



*Meyer House,
Norman Kennedy
rendering.*

THE "CALIFORNIAN" ARCHITECTURE OF GORDON B. KAUFMANN

BY ALSON CLARK

"We must approach the work of a group of men on the Pacific Coast with much more respect. Led by the late Willis Polk certain architects banded together in a common high ideal of beauty and fitness, have evolved a style so personal and so Californian that we sometimes fear it is hardly American. Men like Reginald Johnson, Louis Mulgardt, Francis Underhill, George Washington Smith, the Greenes who invented the California bungalow, and many others formed the group. Curiously enough, the first impetus to this Californian renaissance in domestic work came from that Ariel of architecture, Bertram Goodhue, in the unbelievably beautiful

Gillespie Villa at Santa Barbara, designed in 1902. This villa, perhaps, and the Spanish missions, too, furnished the cue from which has been produced the brilliant series of houses that have caused the palm for the best domestic architecture in America to be transferred from the Atlantic to the Pacific Coast."

Thomas A. Talmadge
The Story of Architecture in America
1972 page 270.

The "Hotel and Villas at Dana Point," planned about 1930, was a Mediterranean village perched romantically on a cliff above the Pacific.[25] Construction was started about 1931, but was stopped a few months later due to the onset of the Great Depression, after only a small portion of the concrete work had been completed. The floors and columns have been there for fifty years, and look more and more like the ruins of a classic temple by the sea. I recall Kaufmann's disappointment that this project, which would have been a coastal landmark, could not be carried to completion.[26] The Depression brought a symbolic and literal end to things of this kind, and to the "Californian" style.[27] It was no longer financially possible.

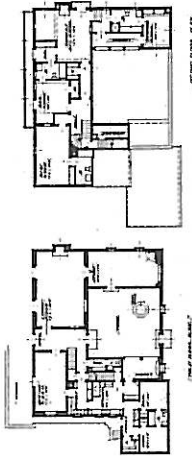
The Los Angeles "Times" building was a Kaufmann project that went through various design stages, before and after the Depression, and was finally completed in 1935. I don't recall that he was too happy with the outcome. I remember my mother saying, "Why, Gordon, you've made it modern." His cryptic reply was, "I wish I'd made it more modern." [28]

"Graystone" was the most expensive house Kaufmann ever designed, but perhaps it was not his best work. An English country house, no matter how good, doesn't look quite at home on a steep hillside in Beverly Hills. I am sure that the site and the style were both the choice of the Dohenys who commissioned it. The large "Graystone" garage and chauffeur's quarters, lower down on the site, in part betray very direct influence of Sir Edwin Lutyens. The south wing of the garage has buttressed piers which could have been inspired by no other source than Lutyens' 1912 dining room addition at "Folly Farm," an unforgettable piece of work.

Kaufmann built his own house in Holmby Hills in 1928-29. Of course it was set as close to the street as the law would allow. Of course it was eclectic. The roof tiles were Italian, and the front was unpretentious, but the rear, overlooking a canyon, had a second floor balcony which recalled Monterey. The superb landscaping, informally formal, or formally informal, was again by Florence Yoch. But even Miss Yoch had problems, one of which was the mature olive tree in the inevitable Kaufmann courtyard, which was the heart of the scheme. Three trees died before the fourth took hold. Gordon had a wry sense of humor. After the third tree died he said that he was going to call his place "Casa de los Olivos Muertos," a wry commentary on people who in those days liked to give their houses pretentious Spanish names. [29]

It is part of the legend of the modern movement that the real monuments of our age are the work of engineers. Of most of the major dams of the West this is not true. The "clean" exterior appearance of the dams themselves, as well as the intake towers and powerhouses were the work of Gordon Kaufmann. I don't know how the choice of this man who had a way of making us feel the third dimension in built works came about, but it was fortunate. A "before" shot of Boulder Dam as the Army Corps of Engineers proposed to build it, and an "after" photograph of the completed structure after it had left the Kaufmann drawing board show that the design was improved. He was responsible for Parker Dam and Grand Coulee as well as Keswick Dam. In the case of one of the last, Shasta Dam, late nineteen forties, the "Art Deco" of the Boulder Dam powerhouse, circa 1932, has been replaced by a very competent rendition of the International Style. [30] Kaufmann died in 1949.

