

Irving Gill's Vision for The Bishop's School

Nicole Holland, Ashley Chang, and Pieter Stougaard

Irving J. Gill (1870-1936), founding architect of The Bishop's School, produced an essay in 1916 while construction was underway on Gilman Hall. He submitted it to *The Craftsman*, an important design and architecture magazine published by Gustav Stickley and devoted to the promotion of an American Arts & Crafts style. His essay was entitled "The Home of the Future: The New Architecture of the West: Small Homes for a Great Country."¹ A photo illustration shows the school's first structure built on Banker's Hill with the caption: "Honesty, frankness and dignified simplicity mark this house designed to rest upon the crest of a canyon: Seen from the bottom of the slope, this section of the Bishop's School, designed by Mr. Gill, rises like a natural monument of stone."²

Gill produced some of his most innovative and path-breaking work for The Bishop's School. He created an architecture based on a modernist stripping down or near elimination of ornamental elements in favor of the straight line, the arch, the circle, and the square. His work reflected the vision of Episcopal Bishop Joseph H. Johnson and Ellen Browning Scripps for a progressive school founded on the motto, "Simplicity, Sincerity, Serenity." Gill fused together American pragmatism and idealism, much like his mentor Louis Sullivan (who declared "form ever follows function"). He also drew on the work of European architects and artists such as the Viennese modernist Adolf Loos and the Dutch artist Piet Mondrian and his circle. In a 1914 essay, Eloise Roorbach, an architectural critic



Portrait of Irving J. Gill, 1915. ©SDHS #80:7818.

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for *The Craftsman* and a close friend of Gill, wrote that the architect “recently built a school at La Jolla down by the sea, known as The Bishop’s School for Girls, which embraces the most radical theories. Its originality must certainly remain unquestioned.”³

Irving Gill was born in a small town in upstate New York. In 1890, he moved to Chicago, the birthplace of the skyscraper. He obtained a job in the renowned office of Dankmar Adler & Louis Sullivan and worked as a draftsman under the supervision of chief draftsman Frank Lloyd Wright. A pioneer in the development of steel framework skyscrapers, Sullivan preached a reductivist aesthetic that attracted international architects like Loos. The latter visited the Chicago office and wrote an essay “Ornament and Crime” (1908) advocating simplicity. Gill, who worked on Sullivan’s Transportation Building project for the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition, wrote in his 1916 essay, “Any deviation from simplicity results in a loss of dignity. Ornaments tend to cheapen rather than enrich, they acknowledge inefficiency and weakness.” His years in Chicago helped him develop a language of architecture at once ethical, moral, symbolic and aesthetic. In his writing, he chose words such as “simplicity,” “honesty,” “chaste,” and “beautiful” to characterize his practice.⁴

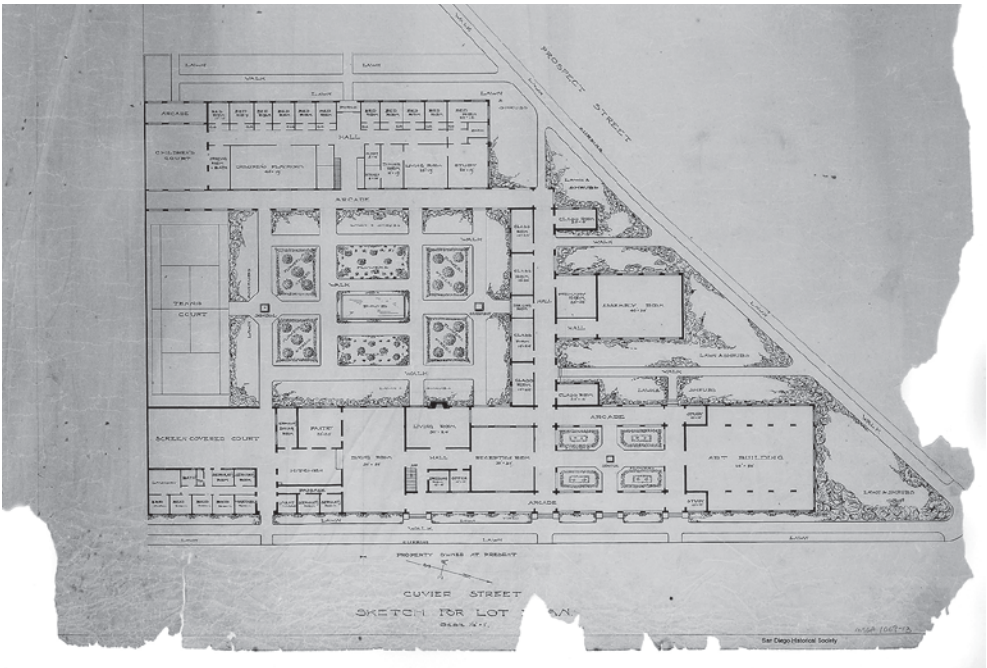
Suffering poor health, Gill moved from Chicago to San Diego, a young town offering both a healthy climate and “the newest white page,” as he described the West.⁵ Gill’s professional partnerships for the design and construction of residences, churches, schools, and commercial buildings included Falkenham & Gill; Hebbard & Gill; Gill & Mead; and, with his nephew Louis J. Gill, the firm Gill & Gill.

