

ARCHITECTS IN THE OAK PARK STUDIO

(Francis) Barry Byrne (1883–1967)

Byrne was so impressed by Wright's work exhibited at the Chicago Art Institute in May or June of 1902 that he sought an interview with the architect. Within a week Byrne was working with Wright. Although he had no prior training, Byrne learned quickly and by 1907 had become a full-fledged member of the studio. Buildings for which Byrne helped execute drawings included the Beachy, Coonley, and Tomek residences and Unity Temple. In 1908, peritonitis kept Byrne away from the studio for three months. He returned for a short time, but quit in August 1908, due to the upheaval that Wright's affair caused in the studio.

After briefly working for Griffin, he left in November 1908 for Seattle to form a partnership with former studio mate Andrew Willatzen. In February 1913, Byrne moved in with Lloyd and John Lloyd Wright in San Diego. Unable to find enough work, he returned to Chicago to take over Griffin's office while the latter traveled to Australia.

After World War I, Byrne opened his own office and soon became a specialist in ecclesiastical and academic architecture. He increasingly favored expressionistic forms constructed in brick and broad, unadorned expanses of wall accentuated with concentrated areas of ornament. In 1934, he began to write and developed his theory of church architecture. His most famous works include Immaculata High School (1920) and St. Thomas the Apostle Church (1922), both in Chicago.

William Eugene Drummond (1876–1946)

While growing up in Austin (now a part of Chicago), Drummond learned the building trades from his father, a carpenter. He attended architectural classes at the University of Illinois briefly, but financial problems forced his departure.

Although he had little formal training, Drummond applied to and was hired by Wright in 1899. His discovery of Wright's work probably occurred during his frequent walks through Oak Park. Drummond was a quick learner and became chief draftsman and project manager for many Wright projects, including the Cheney, Robie and Isabel Roberts residences, as well as the Larkin Building. Drummond left the Oak Park studio in 1901 to work for Richard E. Schmidt, and later D. H. Burnham. However, he continued to work part time for Wright and returned full time around 1905. He permanently left the studio in 1909, with harsh words prompted by a lack of back pay, and opened his own office.

Drummond's first private commission was the 1907 First Congregational Church in the Austin neighborhood. The structure reflects the influence of Wright's Unity Temple and Larkin Company Administration Building. Between 1912 and 1915 Drummond went into partnership with Louis Guenzel. After World War I, he followed general architectural fashion and began to design using historic forms. Throughout his career the majority of his commissions were small churches and residences, and were characterized by imaginative innovations. Almost all of Drummond's designs included hidden storage spaces. In addition to architecture, he had a lifelong interest in Prairie landscape, the Garden City Movement, and city planning. Many examples of Drummond's work can be seen in his adopted hometown of River Forest, including the Methodist Church at 7970 Lake Street (1912).

George Grant Elmslie (1871–1952)

Born in Scotland, Elmslie emigrated to the United States in 1884. He began his architectural training in 1887 in the office of Joseph Lyman Silsbee, where he met Wright and George Maher. Elmslie followed Wright to the office of Adler & Sullivan. He worked for Sullivan for more than twenty years before forming

a partnership with William Grey Purcell.

In *A Testament*, Wright states that “Elmslie would sometimes come out to lend us a hand in the Oak Park studio, putting in overtime when pressure of work would keep us up all night...” Elmslie also mentioned that he worked in the Oak Park studio. In a June 12, 1936 letter to Wright, published in the October 1961 issue of *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Elmslie wrote, “I was loyal to you too. You have forgotten how often I went to Oak Park to do a bit of drawing for you.”

According to a letter written by Purcell in 1941, Wright approached Purcell and Elmslie to take over the Oak Park studio when he went to Europe. He wrote, “Wright wired me to meet him at the railroad station in Minneapolis, which I did. He said he was about to go to Europe for a year and offered to turn over his entire practice to me”. They declined the offer, “knowing Wright’s characteristics in human relations might easily wreck our own rapidly expanding business”.

Purcell & Elmslie was one of the most productive Prairie school firms. In addition to many single-family houses, they were especially interested in obtaining institutional commissions. They designed a number of small banks in Minnesota similar to Sullivan and Elmslie’s bank in Owatonna. Other large buildings by the firm included the Edison Shops (Chicago, 1912– 1913) and the Woodbury County Courthouse with William Steele (Sioux City, South Dakota, 1915–1917).

The firm disbanded in 1920 when Purcell moved to Portland, Oregon. Elmslie continued to design Prairie buildings, but revival styles greatly influenced his work. Except for collaborating on several public schools, Elmslie’s practice came to an end with the advent of the Depression.

