

Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin, Architects of Anthroposophy

Dr John Paull
john.paull@mail.com

A century ago, on the 23rd of May 1912, the winning design of Canberra was announced. Soon after, two talented Chicago architects set sail for Australia. Their plan for Australia's national capital, already named Canberra but at the time merely an empty paddock, had won first prize in an international competition which attracted 137 entries. The winning prize money for the design was a modest £1750 (McGregor, 2009).

Walter Burley Griffin (1876-1937) and Marion Mahony (1871-1961) were married in the year preceding the win. Marion had nagged Walter to enter the competition, "What's the use of thinking about a thing like this for ten years if when the time comes you don't get it done in time!" She pointed out the practicalities: "Perhaps you can design a city in two days but the drawings take time and that falls on me" (Griffin, 1949, volume IV p.294).

After the win was announced, Walter declared: "I have planned it not in a way that I expected any government in the world would accept. I have planned an ideal city - a city that meets my ideal of a city of the future" (New York Times, 1912).

Marion chronicled events of their life together in a typewritten four-volume memoir of over 1600 pages (Griffin, 1949). Her memoir documents their life together and liberally reproduces personal correspondence between them and their associates. Her unpublished manuscript reveals the intensity with which she and Walter embraced the thoughts of Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) and anthroposophy.

Rudolf Steiner, Anthroposophy & Optimism

The Griffins moved from Melbourne to Sydney in 1924 and it was there that they were introduced to the thoughts of Rudolf Steiner; they were ideas that would shape their thinking from that time onwards.

Marion describes her introduction to Steiner:

“In Sydney so many friends and so wonderful, now moving toward a common center from which one could grasp the earth and humanity as a totality. The first step toward this center was the putting into my hands by a Quaker ... a book which changed me completely from a pessimist to an optimist, the *Outline of Occult Science* by Rudolf Steiner which led to my joining some time later the Society founded by him” (Griffin, 1949, IV p.169).

Marion joined the Anthroposophic Society in Australia (ASA) in 1930. Walter joined in 1931 (Mazzone, 1995). Their next-door neighbours at the time, in the then newly developing Sydney suburb of Castlecrag, were the anthroposophist couple, Edith Williams and Robert Williams. Edith was the first General Secretary of the ASA. Marion states that: “Mr. and Mrs. Williams came into the Castlecrag community and through them we joined the Anthroposophic Society, delving into the realm of man's wisdom” (Griffin, 1949, IV p.169).

Marion stated her view that:

“Through Anthroposophy, the Twentieth Century science, which ... revolutionizes thinking for this century as material science did the thinking of the nineteenth century, this power of receiving information directly from the spiritual realms can again be developed” (Griffin, 1949, IV p.393).

She expressed disquiet over aspects of scientific progress:

“Today they know not where to turn nor what to do. Each step now in material science which was the hope of the 19th century ... provokes man to greater and greater destruction. Unless material knowledge is supplemented by that other help, spiritual knowledge, man's work cannot be constructive ... Steiner ... has laid the foundations for the knowledge necessary for the period in which we live” (Griffin, 1949, IV p.396).

Marion lamented the dominant paradigm of her times in which science was transcendent:

“In ancient India, Religion, Art and Science were a true unity ... In our own period Science has become the dominating factor and the gap between it and religion and art has become ever greater. Out of this separation all three have gone astray. Science has become dogma ...” (Griffin, 1949, IV p.396).

She declared the redemptive value of anthroposophy:

“... today we must not rest short of the answer to questions. Otherwise the chaos that we see on our horizons will become world wide. Anthroposophy consists in the capacity to ask questions and to recognize the answers when they come” (Griffin, 1949, IV p.400).

Anthroposophic Festivals

The 1930s were a golden age for anthroposophy in Australia. There was a growing community of enthusiasts clustered in Castlecrag with the Griffins playing a prominent role.

Castlecrag is a waterfront suburb of Sydney on the lower north shore of the city. The suburb was a Griffin design with great attention to environmental awareness.

