Playing for Peace: The World Fellowship Center before Marion Mahony

Marion Mahony’s final commission, an urban design scheme for the congregation of pacifists during the Second World War, has received little scholarly attention—even from Mahony’s most sympathetic critics. Known as the World Fellowship Center, this campus continues to exist as an idyllic retreat in rural New Hampshire although there are no more than a few subtle hints of Mahony’s contribution to the place. A quick glance at the lone surviving illustration of Mahony’s 1942 scheme leaves us with the distinct impression that relief and gradient were constitutive elements of Mahony’s proposal for the World Fellowship Center. Besides contour lines and annotations indicating elevations, the most prominent feature of this plan is a circular Community Center. Occupying some 30 acres, this Center was as much to be defined by its interior—a thickly wooded reserve that included a small pool at the foot of a bluff—as it would be defined by its built up perimeter and the broad sweeping roads that would bring cars to it.

The most widely available explanatory text for this scheme were two pages in Magic of America, Marion Mahony’s unpublished memoir, which the Art Institute of Chicago recently made available as an electronic resource. These pages present an integrated circulation and occupation strategy for the site that would limit the built-up portion of the campus to three dense zones while also laying out narrow trails through otherwise undisturbed parts of the 388 acre site. For Griffin scholars the description contained in these pages has served to confirm that the World Fellowship Center was just another example of planning principles that Mahony and Griffin first articulated in Australia in the 1920s, viz. preserving natural features on the site, using the existing slope for roads, ensuring that the view from each plot would remain unobstructed, and integrating all these aspects of site planning with a rich social program.¹ This

all seems true enough, except that it creates the anachronistic impression that Mahony and Griffin were proto-ecological designers, and it obscures aspects of Mahony’s design that emerged out of important philosophical differences that existed between Mahony and the promoters of the World Fellowship Center. In this paper I want to draw out those philosophical differences in order to gain new insight on some of the founding assumptions of the playground and recreation movement in the United States.

A letter in the archives of the World Fellowship Center is a good place to begin our analysis. Written by Mahony in September 1943, that is almost a year after she had drawn up plans for the World Fellowship Center, the letter is a response to an appeal for funds. Perennially low on funds for operating expenses, to say nothing of lacking the financial means to implement Mahony’s urban design scheme, the World Fellowship Center launched an appeal to save the native trees on its campus promising to recognize contributions to its cause by placing commemorative plaques on each saved tree. Despite her own meager resources, Marion Mahony readily responded to the appeal with a $10 donation in her late husband’s name. She was even more forthcoming with the following backhanded praise:

I am sure you will find a hearty response because what is the use of peace among men if those men continue the destruction of the life of the Earth and all the things living on it, other than themselves, shortsighted because of man’s dependence on nature.  

In a single convoluted sentence, Marion Mahony had overturned the dominant ideology of American wartime pacifism, which sought to replace the hostilities of the Second World War with a global free trade regime. Unlike her many friends in the American peace movement, including the promoters of the World Fellowship Center, Marion Mahony refused to embrace the idea that a more equitable division of natural resources could secure a lasting peace.

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2. Marion Mahony Griffin to Charles F. Weller, 30 September 1943, Records of the New Hampshire World Fellowship Center, Box 4, MS 1105, Rauner Special Collections Library.
What is remarkable here is the format of Mahony’s argument: a distinction is drawn between ‘peace’ and ‘non-violence’ through a concatenation of inversions. Thus Mahony insisted that ‘peace’ was not an ‘end’ in the way that most American pacifists saw it, but a ‘means’ and a pretty useless set of ‘means’ at that. Far from guaranteeing the preservation of life—the putative objective of pacifism—a ‘peace’ secured by the exploitation of natural resources could only spell doom for the planet’s non-human elements. In contrast, ‘non-violence’ implied the steadfast eschewal of the very language of ‘means’ and ‘ends’ no matter how lofty the ‘ends’ or how noble the ‘means’. Integral to the adoption of non-violence was a refusal to criticize anyone. Accordingly, Mahony does not single out or heap scorn on any particular peace advocate. Instead, she embraces an act (the preservation of a tree for its own sake…as distinct from conservation of some trees for future logging) that she thinks could be an example for others to follow. That an exemplary act offers instantiation of the ethic of non-violence is further suggested by Mahony’s request that the commemorative plaque on the tree only bear her late husband’s name; this way the example of Walter Burley Griffin’s life could be remembered without any instrumental reason for this remembrance.

You might be wondering what this abstract discussion on the distinction between ‘peace’ and ‘non-violence’ has to do with the playground and recreation movement. For most of what remains of this presentation, I will argue that the distinction between an instrumental politics that cites ‘peace’ as one of its normative goals and a non-instrumental ethics of non-violence is a crucial, but hitherto missing, component of the intellectual history of the American playground and recreation movement. In part this omission is archival. Charles and Eugenia Weller, the founders of the World Fellowship Center, were pioneers of the playground and recreation movement. Inspired by Jane Addams, the Wellers had converted their own home in Washington,