

Innovative Women in Architecture & Design: Marion Mahony Griffin, 1871-1962

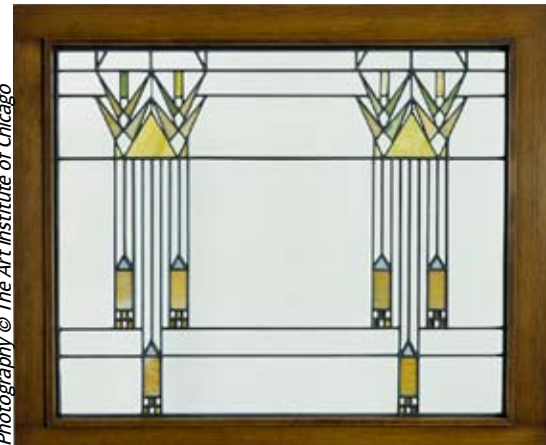
by Kim Haig

“The functions of land planning are: 1st - To protect and preserve natural features, so that the Earth may not die.” Marion Mahony Griffin, “The Magic of America”¹

This statement, written in the 1930’s after a life full of progressive design, is one small indication of how forward thinking this woman was in a world of men. Marion Mahony Griffin was a groundbreaking architect in a number of ways; she was the first licensed woman architect in history and in 1894, she was the second woman to graduate from MIT with a degree in architecture.² Her name and role in history are somewhat obscured by the fame of her mentor and employer, Frank Lloyd Wright, but Mahony secured a place in history through her own design work. She also became a globe-trotting architect before the term was coined, working in Australia and India after establishing her reputation in the US.

Mahony first gained notice for her work while employed in Frank Lloyd Wright’s studio, where she worked for almost fifteen years. During this time she contributed greatly to the development of Prairie Style architecture through her designs in FLW’s office on building commissions, furniture, and windows. She was particularly skilled at architectural rendering, earning the moniker, “greatest architectural delineator of her generation” by the architectural writer Reyner Banham.³ According to one source, Mahony “was an important contributor to his (Wright’s) reputation, particularly for the influential Wasmuth Portfolio. Mahony is credited with creating “more than half of the numerous renderings.”³

An “outspoken, dramatic woman and the only female draftsman in Wright’s studio”,² Mahony had a very close relationship with Wright and his wife. While working on commissions in Wright’s office, Mahony also had independent commissions, such as the Gerald Mahony Residence in Elkhart, Indiana, which she designed for her brother and sister-in-law in 1907.³ Her personal work strongly shows the influence of her mentor. This home, a clear example of Prairie Style architecture, was torn down in 1965, but a stained glass window she designed for the home managed to survive. This window, which features stylized wheat sheaves is on display at the Art Institute of Chicago.



6 Photograph © The Art Institute of Chicago

Stained glass window from The Gerald Mahony house, 1907. It features stylized wheat sheaves and is on display at the Art Institute of Chicago

In 1909, Mr. Wright ran off to Europe with Mamah Cheney, leaving behind his wife and family and creating a huge public scandal. During the uproar, Wright demonstrated the level of his trust in Mahony and how integral she was to his business by offering her the opportunity to run his studio during his absence. Evidently Wright was unable to convince any of his former employees to take over this task, including Mahony, who also declined. Today, it’s difficult to know exactly how she felt about her place in his office as the concept of women’s rights was still developing, and women would not gain the right to vote for another decade. Ultimately, Hermann von Holst took up the responsibility of running Wright’s office. But, “Von Holst realized that he needed someone with a better understanding of Wright’s design concepts to please Wright’s clients. So he promptly hired Marion Mahony to finish the designs.”²

In 1909, Mahony began designing a Dearborn, Michigan mansion for Henry Ford. After the design was approved and the foundation laid, a disagreement developed between Ford and Mahony, and Ford hired another architect to complete the home.² Besides finishing the designs of three homes in Decatur, Illinois that were started by Wright, Mahony also began designing new commissions. The home she drew for Robert Mueller in Decatur primarily followed the lead of Wright’s designs, but she did start to forge her own

path with some decorative touches. In a home for Adolph Mueller, Robert’s brother, her personal style began to emerge in the design of a stained glass tent ceiling for the living room. Unfortunately, the Mueller houses are two of only three homes she designed still standing in the US⁷



7 The Edward P. Irving Residence designed by Marion Mahony in 1909 while working in Frank Lloyd Wright’s office

Shortly after Mahony rejoined Wright’s office, she urged Von Holst to hire Walter Burley Griffin to work on a landscape plan for an entire area of homes being developed in Decatur by Wright’s office.³ Though five years older than Griffin, Mahony began to see him as more than a professional colleague. Friends found the couple an unusual match, with Mahony’s fiery artistic temperament quite a contrast to Griffin’s quiet manner.² The two were married in 1911, starting a collaboration that would last for 28 years.³ After they married, Mahony left Wright’s office to partner with her new husband. From this point on it is somewhat difficult to differentiate the work of Mahony from her husband, but it is clear that she collaborated freely with him during their time together.