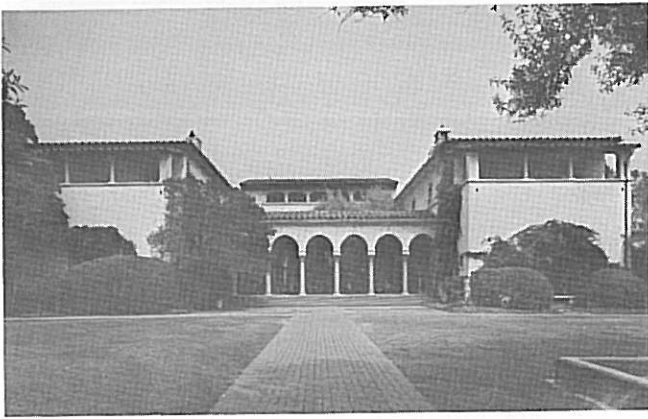
Gordon Kaufmann was in many ways very like the other architects who had helped to create the "Californian" style. He wrote virtually nothing about his work. Like the rest he did "English" or "Colonial" when the client wanted it. Like most of the rest he embraced the International Style with enthusiasm. [31] But he was singularly fortunate in securing commissions for nonresidential work - commissions in which he employed the simple, vernacular, decoratively eclectic approach which characterized the best residential work of the time. His work was essentially "modern" in that it worked remarkably well, as well as displaying a freshness in the most successful jobs which has made them appreciated today. To both these public buildings and to his houses he brought a generosity of approach which was partly personal and also a part of his inheritance, a peculiarly British sensibility about the house and about public work.



Kaufmann House, Plans, view from rear terrace.

Notes

1. Author's conversation with Gordon Kaufmann. 1932.
2. Gordon B. Kaufmann. Obituary. Southwest Builder and Contractor, Los Angeles, March 4, 1949, p. 7.
3. Anon. Who's who in this issue. Architect and Engineer, vol. 101, June, 1930, p. 27.
4. Anon. Who's who in this issue. Architect and Engineer, vol. 101, June, 1930, p. 27.
5. Anon. Who's who in this issue. Architect and Engineer, vol. 101, June, 1930, p. 27.
6. Author's conversation with Gordon Kaufmann. 1932.
7. Author's conversation with Robert E. Alexander, FAIA. 1977.
8. Thurston's Residence and Business Directory of Pasadena, Altadena, and Lamanda Park, Los Angeles, 1916, p. 144.
9. Who's who in America, Chicago, vol. 19, 1936-37, p. 1324.
10. Letter from Reginald Johnson to author's father, dated May 6, 1920. Letterhead reads "Reginald D. Johnson, Architect. Gordon B. Kaufmann Associate."
11. California Southland, Pasadena, vol. 7, March, 1925, p. 23.
12. Pacific Coast Architect, "Arbiter Elegantiarum."
13. California Southland, Pasadena, vol. 7, March, 1925, p. 26.
14. California Southland, Pasadena, vol. 7, March, 1925, p. 26.
15. David Gebhard & Harriette Von Breton, "Lloyd Wright Architect," Santa Barbara, 1971, p. 20.
16. California Southland, Pasadena, vol. 7, March, 1925, p. 24.
17. Architectural Digest, Los Angeles, vol. 6, no. 3, 1927, p. 81.
18. Harris Allen, "Arbiter Elegantiarum," Pacific Coast Architect, San Francisco, vol. 31, May, 1927, pp. 9-47.
19. Arthur Millier, "The Ballin Murals in Los Angeles," California Southland, vol. 9, October, 1927, pp. 9-10,22.
20. "La Quinta Hotel and Cottages," Architectural Record, New York, vol. 74, November, 1933, pp. 345-351.
21. Author's conversation with Raymond J. Dee, archivist of La Quinta. 1982.
22. Pacific Coast Architect, San Francisco, vol. 30, August, 1926, p. 43.



Cal Tech Athenaeum, [top] West Elevation, [bottom] Courtyard.



Proposed Hotel & Villas, Dana Point, Harrison Clarke rendering.

the periphery leaves the center free. Kaufmann and the Landscape Architect, Edward Huntsman-Trout envisioned a place that didn't look pretentiously landscaped at all. There were to be no lawns, as that was not the thing for our semi-arid region. Instead an orange grove was to fill the central space,[23] a scheme that never materialized, as the students and faculty insisted on lawns. The buildings with their eclectic details, some of them evocative of Kaufmann's Edwardian background, are livable and full of charm.

What style is Scripps? In October 1928, Harris Allen, editor of the *Pacific Coast Architect*, published an article entitled "This California Architecture"[24] which said in part,

"...for here has been developing, and we may fairly now say that it has developed, a style or treatment (for we are agreed that it is out of style to speak of an architectural 'style') which is typically, vitally Californian.... We have tried almost everything, and by degrees eliminated the misfits and picked out good bits from this and from that, and tried them out to see what fitted together harmoniously so that consciously or unconsciously we have gravitated toward the type of architecture that seemed most congenial to our traditions, our climate, and our environment.

