In the print edition of the Reader this page is occupied by a Chris Ware comic. At his request, we do not make his work available online.
Kevin Howells was shoveling snow in front of his new house in Rogers Park when some neighbors rumbling by in a silver SUV stopped to ask whether he knew about the celebrated architect who had lived there. He had to admit he didn’t. Actually, Howells’s house, on the 1900 block of West Estes, was once home to two architects: Walter Burley Griffin and his wife, Marion Mahony. But while Griffin is readily acknowledged as a luminary of the Prairie style, Mahony’s role in the movement has been vigorously debated for decades. Some scholars say she was denied proper credit for her part in designing some of the most important pieces of the period—the Robie House, Unity Temple—while others, including her former boss Frank Lloyd Wright, characterize her only as a “capable assistant.”

Yet at least one thing is certain, as an exhibition that opens Friday at the Block Museum shows: “She did the drawings people think of when they think of Frank Lloyd Wright,” says curator Debora Wood. “We can speculate till time’s end what impact she had on the architecture—we know she did the art.” Mahony grew up in Winnetka, where her family took refuge after the Great Chicago Fire. “Always a tomboy,” she wrote in an unpublished autobiography, “The Magic of America,” she took daily walks to the lakeshore through the brush and flora. In her teens Mahony spent long hours “absorbing the scientific fundamentals of our time.”

A family friend arranged to send her to MIT, where in 1894 she became the second woman to graduate from the architecture program. Her thesis, “The House and Studio of a Painter,” articulates 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. “My thought has been to arrange a convenient and elegant home for an artist who, if not great, is at any rate very fashionable,” she wrote.

We know her ravishing renderings helped Frank Lloyd Wright and other Prairie School architects make their mark. But Marion Mahony’s other contributions to the movement are still being revealed more than 40 years after her death.
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Perkins could no longer afford Mahony’s $6 a week salary. Wright hired her to work with him at his new Oak Park studio. She had a talent for freehand drawing and for setting buildings in harmony with nature—another hallmark of the Prairie style. On at least one occasion, recalled architect Barry Byrne, who got his start under Wright, her work was declared superior to the master’s. The two worked together for 14 years, but it was a volatile relationship. She later claimed he’d taken credit for her work on the Dana-Thomas House in Oak Park and for many of her drawings in the Wasmuth Portfolio, which launched his international reputation when it was published in Germany in 1910. Her time at the drafting table resulted in just one solo commission, for the Church of All Souls in Evanston, run by a family friend. The September 1912 issue of the prestigious Western Architect featured its exterior stonework, tall chimney, and skylights, but by 1960 All Souls had been razed for a parking lot.

As Wright prepared to go to Europe with his mistress in 1909, he asked Mahony to continue designing for his clients. For reasons that have never been deter- tained, she refused. Wright then turned to Herman von Holte, who turned to Mahony—who agreed to help him “on a definite arrangement that I should have control of the designing,” Prairie School scholars credit Mahony with both designing and rendering the Robert and Adolph Mueller house in Decatur. A succession of young architects joined her, and she later declared superior to the master’s. She continued to sketch for Wright and for paintings that reflected her fascination with the native plant life. In the essay that accompanied the Mahony exhibition catalog, architect Christopher Vernon of the University of Western Australia writes “It led her to invent a highly personal genre of botanical illustration that she titled ‘Forest Portraits.’ Yet later on she would reveal in ‘The Magic of America’ and to architectural historians that she had hardly retired. As Mark Peisch, who interviewed Mahony extensively, wrote in the Macmillan Encyclopedia of Architects in 1982, ‘Although her specific contribution to the hus- band-wife teamwork is not ade- quately documented, it can be considered major.’

