

# THE GRIFFIN NEWSLETTER

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Walter Burley Griffin

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## FOURTEENTH ANNUAL MEETING SET FOR 29 JUNE IN EVANSTON, ILLINOIS

»PLEASE NOTE CHANGE OF DATE«

The fourteenth annual meeting of the Walter Burley Griffin Society of America will be held in Evanston on Saturday, **29 June 2013**. [NOTE: THIS IS A **WEEK LATER** THAN THE DATE LISTED IN THE FALL NEWSLETTER] The meeting will take place at the Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University, (40 Arts Circle Drive, Evanston, IL). Registration begins at 8:30am and the meeting begins at 9:00. The cost is \$10 for the meeting and tour, \$10 for a box lunch and, of course, registrants must also have paid their annual dues of \$25 to the Society. Please fill out and return the enclosed registration card, with choice of sandwich for lunch.

In returning to Evanston, the Society plans to visit several Griffin buildings, including the Carter and Comstock II houses, as well as a choice group of related houses that will include work from among the following: George Elmslie, Spencer & Powers, Tallmadge & Watson, George Maher and Dwight Perkins. Morning lectures include presentations on the progress of the National Historic Landmark nomination for the Stinson Memorial Library, the restoration and addition to the Comstock II house, and the town plan of Griffin's Idalia in southern Florida. The meeting will coincide with the museum's exhibition on Canberra and the Griffins' relationship with early European Modernism (see next article) organized by Prof. David Van Zanten of Northwestern University.

## DRAWING THE FUTURE: CHICAGO ARCHITECTURE ON THE INTERNATIONAL STAGE, 1900-1925

Northwestern University's Block Museum is hosting a major exhibition, "Drawing the Future: Chicago Architecture on the International Stage, 1900-1925," from 19 April through 11 August 2013. Curated by Prof. David Van Zanten, "the exhibition explores the dialogue between architects and city planners in the United States, Europe, and Australia through drawings, large-scale architectural renderings, sketches, and rare books," according to the museum's press release. "In the early 20th century Chicago-based architects engaged in dynamic conversations with their progressive European counterparts as urban planning evolved in practice and on paper. 'Drawing the Future' focuses on a few key competitions and exhibitions and their primary participants, including architects Daniel Burnham, Marion Mahony Griffin, Walter Burley Griffin, Tony Garnier, and Frank Lloyd Wright....The competition for a plan of the city of Canberra, Australia, the new capital of a young country, provided a context for a fresh vision in 1913. That the first prize was awarded to the American architect Walter Burley Griffin speaks to the international outlook and the idea of transnational exchanges of the era. The exhibition will highlight such moments of dialogue and collaboration." A full-color publication accompanies the exhibition. The Society is fortunate to have Prof. Van Zanten on hand during the meeting for his thoughts about the exhibition.

## LIVING IN OUR GRIFFIN HOUSE FOR 50 YEARS

By Robert E. McCoy

*Bob and Bonnie McCoy have lived in the Griffins' James Blythe house since 1963—which is exactly half of its entire existence. On this, the centenary of its creation, they have paused to share with us some thoughts, feelings, and memories of that experience.*

Mason City was at the head of our Iowa list of places where I might like to practice orthopedic surgery. In 1962, while still stationed at the USAF hospital at Wright Patterson AFB, in Dayton, Ohio, Bonnie and I made a ten-day tour of possible locations. The orthopedic group I was interviewing in Mason City put us in the hands of a realtor for a drive-by tour of neighborhoods. I had little architectural knowledge, had never heard of the Prairie School and, although I had heard the famous name mouthed about, “Frank Lloyd Wright” held no particular associations for me. Only one house on the tour made a lasting impression. I remembered only its stucco-above-stone street façade with three second-floor windows projecting outward toward the street: nothing more.

