

Artists



# In the Beginning

Melbourne’s Capitol Theatre is considered one of the city’s most celebrated picture theatres. It is a theatre known not only for its beauty, but also its storied history, witnessing many openings and closures since its unveiling in 1924. Despite its tumultuous past, The Capitol remains a building of architectural significance and a world-class cinema space – a permanent and important fixture of Melbourne’s cultural landscape.

As noted by Ross Thorne in *Picture Palace Architecture in Australia*, the Capitol Theatre was the first of three grand picture palaces to be constructed in the city of Melbourne during the 1920s, seating an audience of more than 2000 and providing Melbourne with blockbuster movies and live performances.

The theatre opened with a grand launch on Friday 7 November 1924. There was considerable public interest in this event, for it was a historic screen culture first for the city of Melbourne, which had never before seen a cinema of such scale and opulence. *The Argus* reported that six police officers were ‘detailed to control the crowds that sought admittance’. The theatre itself was the prime attraction for the opening, as evidenced by an advertisement in the papers on 8 November 1924, which boasted: ‘Australia’s theatre of wonders: Melbourne’s Greatest Attraction!’

## CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

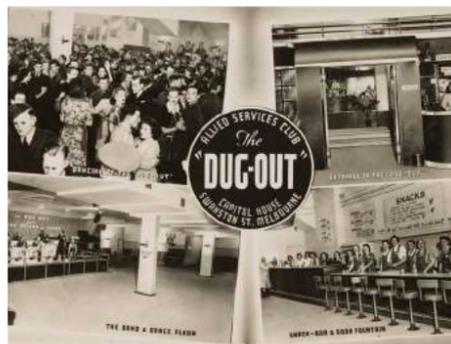
Throughout the 1920s, the Capitol Theatre raised the experience of cinema-going to heights previously unseen in Melbourne. This is exemplified in a description of the 1926 premiere of *The Gold Rush* (Charlie Chaplin, 1925), where the original 2,137 seating capacity proved inadequate to the demand:

*The house was practically sold out before the doors were opened at seven o’clock, and the lines of cars that drew up to the theatre as eight o’clock approached [were] reminiscent of an opera first night. Prior to the commencement of the big feature, Horace Weber on the grand Wurlitzer was heard in several solos, including Charlie Chaplin’s ‘Sing a Song’, and the Capitol Operatic Orchestra, under Stan White, assisted by the organ, gave a spirited rendering... Then as the lights slowly faded out in the auditorium, we were introduced to the first scene in the prologue... The lighting effects, the music and the atmosphere, which is preserved throughout the whole presentation, breaks new ground in picture presentation in Australia...*



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As Trevor Walters has observed in *The Picture Palaces of Melbourne: A History of Melbourne's Picture Theatres*: '[t]hese were the days of showmanship [sic.] and presentation, where a night at the pictures was truly an experience to enjoy'. Enclosed within the plastered ceiling of the Capitol Theatre were thousands of coloured lights. This unique and opulent lighting design provided emphasis during a film's screening, and was synchronised with the orchestra that once played live at sessions from a moveable platform.

A night at the Capitol Theatre was a viewing experience for the senses.

The Capitol Theatre played a role in the social history of Melbourne, hosting some of its longest running and most popular seasons. One such example was *Ryan's Daughter* (David Lean, 1970), which was the last MGM 70mm film released. As noted by Walters, it 'screened into its second year and filled the Capitol every night' and after ten months and 800-plus screenings, the print deteriorated and the theatre had to secure a new one. Another was the long-running American disaster film *Towering Inferno* (John Guillermin, 1974), which was exhibited with the ceiling lights flashing red to emphasise key scenes. The venue left an indelible impression on visitors who recalled not only the film they saw, but also what the experience was like – lasting memories that are unlikely to be inspired by a visit to a modern Hoyts or Village cinema.

#### ARCHITECTS

Renowned architects Marion Mahony Griffin and Walter Burley Griffin were the masterminds behind the Capitol Theatre's elaborate design, which has been considered some of their greatest interior design work.

