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Architect Irving Gill/Philanthropist Ellen Browning Scripps: A Dynamic Duo



Architect Irving Gill/Philanthropist Ellen Browning Scripps: A Dynamic Duo

by Molly McClain



The partnership between architect Irving Gill (1870-1936) and patron Ellen Browning Scripps (1836-1932) grew out of a shared desire to create buildings that lent a sense of permanence to the summer colony of La Jolla – regardless of price. Gill’s re-enforced concrete structures were notoriously expensive to build, particularly when compared to wood-framed plaster ones. Newspaper magnate E.W. Scripps grumbled that Gill “could make a very fine design...providing there was

plenty of money on hand to meet any cost.”

Ellen Browning Scripps first met the architect in 1899 when he drew up plans to add a one-story, flat-roofed wing to her house, South Moulton Villa. Her brother E.W. approved, telling her, “I think Gill is just old enough, just sensible enough, and with just enough ambition to fit into the job.” Over the next decade, the architect met frequently with Scripps to plan improvements that included a new bungalow, conservatory, and the enlargement of Wisteria Cottage.



South Moulton Villa II, designed by Irving Gill, 1916. Courtesy of Scripps College.

George H. Scripps Laboratory (1908-10) for the Scripps Institution of Oceanography, her first philanthropic project. This spare, modern construction included electric lights, indoor plumbing, and flat surfaces that did not collect and hold dirt.

The architect also designed public institutions that contributed to La Jolla’s reputation as a progressive and harmonious place to live. These included The Bishop’s School (1909-16), the La Jolla Woman’s Club (1912-14), and the La Jolla Recreation Center (1914-15), all financed by Scripps.

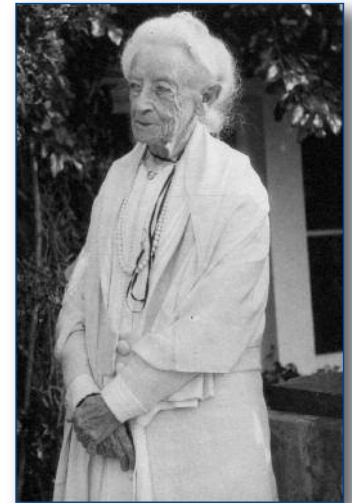
In 1915, Gill rebuilt South Moulton Villa after its destruction by fire, drawing on ideas that he had used in three Los Angeles homes: the Laughlin house (1907-08), the Banning house (1911-13), and the Dodge house

(1914-16), all of which Scripps visited before signing off on the plans. He became personally invested in the La Jolla house, getting down on his hands and knees to rub color into the damp, unfinished concrete floors with his nephew Louis. Scripps recalled, “The two Gills have been busy all day (albeit Sunday) in shirtsleeves and overalls...‘surfacing’ the cement floors...to me it is ‘a thing of beauty and a joy forever.’”

Scripps recognized that Gill built costly structures, explaining, “concrete buildings are always expensive even with the greatest simplicity.” But she trusted Gill as a “scrupulously careful, highly intelligent” architect who took a “personal interest in the matters of the highest kind,” even if he rarely stayed within his initial estimates.

The architect’s business in La Jolla declined after 1918 as there developed “a widespread feeling in the village that the Gills do work in a very expensive way.” He suffered failing health, and declining commissions, after a heart attack in 1924.

Gill’s posthumous reputation as one of the great modernist architects can be explained, in part, by the survival of the La Jolla structures commissioned by Scripps. Her faith in his talent—and her willingness to invest in the future—preserved his work for generations to come.



Ellen Browning Scripps, c. 1920.



Gilman Hall (1916-17) provided a vantage point from which visitors could view games on Opening Day, 1921.

Molly McClain, Professor of History at the University of San Diego is the author of two books and numerous articles published in The Journal of San Diego History. She is currently writing a biography of Ellen Browning Scripps.

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