

# Placebo Girl

Written by  
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Based on a true story

One day in 1890 the twenty-year old son of a Syracuse, New York, building contractor set out for Chicago to work in the drafting room of Adler & Sullivan, and thus it was that Irving John Gill took his first step westward, one which led him a little over two years later to San Diego, where he was to develop on of the few wholly original styles of architecture in the United States.

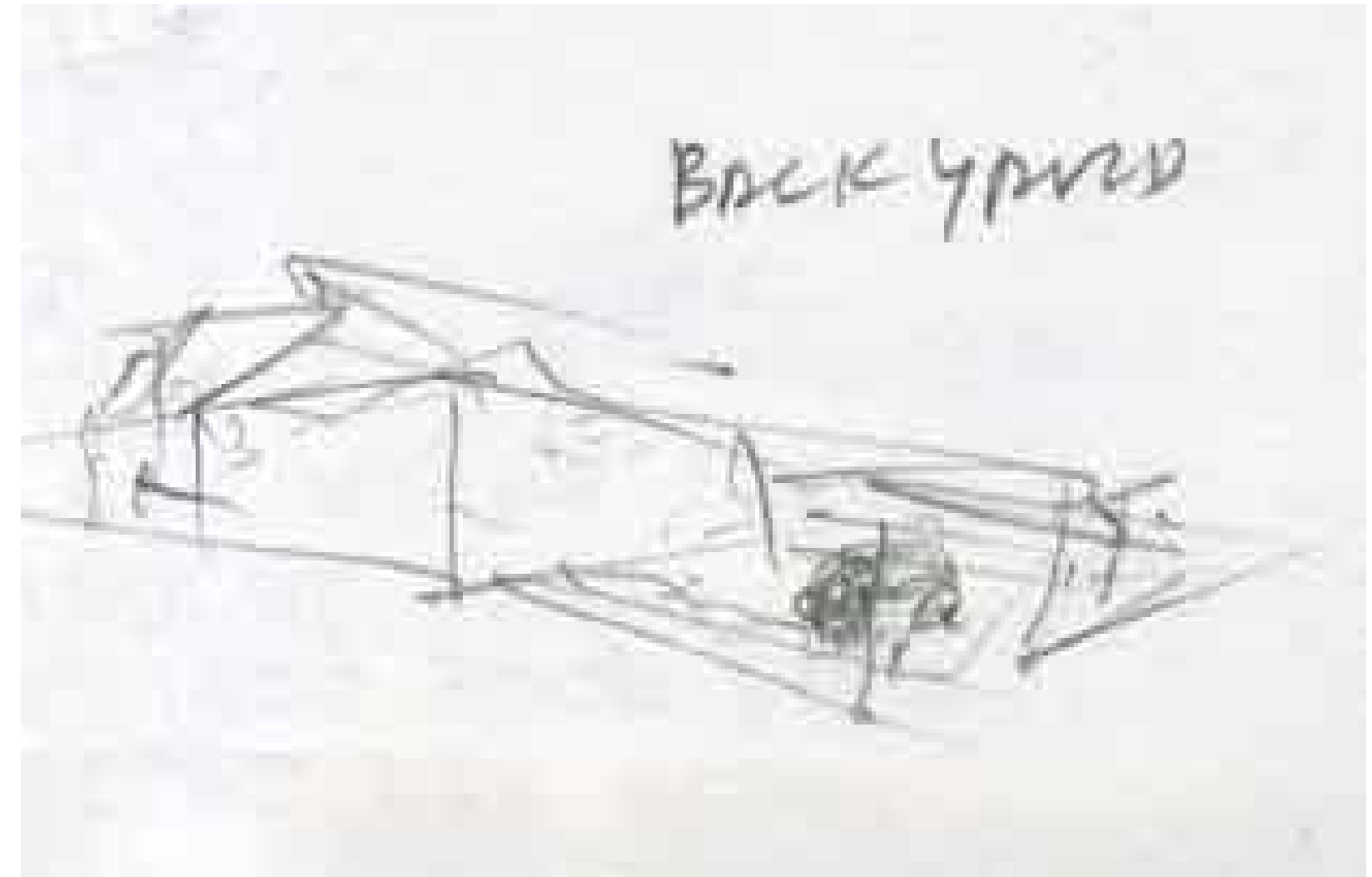
He had never met Sullivan, nor even written to him, but he was quite aware of his work, just as years later he was acquainted with the avant garde architecture of his contemporaries here and in Europe. Like dozens of young men



