

# Irving Gill: A Neglected Design Visionary

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## **Irving Gill and the European Manifestos**

Irving Gill, an innovative architect who practiced in California early in the 20th century, is little known in comparison with many of his European contemporaries. He developed principles and ideals similar to theirs and he demonstrated true talent, yet beside such men as the Viennese architect Adolf Loos or Tony Garnier of France, he appears to be relatively insignificant in the history of the modern movement. The reason may be that his writings have not been as influential as theirs. Pevsner (1960) does not mention Gill at all and Giedion (1967) gives him only a footnote, but both historians clearly state the significance of Loos and Garnier. The manifesto *Ornament und Verbrechen*, "Ornament and Crime," published by Loos in 1908 (Munz and Kunstler, 1964) and Garnier's *Cite Industrielle* are regarded by many authors as seminal works of modern theory (Conrads, 1970).

In this paper I intend to show that Irving Gill not only wrote lucidly about his concepts and ideals but also realized his designs in buildings which are still enjoyed today for their original purpose. The special care he took in the design of simple interiors certainly demands our attention.

## **Background to Irving Gill**

Irving Gill was born in Syracuse, New York, in 1870 and in 1890 joined the firm of Adler and Sulli-

van in Chicago. Another young employee in the firm at that time was Frank Lloyd Wright who had come to the office two years earlier. As an assistant of Sullivan's, Irving Gill worked on the drawings of the transportation building at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Amongst the flamboyant celebration of neo-classic ornament at the Chicago fair, Louis Sullivan's transportation building stood out as the only forward looking structure. Before the exhibition opened Gill, overtired and ill, left Chicago and went to Southern California to make a new start. As an architect in San Diego he generated inventive and challenging projects that still stand as fine examples of the modern movement.

## **Adolf Loos and Irving Gill and the Influence of Sullivan**

There is a temptation when looking at Irving Gill's passion for simplifying in his design work to see strong similarities with the work of Adolf Loos and to assume an influence of Loos on Gill. Yet it is more probable that their projects in Vienna and San Diego around 1910 are unrelated except for a common attitude toward design issues of the day, and for an influence in common: namely, Louis Sullivan. Adolf Loos came from Vienna and visited America from 1893 to 1896. He went to New York and St. Louis and was at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. But it is very unlikely that Loos and Gill ever

met.

It is not only the architecture of these two men which provokes comparison; both wrote polemics against ornament in architecture, which justified the stripped down nature of their work. "Ornament and Crime," published by Loos, stated his case with radical conviction (Munz and Kunstler, 1966). "Very well, the ornament disease is recognized by the state and subsidized with state funds. But I see in this a retrograde step. I don't accept the objection that ornament heightens a cultivated person's joy in life, don't accept the objection contained in the words: 'But if the ornament is beautiful!' Ornament does not heighten my joy in life or the joy in life of any cultivated person." Loos continues his harangue on the use of ornament throughout the piece ending with the statement: "Freedom from ornament is a sign of spiritual strength." (Conrads, 1970, p. 19-20)

According to Ulrich Conrads (1970), Adolf Loos developed his radical aesthetic purism from a remark he brought back from his time in America. It was a remark of Louis Sullivan's which, when taken out of its broader context, certainly appears to be in favor of no ornament: "It can only benefit us if for a time we were to abandon ornament and concentrate entirely on the erection of buildings that were finely shaped and charming in their sobriety." (Conrads, 1970, p. 24) By taking this out of context, Loos limited himself to a position opposed to ornament, yet neglected Sullivan's view on the positive role that ornament can have.