Marion described the logic of the Catlecrag plan:

“The dwellings in this new suburb are designed to harmonize with their natural surroundings. The roads ... flow in curves which please the eye. The houses are inconspicuous, in keeping with the natural harmonies. As the natural flora is restored the houses will nestle into place so that the slopes ... will be as completely garden as they were before ... and in every direction the eye will encounter a garden, instead of a brick wall or an ugly fence ... the general plan ... almost entirely conceals the houses by trees, shrubs and climbers ... Castlecrag not only accepts and makes the most of natural surroundings, but meets all the needs of a human community ... Open spaces are reserved for all time, interior parks giving safe play space for the little ones ... yet allowing them intercourse with other children, so useful for development. Park paths connect these reserves, so that delightful walks will be possible even after occupation is complete” (Griffin, 1949, III p. 152-3).

Marion wrote, in the third person, of an important development for anthroposophy in Australia:

“Then came the momentous decision to have the Anthroposophic Festivals, to awaken a greater consciousness of the significance of the seasons, at Castlecrag. Miss Mitchell, the General Secretary [of the Anthroposophical Society] of Australia, approved ... [Walter] had set aside the Haven Valley for an open-air theatre and Mrs. Griffin was aflame to produce a play in the valley ... In her

introduction she had, through Anthroposophic information, been able to relate the play to the realities of the moon realm and received the compliment that her introduction was as delightful as the play” (Griffin, 1949, III p.430).

Anthroposophic Festivals involved open air plays and community working bees to set the scene:

“ ... the valley was astir for weeks with Castlecrag ‘Bees,’ Griffin working like a navvy along with the others, to his great delight, for if he had not been destined for architectural realms his choice of occupation would certainly have been digging ditches and breaking stones. A stretch of the west side of the valley was terraced and faced with great stones to form seats for the audience; the other side and the head of the valley, a hundred feet above and down a hundred feet and more to the harbor, was the stage the loveliest ever seen. There were coastal Angophoras [Australian native flowering trees and shrubs] great and small with their ever-changing colored bark, one of the eight pillars of heaven in the Australian Natives' lovely lore and a magical succession of blossoming trees, shrubs” (Griffin, 1949, III p.430).

Plays of Goethe, Grimm, Rabindranath Tagore and “Mirabooka - the Southern Cross, Aboriginal Mythology [by] Sylvia Brose and Bette Ainsworth” were presented in the Haven Valley open-air theatre. Marion stated that:

“The basic truths of the mystery schools are to be found even in the most ancient and most primitive lore as we students of spiritual science learn through our own experiences and through our studies whether of Greek or of aboriginal Australian mythology” (Griffin, 1949, III p.430).

Castlecrag landscape features were incorporated into the narrative of plays:

“And the rocks! ... That top promontory where Iphigenia gave her invocation to the sea - with its precipitous drop; and the cave below where in a later play Everyman was laid in burial. The winding path down around the huge leaning tree on whose great sloping boll the aboriginal goddess of the honey sweet grass-tree slept till man, redeemed, found her and all nature came to life again, and around to the Demeter rock, on the terrace below, where in this same aboriginal play the Bat, full of Satanic fervor gloated over the fall of man as he yielded to temptation after the Stream led him down the valley to the South” (Griffin, 1949, III p.431).

Biodynamic Agriculture

The first public lecture in Australia to discuss biodynamic agriculture was presented by Bob Williams in the Griffin's house at Castlecrag on 26 June, 1938 (L. Williams, c. 1984). Walter had died in India just the year before, and Marion would permanently depart Australia for Chicago, USA, just four months later (Spathopoulos, 2007).

In her memoirs, Marion wrote that:

“Australia is rapidly being awakened to the fact that there is something radically wrong with the present methods. Scarcely a week passes without a column or half-column article about the serious condition of the soil, about blights of the products and the diseases of the animals fed from the large quantity production methods attained by chemical fertilizers and other materialistic scientific methods some of which are denuding the districts, some creating growing deserts whose dry sands are sweeping on, constantly increasing the desert area, some of which are reducing the fertility of the soil till it is becoming a pasty concrete-like substance, its fertility lost. It is a pity” (Griffin, 1949, III p.337).