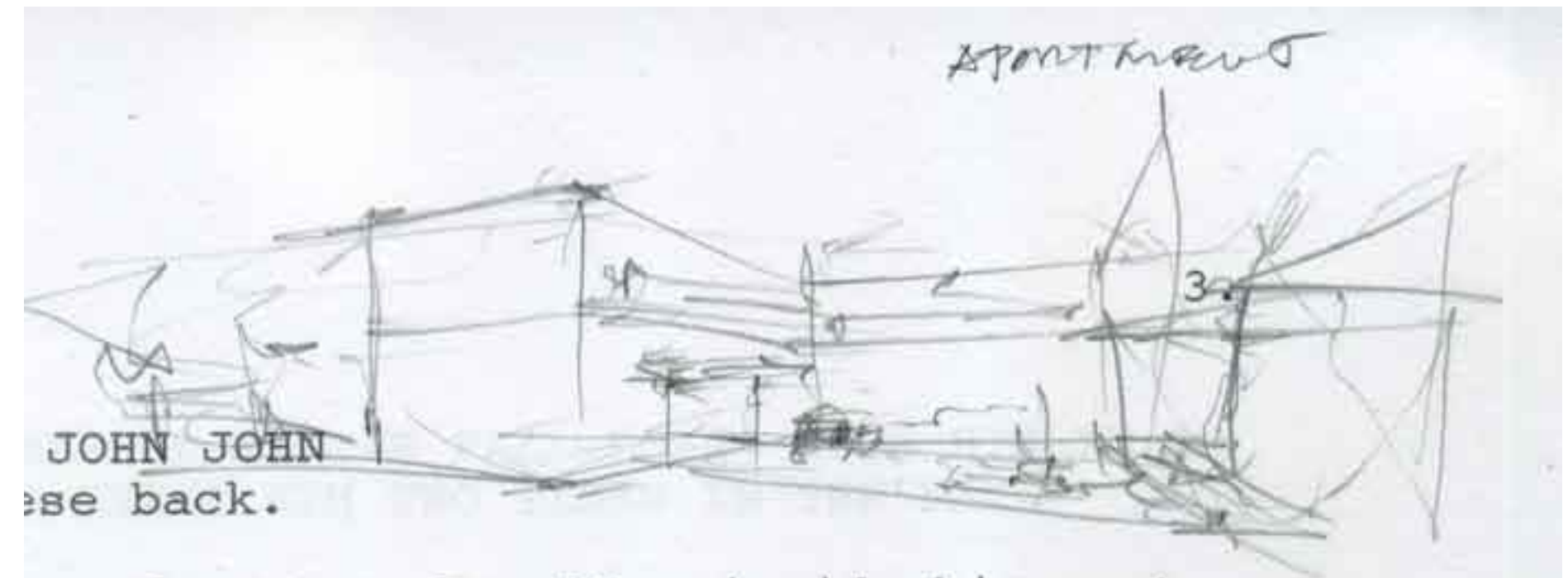
with an independent ways of thinking, he looked upon Sullivan's office as the only true school of architecture.

Gill had nothing to offer in the way of formal architectural training, indeed, his education stopped with high school. The closest he had come to official architecture was a brief period in one of the offices in Syracuse. This may have prejudiced Sullivan in his favor, as Sullivan looked upon schooling as a facility for dipping in and out of books.

There were other virtues beside his innocence of classicism to recommend the young man: a sensitivity to form, an understanding of how

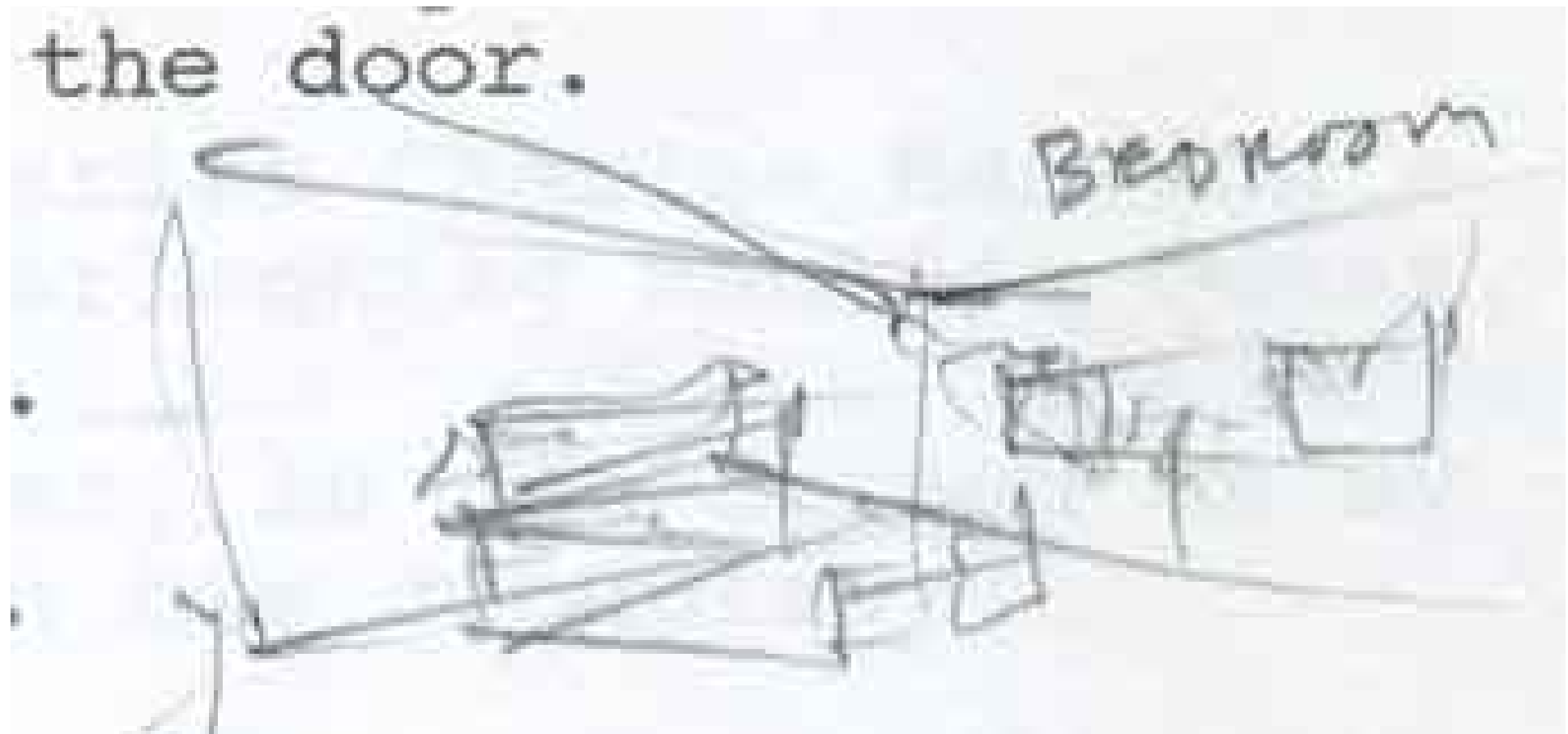


a building is put together, a passion for simplifying, a belief in the application of democracy to architecture, and a mystical and poetic nature. Not the least of his qualifications was receptivity to the faiths of a great teacher. "I supply the yeast, so to speak," Sullivan expressed his relationship to his young draftsman, "and allow the ferment to work in them." It was the dawn of steel, and the city had begun to think in terms of expressed structure rather than literary architectural styles. With engineer and contractor pointing the way, Sullivan anticipated the others of his profession by integrating steel into architecture.