The husband and wife duo were forerunners of early twentieth-century modernism. Their building techniques were innovative (for example, the Knitlock concrete block system they used in the construction of the Capitol building), and they created an architectural feat that took the technology of the day to its maximum: the ceiling of the Capitol Theatre was able to open up to let the smoke out – a feature that, according to the Lovell conservation report, ceased to be used in the 1960s. They were visionaries in applying ornaments, fixtures and fittings, introducing a style that had not been seen before in Australia and also gave Melbourne what has been described as a 'spiritualist vision in architecture'.

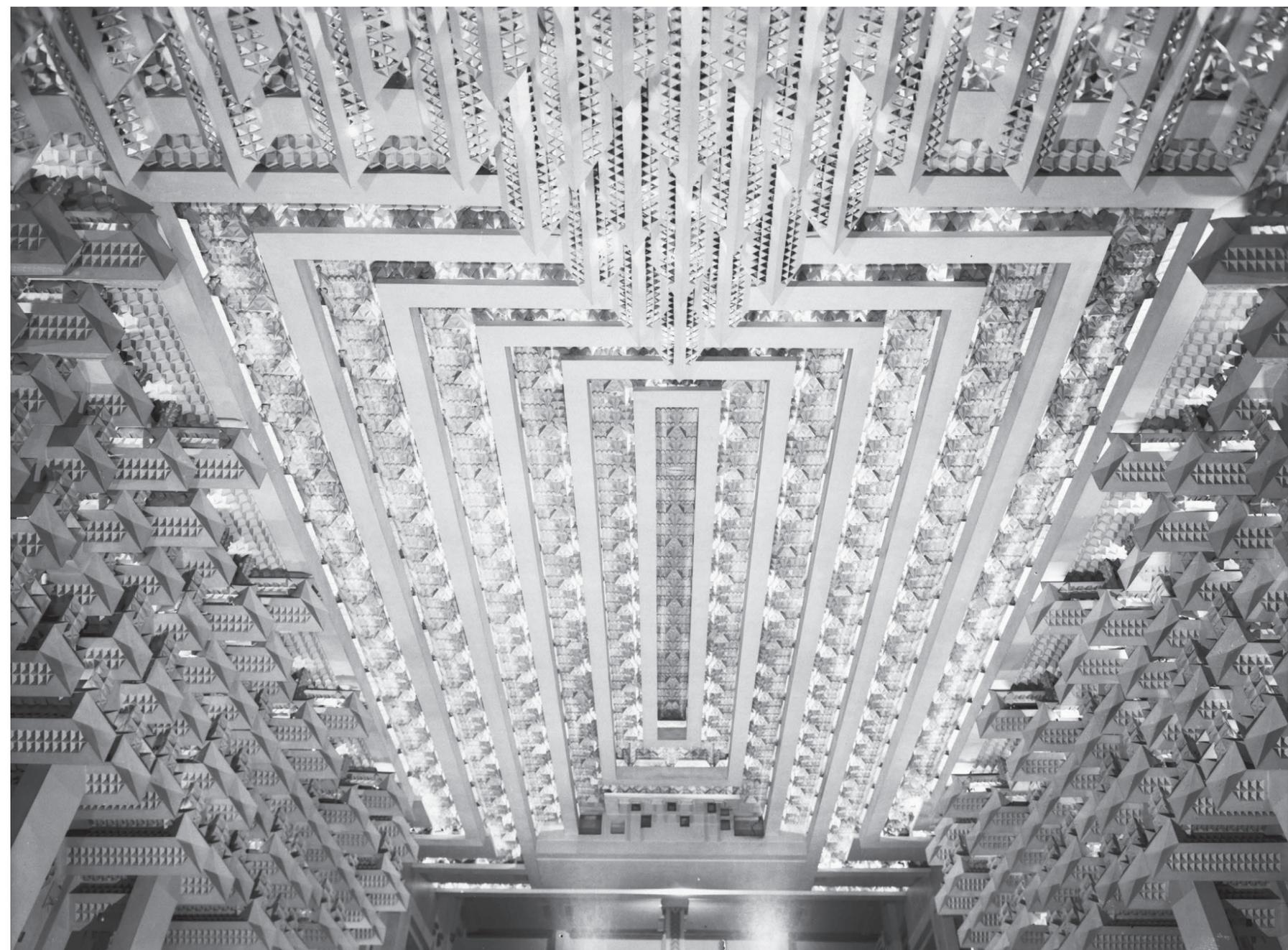
The Capitol remains one of the Griffins' greatest works. To see their greatest legacy just look up – the history and magnificence is in the detail of the ceiling and its intricacies.