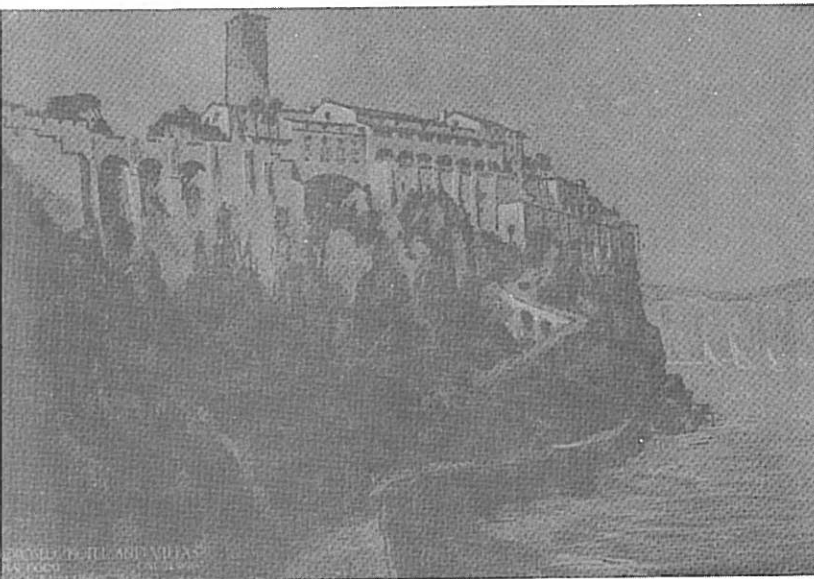
It isn't Spanish, nor Mission, nor Italian, nor Colonial; many people have tried to call it Mediterranean in an effort to embrace the gamut of styles which border that part of the world which perhaps most nearly resembles our Pacific Riviera, but in the end it will have to come to being called what it is, just Californian."

I think Scripps is a perfect example of what Harris Allen was talking about.

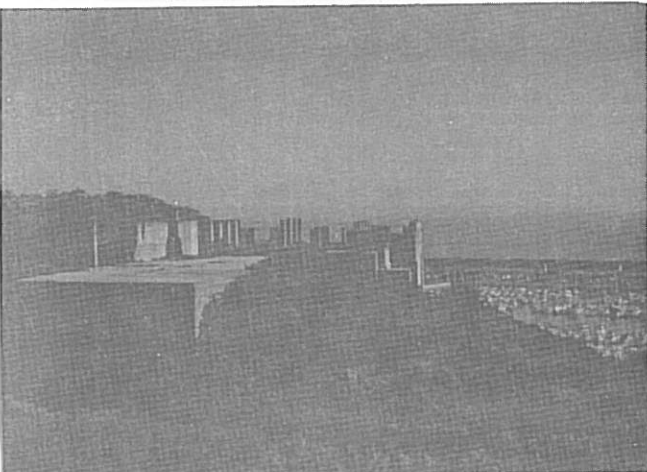
Largely as a result of the success of Scripps, Gordon Kaufmann obtained the commission for the Athenaeum and dormitories at Caltech. Here he was working on a campus already planned by others. Myron Hunt and Elmer Grey had planned the original layout and Bertram Goodhue had succeeded them as architect.

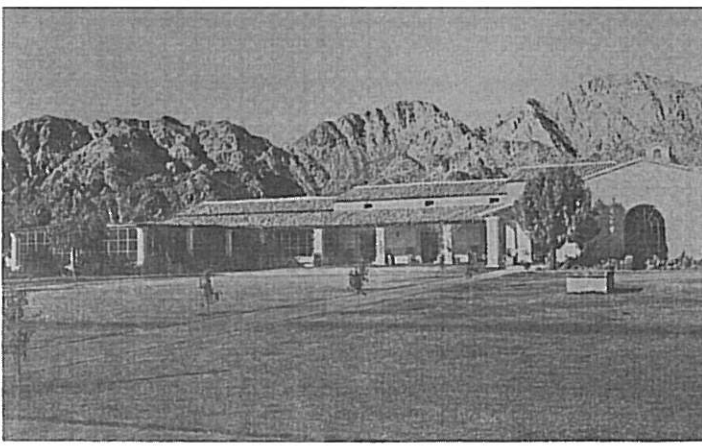
Kaufmann planned the Athenaeum, completed in 1930, at the eastern end of the existing main axis and the dormitories, finished in 1931, to the south. The fine landscaping on both jobs was the work of Florence Yoch and Lucille Council. The Athenaeum is an Italian villa which has been "California-ized" in a rational and convincing manner. The entrance is to one side, informally placed, but grand. The patio, sixty feet square (including the arcades), is the heart of the scheme. The side wings, thirty feet wide, are to the north and south. The dining room, forty feet wide, encloses the patio's east side, and you get a view down the axis from the patio, which is used for outdoor dining all year round. Cross ventilation is provided for each major room, as this was before the days of air conditioning and Pasadena can be hot, but the breeze comes up in the evening and cools things off. The Hall of Associates, with decorations by Smeraldi, can be opened up to the dining room for large meetings. Over half a century after its completion the Athenaeum still successfully serves its purpose as a faculty club and meeting place for Town and Gown.