Bureaucratic interference and World War I would throttle their hopes of executing the Canberra plan. A formal government inquiry found politicians had deliberately withheld “necessary information and assistance” from Griffin, who also suffered for his Bahá’í status. Still, they attempted to stay in Australia. They built a college in Melbourne and a utopian hillside suburb where they lived outside Sydney. A suc- cession of young architects helped them run their business. “Mrs. Griffin had a great ability and a rare capacity to understand and help develop others and their ideas,” writes Queensland archi- tect James Birrell in his 1964 biography of Griffin. During the Depression they turned to industrial design, main- ly in Sydney, creating municipal incinerators that, in the words of Peisch, gave “powerful form and remarkable beauty to a structure whose purpose was neither inviting nor aesthetically challenging.” Major commissions in India fol- lowed, and as Griffin created exhibition buildings, a university library, and maharajah palaces, he reached a new apex in his career. Mahony stayed in Australia to run their practice but left it in the hands of proteges after surmising his husband needed a bit of help. “Mrs. Griffin follows her man,” she wrote to him. Eight months later, Griffin fell from a scaffold while working on the library. He died a week after the accident, in February 1937. Afterward, the couple faced personally and professionally in India, creating municipal projects, but her client brought in 1,100-page autobiographical manuscript she called “my sort of biography of Walt.” Organized into four parts, detailing battles with her own business and professionally in India, her prose failed to draw the attention she’d hoped for.

When Mahony returned to the house on Estes at the end of 1938, America had largely forgotten about both of the Griffins. The few visitors who came to talk about architecture all wanted to know about Frank Lloyd Wright, whose recently completed Fallingwater had made him a press darling. Mahony accepted planning projects for towns in Texas and New Hampshire, but her client died before those could be exe- cuted. She was asked to address the Illinois Society of Architects shortly after her return, but she only wanted to talk about anthroposophy, a religious sys- tem that she and her husband had adopted while abroad. Mahony found solace in writ- ing “The Magic of America,” a 1,100-page autobiographical manuscript she called “my sort of biography of Walt.” Organized into four parts, detailing battles with the couple faced personally and professionally in India, her prose failed to draw the attention she’d hoped for.

Marion Mahony Griffin: Drawing the Form of Nature

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She asked William Purcell, whom she considered Griffin's closest friend from their days in the Oak Park studio, for feedback, explaining that she wanted to get "Walter's Architecture and Town Planning concepts before the general public by hook or by crook." Purcell could only offer measured encouragement: "Yes indeed—here is a treasure of great interest to architects." But he noted she hadn't yet "built this material so that a reader unfamiliar with the issues could see its significance."

No publisher ever came forward. As she neared 80, Mahony finally arranged to deposit copies at the New-York Historical Society and the Art Institute of Chicago.

Not long afterward Mahony called Thomas M. Foldo, the chair of the art department at Northwestern, and said she had some drawings to show him. Visiting her home, Foldo encountered an array of tall artworks on drafting linen—not just presentation drawings for houses in America that Mahony had rendered in ink, her preferred drawing medium, but also her "Forest Portraits," which depict locales in Tasmania and New South Wales that Mahony painted during a 1917 respite from the disappointments of the Canberra project. In all, Mahony would donate 120 pieces to Northwestern. She gave 350 more to the Art Institute before she died in 1961.

In the years since their deaths, recognition of the Griffins has gradually increased. In 1981 the city named a string of Griffin homes Walter Burley Griffin Place. 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.

Many of the pieces she bequeathed to Northwestern will be displayed at the Block Museum as part of Marion Mahony Griffin: Drawing the Forms of Nature, the first exhibition to make Mahony the artist over Mahony the architect. It's the first public showing of the "Forest Portraits," and there's also a section devoted to "Fairies Feeding the Herons," a mural Mahony painted at the Armstrong School in 1931, when she returned to Chicago during a brief separation from Walter in Australia.

While for years getting access to "The Magic of America" required visiting one of the holding venues, Art Institute officials are working to publish it, at least online, in the face of budget cuts. The Block, meanwhile, has borrowed portions of it for the exhibition. "She was one of the first women out there practicing architecture," says Wood. "It gives people a feel for what that was like."