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Architecture and world making: production of sacred space in San Francisco’s Vedanta temple

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This article provides two ‘readings’ of the Vedanta temple of San Francisco to understand the complex process of world making by Hindu religious preachers in the USA during the first decade of the twentieth century. On the one hand is the visible world of shared meanings and practices and on the other hand is the haptic domain navigated by individuals in embodied ways. These two ways of knowing the building are intertwined; they play against each other, and yet they serve different purposes. The first reading explains the material configuration of place and the relationship between the various spaces and their uses. The second reading examines the spatial choreography and human experience of using this building. The example of the Vedanta temple shows us that a building is not a neutral container where inhabitants play out their lives as they wish. Instead, buildings are actively engaged in the way that events, experiences and memory are shaped.

Keywords: architecture; immigration; Hindu temple; Vedanta; world making

Introduction

There is more than one way of seeing, experiencing and knowing the material world. For a historian of buildings, that means that there are many histories and multiple narratives necessary to understand the relation between the material, social and individually experienced worlds. A description of the (material) world may seem easy – buildings, cities, aqueducts and networks can be mapped, drawn, measured and documented. Yet, because of the existence of multiple narratives, the account of ‘world making’ is a more difficult task. This article provides two ‘readings’ of a building layout to understand the complex process of world making by Indian immigrants in the USA during the first decade of the twentieth century. On the one hand is the visible and thematic world of shared meanings and practices, and on the other hand is the haptic domain navigated by individuals in embodied and personal ways. These two ways of knowing the building are intertwined; they play against each other, and yet they serve different purposes.

The upscale neighbourhood of San Francisco, next to Union Street, just north of Pacific Heights, is lined with small Victorian homes sitting on narrow lots. The two- or three-storied buildings on sloping streets with coloured trims, protruding bay windows, Victorian ornamentations on brackets, cornices and lintels and large duplex entrances leading to multiple apartments may seem quintessentially San Franciscan. Yet, if we walk up to the corner of Filbert and Webster Street, we will encounter a building on the southwest corner

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that belies our expectation. The building, at first glance, seems out of place. It does not belong to this world of quiet Victorian homes.

It is not merely its grand scale that seems ‘out of place’. Rather it is the details – the alterity of the architectural motifs and forms – that will attract our attention. The oddness of this building serves a purpose. The building houses a Hindu temple used by the Vedanta Society of Northern California, an organization that began as the Vedanta Class in 1900. Since their founding, between 1894 and 1900 by a Hindu monk named Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), Vedanta Societies were founded in cities such as New York, Boston and San Francisco. The San Francisco building was completed in 1905 and dedicated on 7 January 1906 as the first Hindu temple in the West. ‘But of course!’ we may say, the alterity can now be ascribed to Hindu religious and Eastern cultural differences. This ‘obviousness’ emerges from a coincidence of expectations (Eastern religion ergo exotic architecture).

In 1915, during the Panama Pacific Exposition, the temple lighted up at night. It has since become an urban landmark in San Francisco. Visible from afar, its exotic architecture became the symbol of San Francisco’s claim to be the gateway to the Orient. Architectural historians refer to its hybrid architectural character and trace its oriental lineage. More recently, twenty-first century hotels advertise this building as a must-see grotesque – an architectural oddity and a tourist destination that reflects the uniqueness of this city.3 As one tourist guide of the city observes, ‘you see one of the most intriguing buildings in town: Vedanta temple, corner of Webster and Filbert St. . . . Built in 1905 by architect Joseph A. Leonard, the temple was inspired by the ideal of inclusiveness of this spiritual order. From Edwardian, Queen Anne, Colonial to Medieval, [and] Oriental style elements this building gives you a sense of universality and aesthetic exoticism.’

The building is much more than a mere oddity. Its complexity can be discovered if one physically engages it. Entering the building from the Filbert Street side will take us across a large door, through dark and narrow entry stairs into a cramped hallway. Turning our head, we will encounter a large room – a prayer hall with wood panelling and an altar. In 1908, such an experience framed the way weekend visitors were acquainted with the building. It was the precursory experience to a religious service that followed. To residents entering the building from its Webster Street entrance, the sequential experience was very different. Crossing the porch with Greek columns, across the dark hallway and to the steep stairs, the feeling was no different from entering other neighbourhood Victorian residences. Today, the building is closed to the public. The old prayer hall is occasionally opened to society members for services. Unlike the past, present traffic into the building concentrates along the Webster Street entrance. The pillared porch has two doors with separate doorbells. One door leads into the society guest house whereas the other leads to the ground-level Sunday school. The building remains hallowed grounds, but its sacredness is derived as much from its history as from the activities currently within. Each entrance takes us into a different world through different visceral engagements.

Such is the nature of architecture – the material world once constructed stays in place for a long time (because buildings survive longer than its inhabitants), whereas social life and cultural practices within change at a faster rate. Because of its high visibility and enduring materiality the primary story associated with iconic buildings such as the Vedanta temple often becomes narrowly defined. We talk about its form and symbolism, its religious and cultural references and its function as a religious space. We foreground the technologies and tectonics producing the built form. Much of architectural history, based on visual style, construction techniques, or function, produces taxonomic categories called building-types. Our readings of architecture become petrified and typecast. Yet, buildings are more
than stone and columns, they are similar to living systems that are constantly changing. They are spaces that are inhabited by individuals who engage with the interior spaces in embodied forms. Changes not only occur in the physical form of the building as generations of inhabitants add and demolish parts of it, they also occur in the way the building gets imagined, experienced and read by users. The way we navigate through the built environment reproduces an intensely embodied and haptic relationship. Multi-sensory interactions with a building create lived experiences, frame memory and produce meaning. Seeing a building not as an object in the landscape but as a stage where life unfolds can generate different readings of culture and architecture.