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**RMIT ACQUISITION AND REACTIVATION**

In April 1999, RMIT University purchased the theatre after extensive negotiations. Since then, it has remained an asset of the university. RMIT have done a great deal to The Capitol to ensure it continues to function. In 2000, the theatre was equipped with state-of-the-art audio-visual equipment for student lectures and conferences; inaccessible foyer spaces were recommissioned, and refurbishment stages continued. Between 2005–2006, the auditorium ceiling and foyer were painted, new carpet was laid in the auditorium and new seating was installed.

By 2014 the work required to keep the Capitol Theatre open became so substantial that the building had to be closed to the public. The RMIT Capitol Theatre Appeal was launched in 2017 to raise the funds required to refurbish the iconic landmark.

Thanks to an outpouring of philanthropic support, the Capitol Theatre was reopened in 2019 by RMIT as The Capitol, and is now a contemporary centre for culture, education and innovation. It will host more than 500 events and expect over 100,000 visitors each year.

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# Capitol Ideas

‘Australia’s Theatre of Wonders: Melbourne’s Greatest Attraction!’ trumpeted newspaper ads for the opening of the Capitol Theatre in November 1924. Almost a century later, the grand crystal-inspired auditorium still has the power to instil wonder and awe. Among architectural historians, however, it’s ideas, more than the theatre’s iconic coloured lighting, that illuminate the architecture and dazzle the mind.

The husband and wife architectural team of Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin imbued the Capitol building with democratic ideals, references to architectural history, mysticism and mythology. Most obviously the cavern interior is redolent with nineteenth century transcendentalist beliefs in the power of nature.

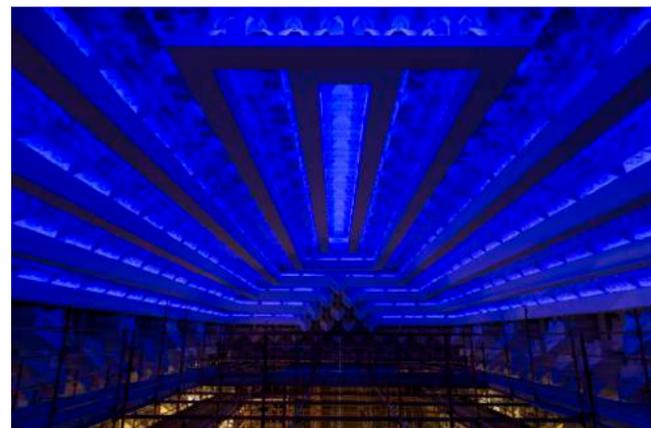
While the main auditorium ceiling remains and restoration has taken place on the foyers, to grasp The Capitol’s full effect we need to picture the ‘picture palace’ when it was first built (before the 1965 alterations eroded the Griffins’ mighty entrance and replaced it with a shopping arcade). Visitors new to the idea of cinematic spectacle were drawn off the street beneath giant pillars. Theatre-goers would enter the lobby, climb the ‘waterfall’ of stairs, or enter the cave-like stalls, before emerging in the splendour of the main crystalline auditorium. Here was the convergence of nineteenth century ideas on nature, spectacle, and the modern metropolis – and their masterpiece.

The American architects’ majestic vision was conjured in reinforced concrete by the company Sir John Monash co-founded, Reinforced Concrete and Monier Pipe Construction Company, and crafted in plaster and hemp using local artisans Picton Hopkins. The Griffins’ design had the drama of both the cinematic ‘reveal’ and sublime nature. Additional subtle hints of the magnificence within surrounded visitors as they walked inside: the entrance lobby and foyer columns displayed simple ‘flowering’ prisms, while the foyer carpet’s orange arrow motifs abstracted and flattened the crystalline forms.

‘The auditorium was like a glowing furnace in the middle of the building and it was animated by the representation of light as part of a life force,’ says Dr Conrad Hamann, architectural historian and associate professor at RMIT.