In describing his relationship to his young draftsmen in a letter to Claude Bragdon, Sullivan states: "I supply the yeast, so to speak, and allow the ferment to work in them." (McCoy, 1960, p. 59) Sullivan preached of freedom from Rome and the Renaissance, "turned the faces of the young men away from Europe and bade them look to Africa, land of the serene wall of earth forms . . . ." (McCoy, 1960, p. 60)

Sullivan did not advocate the total abandonment of ornament. Although he spoke of the need to concentrate on the primary form of buildings, he believed in the use of ornament, as Alberti had advocated, to enrich architecture (Wittkower, 1949). Sullivan created some of the finest and most sensual ornament of his time, for instance, his "ground floor of the Carson Pirie Scott Store, otherwise so austere, glows with that ornament." (Jordan, 1969)

In an essay published in 1892, Sullivan writes, "I believe, as I have said, that an excellent and beautiful building may be designed that shall bear no ornament whatever but I believe just as firmly that a decorative structure harmoniously conceived, well considered, cannot be stripped of its system of ornament without destroying its individuality." (Sullivan, 1947, p. 188)

Gill was very clear when he wrote about building without ornament but in counterpoint he stressed that natural elements could provide pleasure for the senses better than could man-made ornament. In *The Craftsman* 1916, his clear and succinct article entitled "The New Architecture of the West" shows his concern for purity of form and lack of ornamentation. His writing may be reminiscent of Sullivan and Loos, but in his synthesis of man-made and natural forms he brings a new subtlety to the subject. He writes, "Any deviation from simplicity results in a loss of dignity. Ornaments tend to cheapen rather than enrich; they acknowledge inefficiency and weakness. A house cluttered up by complex ornament means that the designer was aware that his work lacked purity of line and perfection of proportion, so he endeavored to cover its imperfection by adding on detail. Hoping, thus, to distract the attention of the observer from the fundamental weakness of his design. If we omit everything useless from the structural point of view we will come to see great beauty of straight lines, to see the charm that lies in

perspective, the force in light and shade, the power in balanced masses, the fascination of color that plays upon a smooth wall left free to report the passing of a cloud or nearness of a flower, the furious rush of storms and the burning stillness of summer suns.” (Gill, 1916, p. 142)

“There is something very restful and satisfying to my mind in the simple cube house with creamy walls, sheer and plain, rising boldly into the sky, unrelieved by cornices or overhang of roof, unornamented save for the vines that soften a line or creepers that wreath a pillar or flowers that inlay color more sentimentally than any tile could do.” (Gill, 1916, p. 147-148)

When Gill speaks of omitting everything useless from a structural point of view he is not being nearly as vehement as Adolf Loos in his more radical reformist approach.

## The Principles of Irving Gill

Both Loos and Sullivan speak in strong architectural terms and it takes Irving Gill to come in al-

most as the Hermes, the mediator, to speak of the man-made and the natural phenomena: “We should build our house simple, plain and substantial as a boulder, then leave the ornamentation of it to Nature, who will tone it with lichens, chisel it with storms, make it gracious and friendly with vines and flower shadows as she does the stone in the meadow.” (Gill, 1916, p. 147) (see Figure 1)

In his *Craftsman* article of 1916 Gill clearly states four principles which were the basis of his design:

1. The straight line, borrowed from the horizon is a symbol of greatness, grandeur and nobility.
2. The arch, patterned from the dome of the sky, represents exultation, reverence, aspiration.
3. The circle is the sign of completeness, motion and progression as may be seen when a stone touches water.
4. The square is the symbol

of power, justice, honesty and firmness.

“These are the bases,” he wrote, “the units of architectural language and without them there can be no direct or inspired architectural speech. We must not weaken our message of beauty and strength by the stutter and mumble of useless ornaments.” (Gill, 1916, p. 142)

In the implementation of his design concepts Gill did not wholly reject previous architectural traditions; indeed he espoused an indigenous Californian style which was already attracting attention when he arrived. There was no need for him to evoke the African examples of which Sullivan had spoken, for in California the straight line, the arch and the square were to be found in the chain of Franciscan missions of Father Junipero Serra built along the southern California coast in the late 18th century. The Caravanserai of North Africa with its innerspace surrounded by plain walls had its counterpart in the mission cloister. Here was a vocabulary appropriate to the land where he was to build.