In 1909, Gill designed structures for The Bishop’s School’s two campuses: a day school in downtown San Diego and a boarding school in La Jolla. Kate Sessions, pioneering horticulturist of Balboa Park, helped landscape the campus at First Avenue and Redwood Street and may have advised on the La Jolla campus.

An important and previously unpublished lot plan in the archives of the San Diego Historical Society, done in Gill’s fine hand, shows his first plan for the La Jolla campus. It contains a central pond and *parterre* gardens bordered by flowers, suggesting a Victorian carved picture frame. Although it is dated ca. 1912, it must have been designed much earlier as it bears little, if any, relation to the actual buildings. It is, instead, a very early presentation drawing, probably done in 1908 or 1909. It reveals his vision of a balance of indoor and outdoor spaces, connected by halls and arcades. It shows two formal gardens, one nearly four times the size of the other, as well as tennis courts. The smaller garden centered on a statue; the larger focused on a pond.

Gill’s plan for The Bishop’s School campus resembled a utopian design for a medieval monastery in its dominant axes, ordered cubical spaces, and overall balance and symmetry. In his essay, he referred to “the arched cloisters of the Missions” that had been “seized upon and tortured until all semblance of their original beauty has been lost.” He wanted to return such spaces to their “meaning and definite purpose—that of supporting the roof or the second story and thus forming a retreat or quiet walk for the monks.”⁶ In a drawing for Gilman Hall, he labeled the arcade “cloisters.”⁷

Gill’s buildings for the La Jolla campus—Scripps Hall (1910) with its living spaces, Bentham Hall (1912) with its small chapel and watchtower, and Gilman



Irving Gill, Sketch for Lot Plan, pen and ink on tracing paper, ca. 1909. This utopian design for The Bishop's School resembles the plan for a medieval monastery and bears little formal relation to Gill's built structures. One exception is the annotated "Assembly Room," a term which reflects Gill's Quaker background, marking the space for the first chapel and an area known today as Taylor Performing Arts Center. Striking are the formal, parterre gardens centering on a pond in the present-day Quadrangle. ©SDHS Archives, #1009-013.