The Griffins arrived in Australia in 1914 after winning the Federal Capital Design Competition for Australia’s capital city, Canberra. The couple divided their time between Sydney and Melbourne. Sydney because they were keen outdoor types who enjoyed the landscape and particularly canoeing. Melbourne because that’s where the temporary seat

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The Griffins were often misunderstood. So much so that Mahony divides her unpublished memoir *The Magic of America* (over 1,400 pages written between 1940–49 and now published online) into four 'battles'. And yet as Hamann points out, during their 21 years in Australia the Griffins realised 80 or more buildings, many during the Great Depression when any work was hard to come by.

Still tensions did follow them. 'Building magazine painted them as "freak architects",' says Hamann. And, according to architectural historian Dr Jeffrey Turnbull, they are still branded by many as theosophists and Frank Lloyd Wright-lite – copyists because they had both worked with Wright. Neither description is accurate, says Turnbull, a senior fellow at the University of Melbourne, co-editor of *The Griffins in Australia and India: the Complete Works of Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin* (1998) and author of the monograph *Walter Burley Griffin: The Architecture of Newman College, 1915–18* (2018).

'Nobody understood Griffin's architecture because they didn't understand his sources and what they meant,' says Turnbull. 'Similarities arise between Wright and Griffin because they

both shared the legacies of Henry Hobson Richardson and Louis Sullivan and their emphasis on horizontality and expression of materials.'

Nor were Griffin designs reductively modernist.

'Griffin did not zero-in on one logical solution, one pattern,' says Turnbull. 'Any Griffin pattern reflected many sources, which gave that pattern its authority. It was demonstrably universal.' Indeed, it's the richness of esoteric references that excite Turnbull and Hamann. 'Pluralist,' according to Hamann. 'Eclectic,' Turnbull calls him.

'Griffin was a conceptual designer who – as Marion writes in her memoir *The Magic of America* – had an "amazing, encyclopaedic memory" for compositional architectural patterns, occidental and oriental, from ancient and modern times,' says Turnbull.

Take the Capitol façade's six piers, grouped in threes by a pair of caps. 'It's a favourite motif of Griffin,' says Turnbull. 'One of the sources of the capped motif is discussed by one of Griffin's favourite writers, William Richard Lethaby, author of *Architecture, Mysticism and Myth* (1891). One of Lethaby's archetypes is what he called the Chaldean gate of the sun, which has two pylons and a frame suspended between them.'

The Capitol's piers also contain a local contextual reference. According to Hamann the six piers respond to the giant order of pilasters and columns on the Melbourne Town Hall opposite. Inside The Capitol's foyers and auditorium are further references to Lethaby's archetypes. A series of stepped ceilings resemble a pyramid or ziggurat. In addition to quoting Lethaby, the ziggurat form pays homage to two ancient buildings.

'It's based on the ancient mausoleum of Halicarnassus [now in Turkey],' says Turnbull. 'But the ceiling is also the 'negative' form of a Hindu temple from northern India that appears in the frontispiece of James Fergusson's *History of Indian and Eastern Architecture* (1876). Fergusson's books on the history of the world's architectural styles were a vital resource for Griffin. In his writings and lectures Griffin often cited Fergusson's views.' (In the mid-1930s the Griffins moved to India where Walter died in 1937.)

In the auditorium the highest 'step' of the pyramid serves a clever practical purpose. The roof opens to the sky in two places to passively extract cigarette and cigar smoke.

Almost postmodern in its pluralism the Griffins' architecture is 'complex and contradictory', says Hamann. 'It has multiple themes running in it simultaneously. The Griffins fit that model of "more not less". It's not about paring down and ultimate refinement. They were modernist to a significant degree, but they were doing other things as well. The Griffins' strength was in their ability to infuse their forms with an immense array of meaning.'

And yet despite Griffin's gift for memory and incorporation of historic references, as transcendentalists the Griffins believed in the power of intuition and nature.