“The Missions are a part of (California’s) history that should be preserved and in their long, low lines, graceful arcades, tile roofs, bell towers, arched doorways and walled gardens we find a most expressive medium and retaining tradition, history and romance . . . . The Missions have taught us also the beauty and usefulness of the court.” (Gill, 1916, p. 148-151) This theory was then quite literally translated by Gill when he began to design courtyard housing and other buildings. (see Figure 2)

As early as 1910 Gill was applying his ideas of purity of form, humanized with vines and trees, in a garden court of low cost housing at Sierra Madre. Like some of the avant garde architects in Europe, Gill was deeply interested in developing housing prototypes for ordinary working people. In this respect, he is probably closest



**Figure 1**

Horatio Court, Santa Monica. Designed by Irving Gill (1919): “Unornamented save for the vines that soften a line or creeper that wreath a pillar.”

to the French experimentalist Tony Garnier whose astonishingly complete project for the Cite Industrielle was developed in the first decade of the 20th century, but did not appear until 1917. Gill and Garnier both combined pioneering work in concrete construction with a concern for human scale (Wittkower). (see Figure 3)

The Sierra Madre Court was built to provide low cost housing for working men and their families. The living units were arranged around a large, open courtyard with a community pavilion. Roofed arcades connected one unit to another and were open to the garden court side, but had solid walls onto the street. These arcades included an entry archway and two arched openings that provided sleeping porches at night and relaxing

spaces during the day. Each unit had one bedroom and its own private yard. From the outside, in the street, all the housing presented continuous wall surface pierced only with occasional openings. This continuous surface allowed Gill's concepts of natural ornamentation to have full reign. The surrounding trees cast dappled light and moving shadows, the colors could be reflected and the plants could grow unimpeded. (see Figure 4)

Throughout Lewis Court, as the Sierra Madre Court was called, there was ample opportunity for creepers to climb, flowers to grow. The straight line, the arch and the square are all in evidence. The rationalistic aspect of his work is all satisfied in this project. The real strength of the project lies, however, in its subtle humanistic

concepts. For example, the needs of the individual are carefully considered in the zoning of private, semi private and public spaces. The private gardens, though not enclosed, are well enough articulated that they are still used and maintained by the residents today. Through interviews with the residents and observation of their dwellings I perceive a timeless message of convenience and comfort that transcended the nineteen eighties and seemed to stretch back to some of the original Gill ideas.

Inside the units Gill took unusual steps to make the small spaces appear lighter, brighter and larger than they actually were. He achieved this with careful geometry in the placing of windows and skylights. The care taken goes



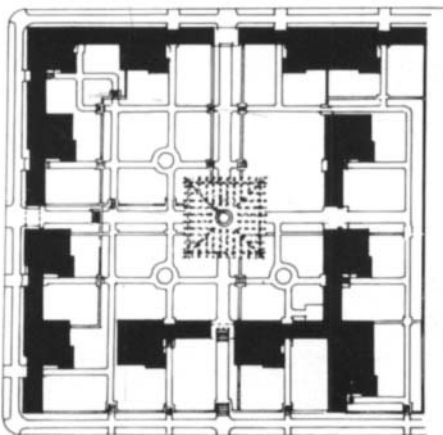
**Figure 2**

Community Center, La Jolla. Designed by Irving Gill: Long, low lines, graceful arcades.

beyond space planning; there are many details to alleviate household chores. Gill used cast magnesite, an exceptionally durable plaster, in the interiors to make smooth connections and to eliminate corners. Throughout the units there was an unusual concern for ease of maintenance and cleanliness.