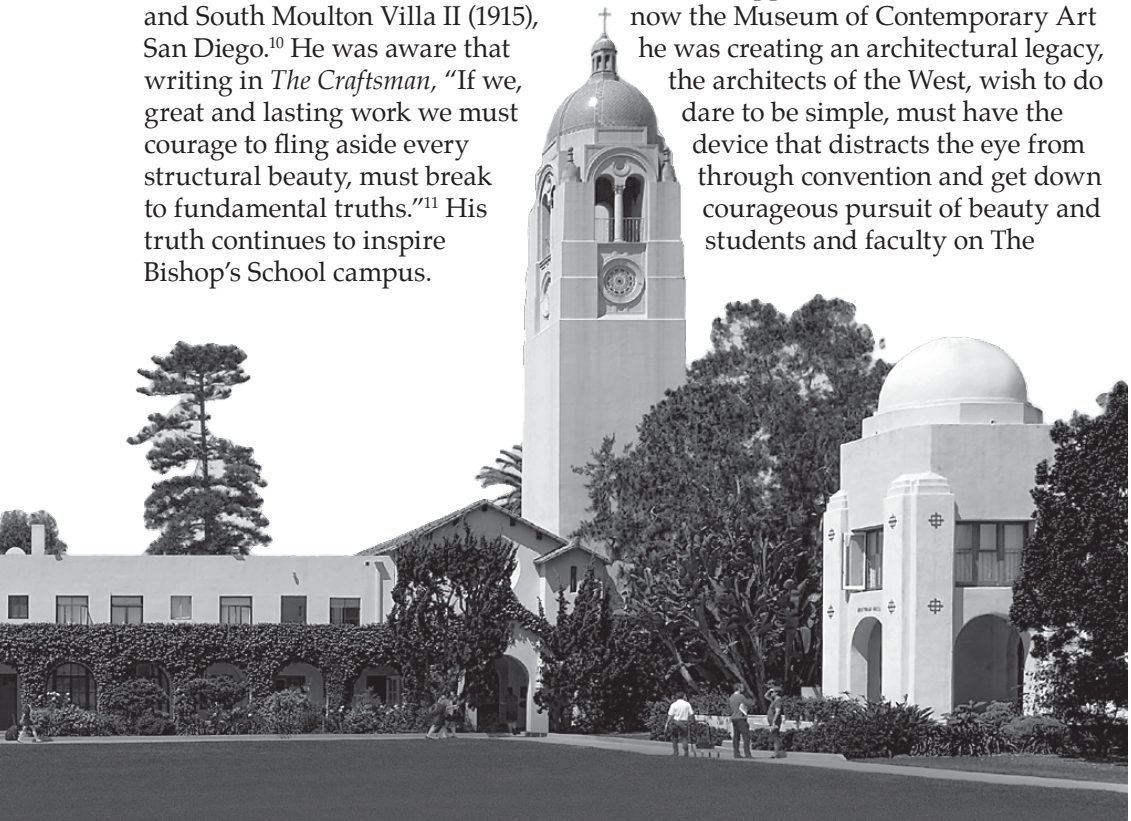
View of The Bishop's School in 2008, seen across the Quadrangle. Left and center, Gilman Hall (1916); right of Gilman Hall, St. Mary's Chapel (1916-17) and the Bishop Johnson Tower (1930); at right, Bentham Hall (1912) with tower by Carleton Winslow (ca. 1930) that replaced Gill's earlier belvedere-style tower. Photograph by Pablo Mason.