The lesson of steel offered by Chicago and Sullivan profited Gill only indirectly, for the vertical line had no application in the town of San Diego. His highest building was the five-story Wilson Acton Hotel, 1908. Steel was at his disposal, but concrete was his material, and from Sullivan he had learned to acknowledge and respect any material, whatever it was.

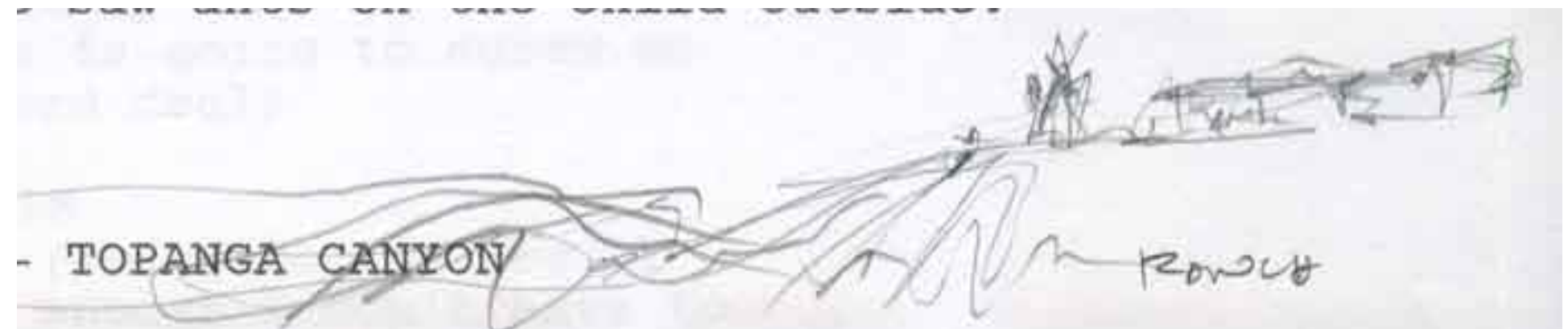
Of far more value to him was the disrespect Sullivan preached for Rome and the Renaissance. He turned the faces of his young men away from Europe and bade them to look to Africa, a land of the silent wall, of earth



forms, of decorative details.

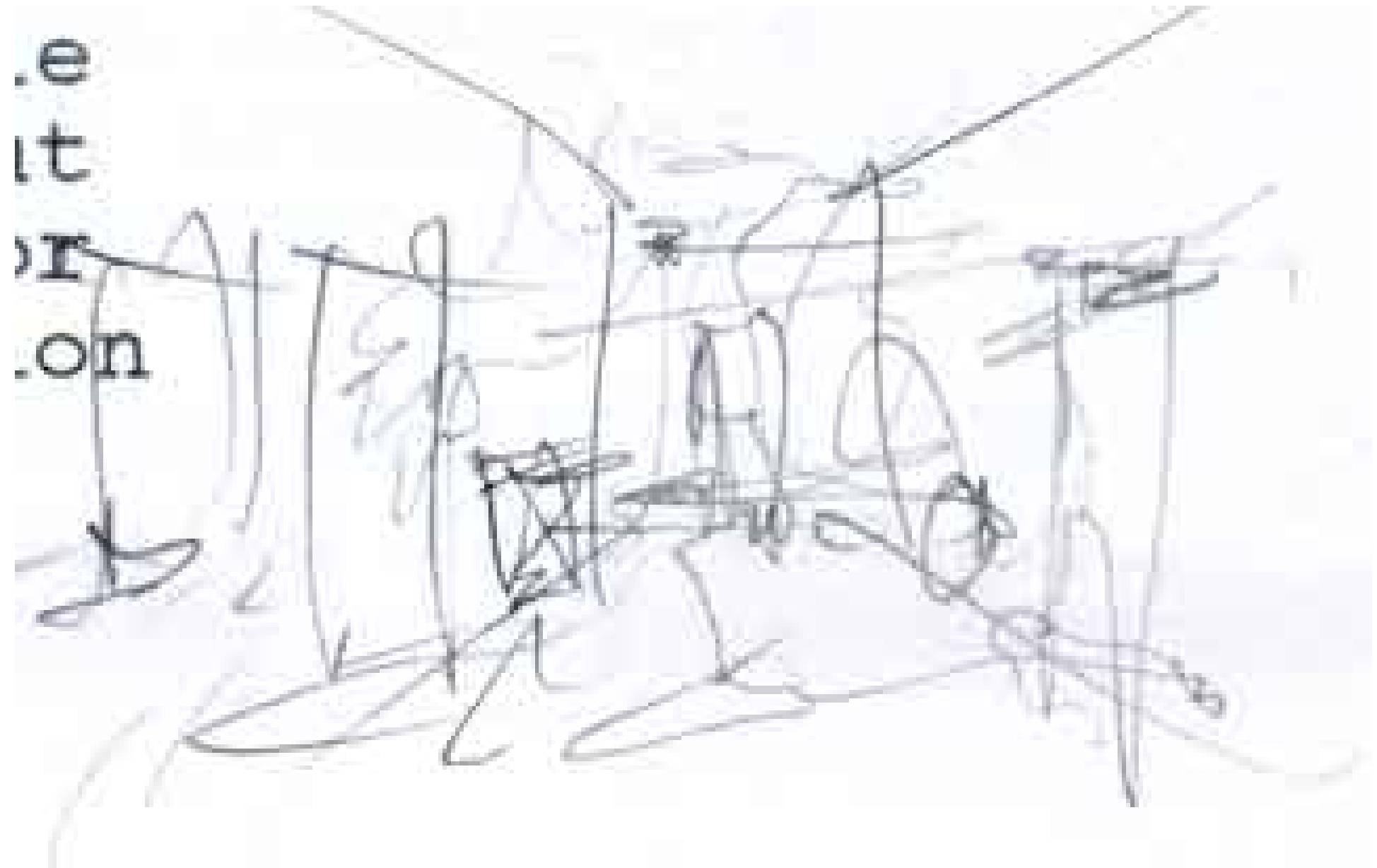
Sullivan's office was a preparation, for defeat as well as success. The inevitability of the growth of modern architecture did not spare it from periods of eclipse. Sullivan's Transportation Building was the only one at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago that heralded the future; all the rest were swathed in the dead wrappings of classicism.

