

to DO GREAT and lasting  
work  
we must dare to be  
simple  
and get down to  
FUNDAMENTAL truths



IRVING GILL  
FUNDAMENTAL TRUTHS

TOUR MAP  
LA JOLLA AND SAN DIEGO  
SOCIETY OF ARCHITECTURAL HISTORIANS  
SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA CHAPTER

# IRVING GILL FUNDAMENTAL

## Irving Gill Arts & Crafts Architect

■ In his writings and comments on architecture, Irving J. Gill (1870–1936) continually referred to three underlying concepts: simplicity, honesty, and democracy. These concepts, rather than the esthetics of his buildings, are what tie him to the Arts and Crafts movement. While the terms *simplicity* and *honesty* exhibit decidedly ethical overtones, he used them primarily as criteria for design. In a 1916 article in *The Craftsman* magazine he wrote that “if we, the architects of the West, wish to do great and lasting work we must dare to be simple. . . . If we omit everything useless from a structural point of view we will come to see the beauty of straight lines.” In the same article he asserted that the architectural ideal of the new West should be realized in the small home, which he equated with the vision of democracy.

Gill’s view of social, economic, and political democracy was not some form of socialism. Rather, it was a full commitment to the ideal of a universal middle class, a middle class living not in congested Victorian cities but in suburbia and the countryside.

Certainly, one of the salient contributions of the American Arts and Crafts movement to the ideal of democracy was the development of the Craftsman bungalow. The bungalow provided for the full range of social classes, from \$1,800 speculative examples for the middle class to high-art ones designed by gifted architects for upper-middle class clients. No matter how large or small, the bungalow, through its informality, argues for at least a symbolic sense of equality among the classes.

Gill realized that neither architects nor the speculative builders seemed able to provide affordable, single-family, detached housing for a large segment of the working class (in America, the lower middle class).

Gill’s personal involvement in low-cost housing began at the turn of the

century, when he purchased land in northern San Diego and built rental units on it. Here, then, was an architect designing small cottages for workers and at the same time providing himself with income—a time honored capitalist practice.

These rental cottages were conceived of as simple boxes, generally capped by partial parapets and a flat roof or by a very-low pitched gable roof. The severity of the stucco-sheathed box was relieved by projecting bay windows, curved parapet ends (usually a small, extended flat-roofed tower with arched openings), and brick chimneys and fireplaces. Entrance was gained either at the end of a long pergola or an extended arcade. Thus, externally, these cottages exhibit just enough references to be responded to as Mission Revival in style.

Gill’s small dwellings proved to be too expensive for workers to afford and too puritanical looking for people of small means to find appealing. Nor were the workers and their families at all interested in the demanding puritanical lifestyle these residences suggested. Apart from subsidized housing, the solution lay in raising the worker’s wages so that America’s ideal of the universal middle class could be realized. Increased pay would make it possible for workers to purchase single-family housing in the suburbs. Thus, several of the ideals of the turn-of-the-century Arts and Crafts movement—the development of a universal middle class and the establishment of garden cities and suburbs—continued to be discussed on into the 1920s and 1930s. Gill’s Cubistic designs of the 1910s and 1920s had to wait until they could be discovered by later proponents of high-art modernism.

Excerpted with permission from “Irving Gill” by David Gebhard *Toward a Simpler Way of Life: The Arts & Crafts Architects of California*, ed. Robert Winter, University of California Press, 1997.

the STRAIGHT LINE  
borrowed from the horizon  
greatness      grandeur      nobility

the ARCH  
patterned from the dome of the sky  
exaltation      reverence      aspiration

the CIRCLE  
completeness      motion      progression

the SQUARE  
power      justice      honesty

# TRUTHS

## Irving Gill Modernist Architect

■ Irving Gill came to the West Coast in 1893 to improve his poor health and begin his search for the "Spirit of Place." He had come directly from the offices of Louis Sullivan, who would lay the foundation within Gill of an architectural ideology that would eventually lead to the planting of seeds of Modernism in California.

Gill's place as the father of Modern Architecture in America is too easily overlooked and rather unfitting of a man who proved to be so very influential to even the likes of this nation's most famous architect, his compatriot in Chicago, Frank Lloyd Wright.

Gill brought with him to California a desire to discover the esthetic fundamentals of an architecture devoid of historical metaphor or reference.

It is easy to see in his early work in San Diego, his search for elements that would firmly ground him in the uniqueness of the regional landscape.

In the elegant austerity of the semi-arid southern California climate, Gill began to respond to the surviving Hispanic structures of the region. He began to perceive in their architecture the geometric forms of the earth, suggesting the possibilities of a comparable response in contemporary materials, such as concrete. The forms and materials he was evolving paralleled a similar response of the Spanish pioneers in a way that brought him to the very same premises of site, climate, topography and building materials. It was a discovery of the nature of building form that was a representative return to history as well. After seven years of trial and experimentation, Gill turned to hollow-tile and concrete as his primary building materials. In doing this he broke through to an innovative simplicity that made possible the first tenants of a distinctly modern American regional style.

Gill made it his personal and very private challenge to re-envision and transform the ordinary, the everyday

American in southern California, as if the ordinary were being seen for the first time and from a fresh perspective. He wished to produce buildings which had a "made in America" look and which visually would create a new architecture in a new land. The true meaning of the Hispanic tradition, for Gill, was as a guide toward a simplified, clean-edged architecture, similar to what was beginning to attract his European contemporaries and their followers. His difference with them, and what distinguishes him from Adolf Loos in particular (with whom he is persistently compared) is his lack of mechanistic pretensions. The use of thin metal mullions and frames in his windows, like his advanced tilt-slab technique for pouring concrete walls, never seems to imply a desire to prove a point about the machine age.

Gill felt a building should be a simple and bold machine object in the garden of southern California landscape. It is hard to Rudolph Schindler's own King's Road house, with its central interior/exterior garden courtyard/living room and tilt-up concrete construction not having Gill as a source for inspiration, particularly with Gill's Dodge House directly across the street. It wouldn't be until the late 1920s and early 1930s when the technology metaphor would emerge with real force in the works of Schindler, Neutra and other regional proponents of the International Style.

Gill heads the list of visionary architects seeking an expression in southern California. He prefigured the mass culture of post World War II. Both Henry Russell Hitchcock and Lewis Mumford considered Gill a pioneer in the Modernist movement. History has left Gill in a place of relative obscurity, even though he proved to be one of the most original, innovative and influential architects of this century.

By John Berky, president of the Society of Architectural Historians, Southern California Chapter