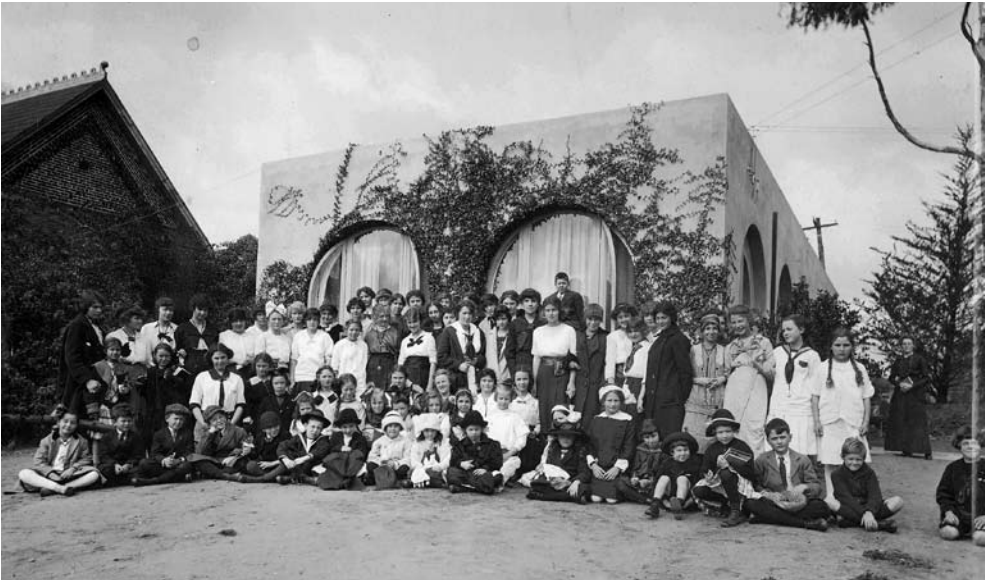


Hall (1916-17)—show a geometric approach that fused reformist Modernism with Mission Revival. In his essay, Gill wrote that the arch signified “the dome of the sky, exultation, reverence, and aspiration,” the square symbolized “power, justice, honesty and firmness,” and the straight line indicated “greatness, grandeur and nobility.”⁸ His structures reflected the core values of physical, mental and spiritual well being that informed the built architecture, the college preparatory curriculum, and school’s community engagement.

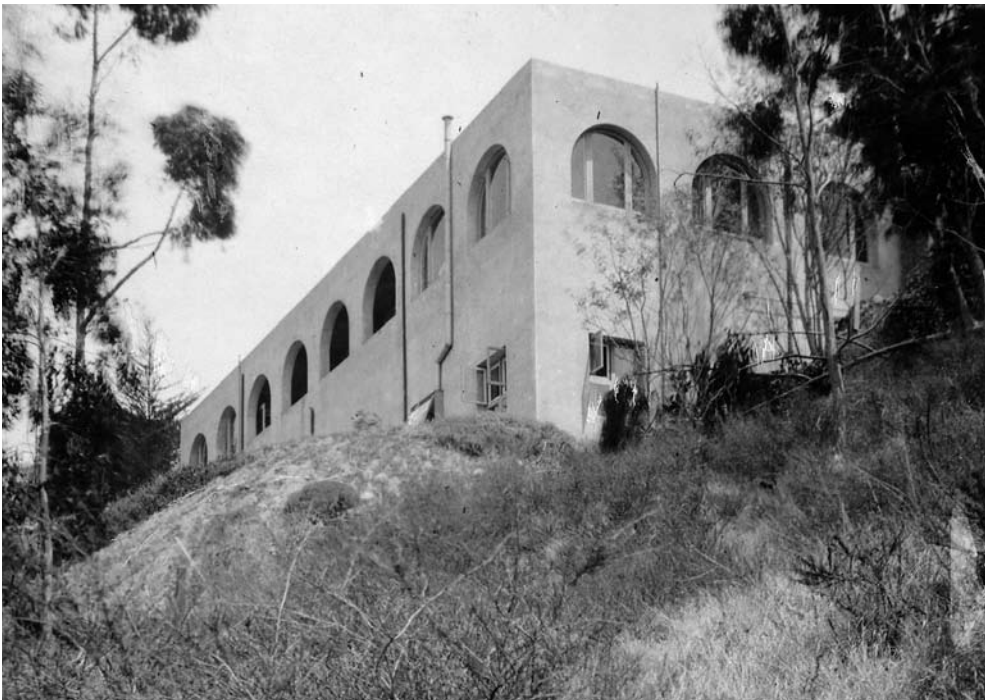
Gill did not design all of the buildings on campus, however. Carleton Monroe Winslow (1876-1946) designed St. Mary’s Chapel in the romantic Spanish Baroque Revival style that became popular after the Panama-California Exposition of 1915 in Balboa Park. Winslow, who had worked in Bertram Goodhue’s New York office, arrived in San Diego in 1911 to participate in the construction of the exposition’s central buildings. In 1916, he received a commission from Isabel Johnson, wife of the bishop, to design a chapel in memory of her mother. Winslow later removed Gill’s original belvedere “watch tower” from Bentham Hall in favor of a dome at some time during his work for the Bishop Johnson Tower (1930) and the Wheeler J. Bailey Library (1934).⁹ To Winslow’s credit, he attempted to maintain Gill’s architectural vocabulary along with his simplicity in design and materials.