Two weeks after Bonnie and I had viewed a half-dozen other situations, we decided on Mason City, a town of the right size (30,000) that, being the largest town within a ninety-mile radius, had the amenities of a much larger city in a state with only five metropolitan areas with levels of medical specialization above ours. We arrived on the first of July. After spending four rent-free months in the vacant winter home of a generous partner-to-be, we bought a three-bedroom 1890s Victorian home from the bank. I stripped the wallpaper and Bonnie made it habitable for our one- and two-year-old sons. By mid-July I began my part of a busy orthopedic practice with referrals from a ninety-mile radius. As the second orthopedist in an eight-person surgical specialty group, I was so busy that it was only when the family two doors down the hill asked us if we would be interested in seeing the home they were putting on the market that I saw that house—and discovered that theirs was the home that had made such a strong impression on me on my first drive-by months before.

Because the house presents its narrow face to the street and its much broader face to Rock Glen and Willow Creek, we were astonished to see it broadside when we were first led onto its acre-and-a-quarter lawn. My first reaction then was, “If it only didn’t come

with all that yard to keep up!” Our thoughts, before buying the house were these: we had already made five moves in our short married lives and, though our Victorian house had all the needed amenities, it was not to be our permanent home; yet we liked this neighborhood, where every boy’s rite of passage could include managing a paper route. We wanted a house that would fill our lifelong needs if we fulfilled its needs.

The more we gazed at that house (and tirelessly over the years since) and learned about the architecture of its creators, the Griffins, the more we loved it. We loved increasingly its rugged mass, its symmetry, the intricacy of its moldings in their relationship with its openings: the way a concrete, window-sill molding in the central section, discontinuously, passing laterally, became the sill of a window twelve-feet-nine-inches wide and seven-and-a-half inches tall; and the concrete cornice at the opposite end of the house that had a deep reveal beneath it of the same dimensions as the very broad, short window just described at the north end of the house.

We like to visually follow the concrete head molding projecting above the panoramic living room window to the right as it becomes the square slab of concrete above the principal entrance and then, continuing laterally, becomes the projecting head molding over the panoramic window of the garage. Following the same head molding from the living room laterally to the left we see it become the square, concrete slab-roof of a living-room corner-window before passing on laterally to become the projecting head molding over the two veranda windows placed symmetrically on either side of the veranda’s garden entrance. (The garden entrance from the veranda is a feature present in one form or another in all Griffin’s Rock Glen/Rock Crest houses.)

We love the fact that the two exterior concrete slabs, just described on the east side of the house are exactly matched on the west side of the house and the soffit planes of the four of them continue through the house as symmetrically placed drop ceilings. It takes some thoughtful observation to see this subtle interior symmetry, but the house invites these mental exercises that are always rewarding. The related geometric themes in the concrete wall panels of the central section, the related window muntins, and the concrete balustrades with their variations on the geometry and squat concrete pilasters like those that might also be seen in a Maya temple are what



The James Blythe house (1913), with the McCoys in 1967:  
Jamie, Andy on Bonnie's lap, and Doug.

our guests most like to see. It is a continually enriching experience to be living in such a comfortable, logically but subtly planned home.

When we bought our house in 1963, the Australians put our architect's face on one of their postage stamps, celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of setting the "cornerstone" for Canberra, the new capital city of Australia, the design of which had been won by Griffin in 1912. We had no inkling we would absolutely love time spent in the yard and that our very active growing boys would love it equally. After going someplace "away" to catch fish, they always found the carp caught in our creek more abundant and better fighters. They didn't want to eat their catch, anyway. Because of our mature trees, we could sit on our terrace facing east in the summer, only four blocks distant from the City Hall, and not see another house. In fairly short order we had one more son and a dog, and a neighborhood of kids their age, the Corleys, the Konigsmarks, the Ewings, the Herlitzkas, running back and forth between house and creek or playing ball on the bases we would set up. Who else has swung on a backyard swing, hanging from a cottonwood limb thirty feet above the ground?—and with an arc of motion of at least 30 feet! Swinging in the city park could never be the same again.

All that, with a beautiful exterior design, originally symmetric on all four sides and a floor plan in which all the rooms were the ideal size for their function.

