**A Cultivated City: The Griffins in Australia’s Capital**

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*The Griffins ‘Archival Legacy*

**Searching for the Griffins: the Archival Trail**

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Summary

This paper, more a personal reflection, will trace my search for the Griffins over a number of years, and refer to what the search resulted in. It recalls some of the motivations for the research, some of the ‘informants’ and highlights selected archival experiences and ‘finds’. The paper alludes to the thrill of the ‘chase’, keeping track of the research, and the occasional competition involved in the archival search. The paper invokes the Nicholls collection, Mark Peisch’s papers in the Avery Library, Grant Carpenter Manson’s papers in Chicago, the Schwimmer Lloyd papers in the New York Public Library, and some ‘finds’ in the Stinson Library, Illinois and the New York Historical Society.

A reflection in six sections

***Section 1: Motivation***

The captivating, award winning documentary, ‘Searching for Sugarman’, inspired the title for this talk. I only recently caught up with the movie, and loved every minute of it. It captured the thrill of the search; the serendipitous moments, the hunches that paid off, and in the cast of characters encountered along the way, threw up some ‘goodies’ and ‘baddies’.

I began the Griffin, and principally Marion Griffin search in the 1980’s, as I prepared to leave the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor to take up a position at the University of Sydney. Research projects are often motivated by personal considerations. As an architecture student at Melbourne University I had been familiar with a number of Griffin buildings, and especially Newman College. I had lived in the Midwest for some 10 years. Chicago was the nearest big city and I had made the pilgrimage to Wright’s studio and buildings. Being an architect and involved in the feminist movement in the US in the 1970s and 1980s, I read Susana Torre’s 1977 book, *Women in American Architecture*. The chapter by Fondiler Berkon brought Marion Griffin’s name to an international and female audience [[1]](#footnote-1). It acted as a catalyst for revising old interpretations which usually accorded Marion Griffin ‘helper- and -damn- good –renderer’ status, usually with a gratuitous garnish of ‘she-wasn’t –very- feminine’.

Taking the existing scholarship further, and through a different set of eyes, seemed the perfect research project. It linked two worlds I knew, and at the time Marion’s work in Australia had been completely overlooked. I was keen to write an architectural biography that would reveal Marion as a person of her time and culture, and establish her place in Australian and American architectural and social history.

***Section 2: Following the trail, meetings along the way, outcomes***

I embarked on this research in the 1980s, and over the years have published a number of articles, book chapters and encyclopedia entries and, as time permitted, chipped away at new parts of the story: through visiting buildings, and archival research in Australia and the USA.[[2]](#footnote-2) I followed any lead- big or small - and sought out people who had known the Griffins. I tracked down older scholars who had written about them. I have had the pleasure of meeting contemporary Griffin scholars in Australia and the US who also have labored hard to assess, understand and interpret the Griffins – meetings sometimes laced with a dash or competitiveness.

While much of the work required hours in libraries looking at drawings, reading secondary sources, or plowing through boxes of materials that might yield minimal or no results, there was an excitement to this pursuit. You never know what would come up, or whether a half-baked hunch would be worth the trouble. There was the thrill of driving huge distances to visit the Stinson Library in Anna, Illinois, to ‘Rock Crest and Rock Glen ‘ in Mason City, Iowa, and to the houses in Decatur and Grand Rapids. Being based in Sydney, Griffin projects in Castlecrag, Eaglemont, and Canberra, and the urban buildings in Melbourne and Sydney were relatively easy to access.

Researchers are a little like detectives and having had quite a lot of experience as an anthropological field worker in South America, seeking out ‘ informants’ was central to my research approach. However, as time passed, the people who knew the Griffins as adults and the early scholars passed away, and this part of the trail has gone cold. I am pleased I recorded the conversations with many of them on an old Sony tape recorder. Unfortunately, I never followed the ‘Griffins in India’ trail, but others have, so there is good research to draw on. Anne Watson’s *Beyond Architecture[[3]](#footnote-3)* and Turnbull and Navaretti’s *The Griffins in Australia and India* (1998)[[4]](#footnote-4) were immensely useful.

***Section 3: Detours, returns and keeping track***

As sometimes happens in life, other things got in the way. Just as I completed the first draft of a manuscript (which weighed in at 100,000 words- at least 20,000 words too long), I detoured into what seemed to me a more urgent area - urban poverty and educating design professionals differently. This has absorbed me for some 10 years although I would occasionally link the Griffins to this work. Notably, I made the attempt to do so when I gave the Dymphna Clark lecture at the Manning Clark Weekend of Ideas in 2006,[[5]](#footnote-5) and again when I gave the inaugural Marion Mahony Griffin lecture at the National Library in 2009.