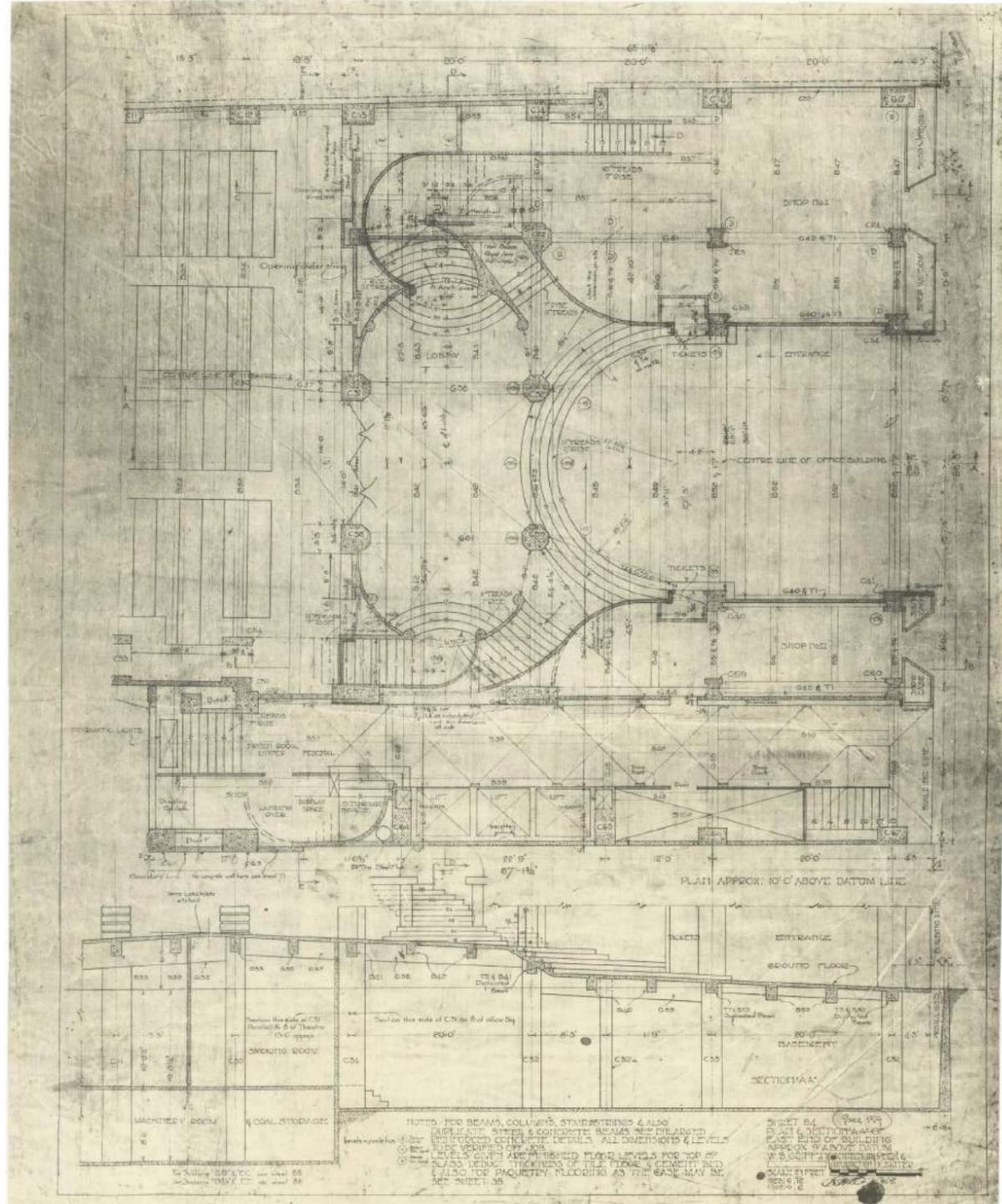
'Griffin would find the greatest authority in the compositional pattern being intuitively formed, rather than logically derived,' says Turnbull. 'He held the transcendental belief that your soul is your means to have a conversation, as it were, with the creator. Your intuition is your connection with the creator.'

Architecture's role was to be naturalistic.

'It was the [transcendentalist] architect's responsibility to make buildings relate to nature and natural phenomena, topography, materials, a style of living in the artefact that you created. Doing so would elevate the spirit.'