The room layout, at fifty years, was still ahead of its time and the equal of its workmanship and detail were to be seen only rarely. It had a thirty-three-foot



Bob and Bonnie McCoy, proud protectors  
of their Griffin treasure.

living room that faced the glen through a 10½ by 4 foot single-pane window, with an attached garage on the street. It had an 18 by 18 foot veranda on the south, shared equally by both living room and dining room, allowing them all to become parts of one great living space. The veranda had windows around its entire circumference. Its largest window faced south with dimensions also 10½ by 4 feet. On the east, the veranda had a door leading to the terrace and the garden, as did all Griffin's Rock Glen/Rock Crest houses.

We experienced the new home-owners syndrome—to want to make our new home our own by "changing things" to make it more "modern." Several trips made to Oak Park quickly disabused us of such destructive notions. We were reminded of the famous dictum, "Don't just do something! Stand there!" In our first year in the Blythe house we had two faded fifteen-foot "Anglo Persian" rugs that had been my grandmother's to keep the boys off the bare tile floor and a six-foot Steinway baby grand to keep Bonnie's fingers from rusting. When one-day we could begin furnishing the living room, the boys informed us in all seriousness that we were stealing their play room.

Early on, it was not easy to find much about Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony. One day there were two or three men in our yard taking measurements of our house and making sketches, uninvited. I went out and brought them into the house for a de-briefing. Very cordial, they were part of a HABS (Historic American Buildings Survey) team and put me onto a 1964 book on Griffin by an Australian, James Birrell. It contained a brief chapter on Griffin's American practice in which it was apparent he

had dry-labbed the section on Mason City. Bonnie and I became acquainted with Bill and Marilyn Hasbrouck, who asked me to work on an article about Prairie School architecture in Mason City for their magazine, *The Prairie School Review*. Anxious to rectify the many misstatements, I accepted the Hasbroucks' suggestion.

I dug in in spare time for several years, strongly motivated to give a correct impression of Prairie School architecture in our adopted home town. I was in time to interview several who had first-hand memories. For my thirty-six-page article, published in the third quarter 1968 issue, I interviewed Francis Barry Byrne with his wife Annette in their Prairie home in Evanston. I may have learned that it was designed by Maher. His wife was very consciously preventing my learning his age, fearing if that became public knowledge, he would never receive another client. I wanted to have Byrne come to Mason City to give a talk at the MacNider Art Museum on his recollections of the Oak Park Studio and the Griffins. He was anxious to do that, but only on the condition that the Museum hold a retrospective showing of his wife's oil portraits. The museum refused, and the deal was off. I was surprised that Byrne told me that at the time he did his work in Mason City, his influence was more that of Irving Gill and even the Austrian Secession than of Wright, his nine-year teacher *extraordinaire*.

Byrne remembered having a very unsatisfactory relationship with a Mason City client for whom he had designed a house on Rock Crest, Samuel Davis Drake. Drake, the owner of a large Insurance Agency, turned down Byrne's design, had the house designed by someone else and refused to pay Byrne his commission. The new architect, Einar Broaten, was a good north Iowa regional architect who gave Drake a large home obviously styled after Griffin. I sent Byrne photographs of the house that was built. He answered that there was nothing in its style to suggest his architecture, and that, further, he would never have designed a house with a hip roof with an attached garage with a gable roof. As I later learned of the unsatisfactory relationship between Byrne and Griffin, it seems most likely that Drake went to Byrne asking him to request a house design from Griffin in Australia. When presented with Byrne's design instead, Drake, though a responsible businessman, refused to pay Byrne's commission.

The next thing I knew, Byrne, a pedestrian, had been run over and killed by a commissioner of one of the

baseball leagues.

Others who had much to tell in the early 60s included Doris Markley, the spinster daughter of J. E. E. Markley, my neighbor when we first came to town and Rob Roy Cerney, elderly, a past member of the Blythe and Markley law firm. The second wife of Curtis Yelland, Drummond's client, gave interesting historical background while Roy Lippincott, Griffin's brother-in-law and a member of the Griffin's architectural firm, was available for telephone interview on at least two occasions. Robert and John Gilmore, grandsons of James Blythe, who have visited two or three times, filled out more information on Blythe, the Kingmaker of Iowa Republican politicians. Finally, a Mason City citizen with a most remarkable memory, Art Fishbeck, fed me background, fed me newspaper articles, and kept me on the right track. I spent many hours in the Mason City Public Library archives poring over period microfilms from the *Mason City Globe Gazette* and the *Mason City Times-Herald*.