Marion looked to Germany for evidence of the efficacy of biodynamic farming and her comments refer to the fact that anthroposophy was banned by the Nazis:

“It is interesting to know that in Germany where Anthroposophy is banned (where if three people come together to converse on the subject in any of its many fields, the many fields of 20th century science, they may be handled as traitors) Anthroposophic agriculture is required (or was until they overran the broad fields of their neighbors) for they realized the need for a type of cultivation which will produce fine crops without reducing the fertility of the soil. There were some 35 centers for distributing the knowledge and materials required and thousands of acres were planted bringing forth crops superior to those under the chemical methods which are really destroying the fertility of the soil - killing the earth” (Griffin, 1949, III p.337).

Marion stated her view that “the Germans ... have accepted the evidence before their eyes of the spiritual-scientific methods - Biodynamics” (Griffin, 1949, III p.341). More than six decades since she wrote those lines, Germany is still the world leader in biodynamics as measured by area under biodynamic cultivation (Paull, 2011b).

She wrote of her own botanical work in Australia:

“I spent much time for several years in listing plants and all details concerning them in tabulated form for use in any and all planting schemes ... tabulated to show different growth requirements, as soil, moisture and so on; heights and shapes of growths; color of flowers, foliage, berries and barks ... It is now being carried on by a couple of young Anthroposophists who are working in the new 20th Century methods of agriculture as established by Rudolf Steiner, methods which increase instead of depleting the fertility of the soil” (Griffin, 1949, III p.337).

Lecturing on Anthroposophy

It has been asserted that Marion’s “intense enthusiasm [for anthroposophy] was not shared by her husband” (Reeves, 1998, p. 64), but this appears to be mistaken. The couple’s personal correspondence appearing in Marion’s memoirs reveals that Rudolf Steiner and anthroposophy were topics raised by both her and Walter in their interpersonal correspondence. They both participated in anthroposophy discussion groups in Sydney, they both engaged with the Anthroposophy festivals and plays in Castlecrag, and they both read works by Steiner (Griffin, 1949).

Walter and Marion each presented lectures on aspects of anthroposophy. Walter wrote to Marion from Lucknow, India, that: “I talked on Anthroposophy for 45 minutes from 1 p.m. to a group studying comparative religions” at a college of the University of Lucknow (letter dated 28 Nov. 1935 in Griffin, 1949, I p.3).

Marion wrote from Castlecrag to Walter that: “Saturday I gave a lecture ... on the Four Ethers in connection with the human organism which I have never touched on in my previous talks; and tied it up with Dr. Pfeiffer’s recent publication on the diagnosis of all diseases and their allocation to special organs by means of investigating the crystals of the blood (letter dated 13 April 1936 in Griffin, 1949, I p.95). Dr Ehrenfried Pfeiffer (1899-1961) was, at the time, coordinating biodynamic agricultural research at the Goetheanum, in Dornach, Switzerland (Paull, 2011a).

From Lucknow, Walter wrote to Marion that “I was attracted by a notice, in the Lucknow Publishing House, of Rom Landau’s ‘God is my Adventure’. It has a fine chapter on Dr Rudolf Steiner and Anthroposophy” (letter 21 Feb. 1936 in Griffin, 1949, I p.77).

Walter wrote to Marion that: "I am reverting to the reading of a Steiner lecture before getting out of bed in the morning and have already encompassed your translation of Philosophy, Cosmology and Religion received last week" (letter 17 March 1936 in Griffin, 1949, I p.85). Marion studied the German language and she translated various of Steiner's lectures into English.

Marion wrote from Castlecrag to Walter in Lucknow:

"The other day I ran across in Steiner that creative accomplishment is not in vain because it has not manifested in material form but that it persists in the etheric realms where it is accessible to creative thinkers and continues to serve human progress. This can be a real comfort to architects whose work differs from that of other artists in being dependent on others for its material fruition" (letter 17 April 1936 in Griffin, 1949, I p.101a).

There were weekly Sunday evening group meetings, attended by the Griffins along with their business partner, architect Eric Nicholls, where the writings of Steiner were discussed. Such works included Steiner's New Art of Education (1928) in which he laid down the foundations of Waldorf Education (Griffin, 1949).