*“Griffin was a conceptual designer who had an amazingly encyclopaedic memory for compositional architectural patterns, occidental and oriental, from ancient to modern times”*

Architecture



# Paving the Way to Modernity

By the arrival of the 1920s, the architecture of Melbourne was still predominantly Victorian. It was a city of wide streets and open spaces lined by ornate Edwardian and Victorian façades, and the buildings which were regarded to have architectural distinction, such as Parliament House and Saint Patrick’s Cathedral, were largely of the nineteenth century.



The arrival of the Capitol House building in 1924 brought about a seismic change in Melbourne’s landscape, heralding the city’s transition into modernity. This change was not just a result of new techniques involved in the building’s construction, or the astonishingly detailed design of the Capitol Theatre’s interior, but of the forward-thinking approach to the building’s function.

Looking to accommodate the changing lifestyles of twentieth-century Australians, the building’s proprietors had envisioned combining shops, offices, accommodation and entertainment all under the one roof, ensuring that Capitol House would remain in use day and night. In order to carry out this vision they turned to a pair of American architects that had been prolific, but not without controversy, since arriving in Australia: Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin.

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### THE ORIGINAL ARCHITECTS

Proponents of the Chicago-based Prairie School of architecture, husband and wife architectural team Walter Burley Griffin (born 24 November 1876) and Marion Mahony Griffin (born 14 February 1871) were first drawn to working in Australia through their involvement in the international design competition for the Federal Capital of Australia, which they won in 1912.

Despite providing the winning design, the Griffins faced years of resistance and interference in their plans, and in 1920, their contract was terminated, and significant alterations were made to their original designs. Despite this tumultuous relationship with the Australian government, the Griffins executed over 80 projects while in Australia, including Collins House (1915), Newman College (1915) and the Café Australia (1916).

The Griffins' work on the Café Australia (a renovation of the Vienna Café, which had been a target of vandalism due to anti-Austrian sentiment brought on by the trials of World War I) was of particular importance, as it introduced the Griffins to A.J.J. Lucas, a prominent Greek-Australian businessman and the café's owner. Lucas was one of the primary forces behind the construction of the Capitol Theatre, and it was likely the prior relationship between Lucas and the Griffins that led to their involvement in the theatre's design.

Though the design of the Café Australia is said to have marked the beginning of modernist architecture in Melbourne, it is with the Capitol Theatre that the Griffins made their biggest impact on the city's changing face.

A big part of this impact was the copious use of newer building materials such as steel and reinforced concrete. In fact, so much steel was used in its construction (700 tons of bar steel reinforcement and 500 tons of structural steel, in addition to 12,000 tons of concrete), that there were concerns during the design process about being able to maintain an adequate supply. These modern materials allowed the building to cater to modern concerns (including greater fire safety, for instance), but their increased strength over traditional building materials also allowed for the building's more daring feats of construction. These included the cantilevered verandah over the building's entrance (which initially drew heavy opposition from the Melbourne City Council), and, of course, the spectacular design of the auditorium's unsupported ceiling. But while the building was notable for its grand ideas, there was also a great deal of effort put into the smaller features, such as the intricately detailed light fixtures and window panels seen throughout the building (many of which were likely the work of Mahony).

Still, while the innovative design and impressive detail work may have made the most impact on the minds of the Melburnians of the time, it was the sheer size of the building which heralded the great changes on the way for the city. As one forward-thinking commentator said: 'Although today it is ultra-modern and said to be the last word in construction, maybe before another century passes it will be but a dwarf in a city of taller structures. Melbourne is merely in its infancy. It is bound to grow up.'

*“Melbourne is merely in its infancy. It is bound to grow up”.*

#### OPPOSITE

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## MARION MAHONY GRIFFIN

Born in Chicago on 14 February 1871, Marion Mahony's early years were marked by major upheaval, with the Great Chicago Fire forcing her family to flee the city later that year. Though no doubt a traumatic experience, their relocation north of the city to the developing suburb of Winnetka proved fortuitous for Mahony's early development. Growing up in Winnetka, whose fledgling community held strong liberal intellectual values, she was exposed to many new ideas. Perhaps just as importantly, Mahony was surrounded throughout her childhood and adolescence by a circle of strong, independent women, her mother and aunt among them, who regularly engaged in social activism and encouraged Mahony's intellectual pursuits.