The dormitory complex is a kind of early "Megastructure" built around six courtyards. Clever advantage has been taken of the site levels. The service entrance is off the public street at a level below the courtyards. This elevation, complete with characteristic Kaufmann walls and gateways, rises three stories. The rest is comparatively low, allowing plenty of light into the courts. Walking through this complex is like a stroll through a neighborhood in Florence. When you emerge again into the reality of Pasadena, it is a distinct letdown. This is all the more remarkable since Gordon Kaufmann never made an extensive Grand Tour of the Continent. During his youth he didn't have the money, and when he was a successful architect he didn't have the time. Perhaps the situation was equivalent to Greene and Greene's never having visited Japan. As Randell Makinson has remarked, "Perhaps it was just as well."



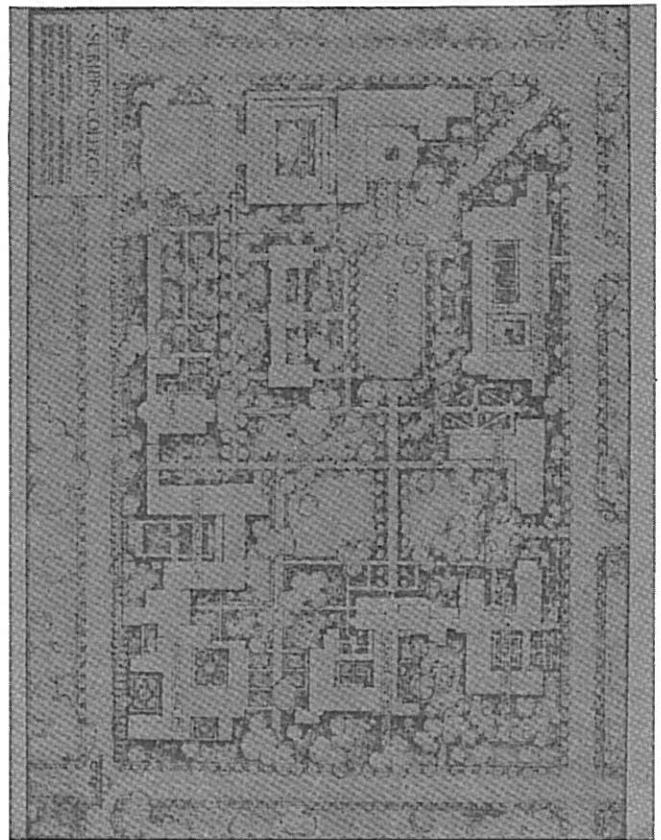
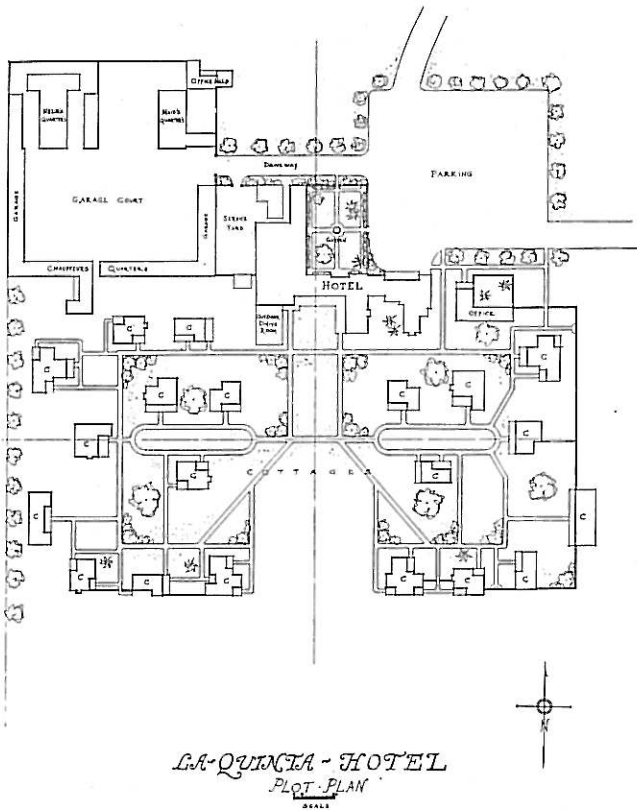
Unfinished foundation, Hotel & Villas, Dana Point.