Gill opened an office in Los Angeles in 1913 and rarely visited San Diego after 1920. His vision of a utopian community, however, helped to define the village of La Jolla in architectural terms. His works there, besides The Bishop’s School, include the La Jolla Women’s Club (1912-14), the Scripps Recreation Center (1913-15), and South Moulton Villa II (1915), San Diego.¹⁰ He was aware that he was creating an architectural legacy, writing in *The Craftsman*, “If we, the architects of the West, wish to do great and lasting work we must dare to be simple, must have the courage to fling aside every device that distracts the eye from structural beauty, must break through convention and get down to fundamental truths.”¹¹ His truth continues to inspire students and faculty on The Bishop’s School campus.





Students and faculty gather for a photograph in front of Bishop's day school campus in San Diego. The property formerly had belonged to a botanist, Professor Townsend Stith Brandegee, who had planted a large number of rare trees and plants. The San Diego Union described it "the greatest collection of Lower California specimens in existence." Courtesy of The Bishop's School.



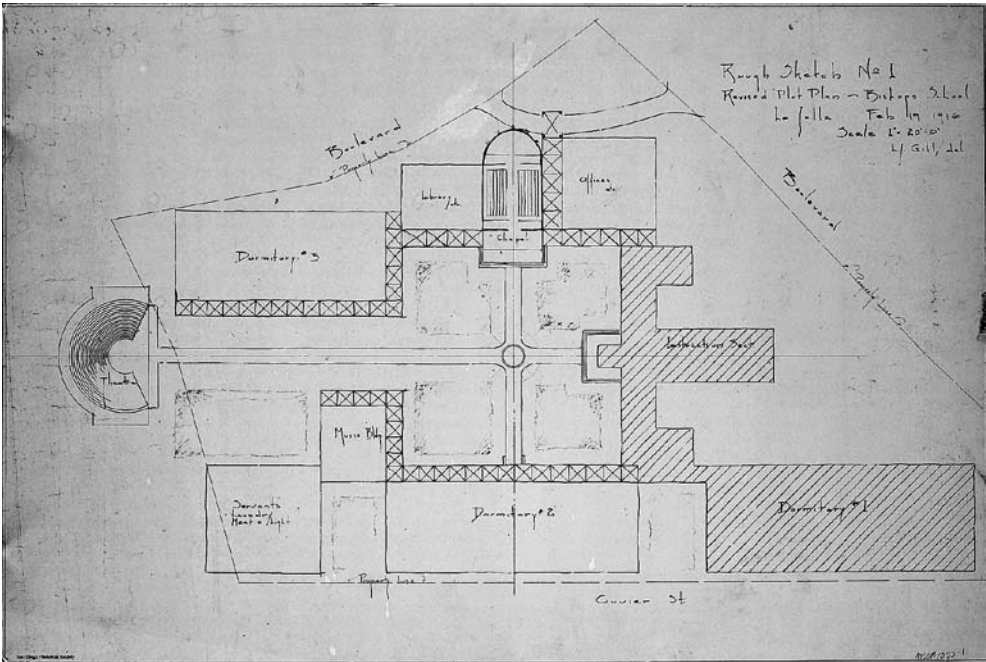
Irving Gill, The Bishop's Day School (1909), 3068 First Avenue, San Diego, California, photograph, n.d. This photograph, doubtless taken by Gill himself, served as an illustration for his only major essay, "The Home of the Future: The New Architecture of the West: Small Homes for a Great Country." Courtesy of the Architecture and Design Collection, University Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara 1968.105.259.p.2.



Irving Gill, perspective rendering, Scripps Hall and Bentham Hall, ink and watercolor on paper, signed and dated 1910. This ink and watercolor image of Scripps and Bentham Halls is done in a palette of soft, tender blues and greens, suggesting climbing vines and wisteria that provided "ornamentation" for the arches, or, as Gill wrote: "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." Courtesy of the Architecture and Design Collection, University Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara, 1968.105.10.0.51.



The Bishop's School, La Jolla, ca. 1920s. This photograph features Scripps Hall, left, and Bentham Hall, center, with the original belvedere "watch tower," the design of which is echoed in the Gilman sleeping porch, behind. At right is St. Mary's Chapel, built by Winslow in 1916-17. The classical detail of the ground story "tabernacle" on Bentham Hall contrasts with the Mission Revival roofline above, a design deriving from Mission San Diego de Alcalá. Gill, who had consulted on the mission's condition, used some design features in the façade for St. James Chapel, no longer extant. ©SDHS #5463.