One of the great pleasures of living in the Blythe house has been the numbers of significant architectural historians and photographers we have been able to meet here and from whom we have gained inspiration and learned a lot. They include H. Allen Brooks, Paul Sprague, Paul Kruty, Wilbert Hasbrouck, Donald Leslie Johnson, Richard Guy Wilson, Don Hallmark, Anna Rubbo, and Alasdair MacGregor, to name a few. Shirley Crossman and her husband, John, were Rock Glen friends and neighbors living in Griffin's Sam Schneider house. She was a Smith graduate with a major in Art History. Dynamic, she formed and became chair of a committee, of which I was a member, to gain National Register recognition for Rock Glen/Rock Crest as a National Historic District that also included Drummond's house for Curtis Yelland. I believe she and her committee also obtained National Register status for the Park Inn Hotel, City National Bank building. In 1989, the Stockman House was moved six blocks to make space for a parking lot for the adjacent First Methodist Church. The city took responsibility for the move and the only space that could be given for the house was a city-owned lot on the bank of Willow Creek where they dumped snow removed from city streets. In its juxtaposition to Rock Glen, right across State street, it was the most ideal site in the whole town!

In 1990 I became co-chair of the Stockman House Restoration Committee with Peggy Bang and, suc-

cessively, Co-Chair and Chair of the Stockman House Operating Committee up to the present. Following the loss of National Register status when the Stockman house was moved, its status was reinstated by Jo Brandt a member of the Stockman House Operating Committee. And, to complete the revitalization of Mason City's architectural glories, Wright's restored City National Bank and Park Inn Hotel reopened last year as a wonderful boutique hotel and meeting center.

Living in the James E. Blythe house for its second fifty years has been a life-changing adventure for Bonnie and me. There were only the last twelve years of its first fifty years when its owners were not the James Blythes or their daughter and son-in-law Hugh Gilmore. When we first walked down the hill to the second house south of us on that dark night of the previous owners' moving day, not knowing where the light switches were, it seemed a bit spooky and much bigger than we had imagined. By daylight we marveled over the wonderful hand-set tile flooring of living room, dining room and veranda, the great living space of the house. The single-hung plate glass sash windows between living room-veranda and dining room-veranda with the huge rectangular lead sash weights on ropes no-longer possessing the required integrity were spectacular. Their plate glass windows were eighty inches wide.

Griffin built the house on limestone bedrock. He employed all of his skills as architect, landscape architect, and city planner in laying out the Rock Glen/Rock Crest neighborhood. Our house and the Melson house on the cliff opposite, the homes of the developers of the two sides of the creek, were both built from basement to roof of reinforced concrete. Our walls were of very substantial rough-hewn limestone over hollow local clay tile, for the first story, and stucco over clay tile for the upper stories. All walls are non-load-bearing. Fifty years old in 1963, it should be structurally sound for another 200 years. For a family wanting to put its roots down what could have been better!

Bob McCoy, 27 March 2013

## **CELEBRATIONS TO BE SPONSORED BY THE WALTER BURLEY GRIFFIN SOCIETY OF AUSTRALIA**

The Griffin Society of Australia is celebrating the centenary of the Griffins' arrival in Australia with three days of events in Canberra on 15-17 August.

Spring 2013

Beginning on Thursday, the Society's annual Marion Mahony Griffin Lecture will be delivered by the Australian architect Caroline Pidcock, while on Friday there will be a symposium of international scholars, including Dr. Karl Fischer, a well-known urban planner and historian from the University of Kassel, James Weirick of the University of New South Wales, and our own Paul Kruty from the University of Illinois. Finally, a bus tour on Saturday will be led by Professor Weirick, who "will relate the exciting story of the development of Canberra from sheep paddock to the national capital, the international competition, the Griffins' vision and plans, political intrigue and bureaucratic intervention," according to the Society's latest newsletter, and will be illustrated with visits to various key locations in understanding Canberra.

