

Thomas S. Hines

Irving Gill and the Architecture of Reform

New York: The Monacelli Press, 2000, 303 pp., 12 color and 279 b/w illus. \$75, ISBN 1-58093-016-6

In a 1916 essay that was probably his most important written statement, Irving Gill railed against contemporary historicism and argued for a return to origins: “the straight line, the arch, the cube and the circle.” His ideal was not the primitive hut but an equally convincing trope that he called “the stone in the meadow.” This phrase implied a method by which the rational was to be brought into an intimate relationship with the organic: “We should build our house simple, plain and substantial as a boulder, then leave the ornamentation of it to Nature” (11).¹

Thomas S. Hines begins his monograph on Gill with a discussion of this essay, which is appropriate, but it also serves to emphasize the problem facing anyone studying Gill’s work: the dearth of written evidence. In 1928, when he closed his Los Angeles office, Gill reportedly put ten truckloads of documents in storage; they have never been found. The Gill archive is, thus, “sadly fragmentary,” requiring Hines to combine “the methods of the architectural historian with the sensibilities of the archaeologist—attempting to divine meaning from the shards of Gill’s experience” (15, 18). The result, as Hines admits, is a highly speculative biography full of “must haves” and “might haves.” It is not, as he warns us, the catalogue raisonné the architect deserves.

Much appreciated in his own day, Gill’s work was frequently praised by journalist Eloise Roorbach—Gill’s

Boswell, according to Hines—in magazines such as *Architectural Record*, *The Craftsman*, *House Beautiful*, *House and Garden*, and *Western Architecture*. But his reputation and his practice plummeted after the 1915 Panama-California Exposition in San Diego, where Bertram Goodhue's baroque confections inaugurated a period of intense historicism in California architecture that lasted through the 1920s. Brief mentions in Lewis Mumford's *The Brown Decades* (New York, 1931) and Henry-Russell Hitchcock's *Architecture: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Harmondsworth, 1958) served to keep Gill's memory alive until Esther McCoy definitively restored his reputation, first with an exhibition and catalogue (Los Angeles, 1958) and later with a chapter in her much-read *Five California Architects* (New York, 1960). William Jordy completed the revival with a fine, appreciative essay on Gill's masterpiece, the Dodge House in West Hollywood (1914–16), in the third volume of *American Buildings and Their Architects* (New York, 1972). By this time, the house had already been demolished, but Gill's reputation as a proto-modernist—important but neglected—was firmly established.

The significance for Hines of that prefix, “proto,” cannot be underestimated, for it is his announced intention to establish Gill as “a major player” who ranks in importance with his contemporary Adolf Loos (12). Hines asserts that Gill, like the other rationalists of the early twentieth century, “eschewed historicism and strove for pure, new, and original statements” (13). This was true up to a point, or rather, after a certain point; until 1907, as Hines demonstrates, Gill was not averse to a little style-mongering. Even later, his approach to the interior of the building remained relatively conservative, as is apparent in the planning of his many boxy houses. In marked contrast to Loos, Gill seems to have rarely designed in section.

As history, this book is a hybrid. The twelve chapters provide a rough chronology of events, but each one has



Irving Gill, Dodge House, Los Angeles (now West Hollywood), 1914–16. Photograph by Thomas S. Hines

a specific theme expressed in a teasingly enigmatic, one-word title (“Genesis,” “Growth,” “Transition,” and so on). Chapter three, “Identity,” is without doubt one of the most substantial, dealing as it does with the context of Gill's work. Here Hines identifies seven “factors” that made Gill's thinking distinctive: “first, the creative potential of concrete construction; second, the twin virtues of simplicity and efficiency; third, the reformist impact of the contemporary Progressive Movement . . . ; fourth, the contemporary implications of California's Hispanic architectural legacy . . . ; fifth, the broadening . . . of Gill's interest in nonorthodox religious and philosophical movements . . . ; sixth, the reinforcement of Gill's penchant for the primitive . . . ; and seventh, Gill's growing identification with the developing modern movement” (70). It is an ambitious program with mixed results. Any one of these factors would have served a single chapter; together they suggest the outline of a very different kind of work.