Louis J. Gill, *Rough Sketch No. 1, Revised Plot Plan*, ink on paper, signed and dated February 19, 1916. Louis Gill ran the San Diego office of Gill & Gill after his uncle left for Los Angeles. This sketch marks already constructed buildings with parallel line hatching. Winslow's 1916 chapel is in outline, as are the projected spaces for Gilman Hall dormitory, library, and offices, upper left, as well as dormitory, music building, and support services, below. Gill proposes an astonishing and never-built Greek amphitheater, an architectural feature then much in vogue, here set on an axis with Bentham Hall. ©SDHS Archives, #1022-001.



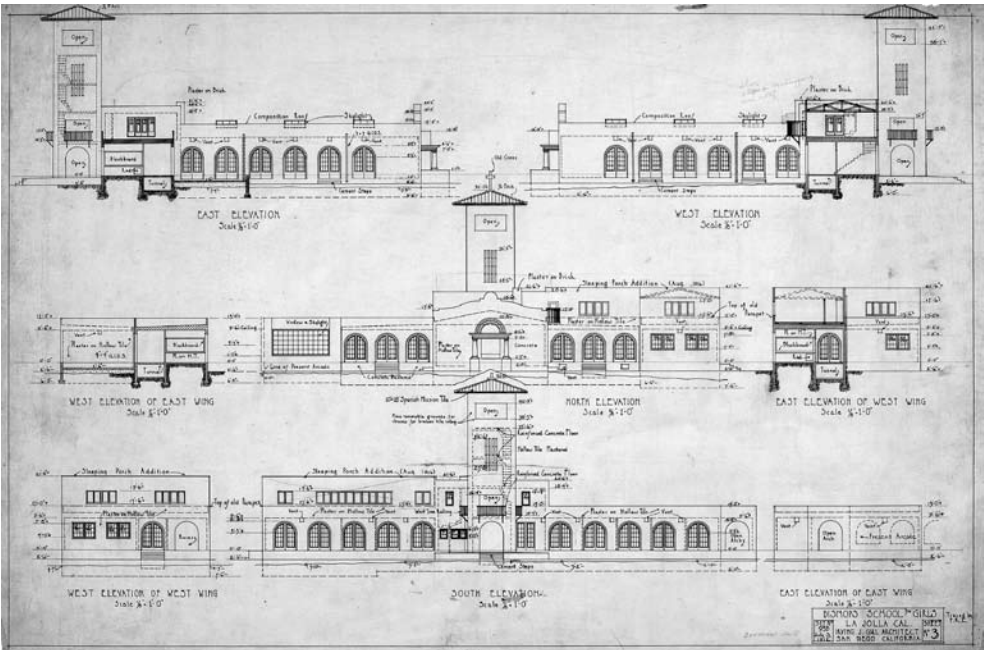
The living room in Scripps Hall, ca. 1910, reflected an Arts & Crafts aesthetic with its large tile fireplace, beamed ceilings, inset bookcases, and comfortable seating. The walls were painted "warm gray" and surfaced "so that they will catch color from sky and garden," according to a 1914 article in *The Craftsman*. ©SDHS #81:11868.



A dorm room in Scripps Hall, ca. 1910. Eloise Roorbach praised Gill for his “modern efforts to encourage individuality instead of molding it along arbitrary lines.” Each room was “severely plain, identical in finish and furnishings, in fact merely a white page upon which each girl may express her individuality.” ©SDHS #81:11898