Unfortunately, the MMG manuscript sits waiting attention - and occasionally beckons. However, I mined it to write ‘War, Women and Magic’ for Van Zanten’s *Marion Mahony Reconsidered.* [[6]](#footnote-6) The invitation to take part in this seminar, and to write a chapter for the forthcoming AGNSW book and exhibition, *Sydney Moderns,* come as welcome prompts to re-engage with the manuscript and my boxes of research materials.

Keeping track of research findings is an essential part of any research project, especially if the project is put to one side as I have done. I have a lot of box files so Boxes 1 through 8 are where I go to pick up the research trail again. Box 1 is labeled ‘General Background, and has nine files. File 5, for example, is “ important US women – biographies tying MM into period’. Box 2 has all the US published articles relating to the Griffins, by decade: 1940s through to the present. Box 3 does the same for the Australian articles, of which there were fewer. So instead of by decade, this box has ‘up till 1980’ and then 1980s, 1990s etc.

Box 5 contains the results of archival work in Australia and the US. To create this box, I spent time in Canberra, Melbourne, Sydney, London, New York, Boston, Detroit, Chicago, Anna Illinois, Springfield, Los Angeles, and the Taliesin archive in Scottsdale, Arizona. My first encounter with the Nicholls collection was in Marie Nicholls’ house. The archival harvest was a great many notes, and copies of drawings, letters, photographs, articles, and ephemera, in other words the ‘raw materials’ the writer needs to start to carve out her own interpretation of the Griffin story.

My research touchstone and starting point, as indeed it has been for many Griffin researchers and aficionados, is Marion Griffin’s epic narrative of around 1000 pages, which documents her early life and the Griffins’ lives and careers in the US, Australia and India. Very early I came across a blue quarto size roneo’d copy of *The Magic of America*, which to this day is full of pink and yellow post-its, keeping tabs on key sections. Having a hard copy made it much easier to consult than the microfilm copies most researchers used. From the start I thought the *Magic of America* held the key to understanding the Griffins, but it was a difficult document: the odd pagination didn’t help and I sometimes wrote about it as a postmodern document that itself needed interpretation. Fortunately, the Burnham Library in Chicago has put it on line, so it is now easy for anyone to access.[[7]](#footnote-7) This is true of many of the previously hard to find research materials.

***Section 4: A word for the beginner***

A common starting point for the novice researcher must be the Wikipedia entries on the Griffins, which open up a world of visual and textual documents, including the resources of the National Library. But I would like to insert one observation in relation to these entries. While the 80s, 90s and noughties yielded a body of fresh and invigorated scholarship by men and women writers, and to a very considerable degree overturned the earlier referred to sub altern (‘helper, dam –good-renderer’) perspective of Marion Griffin, traces remain in Wikilandia.[[8]](#footnote-8)

If you are new to the Griffins, these Wiki sites and the descriptive content are a great place to start. However, if you look closely you will find that while the articles referenced are somewhat ‘inclusive’ of the newer scholarship, the ‘Sources’ section is pretty ‘old school’. So is ‘Further reading’. Works referred to are mostly books, mostly by men, mostly by North Americans, and many written quite a long time ago. The important Fondiler Berkon chapter is nowhere to be seen, nor is Alice Friedman’s 'Girl Talk' essay. [[9]](#footnote-9) Elizabeth Birmingham’s 2006 journal article ‘The Case of Marion Mahony Griffin and the Gendered Nature of Discourse in Architectural History” [[10]](#footnote-10)doesn’t get a look in, and the scholarship of Australian James Weirick is largely missing, as is my own. Turnbull and Navaretti’s impressive *catalog raisonne* does get a mention in ‘Further Reading” for WBG, and Anne Watson’s *Beyond Architecture* (1998) is used as a reference but does not appear as a source, or as further reading. Alasdair McGregor’s *Grand Obsessions* (2009)[[11]](#footnote-11) is absent. These missing publications open up a range of diverse interpretations to the life and work of the Griffins that interested people can enjoy. Yet, as the modification dates (March 13 and April 12) show, these sites have not been left to languish and one could argue these absences speak to presenting a particular view of the Griffin legacy: namely, one that favours the ‘individual creative talent of Walter’ over the’ creative partnership of Walter and Marion’ perspective. This question has been one that has exercised many in the field.

***Section 5: Archival stories***

In the last part of this paper I wish to share some examples of my searching for the Griffins. I will do this through three short stories about ‘meetings’. First is ‘meetings with people ‘in this case scholars whose work I had read, and contacted. Second, ‘meetings with materials’, in this case the Schwimmer Lloyd collection in the New York Public Library, and lastly ‘meetings with objects’, in this case two small pieces of ephemera, one in the New York Historical Society, and the other in the Stinson Library, Illinois.