The draftsman working on the plans of the Transportation Building was Frank Lloyd Wright, who was two years older than Gill. When Wright's son Lloyd was twenty years old, he went to work in Gill's drafting room.



Before the exposition opened, Gill's health made it necessary for him to seek a warmer climate. But his two years with Sullivan had armored him with trust in his own thinking and enriched him with "the luminous idea of simplicity." He had grasped well the organic aspects of architecture—he was never to regard a building as a series of unrelated strands.

Gill chose San Diego, a name heard everywhere in the East, for the Santa Fe Railroad had laid tracks into the town in 1885, and the population had doubled in a few years. Then the bubble burst, and by the time Gill arrived





in 1893 most of the newcomers had packed up and left. The population was again around 17,000.

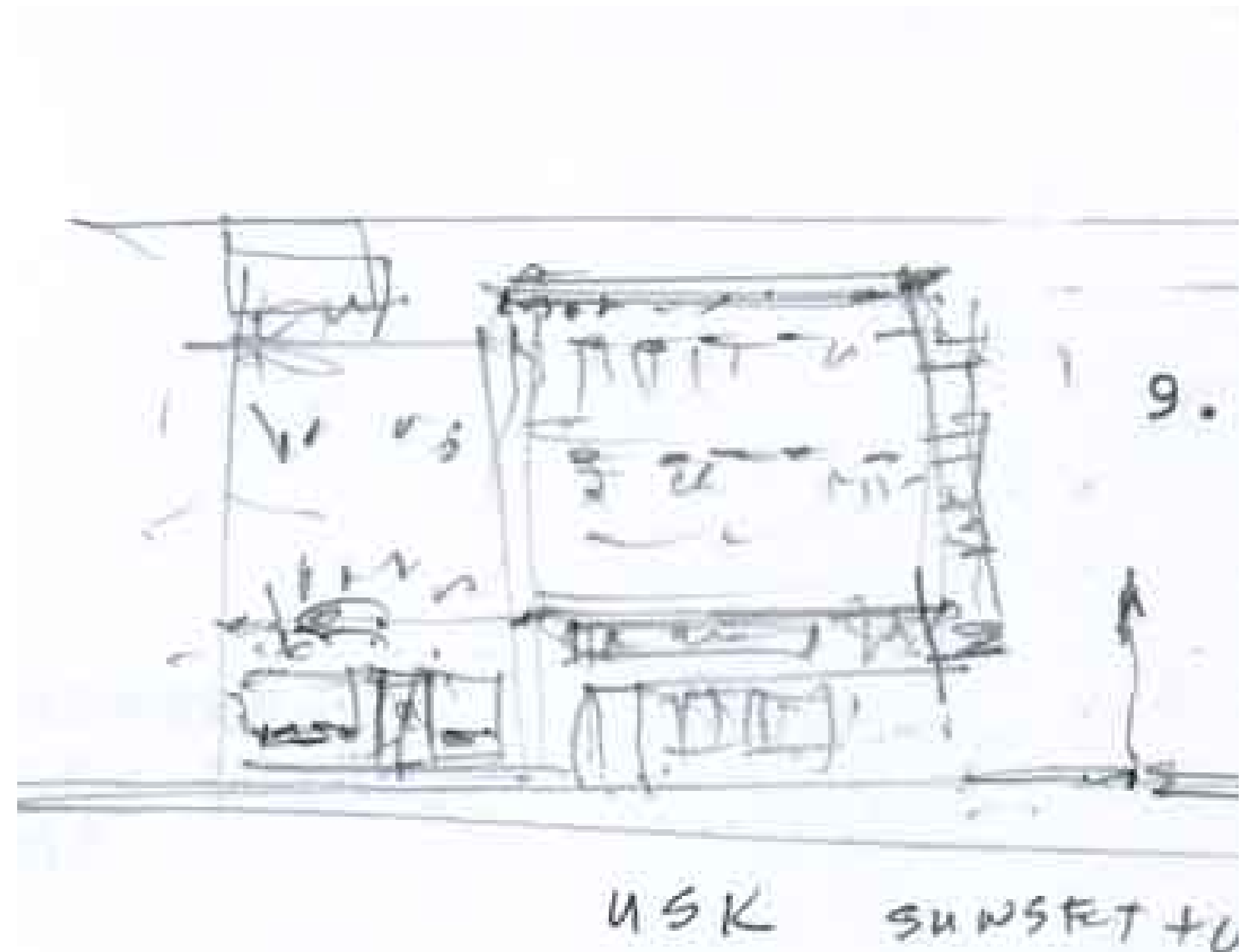
He found there a country unspoiled and unselfconscious. "The west," he wrote, "has an opportunity unparalleled in the history of the world, for it is the newest white page turned for registration."

