

Illinois Women Artists, Part 31

Marion Mahony Griffin

Drawing architecture in a new way

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Marion Mahony (1871-1961) did not allow prevailing convention to deter her from a career as an architect at a time when men of that profession, and members of the building trades in general, viewed women wanting to practice architecture suspiciously. She was born into a family of educators and social reformers, and grew up surrounded by strong women in an environment that fostered gender equality and collaboration. As a licensed professional, she redefined architectural draftsmanship in the early 20th century through her beautifully composed and rendered drawings that combine perspective, plan, and sections on a single sheet of paper. And it was her work as senior draftsman for Frank Lloyd Wright

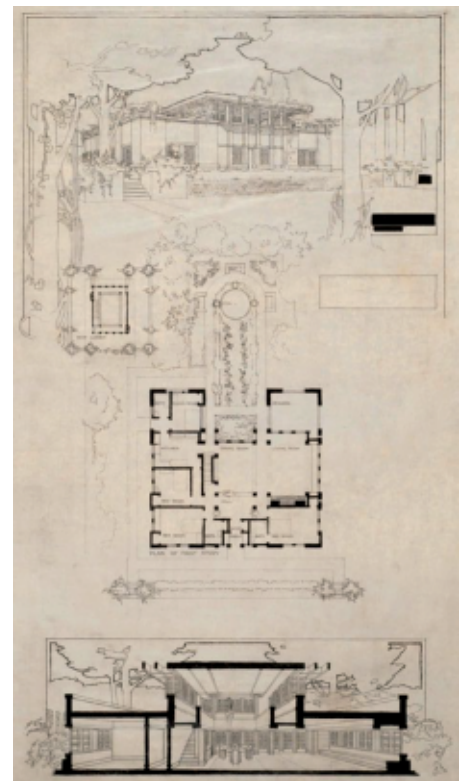


A young Marion Mahony Griffin, about the time she was an architecture student at MIT.

(1867-1959) that probably solidified his reputation as America's most celebrated architect, although until recently published histories have largely ignored her.

Mahony spent her early years in Lakeside, a rural section of Winnetka, Illinois, where her family moved after the Great Chicago Fire destroyed their home when she was just a few months old. She lived around the corner from a beloved cousin, Dwight Perkins (1867-1941), who would influence her path to architecture, and with whom she and her four siblings explored the nearby Lake Michigan beach to the east and Skokie Marsh to the west. The family moved back to Chicago following the death of Mahony's father in 1882 and her mother took a teaching position in Longfellow Public School. The family spent several summers in Winnetka during that decade, where Mahony developed a love of Nature that inspired her efforts as an adult to preserve open spaces within urban settings and led her to incorporate plantings into her architectural renderings.

Another significant influence on Mahony was her mother's association with Chicago-area feminists, religious reformers and intellectuals. Clara Perkins Mahony joined the Chicago Woman's Club and socialized with a group of female activists advocating for suffrage and for educational and labor reforms. She encouraged Mahony to follow her cousin Dwight to study architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), the most respected architecture school in the United States at that time. Mary Hawes Wilmarth (1837-1919), a member of Chicago's early women's clubs and participant in various social reform efforts, provided the funds. Mahony was one of eight women who enrolled in 1890; four years later she was the second woman to graduate from MIT with a degree in architecture. In January 1898, Mahony was among the initial group of young architects to take the state licensing exams, the first in the country; she passed, making



F.P. Marshall Dwelling, Winnetka, Illinois, 1910 (not built). Walter Burley Griffin, architect; Marion Mahony Griffin, delineator.

[Courtesy of the Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University, Gift of Marion Mahony Griffin, 1985.1.100]

her the first woman licensed as an architect in the United States.

Mahony returned to Chicago in 1894 to take a job with her cousin in the newly completed Steinway Hall that Perkins had designed for Steinway & Sons. Several other progressive architects inspired by the Arts and Crafts Movement and the philosophies of Louis Sullivan rented space alongside Perkins in the loft-like top two floors. They were part of The Eighteen, as Wright dubbed the group who gathered regularly for meals and lively discussions. This genial working environment with architects who developed the Prairie School cemented Mahony's penchant for working collaboratively. When Perkins no longer had work for her, she freelanced with the others. Wright, who had recently set out on his own after working as a draftsman for J.L. Silsbee and the firm of Adler and Sullivan, hired her as his first employee in 1895.

She became Wright's chief draftsman and architectural renderer, working for him until 1909.

Current scholarship suggests that in the early years of their working relationship, Mahony helped determine Wright's ideas on family life as they related to the design of homes and contributed ideas that appealed to his many female clients. She became a close friend and confidant of his wife Catherine ("Kitty"). Wright was familiar with Mahony's independent design ideas. He admired her thesis project at MIT, a 3-room artist's studio connected to a residence, intended to encourage direct collaboration between the painter and his (or her) assistants and reflecting her keen interest in joining various aspects of a person's life. This innovative design presumably informed the two-story studio space he added onto his Oak Park home in 1898.

Mahony designed the All Souls Church in Evanston (1904) and a home for her brother Gerald in Elkhart, Indiana (1907). Her plans for a mansion for Henry Ford in Dearborn, Michigan, were abandoned after Mahony and Wright disagreed; they never reconciled. She refused to manage Wright's office after he left Kitty and moved to Europe in 1909 with the wife of a former client, but



Marion Mahony Griffin in her later years. She was known as much for her exquisite architectural drawings as for her designs.




Walter Burley Griffin, architect, Marion Mahony Griffin, delineator, J.G. Melson Dwelling, Mason City, Iowa, 1912, ink on drafting linen. Gift of Marion Mahony Griffin, 1985.1.120.

Hermann von Holst who did take over the abandoned practice convinced Mahony to complete some of the unfinished projects, including the David Amberg house (1910) in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and the Adolph Mueller and Randolph Mueller houses (1910) in Decatur, Illinois.

An architect working Wright's office between 1901 and 1906, Walter Burley Griffin (1876-1937), designed the landscaping for many of Mahony's projects. Their working relationship grew into a personal one, and in 1911 they married, probably at her insistence. Mahony spent the rest of her life working alongside him, encouraging him to seek out projects and in general promoting his career. This collaboration led them to Australia in 1914 as winners of a competition to design a new capitol in Canberra and then to Lucknow, India, in 1936 to design a university library. Following his death, Mahony returned to Chicago in 1939, her career as an

active designer completed; she spent the next decade writing the unpublished memoir of her life with Griffin and his work, *The Magic of America* (available at www.artic.edu/magico-famerica). She died a pauper.

Mahony's greatest contribution to architecture was her elegant draftsmanship and distinctive style of delineation, strongly influenced by 19th and early 20th century Japanese prints. She surrounded the building elevation with flattened vegetation worked in outline to suggest it set within mature vegetation without indicating a specific site. Often she artfully and organically added the floor plan and section. Mahony's renderings were recognized at the time as innovative and stunning presentation drawings, and are now considered works of art by themselves. 

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