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Book Review: Rev. Dr. Mark Hargreaves' The Sacred Architecture of Irving J. Gill

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Book Review: Rev. Dr. Mark Hargreaves' The Sacred Architecture of Irving J. Gill

Keywords

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THE SACRED ARCHITECTURE OF IRVING J. GILL.
BY REV. DR. MARK HARGREAVES. SAN DIEGO:
IRVING J. GILL FOUNDATION, 2023. ILLUSTRATIONS,
NOTES, BIBLIOGRAPHY, AND INDEX. IX + 117 PP.
\$28.95 PAPER.

Reviewed by Molly McClain, Professor, Department
of History, University of San Diego.

This book makes a valuable contribution to the field of modern American religious architecture by focusing on the churches built by Irving J. Gill (1870-1936), who introduced an austere, geometric style to California. A precursor to the European Modern Movement, he made innovative and expressive use of reinforced concrete. This is the first book to consider Gill's ecclesiastical architecture apart from his well-known projects such as the Walter L. Dodge residence (1914-1916) and the La Jolla Woman's Club (1914). It also reminds us that a significant number of Gill's churches are still standing; they are in good condition and accessible to the public.

The author, Rev. Dr. Mark Hargreaves, is rector of St. James-by-the-Sea Episcopal Church in La Jolla. He came to this project with a background in theology and a resistance to the functionalist approach to religious architecture. In his view, churches are not "machines for worshipping," meaning that they are not simply spaces for the enactment of religious ritual (p. 2). Instead, they are "sacred" because worshippers share "an experience of encountering the Divine presence" there (p. 1). It is worth pointing out that functionalism as practiced by Gill's contemporaries like Louis H. Sullivan ("form

follows function”) had its roots in Transcendentalism and emphasized the beauty of simplicity in nature. There is no dichotomy between Gill’s engagement with spirituality and his modernism in the context of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Gill has intrigued—and frustrated—historians for decades because so little is known about his life. Hargreaves notes, “he left precious little on the subject of architecture, let alone spirituality” (p. 3). The architect produced a 1916 manifesto, articles, blueprints, architectural drawings, and buildings still in use today. University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) historian Thomas S. Hines contextualized these materials to produce *Irving Gill and the Architecture of Reform* (2000). Hargreaves draws on this book; Esther McCoy’s *Five Californian Architects* (1960), republished as *One California Architect* (2020); and archival materials, among other sources.

The book is organized chronologically and proceeds from the Congregational Church in Redlands (1899) to the Barona Chapel in Lakeside (1932) and includes unbuilt structures such as the Spanish Village Church in Carlsbad (1936). The author also considers Gill’s early partnership with Cornell-trained architect William S. Hebbard.

Around 1900, the population of Southern California boomed, resulting in hundreds of new churches, many in the Romanesque Revival, Gothic Revival, and Mission Revival styles. Hargreaves finds it “puzzling that Protestant denominations acquired such a taste for the Gothic,” which he associates with Roman Catholicism. In fact, Gothic Revival architecture was a product of the German and English Romantic Movement. An alternative to the Italian and Spanish Baroque, it emerged at the same time

as nationalism in Europe. The Norman Revival style was particularly popular in the American West as it recalled the primitive simplicity of the early English church. It was entirely appropriate for use by Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Methodists, and others.

Protestant churches in the evangelical tradition often had seating arrangements derived from the Akron Plan (1867), first used to organize children during Sunday School. Instead of sitting in pews facing a sanctuary, the congregation sat on benches arranged in a fan-shaped pattern (p. 10). At the front was a pulpit or, sometimes, just a raised platform. Architectural historian Jeanne Halgren Kilde calls this the “auditorium church.” Gill used this configuration often. The seating arrangement emphasized a sense of community (one could more easily see one’s neighbors) and put the laity and the clergy together in the same space (Martin Luther’s “priesthood of all believers”). It made it easier for people to hear the Word, which replaced the Mass as the central drama in the Protestant liturgy. It also made more windows possible. The nave, bathed in light, signaled “the metaphorical light of God’s written Word” (pp. 13-14).

Hargreaves argues that a turning point in Gill’s career was the 1906 construction of the First Methodist Church. The exterior was Norman Revival (not, as the author suggests, “High Gothic”), while the interior recalled Methodism’s history as an evangelical form of Protestantism. Worshippers sat in an auditorium facing a stage where the preacher delivered his sermons. Gill did something strange, however. He insisted that gargoyles be placed on the outside of the building, even though women in the congregation opposed the sculptures as

“idolatrous” (p. 33). Was he being playful? An architectural inside joke? Or was the reference to High Gothic ornament some kind of critique?