It awakened all his sensibilities. "In California we have the great wide plains arched blue skies that are fresh chapters as yet unwritten. We have noble mountains, lovely little hills and canyons waiting to hold the record of this generation's history, ideals, imagination, sense





of romance and honesty.”  
He opened himself fully to all the presences:  
the adobes—earth forms that gradually began  
to appear in his own structures; the U-shaped  
plan of Ramona’s Marriage Place, embracing a  
garden and closed at the end by a high wall;  
the single wall redwood housed, “lovable little  
camp houses,” he called them, “...as natural a  
part of the foothills and canyons as the tawny  
mushroom or the gray stone.” There were the  
missions, in whose “long low lines, graceful  
arcades, tile roofs, bell towers, arched door-  
ways and walled gardens we find a most ex-  
pressive medium of retaining tradition, history

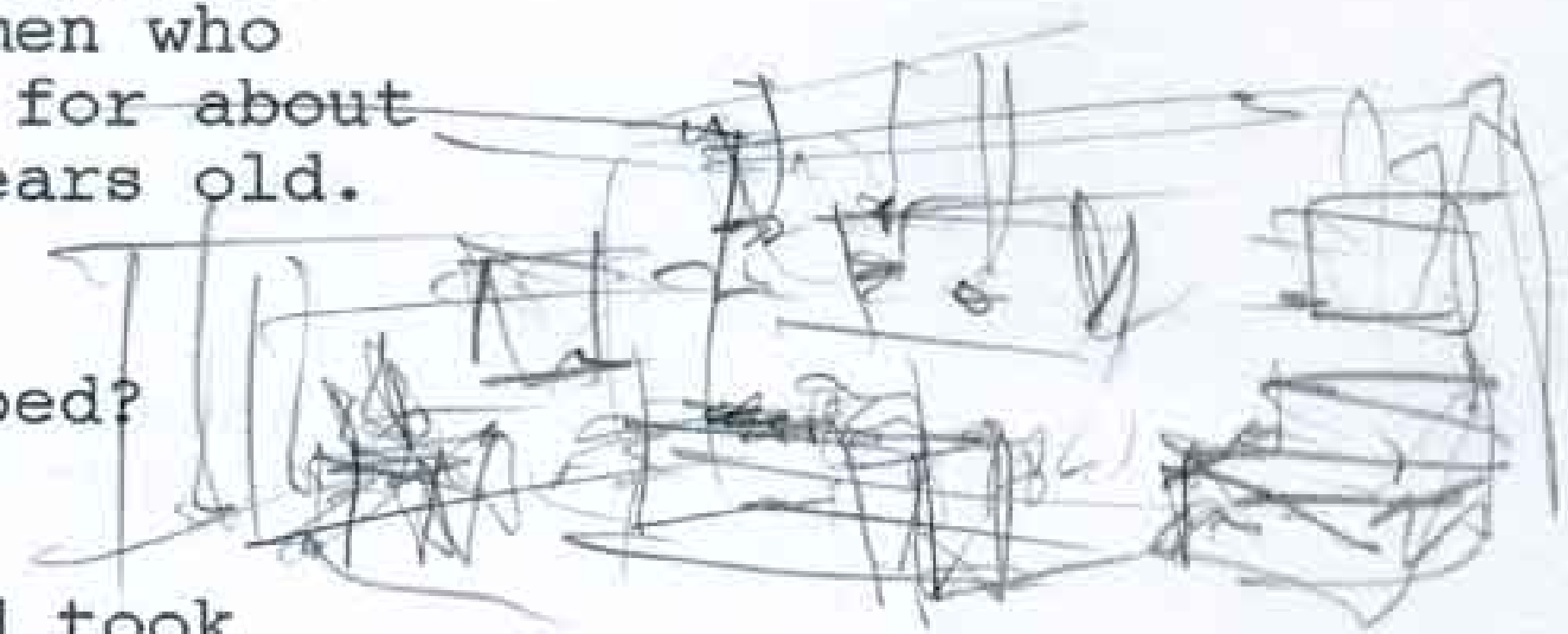


and romance," he wrote in *The Craftsman*. Gill's style grew out of what he found in Southern California. To this he added the things that were missing, and it became architecture as unobtrusive as the change of seasons; so integrated into the past, the climate and way of life that its correctness made it blend into the scene, as do the houses in a Cotswold village or ones in Tuscany. That San Diego has something approaching a unity of style is due entirely to Gill, whose own work was extensive and was widely copied by contractors and various draftsmen who had been through his office.

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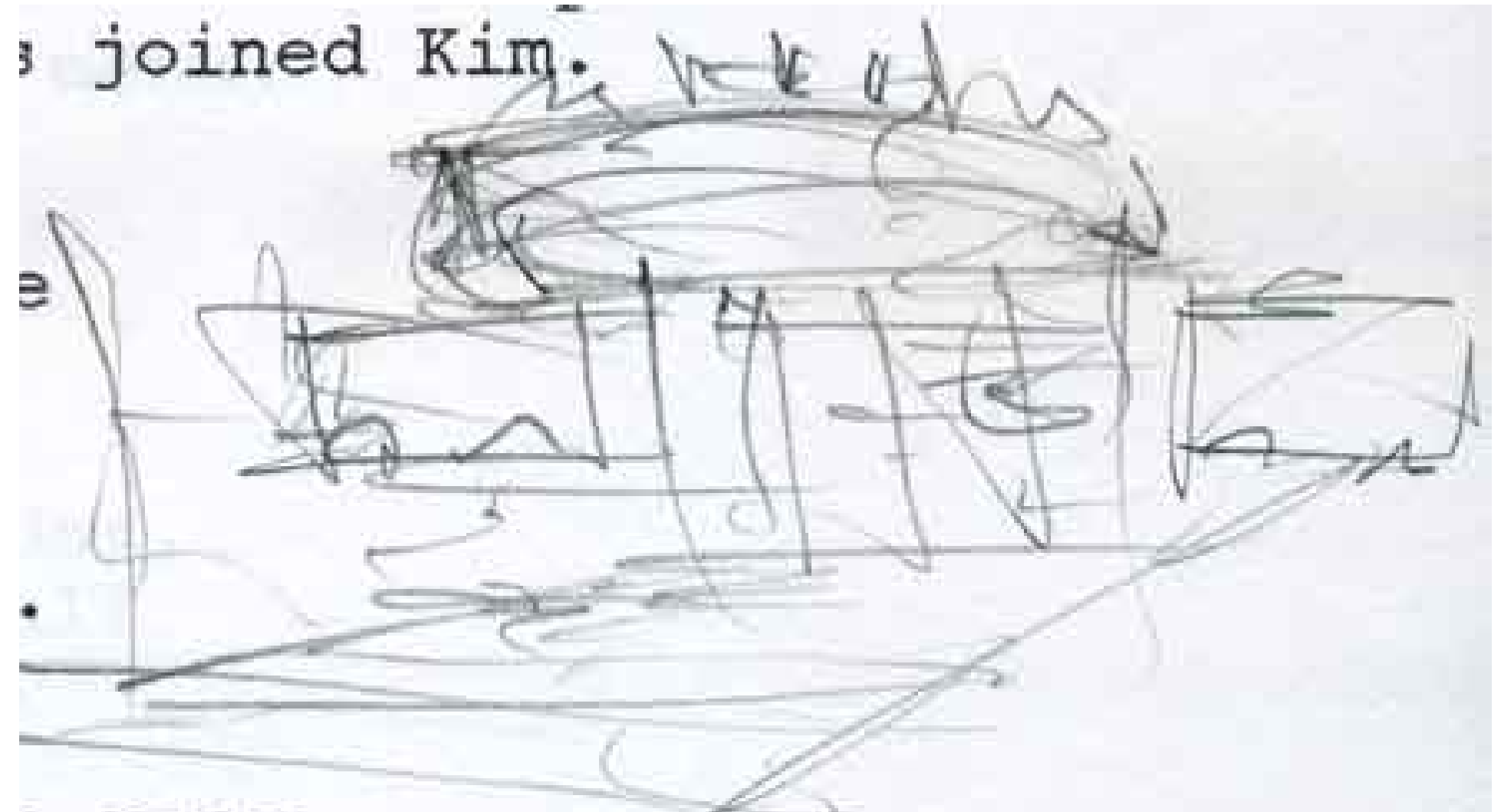
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ARCHITECTURE

