Capital series</u>	1910–17	A110

<u>Correspondence files, Federal Capital Office</u>	1913–17	A214
<u>Correspondence files, administrative works</u>	1915–16	A784
<u>Correspondence files, Federal Capital Office, first system</u>	1916–17	A791
<u>Correspondence files, Federal Capital Office, second system</u>	1917–21	A792

Appearances before Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
<u>Typed Transcript of Evidence given at Committee hearing on Grading and Survey of Canberra Streets</u>	1916	AA1964/71
<u>Correspondence files and other papers of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works</u>	1915–62	A11960
<u>Canberra streets – grading and survey</u>	1915–16	A11960, 1916/263

Royal Commission on Federal Capital Administration

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
<u>Royal Commission on Federal Capital Territory</u>	1902–17	A1, 1917/13695
<u>Federal Capital Administration – report of Royal Commission</u>	1917–20	A192, FCL1922/736

Creation of the Federal Capital Advisory Committee

Title or description of record	Date range	Series, item number
<u>Correspondence with Walter Burley Griffin in regard to his position on the Federal Capital Advisory Commission</u>	1918–21	A199, FC1921/76
<u>Walter Burley Griffin – agreement with Australian Government</u>	1920	A6006, 1920/12/31

For further information

- *Fact sheet 35 - Administration of the Australian Capital Territory*
- *Fact sheet 60 - Design and development of the National Capital*