Walter Burley Griffin (1876–1937)

Griffin was born in Maywood and attended Oak Park High School. He received a B.S. in architecture from the University of Illinois in 1899. A few months later, Griffin joined the architects at Steinway Hall as a part-time draftsman for Dwight Perkins. It was here that he probably became acquainted with Wright. In 1901, Griffin entered the Oak Park studio. While working with Wright, he increasingly assumed additional responsibility and, in 1905, was placed in charge of the studio during Wright’s trip to Japan.

Griffin contributed to the Thomas Residence (1901) and supervised the W. E. Martin Residence (1903). He was involved in the early meetings with the Martins, resulting in the Larkin Building commission (1903), and served as an intermediary for Wright on the Ward Warfield Willits Residence (1901).

Griffin accepted his first major independent commission, the W. H. Emery House (1901–1902) about the time he entered Wright’s studio. Its building materials illustrate the influence of Wright, but the spatial arrangement emphasizes vertical over horizontal.

Griffin left the studio in the winter of 1905–1906 after quarreling with Wright about overdue salary and the handling of certain projects during Wright’s absence. He returned to Steinway Hall in 1906 and designed single family homes that were Wrightian in character. Griffin was reunited with Mahony in 1909 when she moved into von Holst’s Steinway office to help complete Wright’s final studio projects. Griffin and Mahony were married in 1911. Mahony assisted Griffin with renderings during the remainder of his career, but she claimed no credit for the designs.

Griffin’s interest in town planning and landscape architecture is illustrated in his layout for Rock Crest/Rock Glen (1912) in Mason City, Iowa, and his winning entry for the design of Canberra (1912), the new capital of Australia. Griffin left for Australia in late 1913 and remained for 21 years. His work included the town plan for Castlecraig, Sydney (1921–1935) and the Community Center at Newman College, Melbourne (1915–1917).

In 1935, Griffin received a commission to design a new library for the University of Lucknow, India. He moved to India and constructed an office building and plant for the Pioneer Press, Lucknow. While in India, Griffin was stricken with peritonitis and died in 1937.

Local examples of Griffin's work include the Emery House (Elmhurst, 1902) and the W. S. Orth Twin houses (Kenilworth, 1912).

Marion Mahony Griffin (1871–1962)

In 1894 Mahony, with financial help from Chicago civic leader Anna Mary Ickes Wilmouth, became the second woman to earn a degree in architecture from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Her career choice may have been influenced by her cousin architect Dwight Perkins. After graduation, she returned to Chicago to help Perkins with the working drawings for Steinway Hall. When work slackened in Perkins's office in 1895, Mahony joined Wright to help with the Francisco Terrace Apartments. Although she spent most of her time with Wright, she worked in the studio only when needed. She regularly worked for other architects as well as accepted her own commissions.

A gifted designer, she was especially renowned for her renderings. Their linear outlines used foliage and powerful compositions reminiscent of the Japanese print. Byrne remembers Mahony working on designs for furniture, leaded glass lighting fixtures, and glass mosaics.

When Wright left Oak Park, he asked Mahony to take over the studio. She refused but agreed to become a designer with von Holst, who oversaw the work in the studio after Wright's departure.

Mahony's first independent commission was All Souls Unitarian Church in Evanston (1902, demolished). Her original design was more radical than the constructed building, as the building committee wanted "something Gothic". Her decorative touches can be seen in designs inherited from Wright and transformed in von Holst's office, including the David Amberg house (Grand Rapids, 1909–1911), the Adolph Mueller House (Decatur, 1910), and a fully designed but never built house for Henry Ford.

Mahony was reunited with Griffin in 1909 while they worked in nearby offices in Steinway Hall. In 1911, she married Griffin and traveled to Australia with him. Although she claimed no design credit for work by Griffin, she illustrated his designs beautifully, including the 1912 winning entry for the city of Canberra. Mahony followed him to India; and three years after his death in 1937, she returned to Chicago where she did landscape planning and wrote her unpublished autobiography *Magic of America*.

Isabel Roberts (1871–1955)

With the exception of the place and date of her birth (in Mexico, Missouri, in 1871) little is known about Roberts's early life. Her family in Iowa had known Wright and she began to work as a secretary in his office in the early 1900s. Roberts was not only the studio's secretary and bookkeeper, but occasionally assisted with drafting and art glass designs. She and her future partner Idah Ryan often stayed with the Wright children when their parents went out.

In 1908 Wright designed her River Forest home, the Isabel Roberts (Roberts-Scott) residence, which he remodeled in 1955. Roberts remained on the payroll at the time of Wright's 1909 departure for Europe. She assisted Van Bergen with the completion of studio projects, including the Mrs. Thomas Gale Residence and the Peter C. Stohr Arcade Building (1909, Chicago, demolished December 1922).

In 1916, Roberts moved to Orlando, Florida where she practiced architecture in a partnership with Idah A.

Ryan, the first woman to graduate with an advanced degree in architecture from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Their best-known work was the Eola Park Bandshell (Orlando, demolished). Other Orlando projects included houses, apartments and a Unitarian Church. Roberts died in 1955 of coronary heart disease. On her death certificate her occupation was listed as *architect*.