It is an architecture of modesty, of repetition, but the elements repeated were the ones which his perceptive eye recognized as good: they had been tried and tried again until they had reached the ideal of appropriateness. Gill was a conservator of the past, building always of the present, in new materials, with new methods which evolved through arduous trial and error.

He was a romanticist whom time has discovered to be a realist. His references to the missions in his work indicates a romantic regard for the past—a past he made no sentimental attempts to recapture, however. And



his expressions in light, color and the integration of house and garden are certainly romantic considerations.

The voice of the romantic poet is heard in his words: "We should build our house simple, plain and substantial as a boulder, then leave the ornamentation of it to Nature, who will tone it with lichens, chisel it with storms, make it gracious and friendly with vines and flower shadows as she does the stone in the meadow." However, Gill left nothing to chance. He put to work certain principles of which he had a profound knowledge: the principle of the stone, which he translated into concrete' the





principle of naturalness, which he used to coordinate the house and garden in such simple ways as pergolas, courts, patios and porches. He understood shadows and shadings, and his walls are enhanced by them, but when the vines are stripped away and the trees which cast shadows are uprooted, there remain his sensitive forms.

Gill's first building in San Diego gave little hint that he was to be one of the creative men of the West. The Normal School, 1895, now demolished, reveals only that he and the Chairman of the Board liked columns. But

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Gill never again used Ionic capitals. His later columns were strong and modest, with small bands and flat caps.

For one early structure Gill laid tracing paper over Sullivan's Transportation Building and Squeezed it into a 40' front for the Pickwick Theatre, and he had a o at the Coragic Monument of Lusocrates in a fountain in the San Diego Plaza. But among his sketches is another study of the Plaza fountain in a style very much is own. The client for whom both fountain and theatre were designed was Louis Wilde, and when Gill planned a duplex for him in Coronado in 1919, Gill's nephew re-





calls that Wilde said: "You build it and then I'll tell you where I want the doors and windows." Gill finally resigned the job. He walked out one other time, when the congregation of the Christian Science Church, San Diego, 1909, decided to add a dome to his design. Gill was uninspired in his one attempt at Gothic architecture, the First Methodist Church, 1906, and although there are examples of good detailing, as in his use of tile ends as decoration and ventilation, he was not at home in literary styles. Oddly enough, the tower, which comes off least well, has in it more of Gill than any other element. His





nephew remarked, "He didn't know one style from another," and this perhaps was Gill's good fortune. Indeed he makes poor fare for the researcher interested in precedents; his borrowings are from the spirit of indigenous work, reconceived for the present. In 1898 Gill entered a partnership with W. S. Hebbard, and out of their office came a series of large and amiable half-timbered houses for San Diego and Coronado, and in 1902 Gill alone designed the first of four houses for clients in Rhode Island and Maine. In that period of carpenter's Gothic these houses were fine understatements, and in each succeeding



house he was at work simplifying and organizing his elevations until in the Wagenheim house, 1904, he achieved compositions akin to the Japanese.