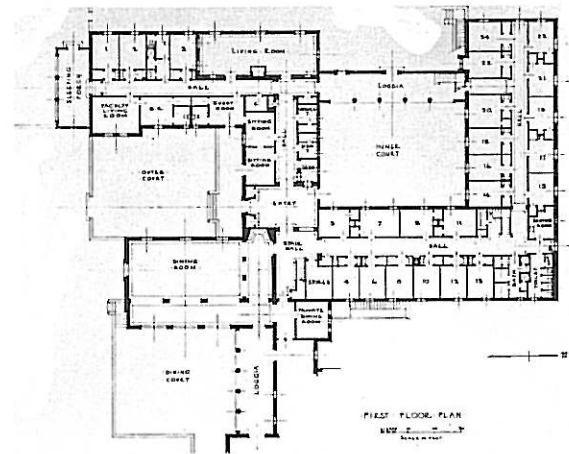


La Quinta Hotel, Main Building, open dining room at left.

La Quinta Hotel, Plot Plan.



[top] Scripps College, Perspective & Site Plan; [bottom] Grace Scripps Clark Hall, Floor Plan.



The hotel is built of adobe bricks made on the site. A kiln was set up and even the roof and floor tiles were made on the site. The color of the roof tiles is most successful. Much of the porch furniture, of extremely simple and sturdy design, was the work of the architect, and was also made on the site.[21] Every effort was made to have plantings which were appropriate to the desert, and the plan included native plants. Even a date palm grove was included in the plan.

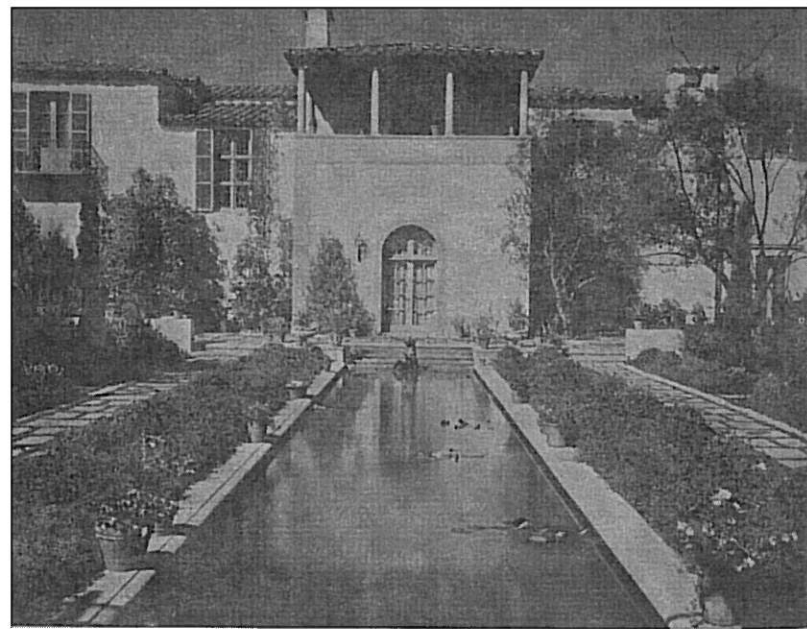
The independent commissions of eighteen busy months must have been favorably received. At any rate the August 1926 issue of the *Pacific Coast Architect* contained the following announcement.[22]

"One of the most coveted of recent architectural competitions in Southern California has been awarded to Gordon B. Kaufmann, AIA, of Los

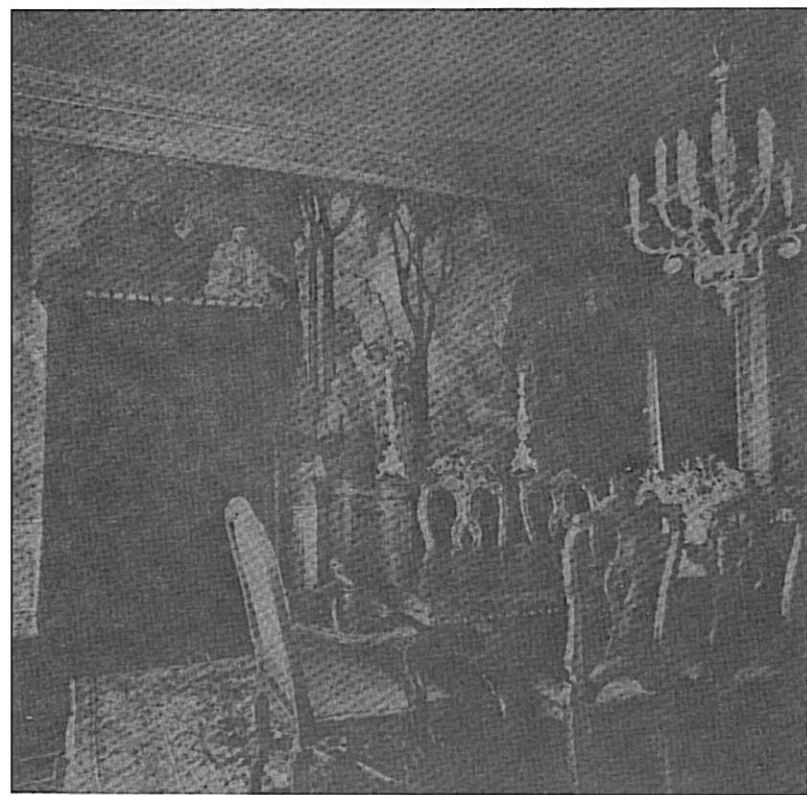
Angeles, by the Scripps College for Women Board of Trustees. Kaufmann has also been given the commission to handle the architectural plans for the first building."