### **"THE DREAM OF A CENTURY: THE GRIFFINS IN AUSTRALIA'S CAPITAL"**

This is the title of a remarkable exhibition that opened recently at the National Library of Australia in Canberra to celebrate the centenary of the Canberra competition. Curated by Christopher Vernon, University of Western Australia, the exhibition runs from 8 March to 10 June 2013. It focuses on the Griffin design enterprise in Canberra and showcases materials drawn from the office records of the Griffins' practice in the United States, Australia and India. The collection includes drawings, photographs and other ephemera, most of which has never before been publicly displayed.



Portion of the Canberra Plan

## CANBERRA AND INDIA: AN ALTERNATIVE CELEBRATION

*Shibu Dutta, an Indian architect living in Canberra, has long been interested in the work of the Griffins in Australia and India. In 1999, he organized and led a tour of northern India for Paul Sprague and John Vinci. Mr. Dutta recently sent Paul Sprague his own thoughts about recent events in Canberra, which Paul has kindly shared with the editor.*

9 March 2013, Canberra, ACT

“Dear Paul and Susan,

“I have been busy with the birthday celebration in Canberra. Here they are calling it the Hundred Years of Canberra. But I question them as to what they are celebrating—the naming of Canberra or the one hundred years of planning Canberra?...

“When Donald Leslie Johnson’s book was published, in the book review section of the RAI [Royal Australian Institute of Architects] publication, they wrote that “America gave birth to Griffin, Australia brought him to prominence, and India killed him.” I say that it was Australia that killed him twice and India gave him a new life. I talked about this to the authorities and they sent their nominated persons to go to Lucknow and Chicago to promote this celebration.

“I was spending time to prepare the materials for display tomorrow when the celebration starts. Australians love parties, so Canberrans are making the world’s longest ‘bubbly-bar,’ stretching along both sides of Lake Burley Griffin, serving free drinks. The authorities have given space to the Indian community for a display, and the Indian community, as usual, likes to display their art of dancing and food preparation. They are having that, yes, but I insisted that they should show the Australians that Griffin was as happy in India as he was in Australia. I borrowed from yours and Paul Kruty’s book, producing six large panels. Working single-handedly and without a work space and equipment, it was difficult. Let us see whether they can appreciate the other life of Griffin from a different perspective.

“Keep well. With all the best. Shibu.”

## “FRIEND AT REST ALONGSIDE CANBERRA’S DESIGNER”

This was the headline to an article that appeared last October 6th in the *Canberra Times*, which reported the rediscovery and marking of the grave of Ronald Craig in the same cemetery in Lucknow, India, that holds the remains of Walter Burley Griffin. Ronald Craig was the young journalist who was instrumental in getting Griffin the commission to design the new library for the University of Lucknow. Craig met Griffin in Bombay and accompanied him to Lucknow. (Their journey is recounted in Kruty & Sprague’s *Two American Architects in India*, 1997, pp. 1-4.) Their twenty-five years age difference meant nothing to the two men, who quickly became close friends. And then Craig died suddenly from smallpox. His grieving Indian widow commissioned Griffin to provide a landscape plan for his burial plot in Lucknow’s Christian cemetery, which apparently was undertaken. But no headstone was ever placed over the grave.

Fourteen months later Griffin himself was buried in the same cemetery. Although he, too, had no stone marking the location, in 1988 a Griffin admirer, Graeme Westlake from Canberra, sought out, found, and marked the site with the present monument. Christopher Vernon from the University of Western Australia, who has been traveling to India for several years uncovering more of the Griffins’ Indian story (readers will recall Christopher’s report on a few of his findings in *Griffin Newsletter* 12, Spring 2011, pp. 4-5), persevered to provide a similar service to Walter’s friend’s remains. Alas, after diligent research, he was unable to find the site, and was worried that, under Indian law, the grave, wherever it was, was eligible to be dug up and reused after being untended for decades. That was when Griffin scholar James Weirick came to the rescue, searching his vast material files and mental databanks to provide the location of the site. Weirick was the original westerner to research the Griffins in India more than forty years ago. This information allowed Vernon and his party to find the plot, only 150 feet from Griffin’s grave, and to correct the lacuna. As the article explains, Ronald Craig’s grave is now “capped by a concrete plinth and identified with a marble headstone.” They also took the opportunity to correct the misspelling of Chicago on Griffin’s own grave. May the two friends now rest in peace.