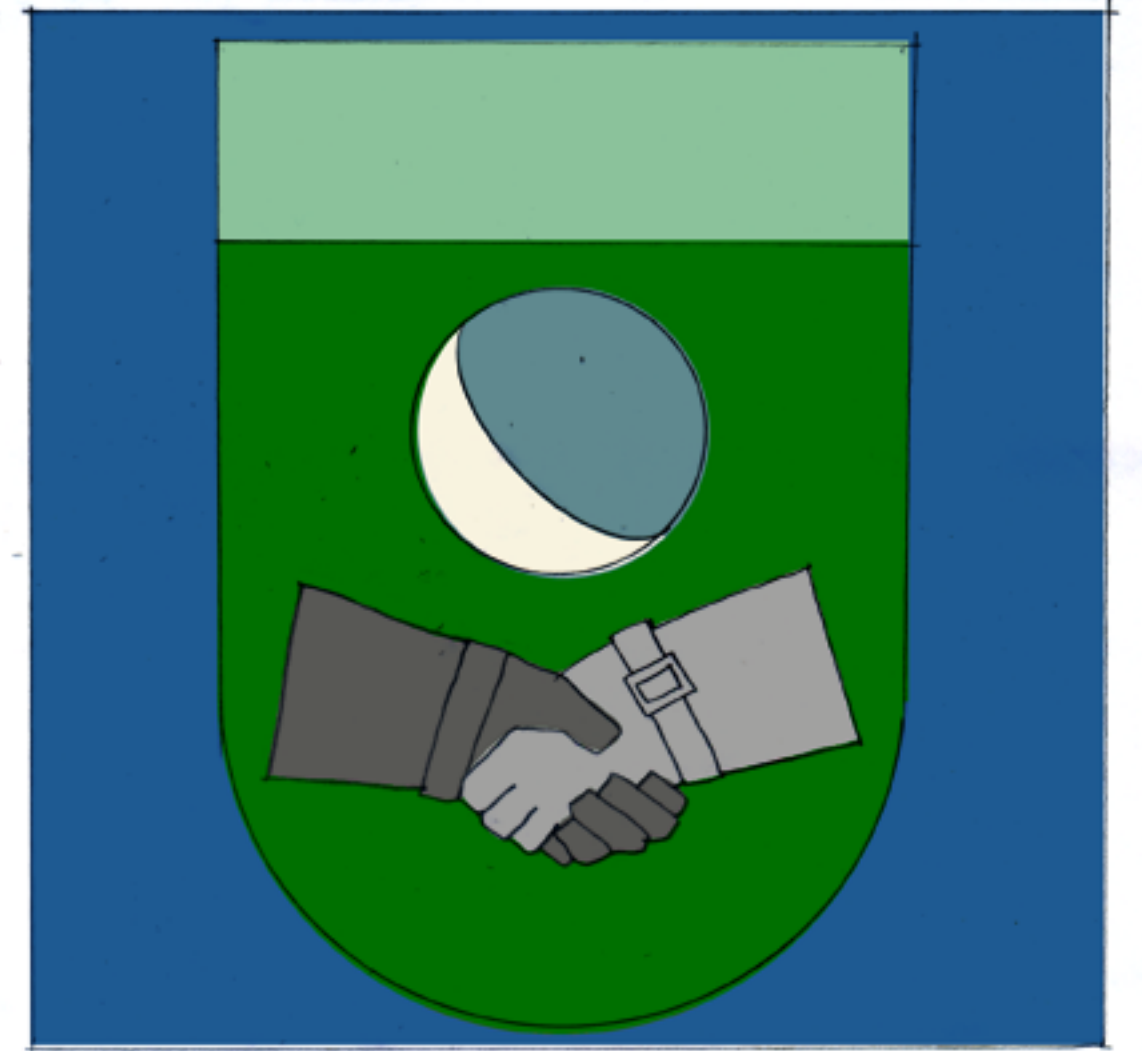
By 1905. In the first house for Miss Alice Lee, a New England lady who was to be his second best client (Miss Ellen Scripps was his first) he gave up masonry as the material for the first floor and used plaster for the entire house.

Another house in 1905, for Dr. Tutt in Coronado, predicted his later earth forms in two blocky brick wings.

The interiors of these houses were unimpeachable witness to his development in the