John Shellette Van Bergen (1885–1969)

After graduating from Oak Park High School in 1905, Van Bergen briefly worked with a small electrical contractor in Hollywood, California. He returned to Oak Park to work for his uncle, a speculation house builder. Walter Burley Griffin, a neighbor of the Van Bergen family, had left Wright's Oak Park studio to set up his own office in Steinway Hall. Although Van Bergen later described himself as "a very poor draftsman", he was hired and worked for Griffin until October 1908. Van Bergen spent the next three months attending special architectural classes and receiving tutoring at the Chicago Technical College. In January 1909 he became the last known employee hired to work in the Oak Park studio.

After Wright's departure in the fall of 1909, Van Bergen supervised work already under construction in the studio, including the Mrs. Thomas Gale Residence.

Between January 1910 and June 1911, Van Bergen worked in Drummond's office while studying for the Illinois licensing exams. After receiving his license, he left Drummond's office and began his own practice.

His firm was always small and never employed more than one or two draftsmen. Van Bergen believed that "good proportions mean good architecture—simplicity means good taste in all forms of art". His Prairie designs contained carefully worked out details such as a through-the-wall window box waterer, dressers that opened into a bedroom and an adjacent bathroom, and an interior casement screen lock and window opener.

Van Bergen moved to Ravinia after World War I and designed residences primarily in the surrounding communities. After 1945, Van Bergen's designs increasingly reflected modern technology and included concrete slab floors with radiant heat, concrete block walls, and flat roofs. Van Bergen had a deep interest in the relationship of architecture to landscape and was a close friend of Prairie school landscape architect Jens Jensen.

In 1955, he moved to Santa Barbara, California, where he continued to design until his death. Unfortunately, in 1964 a fire destroyed his new family home, as well as the drawings and records of Van Bergen's career. Examples of his work can be seen at 426, 432 and 436 North Elmwood Avenue (1912–1914), and 1036 Fair Oaks Avenue (1926) in Oak Park.

Hermann Valentin von Holst (1874–1955)

Von Holst was born in Germany and arrived in America with his father in 1891. He graduated from the University of Chicago in 1893 and received a Bachelor of Science degree in architecture from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1896. Von Holst returned to the Midwest and worked in the Chicago office of Shepley, Rutan & Coolidge. In 1905 he opened his own office in the Rookery and taught architectural design at the Armour Institute of Technology for a year. Buildings von Holst designed include a "Queen Anne" cow barn on the Littleton, New Hampshire estate of J. J. Glessner (1906–1907) and many electric company substations, including the North Shore Electric Company in Evanston (ca.1906).

After several studio architects declined, Wright asked von Holst to complete commissions underway in

the studio at the time of his 1909 departure to Europe. According to architectural historian David Gebhard, Wright may have approached von Holst because he was primarily a businessman and not a designer. Wright may have felt that his plans would not be altered. In 1909 von Holst moved his office to the ninth floor of Steinway Hall. Here the studio projects were probably completed. Von Holst formed a partnership with James Fyfe and asked Marion Mahony to help out on the commissions. She became the chief designer and had several people working for her, including Albert McArthur. Houses that they completed included the Edward R. and Florence Bernice Irving Residence (1909, Decatur) and the Amberg (1909–1911), the Adolph Mueller (1910), the Robert Mueller (1911) and the Doyle (1912) Residences. Projects for C. H. Willis (1910–1912) and Henry Ford (1912) were never built.

Von Holst was the author of *Modern American Homes* (1912). The book includes the work of many Prairie architects, including Griffin, White, Tallmadge & Watson, and Spencer & Powers. He became associated with George Elmslie in the 1920s on two projects for the Commonwealth Edison Company, and two bank projects. Von Holst worked at the Public Service Company of Northern Illinois until 1932 and eventually retired to Boca Raton, Florida.

Charles Elmer White, Jr. (1876–1936)

Born in Lynn, Massachusetts, White found employment with Swift Brothers Meat Packers, designing refrigerators for vessels in Boston Harbor. He may have taken special courses in architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. However, the school has no record of his presence. Later he worked for the American Gas Company as superintendent for the erection of buildings in the East and Midwest. He then worked as an engineer and architect for street railway companies in Ohio and Illinois.

While working in Rockford, Illinois in 1901, he met and married Alice Roberts of Oak Park. The couple settled in her hometown two years later. In the fall of 1903, White entered the Oak Park studio. By early 1905, White was working only half time for Wright but left the studio soon after Wright's return from Japan.

White designed and built his own studio, and collaborated with Wright and Vernon S. Watson on the River Forest Tennis Club in 1906. His office was successful, listing fifteen different commissions in the Chicago Architectural Catalogue in 1909.

[\[RETURN TO SYLLABUS\]](#)