## INDIAN MONOGRAPH STILL AVAILABLE

The Griffin Society is pleased to make available a limited number of new copies of the ground-breaking book, *Two American Architects in India: Walter B. Griffin and Marion M. Griffin, 1935-1937*, published in conjunction with the international conference, "The Griffins in Context: American, Australia, India," held at the University of Illinois in October 1997. Written by Paul Kruty and Paul E. Sprague, the book is a comprehensive examination of the brief but productive period during which the Griffins worked in northern India. Long unavailable and difficult to find, the book is for sale through the Griffin Society for \$25, which includes shipping and handling. (A few used copies are currently available on Amazon for up to \$98.82 plus shipping.) Copies may be ordered on the website or by writing to the Walter Burley Griffin Society of America, 1152 Center Drive, St. Louis, MO, 63117.

## REAL ESTATE NEWS

Dan Tolbert, owner of the Orth house at 38 Abbottsford Road in Winnetka, which was among the buildings toured during the 2009 Griffin meeting (and also in 2001), has put the house on the market and hopes to find a sympathetic buyer interested in Griffin and the Prairie School. Dan reports that when he acquired the house in 2003, it had stood unoccupied for the previous two years and was in serious jeopardy of being the victim of a tear down, as had happened to Griffin's nearby James Marsh house in 2002. The deferred maintenance required him to undertake a near complete renovation and restoration to return it to the state we saw on the last tour. If you are interested in buying the house, or know of anyone looking for a classic Griffin design to call home, please contact Dan Tolbert at [dantolbert@gmail.com](mailto:dantolbert@gmail.com).



38 Abbottsford Road, Winnetka: Griffin's Orth House I, 1908  
Photo by Peter B. Griffin, 2009.

## SOCIETY'S TWO PUBLICATIONS AVAILABLE

Everyone who is interested in the Griffins and in the Prairie School will want to own the Society's two original publications, available through the website and by ordering directly from the Society's headquarters in St. Louis.

*Marion Mahony and Millikin Place* presents for the first time the whole exciting story of the development of Millikin Place in Decatur, Illinois. As Paul Kruty explains, "The history of Millikin Place is the personal story of Marion Mahony and Walter Griffin. The chain of events set in motion in September 1909, when Mahony agreed to complete Wright's buildings while he was abroad for a year, not only brought Walter and Marion together in Decatur, but it soon led to their marriage, and later to the extraordinary Rock Crest/Rock Glen commission in Mason City, Iowa, and finally to Australia."

*Walter Burley Griffin and the Stinson Memorial Library* reveals the international significance of the Griffins' major public building in the United States, a work that H. Allen Brooks called "a brilliant design and a fitting climax to Griffin's American career." Drawing on the priceless collection of letters and documents surviving at the library, Paul Kruty recounts the story of the commission, design, construction, and reception of the building, as well as its contexts in Griffin's career, the public library in America, and the architect's intention to create a Modern representational public architecture.

*Marion Mahony and Millikin Place* sells for \$29.95, while *Walter Burley Griffin and the Stinson Memorial Library* sells for \$25, plus s & h. Griffin Society members receive a 20% discount on both publications.

## MEMBERSHIP

The Walter Burley Griffin Society Of America is a not-for-profit, tax-exempt corporation under IRS Code 501 (c)(3). We invite you to become a "Friend" of the Society. For annual dues of \$25.00, you will receive a periodic newsletter keeping you abreast of the Society's activities, such as lectures, tours, exhibitions, and other events related to the Griffins' work. (\$20.00 for seniors 65 and older.)