Another connection, or in this case lack of connection, with the "pioneers of modern design" was that donor of Scripps, Ellen Browning Scripps, was Irving Gill's great patron of former years. Gill did not receive the commission.

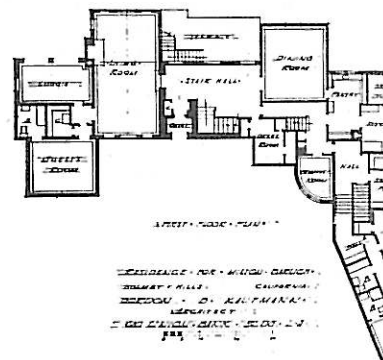
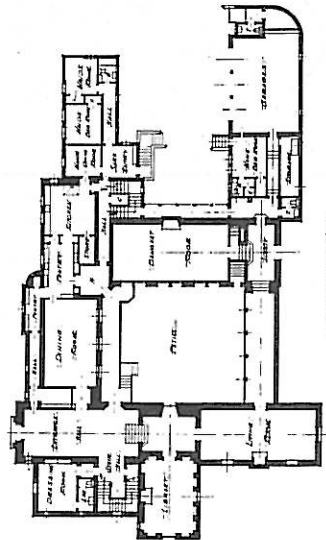
The site plan of Scripps is remarkably free of formality. It is ordered, but the axis does not appear as a dominating theme. It is also very urban for the period. All the land has been put to work. Very un-American high walls enclose much of the campus, which might have been forbidding had not the design of the buildings, domestic in scale, been handled with so much warmth. The distribution of buildings around



[above] Eisner House, view from third court, looking toward library; [below] Getz House Dining Room with Hugo Ballin mural.



House of I. Eisner, Los Angeles—Gordon B. Kaufmann, Architect



[center, left] Eisner House, First Floor Plan; [right] Baruch House, First Floor Plan; [top] Baruch House, "Garden Front" view.



La Quinta Hotel, Main Building Plan note outdoor dining room.

Pasadena, where even the most expensive "Spanish-style" houses usually had simple beamed ceilings with perhaps a little stenciled decoration. The dining room of the Milton Getz house (Beverly Hills, 1925-6) relies for its decorative impact entirely on the murals of Hugo Ballin. Ballin was a first-rate muralist who had come to Hollywood to work as a set designer. He hadn't done murals in years, but Gordon Kaufmann talked him into contributing to the decoration of the Getz house.[19] After this Ballin went on to become one of the area's most successful muralists.

Another chance connection with the "pioneers of modern design" in the region developed about this time, when Richard Neutra worked briefly for Gordon Kaufmann. Kaufmann was, I believe, the only "establishment" architect Neutra worked for here. There are a few nice "Kaufmannesque" renderings in the Neutra archive at UCLA.

In 1927 Kaufmann obtained a unique commission - the chance to build a luxury hotel complex in an isolated desert valley near Indio. "La Quinta," as the resort was called, is intact and is still a successful luxury hotel. Since rain is not a problem in the desert, the guest rooms are a series of dispersed cottages and the casual main building uses outdoor circulation.[20] There was a shaded outdoor dining room, as well as an indoor space for dinner in the evening when the desert starts to cool off. The prototypes for La Quinta were the Desert Inn at Palm Springs, the first luxury hotel in the area, which also had detached cottages, and Lloyd Wright's Oasis hotel, also in Palm Springs, which had been built three years before. La Quinta has virtually no decoration on the exterior. The serene masses build up against the rocky hills, which are in themselves the decoration.

