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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:**

September 15, 2016

## ***In Her Own Right: Marion Mahony Griffin***

***Shedding light on the unheralded Prairie School innovator and  
Illinois' first woman architect***

ELMHURST, IL – To say that Marion Mahony Griffin was a pioneer in her field is a bit of an understatement. Terms like “force of nature” or “trailblazer” are more fitting to describe a woman—the first registered architect in the state of Illinois and the second woman to earn an architecture degree from MIT—who stood shoulder-to-shoulder with her male peers in the vaunted Prairie School of Architecture led by the inimitable Frank Lloyd Wright.

Though Wright and her husband, Walter Burley Griffin, may be more familiar to those who know about American architecture, it is the often unheralded design work by Marion that became the distinct hallmark of the Prairie School through detailed renderings of such masterpieces as Unity Temple in Oak Park and the Plan for Canberra in Australia. Mahony Griffin was one of Wright’s first employees in the legendary Oak Park studio, and she proved to be ahead of her time in her ideas and innovative drawing style that integrated the natural environment into the design process.

For many years, Marion Mahony Griffin’s story went untold as the spotlight shone on men like Louis Sullivan, Wright, and others. Her story is now being brought to light with a new exhibit presented by the **Elmhurst History Museum** entitled “***In Her Own Right: Marion Mahony***

**Griffin.**” The exhibit will be open from October 7, 2016 through March 12, 2017 and brings Mahony Griffin’s own story out of the shadows as a brilliant architect, talented artist, avid environmentalist, and social activist. *“In Her Own Right”* traces Mahony Griffin’s early life, her personal and professional partnership with her husband on three continents, her final years in Chicago where she died in obscurity and penniless—and considers the legacy of a Chicagoan of immense but often overlooked importance.

### **Telling Marion’s Story**

The Griffins are perhaps better known in Australia than they are in the U.S. due to the years they spent there working on the elaborate Plan for Canberra—an impressive international contest-winning design created for the country’s capital city—and the town of Castlecrag, an idyllic community near Sydney that assimilated architecture into the natural landscape. So it is fitting that the Elmhurst History Museum turned to Dr. Anna Rubbo, PhD—an Australian native and an adjunct senior scholar at the Center for Sustainable Urban Development at Columbia University and a former Associate Professor of Architecture, Design and Planning at the University of Sydney—for development of the exhibit content. Rubbo has researched, published, and lectured extensively on Marion Mahony Griffin—a woman she feels has not been given the credit she deserves in architecture history.

Lance Tawzer, Elmhurst History Museum’s curator of exhibits, shared his rationale for telling Marion’s story now. “Anna Rubbo brings a special perspective to this story as a scholar, an architect, and an Australian, and she was very enthusiastic about partnering with us on this project,” said Tawzer. “We were drawn to doing this exhibit because it seemed unfair that Marion’s story had not yet been told without being put in a box with Walter Burley Griffin and Frank Lloyd Wright. When we started to pursue this story a few years ago, it was because of Walter’s relationship to Elmhurst where his parent’s lived and he designed three homes and the Elmhurst Golf Club’s clubhouse. But as we dug further, we realized the unique story here was Marion’s and we felt it was time to give her the accolades she deserves. With Anna Rubbo’s scholarship and research, I believe we are able to tell a compelling story that people need to know more about.”

Tawzer continued: “What I hope people take away from this exhibit is an understanding that this is a woman who has earned a place in history, a woman with vision and talent who dared to have a career in a field dominated by men. Mahony Griffin is certainly a role model for all of us

today to look up to, and I believe by experiencing this exhibit our visitors will have a greater respect for her importance in history.”

## Exhibit Highlights

In the exhibit, Rubbo tells Marion’s story through a number of themes including early childhood life and influences, her years at MIT, her early professional career in Wright’s Oak Park studio, her personal and professional partnership with Walter, their years abroad in Australia and India, and her return to the U.S. and late career. The Elmhurst History Museum staff brings these details to life through a number of loaned photos and materials including:

- Two of Mahony Griffin’s “Forest Portraits” (private collector);
- Illustrations from the Mary and Leigh Block Museum in Evanston;
- Rare photographs from the Frank Lloyd Wright Trust, National Library of Australia, Walter Burley Griffin Society, Oak Park Public Library, and others;
- A model of Mahony Griffin’s first major commission, All Soul’s Church in Evanston, loaned by Griffin scholar Paul Kruty.

## Exhibit-related Programs

To expand the learning experience of *“In Her Own Right,”* the Elmhurst History Museum has planned a full roster of exhibit-related programs with visiting scholars, authors and interesting tours to learn more about Marion Mahony Griffin, including:

**Oct. 6: Opening Lecture, 7 p.m.**—Dr. Anna Rubbo presents the opening lecture to launch the exhibit, discussing Mahony Griffins remarkable life and legacy. *Location:* Elmhurst History Museum Education Center *Cost:* Members Free, Non-Members \$10.

**Oct. 25: Graceland Cemetery Tour: Women of Influence, 8:30 a.m-1 p.m.**—The Chicago Architecture Foundation will lead this tour of Chicago’s northside cemetery where Mahony Griffin and other notable Chicago women are buried. *Location:* Tour begins/ends at Elmhurst History Museum *Cost:* Members \$30, Non-Members \$35.

**Nov. 1: Marion Mahony Griffin: A Force of Nature, 7 p.m.**—Noted Griffin historian Christopher Vernon presents an illustrated lecture on Marion’s little-known practice as a landscape architect, her impressive work on the Plan for Canberra, and her legacy to the world. *Location:* Elmhurst History Museum Education Center *Cost:* Members Free, Non-Members \$5

**Nov. 17: Women of Steel & Stone: Inspirational Architects, Engineers & Landscape Designers 1 p.m.**—Author Anna M. Lewis shares stories of female architect, engineers, and landscape designers from the 1800s to today. *Location:* Elmhurst History Museum Education Center *Cost:* FREE

Reservations for all of these programs are required, and can be made by emailing [EHMprograms@elmhurst.org](mailto:EHMprograms@elmhurst.org) or online at [elmhursthistory.org](http://elmhursthistory.org) (in the Adult Programs section). Additional programs will be added throughout the exhibit's run into March of 2017. For registration and more information on these programs, go to [www.elmhursthistory.org](http://www.elmhursthistory.org) in the Adult Programs section.

Gain a deeper understanding of a little-known innovator and architect by experiencing “***In Her Own Right: Marion Mahony Griffin***” from October 7 through March 12, 2017 at the Elmhurst History Museum, located at 120 E. Park Ave. in downtown Elmhurst. Exhibit hours are: Sunday, Tuesday through Friday from 1 to 5 p.m. and Saturday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. General admission is free, and limited free parking is available. For the latest exhibit and program information, please visit [www.elmhursthistory.org](http://www.elmhursthistory.org) or call (630) 833-1457.

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*The Elmhurst History Museum is a department of the City of Elmhurst supported by the Elmhurst Heritage Foundation. The Museum is located at 120 E. Park Ave. in downtown Elmhurst. General admission is free with nominal fees for special programs. For more information, call 630-833-1457 or visit our web site at [www.elmhursthistory.org](http://www.elmhursthistory.org).*

*CAPTION: Marion Mahony Griffin portrait, National Library of Australia. Used by permission.*