



## **Marion Mahony Griffin Lecture 2009**

### ***Marion Mahony Griffin: 21st c. avant gardiste or 19th c. dreamer?***

The inaugural Marion Mahony Griffin Lecture on 12 February 2009 at the National Library in Canberra was a great success. Over 260 attended, including many WBGs members from Sydney and representatives of a wide range of Canberra's architectural, arts, landscaping, heritage, educational, government and community organisations.

Dr Anna Rubbo, Associate Professor of Architecture, University of Sydney, gave a stimulating, informative and inspiring presentation. Drawing on new material from her recent research into Marion's latter years 1938-61 and *The Magic of America*, Anna conveyed a vivid and rounded portrayal of a remarkable individual. Marion would surely have been pleased to learn that her life, works and values are highly respected and relevant in today's world.

Dr Rubbo linked President Obama's Inaugural Address about remaking America, including the words 'there is work to be done...all this we will do', to the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson 'make the most of yourself because that is all there is of you.' Marion would have endorsed the President's call for 'shoulders to the wheel' and new ways of community engagement, adding to Emerson 'make the most of yourselves together.'

Anna referred to current economic, social and environmental turmoil and the United Nations Millenium Development Goals. She is a member of the Millenium Taskforce to Improve the Lives of Slumdwellers (Goals 1 Eradicate poverty, Goal 7 Ensure environmental sustainability and Goal 8 Partnerships for development) and a Director of Global Studio of design and planning professionals addressing sustainable urbanisation.

The Lecture provided a wealth of observations about Marion's energy, beliefs, personality, interests, marriage with Walter, her family life in America and legacy in the fields of urban planning, architecture, the arts and community life. By the early 1930s both Marion and Walter were imbued with anthroposophy and the teachings

of Rudolph Steiner, which renewed their creativity and energy. The Castlecrag community thrived on spirituality, environmental harmony, innovative housing design, radical politics, theatre and sharing.

Back in America Marion became closely involved with Lola Lloyd and the World Fellowship Centre. Initiated in 1918, the Centre was prominent in the peace movement and promotion of world democratic government. Marion designed a beautiful estate for the Centre in New Hampshire. Recognised for her 'vision and skills' Marion was also commissioned to design a communal estate in Texas which deployed all the progressive concepts she had applied in Castlecrag.

She gave a number of public speeches on professional, philosophical and political topics. She entered the post-World War II 'Better Chicago' competition incorporating enlightened ideas about public transport, healthy city, affordable housing, democratic citizenry, rich community life, social justice and environmental management.

Dr Rubbo recommended reading Magic of America for its wonderful insights, historical narratives, autobiography and tribute to Walter.

In the next part of the talk, Dr Rubbo described Global Studio programs to alleviate poverty in the 'Global South.' She noted the parallel with Marion's work on 'design to improve people's lives', her use of big ideas, education, friendship, social inclusion, culture, environmental sustainability and her work in America in the 1940s. People need to identify their needs, community cooperation and self reliance, which represents a challenge to conventional 'top-down' design professionals.

The story of the Griffins and the four case studies given by Anna served to illustrate the words on one Obama Inauguration Day T-shirt: 'Sit..Walk..Run..Fly.' Marion exemplified hard work and determination, the best of herself, imagination, the ability to move on and to redirect her focus, energy and creativity. She emphasised community, culture and spirituality as opposed to materialism and an individualised world.

Dr Rubbo was introduced by the acting Chief Executive (now confirmed in the position) of the National Capital Authority, Gary Rake. He read the speech of the Minister for Home Affairs, the Hon. Bob Debus MP, who was detained in Parliament. The Minister's speech was especially notable for his commitment to sustainability and democracy. He endorsed Marion's precepts of 'democratic architecture' and her 'belief in authority within, instead of from without.' The Society gratefully acknowledged the sponsorship of the ACT Government by way of a financial grant and inclusion in the program of Canberra Centenary events. The Inaugural Lecture was chaired by Professor James Weirick, organised by the Canberra Chapter of WBCS and Rosemarie Willett gave the vote of thanks to Dr Rubbo.

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