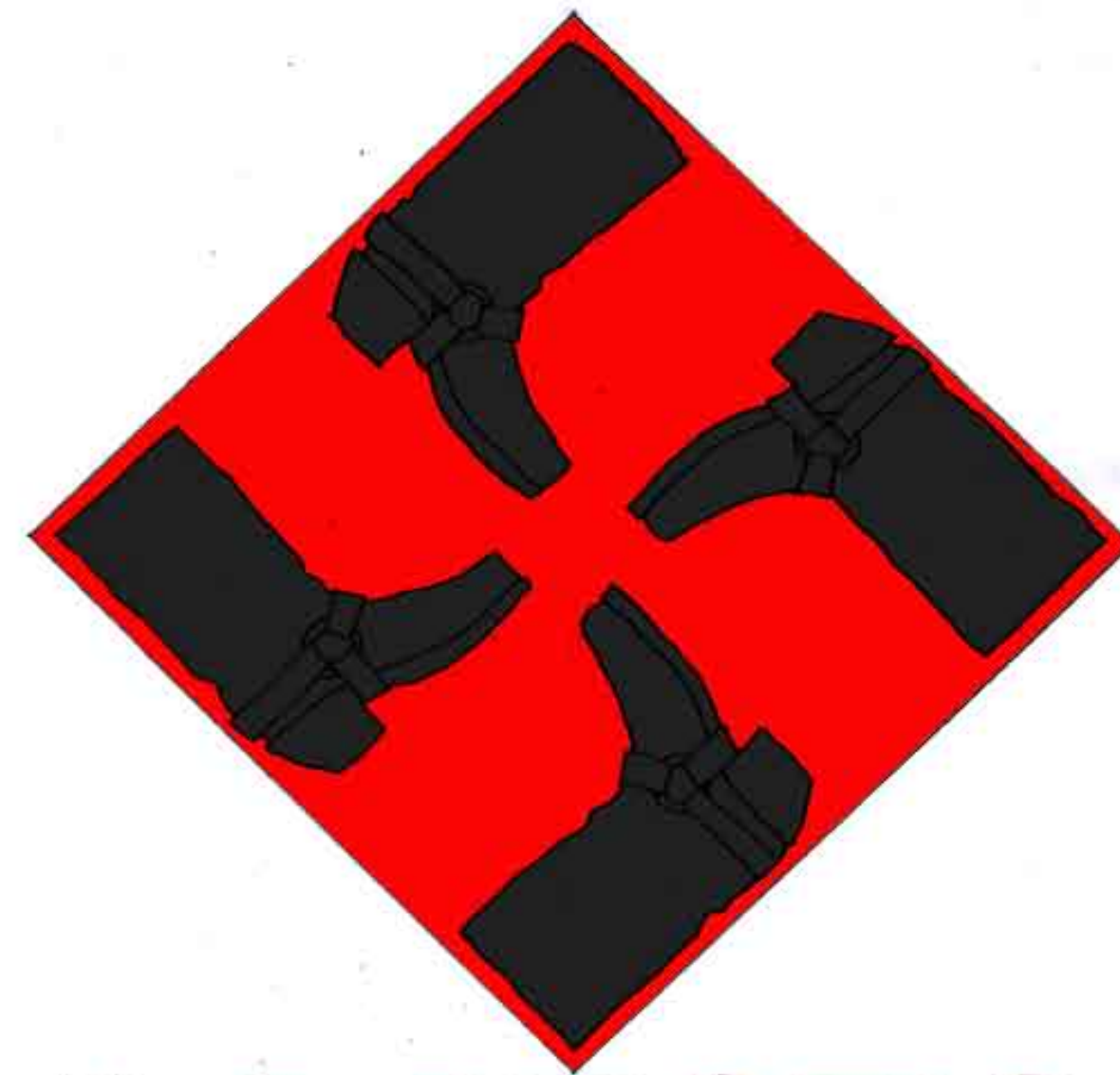


direction of simplicity. In all of them was hand polished redwood in dimensions large enough to register the nature of the wood. (He considered it a sacrilege to use oil or stain, even wax, on redwood.) And the square redwood sticking of the balustrades carried through his style to the Dodge house of 1916. Moldings were 2 x ¾ stock, with the edges sanded down. In his 1904 Christian Science Church he left off moldings entirely, although the church added them later, "to give it a finished look." In the third floor of the Feorge Marstin house, 1904, where he took greater freedom than on the two lower floors,



**Knight Riders**

he began simplifying the door—a movement in the direction of his slab doors of 1907. And as early as 1894 his interest in plastic materials is noted in his development of magnesite floors. The hardware for all his houses was of cast brass from his own excellent designs. At a time when houses were dim, his were invariably bright. Perhaps this came from the direct approach of the Chicago School in the lighting of office buildings. Sullivan's three-division window, with fixed glass in the center and as operating pane on each side, was an invariable in Gill's design. His preoccupation with the integrity of mate-



# LOCUSTS

rials is clear from the first. An early concern was to develop a method of applying plaster in his half-timbered houses to prevent in from shrinking away from the wood. On the exterior walls of the Burnham house, 1906, he recognized the brick by setting it into panels defined by 12" redwood boards forthrightly bolted to the frame.

Writing in *The Craftsman* of this formative period, he says, "In California we have long been experimenting with the idea of producing a perfectly sanitary, labor-saving house, one where the maximum of comfort may be had with the minimum of drudgery. In the



recent houses that I have built, the walls are finished flush with the casings and the line where the wall joins the flooring is slightly rounded, so that it forms one continuous piece with no place for dust to enter or to lodge, or crack for vermin of any kind to exist. There is no molding for pictures, plates or chairs, no baseboard, paneling or wainscoting to catch and hold the dust. The doors are single slabs of hand polished mahogany swung on invisible hinges or else made so that they slide into the wall. In some of the houses all windows and door frames are of steel." His sinks were set in magnesite, which was cast in one piece with





the walls, and the corners rounded, "so not a particle of grease or dirt can lodge, or dampness collect and become unwholesome. The bath tubs are boxed and covered with magnesite up to the porcelain."

He was impatient with the infinite number of parts in a house; the wood frame seemed to him to be something hooked together, and he set himself to the business of simplifying structure, of eliminating, making one piece do the work of ten.

His nephew, Luis J. Gill, said, "He was always trying to do something better. He never stopped, he was never satisfied. A window





had twenty-four parts, and he designed one with four, then he found out the cost was the same.”

As early as 1904 he departed from the balloon frame to construct wall of 1 x 4s, 4” apart, over which he placed diagonal lathing and plaster. The finished interior walls were 3” thick, and they tested equal to the 2 x 4 studs 16” on center, which makes a 5 1/2” wall. Plaster filled the openings between the 1 x 4s so there were no spaces to act as fire flues. The exterior walls were thicker, but of the same construction.

Gill used this system until 1907, then he



turned to hollow tile over studding for the Melville Klauber and Homer Laughlin houses. The tile provided excellent insulation, and since it does not shrink it eliminated the possibility of plaster cracking. This was also a period of transition in styles. He was moving toward more concentrated forms, and his preference for plaster to masonry was established. Earth materials and earth forms were emerging in his style. The pitch of roofs was lowered, and often he used a hipped roof. In another year his cornices started to dwindle to 1 ¼" projections, finally to disappear entirely.



Nineteen eight was a decisive year. Two buildings, neither residential, established incontrovertibly his direction and marked the first of his last style. They were the Holly Sefton Memorial Hospital for Children, San Diego, and the Scripps Building at Scripps Institute of Oceanography, La Jolla. Both were utilitarian, with cost a major consideration. To Gill, this was an opportunity to strip them clean of projections or ornament of any kind. They were both of reinforced concrete. Concrete was a material to which Gill was especially sympathetic; its plasticity appealed to him, as well as its durability and its fit-



ness for the "wholly sanitary house." Reinforced concrete had been employed in scattered buildings in the U. S. since 1877, and on the Pacific Coast in the Stanford Museum in Palo Alto; Frank Lloyd Wright had used it in Unity Temple in 1906. But Gill was one of the first to bring architectural convictions to the system and to develop a body of detailing which would make it accessible for general use. He was an inventor out of necessity. In the hospital and the Scripps Building he fashioned the parts to build them: steel casings for doors and windows; the bull nose, a metal section which prevents corners from chipping;



steel lath. Fortunes were made later in steel trim, but for years Gill went to the sheet metal shops to have the stuff broken for him. Before these two buildings we have evidences of his initial groping[s] in architecture, and now he had arrived at what was dominant. From this time on he began to apply to residential architecture the principles of simplification he had learned here. His certainties were expressed in these words: "There is something very restful and satisfying to my mind in the simple cube house with creamy walls, sheer and plain, raising boldly into the sky, unrelieved by cornices or over-

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