GRAND VISIONS OF AN IDEAL CITY: DEMOCRACY, CHICAGO AND THE GRIFFINS’ CANBERRA PLAN

Dr David Headon, Chief Minister’s Department, ACT Government, IHuG Visiting Fellow

Conference Room, Sir Roland Wilson Building, Bld #120, McCoy Circuit, Canberra

When Walter and Marion Griffin’s entry #29 won the international competition to design Canberra (on 23 May 1912), he was interviewed shortly after by the New York Times. In the interview, Griffin stated: ‘I have planned a city not like any other city in the world. I have planned it not in a way that I expected any government authorities in the world would accept. I have planned an ideal city—a city that meets my ideal of the city of the future’. It was a bold and precocious statement, one that linked him, in one memorable sweep, to the robust tradition of nineteenth-century American idealism that had in part shaped him, and to an Australia before the Great War still inextricably connected to the optimism and thirst for technology so prevalent in the decades before Federation. This paper will explore some of the cultural (and design) links between Australia and the United States, a century ago—links that prompted American critic Joseph Jones to refer to the two nations as ‘radical cousins’.

When Walter and Marion Griffin’s entry #29 won the international competition to design Canberra (on 23 May 1912), he was interviewed shortly after by the New York Times. In the interview, Griffin stated: ‘I have planned a city not like any other city in the world. I have planned it not in a way that I expected any government authorities in the world would accept. I have planned an ideal city—a city that meets my ideal of the city of the future’. It was a bold and precocious statement, one that linked him, in one memorable sweep, to the robust tradition of nineteenth-century American idealism that had in part shaped him, and to an Australia before the Great War still inextricably connected to the optimism and thirst for technology so prevalent in the decades before Federation. This paper will explore some of the cultural (and design) links between Australia and the United States, a century ago—links that prompted American critic Joseph Jones to refer to the two nations as ‘radical cousins’.

David Headon is a cultural consultant and historian. Formerly Director of the Centre for Australian Cultural Studies (1994-2004), and Cultural Adviser to the National Capital Authority (2000-2007), he is now History and Heritage Adviser for the Centenary of Canberra (Chief Minister’s Department, ACT Government), and an Adviser to Senator Kate Lundy, Minister for Multicultural Affairs. Dr Headon is a regular commentator on cultural, political and social issues on ABC television and radio (regional and national). Over the last six years he has presented a series of segments for ABC TV’s 7.30 Report on Canberra’s rich vein of Centenary history. Dr Headon is also a Visiting Fellow at the ANU (College of Arts and Social Sciences), a member of the ACT Place Names Committee and the Territory Records Advisory Council. He was Vice-President of Manning Clark House from its inception in the late 1990s to 2011. His publications include: North of the Ten Commandments—a Collection of Northern Territory Literature (1991), The Oxford Book of Australian Sporting Anecdotes (1993), The Abundant Culture—Meaning and Significance in Everyday Australia (1995), League of a Nation (1996), Canberra—the Guide (1997), Our First Republicans (1998), Makers of Miracles—the Cast of the Federation Story (2000), The Best Ever Australian Sports Writing—a 200-Year Collection (2001), The Symbolic Role of the National Capital (2003) and Canberra Red—stories from the bush capital (2013). Dr Headon was the project co-ordinator, editor and co-writer of the national award-winning The Griffin Legacy (2004). In 2001, he was awarded the Centenary Medal.