Hebbard and Gill ended their partnership soon after this. The former continued to respond to the needs of his clients, while Gill developed his unique architectural voice. His patrons were typically progressive, educated, and rich.

The First Church of Christ, Scientist (1909–1910) is an iconic building in Gill’s mature style. Its clean lines and rationally ordered space reflected the teachings of Christian Science, according to Hargreaves. He writes, “In Christian Science, conventional symbols detract from the abstract and direct influence of thinking through the unmediated sacred Word” (p. 52). The white, light-filled space, meanwhile, “speaks of clarity and lucidity” (p. 53). Hargreaves argues that this church should be considered among the first modern American churches, along with Frank Lloyd Wright’s Unity Chapel (1905–1908) and Bernard Maybeck’s First Church of Christ, Scientist, in Berkeley (1910).

The First Church of Christ Scientist, Coronado (1929), meanwhile, was arguably Gill’s most successful sacred building. It used the most basic architectural language: the straight line, the arch, the circle, and the square. Hargreaves writes, “Gill did not strip the church of ornament for the sake of ‘functionalism.’ He did it for the sake of beauty. He was aiming in this building to tap into the power of beauty and in so doing he points to an alternate way that Modern architecture might travel” (p. 83). Louis H. Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright did the same; in fact, this was a mainstream path for modern American architects.

One wonders what Gill's father, "a stern religious man," thought about his son's ecclesiastical architecture (p. 3). Quakers, who abhorred ritual in any form, had meeting houses with no altar, no pulpit, and no choir: only bare wooden pews. Some never lost their disdain for authority and hierarchy, even as the Society of Friends became respectable, often bourgeois, by the end of the nineteenth century.

Some historians attribute the development of Gill's austere and minimalist style to his Quaker upbringing. To Hargreaves' credit, he doesn't fall for that easy association. There is more to Gill's modernism than that. In any case, the architect left the Society of Friends to join the Episcopal Church. He was an early member of All Saints Church in Hillcrest and became "absorbed" in Theosophy, according to Esther McCoy. A contemporary described him as a "Point Loma Type" (p. 3).

If Gill were a Theosophist, he would have viewed all religions—Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, Islam—as manifestations of a single Truth. Hargreaves suggests, however, that Gill had issues with the sacramental requirements of the Roman Catholic Church. He makes much of the fact that Gill turned over the design of Sacred Heart Church, Coronado (1919-1920) to his nephew Louis Gill. He also tells us that Irving Gill's plans for Barona Chapel in Lakeside (1932) were rejected six times. A committee composed of women from the Barona Band of Mission Indians wanted a church with at least one stained glass window, an altar at the east end, and a traditional west door.

It would be interesting to know if Gill's resistance to ritual and ceremony affected his relationship with

the Episcopal Church. The structure that Hargreaves identifies as “The Bishop’s School Chapel” (1912–1913) was not, in fact, a chapel, even if that had been the original plan. A 1914 article in *The Craftsman* magazine made it clear that students worshipped at St. James Chapel. It looked very much like a church, however, with a rectangular assembly hall, a façade that mirrored St. James, and a prominent tower. It was intended to contain a residence and reception rooms for the bishop, together with classrooms. Perhaps Gill’s nod to ecclesiastical architecture signaled respect for the bishop’s authority? It was, after all, The Bishop’s School. The result was confusing, however. Instead of designing the entire campus, Gill completed only one additional building. The commission for St. Mary’s Chapel (1916–1917) went to Carleton M. Winslow, who created a recognizably Episcopalian sacred space.

It remains to be seen whether Gill’s ecclesiastical architecture can tell us more about the origins of his path-breaking modernism than his secular buildings can, but this book is a start. Credit is due to the Irving J. Gill Foundation for publishing this lavishly illustrated history. Historical photographs, however, are not identified and credited as thoroughly as they should have been. It also would have been useful to have a list of the churches still standing.

The historian Kevin Starr wrote, “It is hard to write about Gill’s buildings at any length because, like a very dry martini, they speak for themselves.” This book, however, points out some features that are not self-evident. It will appeal to readers who wish to learn more about Gill’s churches as well as those who enjoy the complex modernism of his work.

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