The Society seeks comments, advice, suggestions, and news from you, its friends. The Society needs your financial support. All donations are tax-deductible.

If you wish to join the Society or renew your membership in the Society, please fill out the following form and mail it to us at the address below - or email us that you are attending the Annual Meeting and you can pay for both membership and meeting at that time.

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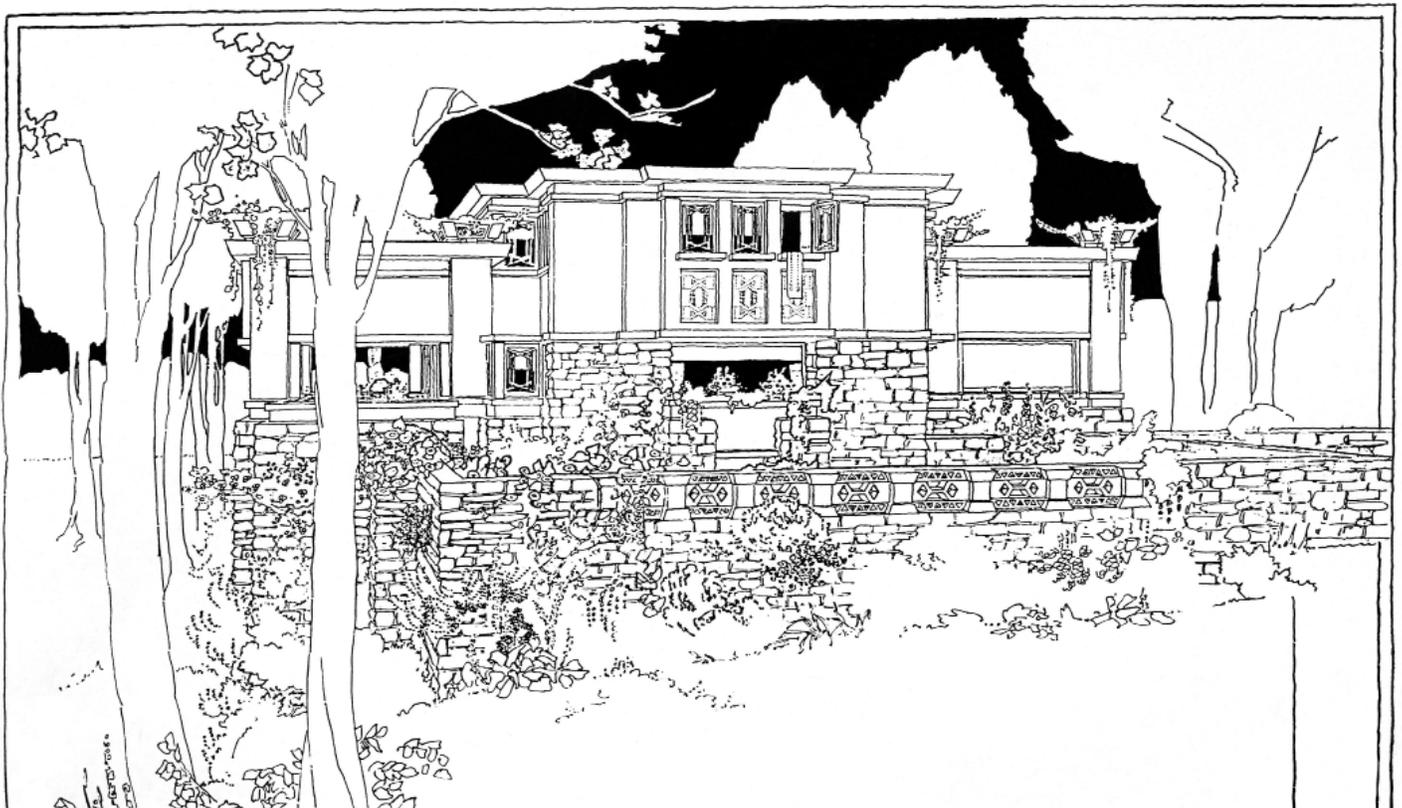
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Blythe House Perspective, drawn by Marion Mahony Griffin.