

# Architect in search of our nation's magic

By Ian Warden

Is Australia still a magical place? What would Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin, so very idealistic 100 years ago about young Australia's prospects as a nation, think of today's Australia? Would the Griffins have seen distressing misogyny in what's befallen Julia Gillard?

Sydney architect Caroline Pidcock tackles big questions like these in Thursday's 2013 *Marion Mahony Griffin Talk* titled *The Magic of Australia*. Her talk opens the August 15 to 17 Canberra event *Celebrating The Griffins' Canberra*, which on Friday blossoms into a half-day symposium involving a panoply of Griffins scholars.

As well as being timely in Canberra's centenary year, it marks almost exactly the centenary of the day (August 18, 1913) when Walter Burley Griffin, winner with Marion of the competition for the design of the federal capital city, arrived in Australia for the first time.

In her heartfelt talk, Ms Pidcock, who has led her own architecture business for 21 years (in a profession she says is still dominated by men), sees Marion as a kind of kindred spirit. She agrees with someone's assessment that "Marion Griffin lived a feminist principle well ahead of her time."

She notes how "the Griffins, attracted



TALK: Caroline Pidcock and Marion Mahony Griffin with Walter Burley Griffin.



by the nascent democracy of a brave land with leading social agendas, came with high ideals and hopes. They found, as with most things in life, reality is more complex than that. The utopian democracy and the opportunity to make significant impact on the development of this country's built environment were the lure for the Griffins."

Ms Pidcock says the Griffins noticed excitedly how "the founders of the new nation wanted Australia to be harmonious, cohesive and egalitarian. They had progressive ideas about human rights, the observance of democratic procedures and the value of a secret ballot. Australia was one of the first countries to give women the right to vote and the right to sit in Parliament."

But she notices how the Griffins suffered some early disillusionments

here and thinks that they would be disappointed today by some Australian failures to live up to our nation's progressive, humanitarian flying start.

"It seems that we have moved away from the optimistic ideals of our nation's founders 100 years ago – the very ideals that initially attracted Walter and Marion to our shores."

Ms Pidcock believes that today the Griffins would be disappointed by a whole range of things, including our "increasingly less compassionate" treatment of our refugees.

She is sure that with us in today's Australia Marion would agree with the recent manifesto of the Victorian Women's Trust. That manifesto deplors how: "Over the past two years, we have watched with growing concern as ... interrelated, negative forces have been

unleashed – in large part triggered by people intent on tearing down a legitimate minority government which also happens to be led by the first woman to occupy the country's powerful top job [and how] respect for women has been pushed aside by gendered attacks directed at the [previous] prime minister since her election to office, suggesting we are not yet ready to give women and girls the recognition that is implied in a 'fair go' in public life."

Ms Pidcock will say that she is sure that if Marion was in Australia she would be an active member of the Women's Trust, sharing its emphases "on the honouring of gender equality, democracy, and care for the earth".

But in Thursday's talk Ms Pidcock will catalogue lots of Australian achievements and trends she thinks the Griffins would find buoying, and she will point to some magic going on here.

She will say how lucky this country was "to enjoy the creative genius of Marion Mahony and Walter Burley Griffin and their powerful narrative for what a great country we could be".

Bookings are essential for Thursday's 6pm lecture at the Shine Dome, Australian Academy of Science.

All details of *Celebrating The Griffins' Canberra* events, including Friday's symposium, are on the website of the Walter Burley Griffin Society Incorporated.