Plate 1: The Essendon Incinerator in Melbourne opened in June 1930, designed by Eric Nicholls, the first of thirteen municipal waste incinerators constructed using Griffin-Nicholls designs (the waste loading door is to the left on the upper level).

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The first four General Secretaries of the Anthroposophic Society in Australia were colleagues, including even next-door neighbours, of the Griffins. The inaugural General Secretary was Edith Williams* (General Secretary from c.1926-1935), followed by Lute Drummond (from 1935-1948), architect and colleague Eric Nicholls (from 1948-1966), and biodynamic pioneer Robert (Bob) Williams* (from 1966-1983) (Mazzone, 1995).



Plate 2: The Essendon Incinerator, lower level, with furnaces of the Reverberatory Incinerator Company, Melbourne, on the left.

Anthroposophic Architecture & the Goetheanum

It seems that Marion underestimated Rudolf Steiner as an architect. Marion wrote an oddly mistaken, and misinformed, account of the most important building designed by Steiner - the Goetheanum at Dornach, Switzerland (Plate 3). Just what she based her comments on is unclear, but it was not personal experience. She wrote:

“So far as I know the only attempt to give architectural form to this consciousness is the present portentous ‘Goetheanum’, center of the General Anthroposophic Society, the work of its founder, Rudolf Steiner, Ph.D. ... This threatening scull-like [sic] structure in Switzerland puts the stern and forbidding aspect of the work of this age before the society's European students and workers which the

present seems to justify. However it is just as possible to beings of intellectual aspirations to accept the necessities of materialization without accepting the ugliness it reveals when man succumbs to materialism's thankless rigidity as a taskmaster. Meaning and interest given to this solid state of incarnation can transform it in life and in architecture into the servant of new beauty instead of a one-eyed tyrant" (Griffin, 1949, 1 p.180).

Rather than being 'the only attempt', Rudolf Steiner designed at least twelve buildings at Dornach. They were designed and built in the 1910s and 1920s - with reinforced concrete as a favoured material. Steiner's buildings include residential houses, a guest house, the natural science centre where biodynamics research was managed by Pfeiffer, and the Goetheanum itself.

The Goetheanum could be described variously as magnificent, monumental or monolithic, but Marion's 'portentous' does not hit the mark at all, and nor do her comments of 'skull-like', 'stern' and 'forbidding aspect'. As photographs can attest, and a first-hand visit will readily confirm, the Goetheanum is a light-filled building which is a joy to visit, to explore and to work in, and the play of light, shadows and colours both inside and out is a delight. Marion's Goetheanum comments appear to be an odd lapse of judgement.



Plate 3: The Goetheanum, in Switzerland, designed by Rudolf Steiner, headquarters of the Anthroposophical Society.

Conclusion

Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin were intimately entwined in the early development and proliferation of anthroposophy in Australia. Their introduction to Steiner occurred several years after Steiner's death, nevertheless, anthroposophy became for them a lived experience which was woven into the fabric of their lives and thoughts. Through their reading, correspondence, recruitment activities, lectures, study groups, translation of Steiner, and Anthroposophic Festivals, the thoughts and insights of Rudolf Steiner became a core part of who they were and how they lived their lives. In the joys of projects realized and in the trials and tribulations of projects that never materialized, anthroposophy gave them succour.

It is now eight decades since the accomplished architects, Walter Griffin, Marion Griffin and their partner in architecture, Eric Nicholls, joined the Anthroposophic Society in Australia (in 1931, 1930 and 1934 respectively). They studied and promoted anthroposophy while working together collaboratively to produce distinctive and distinguished architecture around Australia. Anthroposophic practice, studies and research continue in Australia with such recent books as a fresh biography of Rudolf Steiner (Whitehead, 2010) and a new study of Waldorf Education (Mazzone & Laing, 2010).

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Note

* There are two unrelated 'Robert Williams' in the early history of anthroposophy in Australia. One was married to Edith, the first General Secretary of the ASA, and the other was a later General Secretary of the ASA, was married to Louise, and was an early advocate of biodynamics.

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