*Meeting with scholars*

Grant Carpenter Manson wrote an important and influential book *Frank Lloyd Wright to 1910*. Writing about FLW’s office, where Marion Mahony worked for some 15 years, Manson said if the office had been more conventional, Marion would have been considered a ‘head designer’. I went through some of his research materials in the Oak Park Public Library in Chicago. The records showed he had visited her so I wrote to him asking whether he had any further information. I received a letter from him in April 1993, in which he said,

Her (Marion Griffin’s) name and her presence had haunted me, and since the biblio on her then was nil I decided to talk about her and to share with my readers what I knew. Hence, the space devoted to her in Appendix F of the book, which was in fact her first introduction to the world of architectural criticism at large.

He was being helpful but he was also setting the historical record straight. He wanted me to know he thought he was the first person to write about Marion.

Mark Peisch conducted his research for *The Chicago School of Architecture* (1964) in the 1950s.[[12]](#footnote-12) He gave his research papers (252 items) to the Avery Library at Columbia University and many scholars have poured over them. I found the correspondence and papers a rich source for the research on the Griffins in the US and Australia, and wrote to him. He was most generous with his ideas, and we met a number of times in New York, mostly over lunch in the Metropolitan Museum restaurant. Peisch had also visited Marion Griffin, in 1952, and in a letter to Eric Nicholls (held in the Avery Library) he wrote, “Perhaps my greatest disappointment is this sweet lady’s loss of her memory. When I visited her in Chicago two years ago (1952) I found her living in rather ramshackle surroundings.” In the same letter Peisch went on to ask Nicholls, “I would be interested to know the extent to which the Griffins collaborated on the design and if Mrs Griffin did any work independently while she was in Australia”.[[13]](#footnote-13) He didn’t receive an answer, nor apparently did Nicholls respond to Marion’s concerns about all the materials she left behind in Australia.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Peisch was interested in the Griffins’ partnership as a way to better understanding Griffin. In *The Chicago School of Architecture* Peisch notes, “In many ways their (the Griffins’) marriage was a complete merging of personalities and ideals, an artistic union so complete that to distinguish or separate their careers after this date becomes impossible”. [[15]](#footnote-15) Later Peisch would tell me he thought she was “an unsung heroine”. [[16]](#footnote-16)

*Meetings with (archival) materials*

During my research of Marion’s early life I branched out to read more extensively about her networks that included the Lloyd family. Marion Griffin talks about the projects she did after her return to the US in 1938. One of these was for the World Fellowship and peace activist Lola Lloyd appears as the client in the development of two projects. Neither went ahead because of Lloyd’s death in 1944. Why had Lloyd commissioned Marion Griffin? My search took me to the Schwimmer- Lloyd archive[[17]](#footnote-17), which took some weeks to go through, with the requisite pencils only, and white gloves rule for some parts of the collection. However, through this search, the answer to the question why Lola commissioned Marion became clear.

Some of the Lloyd correspondence had a street address, so, taking a chance that a 30-year-old address would still be active, I wrote a letter. This led to an invitation by Georgia Lloyd (Lola’s daughter) to attend the next Campaign for World Government meeting at the UN in New York. There I met a group of ageing, radical, highly principled, small ‘l’ liberals, who had been active in peace movements in WWII and all subsequent wars. Georgia Lloyd invited me to visit her in Chicago to talk more, and she also wanted to show me a light fitting in the house her mother had built. As members of the Uniting Church, the same All Souls church, Marion Griffin designed in 1901; parishioners were offered the light fittings when the church was to be demolished for a car park. Georgia Lloyd acquired one. When the Sydney Powerhouse exhibition *Beyond Architecture* opened in 1998, Georgia’s light fitting was on display.

*Meeting with objects/ephemera*

The New York Historical Society has a leather bound copy of the Magic of America. It is slightly different to the copy in the Burnham Library. For the researcher who becomes somewhat addicted to archival materials this was one of the thrilling documents to read, and to discover among the pages a small swatch of the linen Marion Griffin used for her Canberra renderings. I hope it is still there.

The Stinson Memorial Public Library is one of the finest and most intact of the American buildings. Spending some hours in it, it revealed a couple of secrets- a framed water damaged copy of the coloured perspective rendering, and a small piece of a geometrically patterned linoleum, presumably designed by the Griffins. Again, I hope it is still there.

***Section 6: Conclusions***

My intention has been to open up some of my experiences in searching for the Griffins: the process, the ‘finds’, the excitements, and the enjoyment of being part of a small research community. Like Sugarman, the Griffin’s achievements were hardly known in the US, and little celebrated there until fairly recently. Today, much of that searching can be short circuited through on -line materials. This is indeed progress but it may take some of the fun out of it: the smell of papers that haven’t been touched for a long time, the ‘pencils only’ and ‘white gloves’ rules, the travel and the people one meets along the way.. And will the new technologies, and especially email and social media, mean that the intimate and personal trail Marion Mahony Griffin established with the *Magic of America* will be a thing of the past? Time will tell whether today’s creative people will write memoirs, or leave such engaging sources for future researchers to interpret, and whether researchers will leave correspondence and papers as valuable as that Mark which Peisch deposited at Columbia University.

