

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person

Entry ID: AWE2103

Mahony Griffin, Marion Lucy

(1871 - 1961)

Born 1 January, 1871, Chicago Illinois United States

Died 31 December, 1961, Chicago

Occupation Architect

Summary

Canberra's initial depiction as a civic utopia was captured and communicated by the hand of Marion Mahony Griffin. A remarkably talented draftsman, Mahony Griffin was responsible for the plan and perspective renderings which accompanied her husband Walter Burley Griffin's entry for the 1912 design competition for the new Australian capital. Lithographed onto cambric, the exquisite panels fanned out over twelve metres, shining with the golden, burnished splendour of the Australian bush. Conceived and created in less than ten weeks during a bitterly cold Chicago winter, Mahony Griffin enshrined a distinctively Australian landscape on the winning design, without ever having been to the southern site. Her grand vision was finished only when 'toward midnight of a bitterly cold winter night, the box of drawings, too long to go in a taxi, was rushed with doors open ... to the last train that could meet the last boat for Australia'.

Marion Mahony Griffin's creative force has hesitantly received richer recognition as her prowess as an architect and an artist have continued to be seen in a more independent light.

Details

Born Marion Lucy Mahony in Chicago, Illinois in 1871, Marion Mahony was the second woman ever to graduate from the architectural program at the prestigious Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In 1898 Marion Mahony became the first woman in Illinois to be licensed to practice as an architect, pioneering women's participation in architecture in the US. After beginning her career working with her cousin, architect Dwight Perkins in Chicago, she went on to spend fourteen years with Frank Lloyd Wright, becoming his chief draftsman and architectural renderer.

As a principal of the Prairie School, Frank Lloyd Wright became an architect of world renown. Marion Mahony his 'capable assistant', as he acknowledged her, escaped any recognition for decades to come. Although her thesis, 'The House and Studio of a Painter', articulated design elements that would become hallmarks of the Prairie style – rooms freely communicating with each other, lit by large groups of windows, with a workspace attached to the same axis as the house and courtyard – the credit extended to her during her time with Wright was limited to her decorative talents.

Even handicapped by these slights of perception, Marion Mahony's gifts shone regardless. The iconic, Japanese-style presentation drawings and watercolours which helped create Wright's international reputation were Marion Mahony's delicately defined incarnations: 'She did the drawings people think of when they think of Frank Lloyd Wright'.^[1] Indeed, later in life, she would claim that Wright had taken credit for her contributions to his Dana-Thomas House (1904) in Springfield, Illinois, and for some of the drawings in the *Wasmuth Portfolio* (1910) that helped make Lloyd Wright's aesthetic accessible around the world.

While dispute over the nature and extent Marion Mahony Griffin's architectural influence continues to seesaw, it is clear that she was no mere draftsman. As a fellow architect in Lloyd Wright's studio recalled, on at least one occasion, her work was declared superior to the master's: 'I can well remember welcoming her advent because it promised an interesting day. Her dialogues with FLW who as we all know is no indifferent opponent in repartee, made such days particularly notable'.^[2]

Marion first met Walter Burley Griffin in Wright's studio. Their relationship grew from canoe trips on Lake Illinois, 'to escape the filth and eyesore of human habitation'. In her unpublished biography, 'The Magic of America', she wrote: 'I was first swept off my feet by my delight in his achievements in my profession, then through a common bond of interests in nature and intellectual pursuits, and then with the man himself. It was by no means a case of love at first sight, but it was a madness when it struck'.^[3]

Marion and Walter married on 23 June 1911 and immediately launched into the preparation of a proposal for the international competition detailing the planning of Australia's projected new capital city – Canberra. While won under Walter Burley Griffin's name, it was through the auspices of his wife's drive and delicate delineations that the Griffin plan was assured of success. Senior lecturer in architecture at the University of Western Australia, Christopher Vernon, believes the beauty of Marion's drawings, 'works of art in themselves', gave the plan a compelling allure. 'I think if you had taken the same design and didn't render it in the same way, I don't know whether it wouldn't have won but it certainly would not have put them way above everyone else'.^[4]

After Griffin was appointed Federal Capital Director of Design and Construction in 1913, Marion moved with him to Australia on 12 May 1914. They set up house in Melbourne, with Marion managing a private architectural practice while Walter focused on the planning of the new national capital. The political winds blew ill from the beginning.

The Griffins' vision of democratic civic perfection was not shared by a fiscally focused bureaucracy. Their desire to create a work of art on a continent untainted by Old World complexities was not reflected in the realities of life in Australia, or embraced in the manner the couple envisaged. As Marion sadly maintained, 'in the early days practically no-one wanted Canberra ... [But Griffin] knew the people of Australia needed it and would awaken to the need'.^[5] They had arrived during a turbulent period in Australia's social and political history, but their poor timing coincided with the advent of the First World War which brought the construction of Canberra to an abrupt halt.