One of their most significant collaborations was the development of Rock Crest Rock Glen, a collection of Prairie School homes in Mason City, Iowa. This development “remains the largest collection of Prairie Style homes surrounding a natural setting.”³ Walter Griffin is particularly noted for his design of the new Australian capital city of Canberra. He won first prize in an international competition, partly by virtue of the watercolor perspectives that Mahony provided for the submission. This commission caused the couple to move to Australia in 1914 to oversee the development of the capital.⁴ She ran their Sydney office, designing whatever private commissions came in. Later they moved to India, where Mahony designed over a hundred Prairie style homes in less than a year.³ After Griffin died in 1937, Mahony returned to the US and began the work of documenting their design philosophy in the unpublished “The Magic of America”.⁴



8 Photograph © The Art Institute of Chicago
Ink on linen drawing, Soldier’s Club, Toowoomba, Australia: Perspective View, 1919

Ultimately, Marion Mahony Griffin helped establish Prairie School design on two continents, far from its roots in the Midwest. She credited Louis Sullivan as the originator of the Prairie School philosophy, and she “considered Wright’s habit of taking credit for the entire movement as the reason for its early demise in the United States”.³ Though largely overlooked by the architectural world, as were many early women architects, Mahony forged the way for future generations in her contribution of progressive design to the world.

[Professional Development]

Women in Leadership

by Gail M. Cavanagh

Does this experience sound familiar? A highly placed principal at a local firm was delivering a seminar recently about new influences that architectural firms would have to prepare themselves for in the future. Items 1 thru 4 were discussed in detailed depth. Listed fifth was “Diversity”. Using a laser pointer to brush over the word on the screen, the presenter intoned, “We all know how important this is”, and moved on.

While not an extreme example of cavalier discrimination, it is, however, an illustration that true diversity has yet to be achieved. As the world is divided culturally, wasn’t diversity going to affect the business decisions of this international firm? Also, many business forums have studied and documented how women’s perceptions influence their business decisions; their outlook is generally long-termed. Wouldn’t this talent help to smooth out the jagged ups and downs of risk-taking? Wouldn’t this influence be great to have on governing boards given the volatile nature of an uncertain economic future?

AIA National and the Boston Society for Architects/Women in Design co-sponsored a “Women in Leadership” seminar, September 25th and 26th at the Wyndham Hotel in Chicago to advocate for diversity. The conference began with a discussion of the progress women have made in becoming principals in architectural firms. The first speaker quoted statistics and needless to say, the numbers were not impressive.

Additionally, the conference highlighted the common inequities that all women have struggled with since entering the profession in quantifiable numbers in the 1970’s. But then, the conference took a turn into new and exciting territory: unprejudiced discussion ensued and constructive solutions were suggested. The most outstanding are listed below.

Solution #1: Client clout. Did you know that women and minorities are our clients in increasing numbers and they are instrumental in initiating documents that ask for proposals for new work? In order to promote gender and racial diversity in architectural firms, RFP’s should require applicants to show what steps are being taken to diversify their top levels of management.

“And the day came when the risk to remain tight in the bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom.” Anais Nin

Solution #2: Join a board. To further your career, get involved! Join a social group or volunteer for a local election. Networking is not only about meet and greet, it is about becoming a worthwhile participant in the community. For instance, just in case you do want to join a board, here is an organization that can help, www.womenleadershipcoaching.com. Be sure to scroll down the home page for many more organizations that can help to develop your business. In case you just want to network, see www.cw-network.org.

Solution #3: Critical mass. Women represent a large portion of practicing architects in all parts of the United States. Get to know them and share experiences. Part of a great career is being open to opportunities and taking risks in what may seem to be odd directions. Happiness is not found in job drudgery, neither is talent utilized. Believe that you can build your own world. The decision was made to continue this inspiring conference biennially and St. Louis has offered to host the next event.

Solution #4: When you find another solution to our common problems in diversification, add it to this list and pass it on....