**Notes on the author:**  
Anna Rubbo has written extensively on Marion Mahony Griffin. Her most recent publications are ‘War, Women and Magic’ in *Marion Mahony Reconsidered* (2011), and  ‘Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin: International Moderns’ in *Sydney Moderns* (forthcoming 2013). An architecture educator at the University of Sydney until 2012, she is now a researcher in the Center for Sustainable Urban Development at Columbia University, with a focus on urban poverty.

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1. Fondiler Berkon, S., ‘Maron Mahony Griffin’ in Torre, S. (1977) *Women in American Architecture: A Historic and Contemporary Perspective,* Whitney Museum [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Publications include ‘Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin: International Moderns’ in Edwards, D, (ed) *Sydney Moderns* (forthcoming); ‘Marion Griffin’s Return to America: War, Women and Magic’ in Van Zanten, D (ed.) *Marion**Griffin Reconsidered*: *Architect, Drawing, Planning.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2011; ‘Drawing the Form of Nature’, *Architecture Australia* Jan/Feb, Architecture *Australia, 2006;* ‘Marion Griffin’ in *Women Building Chicago 1790-1900: A Biographical* *Dictionary*, Schultz, R. and Hast, A. (eds.) Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2001; ‘Marion Mahony Griffin: a larger than life presence in early twentieth century architecture’ in *Beyond Architecture: Marion Mahony and Walter Burley Griffin in America, Australia and India, Watson*, A. (ed.) NSW: Powerhouse Museum press. Also published in the USA by University of Illinois Press 1998; ‘Marion Mahony's role in the Australian and Indian practices: a view through the looking glass of the Magic of America’ in *The Griffins in Australia and India*, Navaretti, P. and Turnbull, J., Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 1998; ‘Celebrating a new award and its namesake’*, RAIA Bulletin*, April, 1998; The numinous world of Marion Griffin’ in *Spirit and Place: Australian Art 1850-1950*, Mellick, R. and Waterlow, N. (eds.), NSW: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1996; ‘Marion Mahony and Walter Burley Griffin: A creative partnership’ in Architectural Theory review, Vol 1, No. 2, 1996; ‘ Marion Mahony Griffin: A portrait’, in *Walter Burley Griffin- A Review*, Duncan, J. (ed.), Melbourne: Monash University, 1988.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Watson, A., (ed) (1998) *Beyond Architecture: Marion Mahony and Walter Burley Griffin: America, Australia, India* , Powerhouse Publishing [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Turnbull, J., and Navaretti, P. (eds) (1998) *The Griffins in Australia and ,* Melbourne: Miegunyah Press [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Dymphna Clark lecture, 2006, http://manningclark.org.au/papers/manning-clark-house-anna-rubbo-make-poverty-history [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Van Zanten, D. (ed.) (2011) *Marion Mahony Reconsidered*, University of Chicago Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *The Magic of America*, http://www.artic.edu/magicofamerica/ [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Marion Griffin entry <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marion_Mahony_Griffin>, last modified on March 13, 2013 at 16.59, and Walter Burley Griffin <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walter_Burley_Griffin> modified on April 12, 2013 at 7.17. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Friedman A., (2011) ‘Girl Talk: Marion Mahony Griffin, Frank Lloyd Wright and the Oak Park Studio’ in Van Zanten, D. (ed.) (2011) also http://places.designobserver.com/feature/girl-talk-marion-mahony-griffin/27888/ [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Birmingham, Elizabeth, “The Case of Marion Mahony Griffin and the Gendered Nature of Discourse in Architectural History,” *Women’s Studies,* 35 (March 2006), 87–123. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. McGregor, A. (2009) *Grand Obsessions: The Life and Work of Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony* *Griffin*, Lantern, Penguin.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Guide to the Mark Lyons Peisch Correspondence and Papers Collection (1903-1997), http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/eresources/archives/avery/peisch/ldpd.3460636.001f.html [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Mark Peisch to Eric Nicholls, January 15, 1954, Mark Peisch papers, Avery Library [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. MM Griffin letter to William Purcell, 2nd October 1944, Mark Peisch Papers , Avery Library [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Peisch, M. *The Chicago School: Early Followers of Sullivan and Wright*, 1964: 58-59 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Cited in Rubbo, A. “Marion Mahony Griffin: A Portrait”, in Duncan, J (Ed), *Walter* *Burley Griffin A Re-View*, Victoria: Monash University Press, 1988, p16, personal communication [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Schwimmer- Lloyd Collection, http://www.nypl.org/archives/1871 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)