Building began again, but Griffin found himself unable to work with the federal bureaucrats responsible for the capital's construction. In 1920 a dispirited Griffin retreated to his and Marion's Melbourne office. His general arterial axes were implemented in the 1920s, and in the 1960s the Molonglo valley was eventually flooded to form 'Lake Burley Griffin', but few of the details of the original plan were implemented.

Whilst in Melbourne the Griffins' practice produced designs for some remarkable houses, as well as Newman College at Melbourne University, and the Capitol Theatre. In 1921 they secured an option on 650 acres in Castlecrag, and founded the Greater Sydney Development Association (GSDA). After the disappointments of their Canberra foray, this utopian community finally allowed them to explore their democratic ideals in an affirming landscape. Marion was able to indulge her passion for drama here, and developed a community theatre (which is still in use today), acted in and costumed plays, taught local children, and generally functioned as the hub and hearth of Castlecrag.

During their Castlecrag years the Griffins were increasingly committed to anthroposophy, a religious system seeking to heighten spiritual reality through cognitive awareness. The Anthroposophical Society in America relates their beliefs in relation to architecture as: 'beyond blending beauty and function, buildings should be ecologically sound and reflect the character of the region or culture. They should provide an environment enhancing the physical, psychological and spiritual well-being of the people who work in them.'^[6] This avant-garde approach to ecology manifestly placed the Griffins ahead of their time.

Through their anthroposophy connections (his friendship with a former Theosophist, Ula Maddocks), Burley Griffin obtained a commission to design a University for Lucknow in India and, after creating exhibition buildings and maharajah's palaces; he reached a new zenith in his career. Marion stayed in Australia to run their practice, but left it in the control of their partner, Eric Nicholls, after determining that her husband needed her assistance. 'Mrs. Griffin follows her man', she wrote to him. Only months later, Griffin fell from a scaffold while working on site. He died of peritonitis a week later, in February 1937.

A devastated Marion finalised their Indian affairs, turned down further job offers, returned to Australia to tidy up pressing commissions and then flew home to Chicago in 1938. On the eve of the Second World War Marion focused her attention on producing her autobiographical epic, 'The Magic of America'. A thousand pages of script, photos, anecdotes, renderings and even silk swatches, 'The Magic of America', was what she called 'my sort of biography of Walt'. No publisher ever came forward. As she neared eighty, Mahony finally arranged to deposit copies with the New York Historical Society and the Art Institute of Chicago.

In addition to this manuscript, Marion also donated a series of 'Forest Portraits' which she had painted at a number of locales in Tasmania and New South Wales during 1917. These passionate depictions of local flora, painstakingly crafted with watercolour and ink on silk, are unmistakably works of art. Marion's dream of Australia had been diseased by their disappointments, but her real love dwelled in nature and the colours of the Australian bush which she seemed to have grasped from the beginning. She once remarked, 'The archangels who painted this continent did so with the softest of brushes – beautiful, pathetic Australia.'^[7]

Marion Mahony Griffin died a pauper's death in Cook County Hospital in 1961.

While the world may not have been ready to accept such an innovative artist and architect during her own lifetime, recognition has gradually been on the increase in the years since her death. John Notz, a Prairie School historian and trustee of Graceland Cemetery, arranged to have Mahony's cremated remains moved from an unmarked grave to a columbarium that now bears a plaque with her name and one of her flower renderings; and the Royal Australian Institute of Architects presents an inaugural Marion Mahony Griffin Architectural Award. A recent exhibition at the Block Museum at North-western University in Evanston, Illinois, 'Marion Mahony Griffin: Drawing the Form of Nature', is the first devoted entirely to her graphic work. The ACT Assembly intends to honour her at Canberra's centenary in 2013.

As Christopher Vernon recently observed, Marion would have been much better off had she been born fifty years later: 'If you look at her interests, things like conservation of the natural world, trying to design houses and cities in harmony with their environment, all of her interests have equal if not greater currency.'^[8] An insight into her own dedication and her fight for equality is evidenced in her own words: 'It was necessary for women to take up work in the same spirit as men did. If we wanted anything in the world we must pay the price for it, and to succeed in the more interesting lines meant the greater effort. As a man did so a woman must – work day times, night times. It must form the basis of her dreams. She must give it her Saturdays and her Sundays and go without holidays... any real accomplishment would always mean a life's devotion.'^[9]

This entry was prepared in 2006 by Roslyn Russell and Barbara Lemon, Museum Services, and funded by the ACT Heritage Unit.

Published resources

Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Site Exhibition

From Lady Denman to Katy Gallagher: A Century of Women's Contributions to Canberra, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2013,
<http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/ldkg>

Author Details

Barbara Lemon

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