References and Credits

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[Events]

CWA Panel Discussion

by Gail M. Cavanagh

CWA’s member’s meeting was held on September 29th at the Steelcase showroom located at the Merchandise Mart. The topic was entitled “The State of Architecture: Strategies for Creatively Responding to the Economic Storm”. Panelists included Carol Ross Barney, FAIA, of Ross Barney Architects, Sarah Dunn, Assistant Professor at UIC, College of Architecture and the Arts, Elva Rubio, of Rubio Studios, Catherine Baker, AIA, Landon Bone Baker and moderated by Deirdre Colgan of Executive Director of Sacred Space International, Chicago. This topic was originally conceived in February and even after months of planning, it is still relevant. Over the last year, the economic downturn has taken a toll on the architecture profession. The changing climate in the entire construction industry has left us with many questions: what is next, how will we respond the challenges ahead and how will we rebuild the profession. This panel sought an opportunity to reflect, brainstorm, and inspire.

Especially, CWA would like to thank the Steelcase showroom for hosting us this evening and AIA Chicago for co-sponsoring tonight’s event and providing us with the opportunity to earn CEU credits.

Jennifer Faist, Wendy Bright, Eric Thomaston, Jennifer Van Durmen, Rich Harkin, and AVI-SPL videotaped this event. CWA wishes to thank everyone who donated his or her time and equipment to make this video possible. The video will be available for viewing on the CWA website as well as the online blog at Architect magazine.

5 Minute Speed-Mentoring for Designers

by Gail M. Cavanagh

On October 27, CWA and Archeworks held a Speed Mentoring workshop at Archeworks studio. Lee Waldrep, assistant director of undergraduate student services in the School of Architecture at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign facilitated the event. He is the author of “Becoming an Architect: A Guide to Careers in Design”, and has co-led sessions on Speed Mentoring at the last three national AIA Conventions. 80 people of diverse design professions such as landscape architecture and graphic design as well as architects and interior designers participated. Mr. Waldrep began the event with a short talk on what mentoring meant to him and then the participants set to work.

CWA would especially like to thank Archeworks for co-sponsoring and hosting this event. Thanks also to Mr. Waldrep for his excellent skill at encouraging discussion. CWA coordinators include Mindy Viamontes, Charlene Andreas, Lina Grigaitis and Amanda Roelle, current CWA member and Archeworks alumni.

CWA Annual Holiday Party

Hafele Showroom, 154 W Hubbard St
December 7, 2009
5:30 Reception, 6:30 Presentation

Guest Speaker: Lisa Elkins, owner of 2 Point Perspective



The night will include a Silent Auction to benefit the CWA Scholarship Fund.
\$25 CWA members & non-members
\$15 with food drive donation

All money collected at the door will benefit the CWA Scholarship Fund.

[Calendar of Events]

Confirm dates, times, and locations with the sponsoring organization. RSVP to all events by emailing RSVP@cwarch.org

December 2009

[07] Holiday Party @ Hafele Showroom: 154 W Hubbard St. 5:30pm Reception. 6:30pm Presentation. guest speaker: Lisa Elkins, owner of 2 Point Perspective. \$25 for members and non-members or \$15 with food drive donation. Silent Auction to benefit the CWA Scholarship Fund.

January 2010

[12] “Achieving Greater Efficiency in Your Architect Office: Getting More Out of Your Efforts in a Challenging Economy” @ bulthaup: 165 West Chicago Avenue. Presentation and discussion led by Kristine Fallon, F.A.I.A.

[19] CWA Lecture Series @ Museum of Contemporary Art: 220 East Chicago Avenue. Coren Sharples of SHoP Architects. co-sponsored by the MCA.

February 2010

[08] 2010 Chicago Women on Boards @ Hyatt Regency, 151 East Wacker. 3:00pm - 6:00pm.

[09] CWA Monthly Meeting @ bulthaup: 165 West Chicago Avenue. 5:45-6:15pm, Meeting 6:15-7:15pm. Discussion led by Dorothy McCarty “Building the Business Case”.

April 2010

[01] Green Home Chicago Tour and Happy Hour @ location TBD.

[13] CWA Monthly Meeting @ bulthaup: 165 West Chicago Avenue. 5:45-6:15pm, Meeting 6:15-7:15pm. Join us for cocktails and networking. All members are welcome! RSVP.

[21-25] Annual Meeting of Society of Architectural Historians in Chicago @ most events held at the Holiday Inn Chicago Mart Plaza

[24] Gala for the Society of Architectural Historians: “Chicago’s Cutting Edge Seventies” special honorees include founding members of CWA

[25] Spring Brunch @ location and speaker TBD.

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