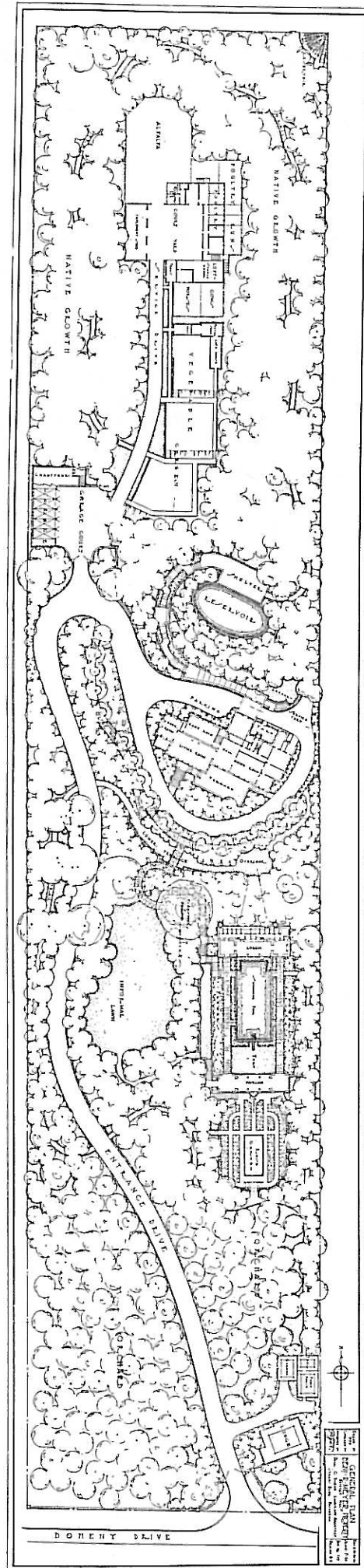
Reginald Johnson attended Williams College, then took the architecture course at M.I.T. and spent five years in Europe before opening his own office in 1912.[9] He knew that California was provincial, disdained the Mission style, and hence did not try to build Spanish vernacular houses. All this seemed to change about 1915, perhaps as a result of Goodhue's San Diego Fair. Johnson began to produce Italian villas and farmhouses, discreetly touched with Spanish Colonial ornament.

At least by 1920 Kaufmann had become the "Associate" of Johnson.[10] In 1922 the firm became Johnson, Kaufmann and Coate, the "Coate" being Roland E. Coate, Sr. The partnership did St. Paul's Episcopal Cathedral in Los Angeles and All Saints' Church in Pasadena, as well as many houses. In late 1924 the two junior partners left the firm and formed their own offices, but before that they had apparently been responsible for at least some of their own residential jobs. The Ben R. Meyer house was first published as the work of Johnson, Kaufmann and Coate,[11] but soon after was published as the work of Gordon Kaufmann alone.[12] It has the earmarks of a Kaufmann job.

The site plan is dated 1920.[13] The Landscape Architect was Paul Thiene,[14] and here begins a series of slightly ironic connections between Gordon Kaufmann and the well-known "pioneers of modern design" in Southern California. In 1920 Lloyd Wright, then a Landscape Architect, was working with Paul Thiene, so undoubtedly Lloyd Wright played a part in developing the plantings on this estate.[15] The landscaping was put in a couple of years before the construction of the house. The plot was long and narrow and it was important to plant out neighboring distractions so that the desired effect of space might be achieved. The house was placed high on the property and the swimming pool and bath houses below. The virility and feeling for the third dimension of Kaufmann achieved was distinctive. The interiors were equally distinctive. The living room has a restrained sumptuousness and consistency that were unusual for Los Angeles at that time. Part of the success of the house lies in the craftsmanship. The breakfast room was decorated by Giovanni (or John B.) Smeraldi, a remarkable Italian decorator/artist who had settled in Southern California.[16]

One of the first major commissions which Kaufmann received after opening his own office was the Eisner house on a comparatively small corner lot in Hancock Park.[17] It is one of the most urban single-family houses which was built in Los Angeles up until that time. The main entrance was on the back, off a driveway which entered off one of the streets and exited on the other, making the plot even smaller. Take away the compulsory meaningless small setbacks and it becomes a town palace in a Mediterranean country. Mr. Eisner was evidently fond of entertaining, as the banqueting hall, complete with musicians' gallery, has a separate entrance. The house was essentially planned around three courtyards, a service courtyard, a central courtyard, and a third garden courtyard with reflecting pool, not shown on the plan but easily understandable from photographs. The house is now romantically overgrown with vines and festooned with signs saying it is patrolled by so and so and guarded by such and such a security system. Luckily the stucco has never been painted and the walls have acquired a patina which no amount of money could duplicate. This house of three courtyards, which won Kaufmann his first AIA award in 1926, was the prototype for Scripps College.