Hines's discussion of concrete is a case in point. It is remarkably brief and narrowly based, which is disappointing given the importance of the material in

the argument for Gill's significance. Equally problematic is the author's exploration of Gill's relationship to the buildings of Hispanic California. He makes an ambiguous argument about the missions' influence, citing an unpublished comment by the late McCoy. She regretted her earlier reading of Gill as a regionalist, having come to the conclusion that his signature arches “refer just as much to contemporary practices in reinforced concrete” as they do to the missions (265 n. 15). Hines, like McCoy, does not want to call Gill a regionalist, because that would tarnish his reputation as a modernist. The result is that he must circumscribe the influence of the missions and related buildings, even while he gamely documents Gill's relationship to them.

Chapter five, “Modernity,” deals with the period of 1907 to 1914, when Gill found his own architectural voice. One of the meatiest chapters in the book, it includes interesting coverage of the Miltimore House in South Pasadena (1911) and the Banning House in Los Angeles (1911–13), both commissioned by strong, self-sufficient women. This section also makes vivid the connection between progressive values of health and

cleanliness and the smooth surfaces and spare details of modernist design. Unfortunately, however, Hines is in such a hurry to proclaim Gill a prophet of modernism that he does not take the time to make his case. He also betrays a certain confusion about building in concrete that is not unique to this chapter. In his discussion of Gill's use of the Aiken tilt-slab system in the construction of the Banning House, for example, Hines says that the walls were cast flat on the floor slab, but his own quoted source plainly indicates that they were cast at an angle. Hines does see, perceptively, a link between this system of construction and Gill's tendency to design in plan and elevation only. He correctly contrasts Gill's essentially flat conception of architecture with Loos's more three-dimensional idea of the *Raumplan*. The main claim of the chapter (and by extension the entire book) is that Gill beat Loos to the punch—that Gill was making white boxes before Loos, which leads to the perennial question: Who knew what and when? Gill's nephew Louis stated that his uncle did subscribe to the European magazines, but Hines wisely concludes that although Gill and Loos could have known of each other's work, they were more likely responding to the same influences.

Much more information is offered: later chapters deal with Gill's commitment to the design of affordable, multi-family housing, as exemplified by Lewis Courts in Sierra Madre (1910); his varied work in Fontana, La Jolla, Ocean-side, and the new town of Torrance; his frustrating involvement with the Panama-California Exposition; even his sexual orientation (237–39). But there is in the end something hasty about Hines's approach, including a tendency to overstate the case for Gill's significance and to make large claims without substantiating them, as well as the kind of small mistakes that every scholar dreads. In chapter nine, for instance, he describes the Raymond House in Long Beach (1918) as undergoing a "belated rediscovery" in the 1980s (207), but it is clearly listed in the 1977 edition of

David Gebhard and Robert Winter's *A Guide to Architecture in Los Angeles and Southern California*. The description of the house is further hampered by the fact that the orientation is incorrect and by the lack of floor plans as illustrations. The latter is a persistent problem with the publication, and one is left wondering whether Hines used the surviving evidence of the buildings as well as he might have.

Hines is a leading scholar with an established reputation, and one approaches his work with high expectations. This makes *Irving Gill and the Architecture of Reform* something of a disappointment. The volume itself is handsome—a fitting addition to Monacelli's catalogue—but much of the text consists of short building descriptions and simple formal analysis: Gill made white boxes and arranged the openings in a certain way. There is no comprehensive attempt to grapple with his architectural language in depth, which is a shame since Gill's creation of a regionally appropriate vernacular is his most important accomplishment. After considering his impact on the architecture of southern California, as well as the fate of his reputation and his buildings, the Dodge House in particular, Hines comes to a disinterested, oddly truncated conclusion—a single-sentence paragraph that begins with the phrase, "The rest, as the saying goes, is history . . ." (261). One hardly knows what to make of this cliché, but it certainly does not belong at the end of a study that aspires to any level of seriousness.

Hines's book cannot be considered anything less than a substantial contribution to an otherwise limited literature, and it has already become a standard source on the subject. But despite providing a comprehensive survey, the publication is marred by Hines's ambition to improve Gill's stature, a goal that seems to have blinded the author to the architect's limitations. In the end, Hines cannot pitch Gill's influence much further than Richard Neutra's, which puts a serious limit on Gill's "'premonitory' significance" (106). After weighing the arguments, and professing my own

admiration for Gill's work, I still cannot think of him as anything more than a transitional figure.

BRUNO GIBERTI

California Polytechnic State University

Note

1. Irving Gill, "The Home of the Future: The New Architecture of the West—Small Homes for a Great Country," *Craftsman* (May 1916), 141–42, 147.