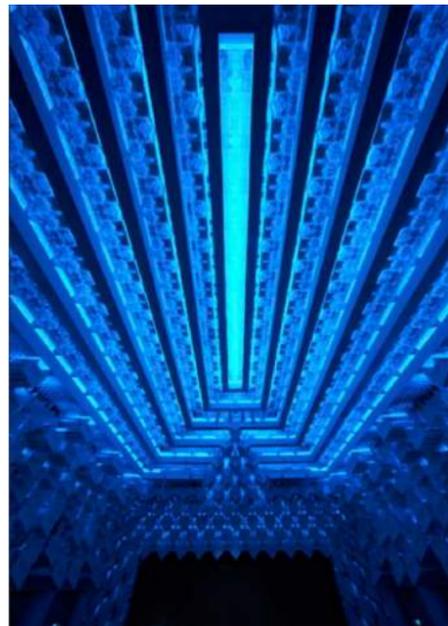
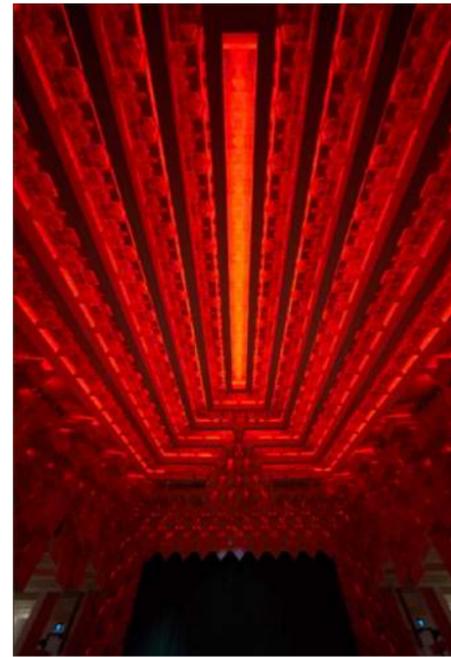
In addition to these female role models, Mahony's decision to further her education was likely influenced by her cousin, Dwight Perkins, an architect who had studied at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Supported by the daughter of one of her mother's friends, who helped her study for the entrance exams in addition to funding her education, Mahony followed in her cousin's footsteps, enrolling at MIT in 1890. In 1894, she became only the second woman to graduate from the institution's school of architecture, following Sophia Hayden in 1890. Mahony returned to Chicago, and worked with her cousin for a time before coming into the employ of Frank Lloyd Wright, with whom she would continue to work for well over a decade.

During this time she continued her trailblazing career arc, and in 1898 became the first woman in Illinois – if not the entirety of the United States – to be licensed as an architect. She also cultivated a reputation as an exemplary draftsman, illustrator and designer, though her position as a woman in a male-dominated industry meant that her contributions were frequently overlooked or downplayed. After Wright's departure for Europe in 1909, Mahony stayed on at her former employer's practice for a time, working under Hermann von Holst. In 1911 she married another of Wright's former employees, Walter Burley Griffin, which began a romantic and professional partnership that would last until Griffin's death in 1937. The two opened their own office together, and began collaborating on a number of projects, perhaps most importantly the aforementioned design competition for the Federal Capital of Australia.

It has been speculated that Mahony's watercolour renderings of the Australian landscape were instrumental in winning the competition and the contract, yet the winning design is often credited to Griffin, with Mahony going largely unmentioned. Indeed, as with her earlier work in the United States, Mahony's contributions during her work with her husband in Australia were significant, but frequently unheralded. This may have been a sign of the times, but it is likely also a result of Mahony's own sensibilities, as her reported model for the way women – and married women in particular – should act involved staying in the background and making sure everything ran smoothly. This modesty likely contributed to the relative anonymity of her works, an anonymity which for the most part still persists. Even so, architectural historians agree that much of the Griffins' highest quality work can be credited to her designs. In Australia, this included much of the interior design work for both the Café Australia and the Capitol Theatre, and, most notably, the extraordinary design of the Capitol Theatre's ceiling.

Over half a century since her passing, the circumstances of Mahony's life and work have yet to attain the recognition they deserve. Nonetheless she remains a trailblazer when it comes to the advancement of women in the workplace, and an immensely talented and influential architect in her own right.





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