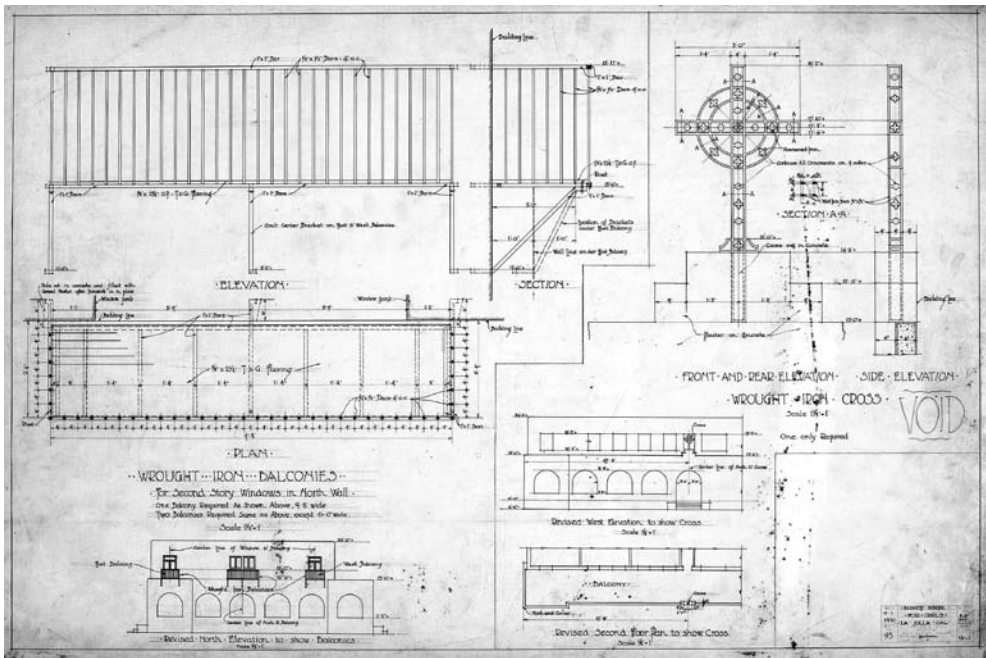
Maurice Braun, Wheeler J. Bailey house, colored pencil drawing, ca. 1920s. Leading San Diego plein air artist Maurice Braun (1877-1941), an avid student of Theosophy and a firm believer in San Diego's Edenic qualities, illustrated Gill's 1907 La Jolla house for Wheeler J. Bailey, a long-time Bishop's trustee and donor of the 1934 Library. Dating from Braun's middle period, this colored pencil drawing denotes the sweeping seascape and accents the Mediterranean feeling of the Southern California coastline. Braun's vignette is a rarity; it portrays the only accurately identifiable Gill building in Braun's overall work. Courtesy of the Braun Family Collection.



Irving Gill, Bentham Hall East, West, North and South Elevations, graphite and ink on linen, dated in title block, July 3, 1912. The south elevation, seen at the foot of the sheet, features Gill's original tower, designed in the Italian "belvedere" or "watchtower" style, with unglazed openings on each side, a design echoed in the extant upper story of Gilman Hall, once the sleeping porch. Carleton M. Winslow replaced Gill's tower with a domed version around 1930. Courtesy of the Architecture and Design Collection, University Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara, 1968.105.11.D.56.



Tilt-slab concrete construction method, La Jolla Women's Club, 1912. The tilt-slab method was invented by U.S. Army Colonel Aiken for barracks construction during the Spanish-American War. Wheelbarrow loads of concrete are poured into horizontal forms articulated by steel bars, marking heights and outlining openings for doors or windows. Here, an entire wall is seen being hoisted into place. Gill purchased equipment in 1912 and used the process in building Gilman Hall in 1916. Gill's recently rediscovered 1910 specifications for The Bishop's School refer to it as a "reinforced concrete school" and give no indication that he used the tilt-slab method for the earlier buildings. Courtesy of the Architecture and Design Collection, University Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara 1968.105.130.p. 20.



Scripps Hall, Wrought Iron Balconies, revised North Elevation to show balconies, Wrought Iron Cross, revised West Elevation to show cross, graphite and ink on linen, dated in title block 9/1/1910. Scripps Hall, the first of the three Gill buildings, was intended for living quarters and included bedrooms, kitchen, dining room, and parlor. Its west elevation featured the original entrance to the school, surmounted by a wrought iron cross, shown here, with a pathway to Prospect Street. Gill's attention to detail is noted in the precision of measurements and patterning, seen in the balcony and the Celtic-Mozarabic-style cross. Courtesy of the Architecture and Design Collection, University Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara, 1968.105.10.D.37.



Students gathered on the arcade of Gilman Hall, 1916. Courtesy of The Bishop's School.



