

## Canberra and Mexico City: an early design dialogue?

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Walter Burley and Marion Mahony Griffin's victory in the 1912 international design competition for Australia's new capital city Canberra propelled the couple out from under the shadow of their former employer Frank Lloyd Wright. Central to their submission's success, the Griffins' plan encapsulated an almost worshipful regard for the future city's rugged site. Most striking is the plan's symbolically-charged, crystalline geometry. Crucially, this modular system not only accommodated, but was also informed by, and accentuated the site's irregular landforms. The remarkable structural dialogue between the plan's geometry and the site's topography has attracted considerable scholarly attention. When seeking to identify its compositional origins, many have concluded that the Griffins' design cannot be 'understood simply in terms of either late nineteenth century City Beautiful models or Howard's Garden City principles'. Given this, some have ascribed the design's structure to the 'secret' formulas of ancient cosmological and other esoteric sources. This paper, however, argues that the Griffins drew upon more immediate, exoteric sources. These sources, in turn, are to be more accurately identified through an investigation of the couple's own pre-Canberra projects. This alternative interpretation features works produced during Walter Burley Griffin's early (ca 1900) and little-known tenure with Italian-American architect Adamo Boari.

Adamo Boari is today remembered almost exclusively (if at all) as the architect of Mexico City's Palace of Fine Arts. Almost no attention has been given Boari's considerable experience as an urbanist. Beginning with work on national infrastructure projects in

Brazil, Boari next practiced in Chicago. There, he apparently worked for Daniel Hudson Burnham at the time of the World's Columbian Exposition. Later sharing an office with Frank Lloyd Wright, Boari was soon immersed in Chicago's progressive design milieu. Although recognised as a singular achievement, Boari's Palace of Fine Arts was, in fact, but one component of his broader initiative to transform the city centre of the Mexican capital. In this urban design endeavour, Boari also developed, partly informed by ancient Meso-American technique, a modular geometric system as an urban ordering device. Sharing his elder employer's Meso-American enthusiasms, the young Griffin similarly formulated his own proportional systems. In parallel with re-establishing Boari's position within a town planning, this paper concludes that his Latin American urbanism offered the Griffins an important precedent when conceptualising their exoteric design for the Australian capital.

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