



MARION MAHONY GRIFFIN DESCRIBES THE FISHWICK HOUSE

Introductory Note: Marion Mahony Griffin returned from Australia to her native Chicago in 1937 after the death in India of her husband Walter Burley Griffin. She was embittered by what she saw as the “battles” fought by the couple against various authorities - politicians, bureaucrats, architectural professionals and other naysayers - who could not, or would not, accede to their views on what constituted good design and architecture. She set about assembling material which was part homage to her husband, part a review and justification of their creative approach and philosophies and part a rant about their tormentors. The resulting work “*Magic of America*” ran to over 1400 pages and contained nearly 700 images. Unable to find a publisher, before her death in 1961 she deposited copies of it in the Art Institute of Chicago and the New-York Historical Society. They contain this description of what she called the “Terraced House”.

It should be remembered that Marion was elderly when she worked on her opus, her memory was weakening and she was far from objective in her views. Further, the two source documents differ, her prose is sometimes difficult to follow and the organisation of the material is unreliable. For this reason, in August 2007 the Institute launched a website which helps readers understand her work. This description of the Fishwick house is from that source. It and the photograph below are included here with the Institute’s kind permission. For more on their battles open [.pdf The Griffins’ Changing Fortunes](#). See the entire text, illustrations and interpretive aids on “*Magic of America*” at <http://www.artic.edu/magicofamerica/moa.html> [1]

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Where, in these terraced regions stepping down to the waters of the Harbor, a road takes a curve to a lower level the lot takes a fan shape, narrow on the street frontage. A sharp turn as here would make the street frontage quite narrow. As shown in the photo the only street level entrance is out through the rock; to the left under the bedroom above is the garage, to the right, already on the level of the street, is a gate to the kitchen yard, straight down through a tunnel between the walls of the garage and the kitchen between beautiful gold-tiled walls one reaches the handsome illuminated front door. Above the garage the housekeeper’s suite as shown in the photo is open on three sides to fine views especially grand to the Southwest.



Even a single little tree might be a determining factor in establishing the location of a dwelling. It and its shadow might give it a feeling of completion from the start.

The front door opens into a great reception hall with intriguing prospects on every side. To the left a short flight of tile-patterned masonry steps takes one to the bedroom floor. The two main bedrooms are to the east both with direct access to the roofs of the main rooms below and stepping up to the higher roofs, with awnings when desired, and grand views on every side over the valley and harbor.

To the right of the reception room is a colonnade of openings into the dining room which in addition to its valley view is lighted night and day by a large fish-pool in its ceiling with glass bottom. To the left through a broad opening a wide flight of steps down, for the room is under one of the bedrooms above, brings you to the library, its high windows to the East. On ahead from the reception hall to the East is a grand central stone fireplace with opening in center between its flues so that you see on beyond into the living room with its windows sweeping around the further side to the East and North and South. Thus the house is terraced to fit the allotment and when the home was filled with guests you found them even up to the top roof terraces from which they got a breathtaking view around the whole horizon including the Pacific Ocean. This dwelling gets superb views in all directions.

Here were held musicals, for madam was a musician herself and, as customary in such town planned communities, each family centered on its particular field and genius in its often even grandiose affairs of hospitality. Here, before the valley theatre had yet been made available [2], was presented Goethe's "*The Green Snake and the Beautiful Lily*" - his only fairy story. It is impossible to describe the loveliness of such a production. The guests packed the house including the areas of the windows outside. It was given in German this time. When presented in the valley later on it was in English and miraculously lovely.

Sometimes the maximum outlook from all the rooms in the house is attained not by courts or semi-courts but by terracing the house. The nature of the allotment on which it is to be built determines the type of house. The Fishwick house at Castlecrag - from its roof the one a half story above the other - commanded two valleys one to the South, the other to the East and North-east. The residents here spent much of their time and entertained their guests on these superb lookout terraces, and supplemented their garden with showy, blossoming plants annual and perennial.

A path down the valley leads directly to the open-air theatre but before plays had been given there the dwelling itself had made charming settings for plays. In this case the living rooms are on the lower level, the bedrooms half a story above and the library a half story below.

The allotment is kite shaped, the only street frontage is on a circular drive with an interior monumental rock garden circle in the center, just sufficient to give the triple entrance to the dwelling, in the center the gold tiled walls of the front entrance, to the left the garage opening, to the right the entrance to the kitchen yard and the kitchen.

This is the only stub end street on the Crag and arose from the fact that the Council had forced a steep road down to the next level to give entrance to a boating reserve so the Castlecrag lower roads diverged from that.

Footnotes:

[1] This extract is from "*Magic of America*" Marion Mahony Griffin Art Institute of Chicago copy pp379-383

[2] The reference is to the natural open-air Haven Amphitheatre located directly below the house. Marion was central to its creation in the 1930s and its emergence as Castlecrag's prime venue for communally-produced musical and theatrical gatherings. It continues to fill this role.