The school's first gymnasium and swimming pool were designed by Louis J. Gill, the nephew of Irving Gill, in 1924-25. They were located on the site of a cottage that had served as the domestic science building. Courtesy of The Bishop's School.



Aerial view of La Jolla showing The Bishop's School at the corner of Prospect Street and La Jolla Boulevard, April 16, 1935. ©SDHS #79:741-8.



St. Mary's Chapel (1917) was designed by Carleton M. Winslow in the Mission Revival style. In 1933, the San Diego Chapter of the American Institute of Architects awarded a certificate of honor to The Bishop's School, recognizing the "exceptional merit" of the chapel's architectural design. The jury took particular note of the woodwork, windows, and tile floor. Courtesy of The Bishop's School



Gilman Hall's arcade represents Gill's modernist interpretation of a medieval cloister. ©SDHS #93:18897-1.



Wheeler J. Bailey Library (1934), photograph by Erickson. This photograph shows the bridged pathway over the ravine—called by Bishop's students "the jungle"—that was later cleared and filled. Carleton M. Winslow's customary Spanish Baroque Revival style appears in the interior stained glass lancet windows, beamed ceiling, and cruciform plan, but the architect pays homage to founding architect Gill in the arches and clerestory windows on the exterior. Courtesy of The Bishop's School.

NOTES

1. Irving J. Gill, "The Home of the Future: The New Architecture of the West: Small Homes for a Great Country," *The Craftsman* (May 1916): 140-51, 220. All quotations in illustration captions come from this essay. For monographs and critical writings on Gill see: Thomas S. Hines, *Irving Gill and the Architecture of Reform* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 2000); Bruce Kamerling, *Irving J. Gill, Architect* (San Diego: San Diego Historical Society, 1993); Esther McCoy, *Five Architects* (New York: Reinhold Publishers, 1960); Marvin Rand, *Irving J. Gill Architect 1870-1936* (Layton, UT: Gibbs Smith, 2006); Sarah J. Schaffer, "A Significant Sentence Upon the Earth: Irving J. Gill, Progressive Architect: Part I: New York to California," *The Journal of San Diego History* (hereafter JSDH) 43, no. 4 (1997): 218-39; and Schaffer, "A Significant Sentence Upon the Earth: Irving J. Gill, Progressive Architect: Part II: Creating a Sense of Place," JSDH 44, no. 1 (1998): 24-47.
2. Gill, "The Home of the Future," 144. In the article, the photograph is misidentified as a structure on the La Jolla campus. The former Bishop's Day School, on the edge of a canyon, is now the site of the Self-Realization Fellowship Temple at 3072 First Avenue at Redwood Street.
3. Eloise Roorbach, "The Bishop's School for Girls: A Progressive Departure from Traditional Architecture," *The Craftsman* (September 1914), 654. In her essay, Roorbach misidentified a photograph of the St. James by-the-Sea as The Bishop's School Chapel. Bentham Hall contained a small chapel.
4. Gill, "The Home of the Future," 142, 144.
5. *Ibid*, 141.
6. *Ibid*, 151. Gill's vision has endured to the present day, as one participant in a 2007 student survey of attitudes toward the campus commented: "We have a beautiful campus and grounds, which creates a warm, safe, and comfortable feeling. There is a lot of open space, which makes offices and classrooms feel accessible."
7. Drawing, Architecture and Design Collection, University Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara 1968.105.9.D.18.
8. Gill, "The Home of the Future," 142.
9. In honor of the centennial of The Bishop's School, an exhibition of drawings and photographs of The Bishop's School will feature the designs of Irving Gill and Carleton Winslow, Sr., as well as subsequent campus architects Mosher/Drew; Frank Hope; KMA Architects; and Tucker, Sadler, Noble, Castro.
10. Gill's original design was recreated with considerable modifications by architect Robert Venturi. The Museum of Contemporary Art opened in 1996. See: Laurie Ann Farrell, Hugh Davies, and Robert Venturi, *Learning from La Jolla: Robert Venturi Remakes a Museum in the Precinct of Irving Gill* (San Diego: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1998).
11. Gill, "The Home of the Future," 141-42.