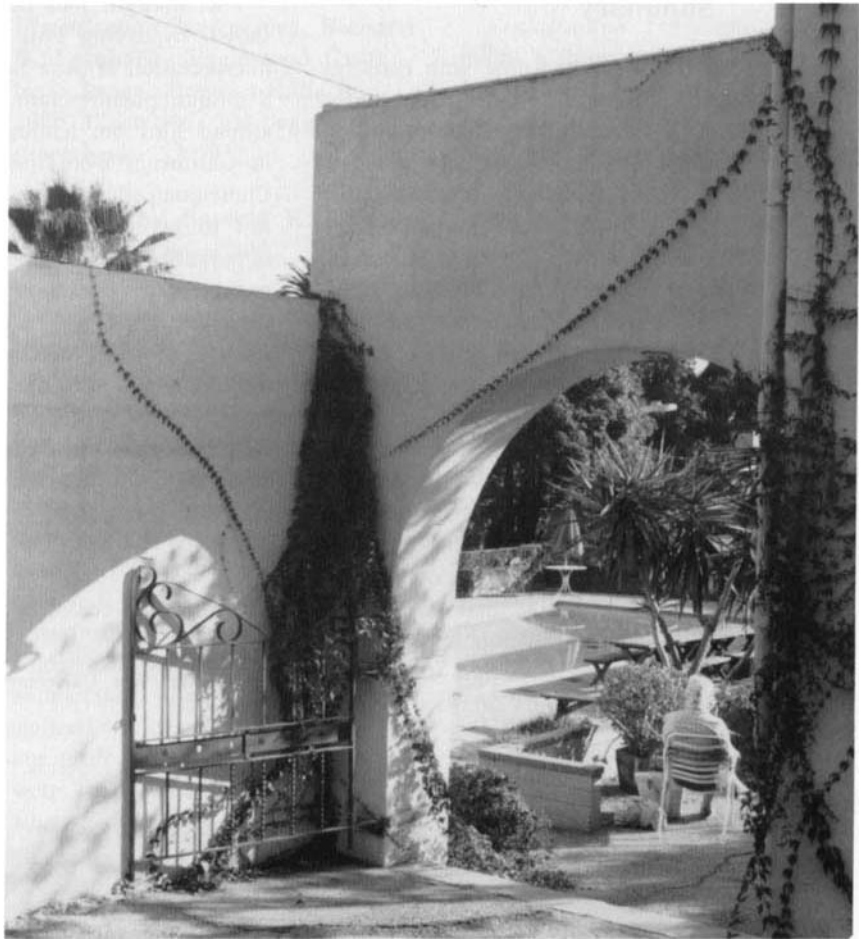
Gill's study of materials was not merely theoretical. He was constantly trying to learn and would experiment with the materials himself. This urge to experiment was carried out throughout his work. In the Horatio West Court in Santa Monica, 1919, the bands of glass on three sides of the second story living rooms of the units indicated a new concern for transparency and an astonishing parallel with what was occurring in Europe in design. (see Figures 5 and 6)

Esther McCoy records that as early as 1910 Gill had fallen from favor. She tells how Bertram Goodhue wrote to Elmer Gray, former partner of Myron Hunt, the directing architect of the San Diego Exposition, 1915. "The Churrigueresque style of the buildings, with their concentration of ornament, ushered in a period of cultivation and refinement in which there was little appreciation of Gill's austere simplicity." (McCoy, 1960, p. 89)



**Figure 3**

Lewis Court, Sierra Madre (1910): Site plan.



**Figure 4**

Lewis Court, Sierra Madre. Designed by Irving Gill (1919): Low cost housing for working men and their families.



**Figure 5**

Horatio Court, Santa Monica. Designed by Irving Gill (1919): A new concern for transparency.

## Summary

It is hard to know with certainty who influenced whom in the period of architectural ferment around 1910. There is no doubt that American architects received and perused progressive journals and portfolios from Europe. However, it is unlikely that Gill was significantly influenced by Adolf Loos. There is not even a chance that they met, and it is clear that the two architects built their first experimental works at the same time. What may have been the more formative influence that threads through the ideas of both Loos and Gill is the core of the Sullivan concepts that each man was able to develop and expand so similarly in design expression but so differently in their writings.

The strength and determination shown by Irving Gill in his own interpretation of pure form is surely a unique phenomenon. While around him the leading architects in California were indulging in Churrigueresque ornament, he held fast to his principles. This was a remarkable achievement when one considers his isolation from the pioneers of design in Chicago and Europe. On the evidence of his buildings and writings it is clear that he was a pioneer in his own right. Indeed, his writings may be regarded as a missing manifesto.

## Author Notes

Field research funded by Arts and Humanities Faculty Travel Grant, Office of Grants and Research Development, Washington State University, Pullman, Washington.

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**Figure 6**

Horatio Court, Santa Monica. Designed by Irving Gill (1919): The arch, patterned from the dome of the sky.