The office produced much domestic work during these years. The Milton Baruch house of 1925-26 is an example of a more typical Los Angeles commission,[18] the large suburban house which was meant to "stand in its own grounds" and be seen from the street. Powerful, simple, largely unadorned spacial volumes, massive construction, executed with conviction - in short, vigor and go. The interiors of the houses were elegantly rich but subdued complements to the simple exteriors. The H.L. Thompson house (Pasadena 1927) is an eighteenth century villa on the Brenta. The ceiling of the living room was decorated, again by Smeraldi, with allegorical scenes which might well have decorated an Italian villa of the time. This was very unusual for



Meyer House,
Plot Plan.



Heathcote, Ilkley, Sir Edwin Lutyens, Architect.



Meyer House, view from pool & loggia, living room.

madge's book, long out of print, is remarkable. For instance, Vincent Scully has been credited with discovering the "Shingle Style." However, Talmadge discovered it long before, and defined it; although Scully, of course, coined the name. Carl Condit has been credited with tracing the rise of the skyscraper, but Talmadge did it in 1927, so we must respect Talmadge.

"Thus the Forum devoted an issue in 1934 to California Spanish architecture as it was being designed by Wallace Neff, Reginald Johnson, Gordon B. Kaufmann and H. Roy Kelly. These houses were charming and much more than competent.... The buildings were professionally finished, yet never dull.... In 1934, outside of Wright's work, which the editors generally championed, no other American architecture had comparable warmth."

John E. Burchard and Albert Bush-Brown. The Architecture of America: a Social and Cultural History
1961 page 459

This short passage was about the kindest thing the authors had to say about architecture on the West Coast.

Southern California has long been known for the quality of its residential architecture. The region was not much acclaimed for its non-domestic work in the Twenties and Thirties, although some of it was by the same architects who were so praised for their houses. The comparatively few buildings designed according to Talmadge's "high ideals of beauty and fitness" were so widely scattered that they counted for little in the image of the Southland. The work probably struck visitors as too informal. Although the public buildings were as professionally finished as the houses, they were often asymmetrical and usually incorporated patios for California living. The profession of Landscape Architecture advanced hand in hand with Architecture during this era. Indeed it would be hard to imagine the public buildings of the period without the complement of palms of varied heights, white-barked eucalypti or the olives and citrus trees which adorned the patios. Gordon Kaufmann was one of the most successful architects of public buildings in this vein. His career was unique in that from the beginning of his independent practice he obtained commissions for whole groups of buildings at the same time that he was gaining a reputation as one of the area's foremost residential practitioners.

Gordon Bernie Kaufmann was born in London in 1888. His mother was Scottish and his father was of German origin.[1] The family was middle class. Kaufmann attended the Whitgift School, Croydon, from 1899 to 1904.[2] From 1904 to 1908 he attended both the London Polytechnic and the Royal College of Art.[3] From 1908 to 1910 he was articled to the London architect A. W. S. Cross, FRIBA,[4] The author of two technical books on architecture and a contributor to the American Architect in 1912 (the article was a lament on the destruction of John Nash's Regent Street). This apprenticeship was very important, as England had no architectural school equivalent to the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. Even more important was the architectural milieu of the period. It was the height of the Edwardian era, and Sir Edwin Lutyens' "Heathcote," Ilkley, Surrey, a typical example of free, imaginative classicism, was one of the most admired houses of the time. I don't think Gordon Kaufmann ever quite shook off this approach to design, which was somewhat different from the often more puritanical atmosphere surrounding architecture, especially domestic architecture, in the United States. After his two years with A. W. S. Cross, Kaufmann emigrated to Canada.[5] There he married Eva St. Denis MacFarland and had a son, born in 1913.[6] Mrs. Kaufmann's health was always delicate, so, in 1914, the family was forced to seek a mild climate and moved to Los Angeles. Arriving penniless and friendless, it is said that Kaufmann could only obtain work as a gardener.[7] In a year or so things improved, as, in 1916, he was listed as a draftsman in the office of Reginald Johnson in Pasadena.[8] This association was of much importance, as there he was Americanized.



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1941 (with Paul R. Williams, Adrian Wilson, Wurdeman and Becket and Richard J. Neutra.) After this the International Style appeared to become the preferred design approach in the Kaufmann office. Of the other architects mentioned by Talmadge who survived into the thirties and forties, Myron Hunt's La Vina Sanatorium, Pasadena, 1936, employed this architect's version of the International Style. Reginald Johnson gave up his conventional practice in 1934 to devote himself to promoting government-sponsored public housing, and designed his last house for himself (in conjunction with his son, Joseph L. Johnson) in an unabashed modern manner (1947).

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