In the case of the Vedanta temple, the visible world defined by the eye-catching architecture served a public and civic function. It projected an image and identity that engaged a certain kind of audience. For instance, the plan and the building layout expressed the interior functions of the building to the general public through the building façade. The public saw this building as a temple, a place of prayer. However, for those who entered and inhabited various parts of the building interior, the experience of sacredness was not merely expressed through visual symbols or architectural form. Sacredness was experienced through practice, bodily restraint and mental discipline. The embodied experience of sacredness produced yet another kind of audience. Talking about these two world-making practices separately raises questions about their interrelatedness. It is that relationship between cultural meaning and everyday lived experiences of the Hindu temple that I examine here.

The word ‘architectural layout’ has two distinct connotations. First, it refers to the material configuration of space and the relationship between the various spaces and their uses. A plan drawing illustrates such relationships. Boundaries are marked in plans by separating various functional zones, by changing the form of rooms and by placing physical obstructions such as doors and windows. That is one rather static definition of the word. ‘Laying out’, however, is also an act of spatial choreography. As humans we do not see the entire plan as we walk into a building. We experience the interior sequentially as we cross the sidewalk, pause in front of the door and wait for that impulsive moment to open the door and step in; we adjust to the brightness inside and situate ourselves by looking for familiar objects and people; then enter and walk down the hallways and aisles towards our destination; and so on. We interact with the building in visceral ways. The first description of layout refers to a certain kind of organizing vision that is aerial, rational, disciplining, top-down and, in the words of de Certeau, a strategic form of arrangement. It refers to a layout that the building’s owner determines. The second definition is an interactional, haptic, bottom-up, tactic that individuals experience as they inhabit these spaces. Such an experience can be controlled and enforced, but individuals also have opportunities to circumscribe top-down forms of decorum and control. The latter – the human-embodied experience of the interior layout – often ends up modifying the behaviour of the users and inhabitants.

Whereas the rational plan separates functional zones, use spaces and rooms by walls and doors, the experiential layout is composed of flexible, porous and malleable boundaries that Ian Borden calls thick edges. ‘Thick edges’ are physical and social zones mediating two or more conceptual domains (public/private, home/work). When you walk into Vedanta temple, the experiential edge between the sidewalk and the chapel is more than a door and a wall. It is a territory that encompasses the entire act of entering. When we consider the first definition of layout (i.e. the architectural and rational arrangement), we see only thin edges. They are façades wrapped round the building such as a skin, doors and entrance portals defined by arches and cupolas.
Plan layout and the building façade

In 1906, the opening of the first Hindu temple in the USA caused quite a stir in San Francisco. The new two-storied frame building with large bay windows looked no different from its neighbours until one crossed the street and looked at it from a distance (Figure 1). A *San Francisco Chronicle* reporter wrote in January 1906, ‘There is nothing to distinguish the building from other two story flats save the entrance to the temple on Filbert Street, where there is a vestibule of white marble under an arch after the Hindu style of Architecture.’ The reporter must have missed the odd bulbous double-onion dome on the northeast corner of the building. The dome became evident only when one looked at the building from afar. From below the building, standing on the sidewalks along Webster Street, one could not see the dome. This visual ploy was achieved by the clever layout of the building plan. The temple plan layout was morphologically no different from neighbouring Victorian residences. According to Anne Vernez Moudon, the traditional layout of the San Francisco Victorian is based on a system of bays set against the street line (Figure 2). Narrow bays accommodate corridors, hallways and stairs whereas wider bays contain rooms. In this way movement spaces (circulation) are separated from living zones. In the case of buildings located on a corner plot, the bays run perpendicular to the street on which the entrance is located. The internal bays of the temple’s wing abutting Webster Street maintained this Victorian structure. The Victorian order was also retained in the additions to the upper floor residential zone along Webster Street. However, these bays did not carry through to the temple and chapel portion of the building abutting Filbert Street. The chapel had a separate entrance on Filbert Street and its interior plan with deeper beams and larger interior spans contained the public chapel. The Vedanta temple was conceived as a traditional Victorian residence and a chapel – two independent back-to-back buildings sharing a common wall. This dual layout produced different experiences from the street. The residential side along Webster Street had the same proportions and scale as the buildings nearby. The temple side, despite being smaller in square footage, commanded more attention.

By April 1908, the building was expanded with an additional floor and more eclectic and clearly sensational architecture (Figure 3). The plan of the new addition continued the San Francisco Victorian morphology with the narrow staircase and circulation bay and the wider room-bay. Most of the new additions were on the eastern section of the building that housed the residential complex. However, the ornamental treatment of the building façade in the new additions rendered invisible the seam between the two back-to-back buildings (the residence and the chapel; Figure 4). According to EC Brown, a member and resident, the ‘new’ third floor had ‘a large front living room, kitchen, bedroom and bathroom, all fitted with every modern convenience. A veranda lighted at night by many electric lights, ornamented its full length with pillars and Moorish arches of oriental design and protected by an iron railing running all around the east and north side.’ Fish-scale shingles (common to Victorian houses) imbricated the wall and roof surfaces on the third floor and terrace. The multi-foil cusped arches rose above spindly columns creating an arcaded breezeway all around. The rooms could not be seen from the street because of the arcade. The colonnade produced a visual illusion of lightness and buoyancy that literally made the roof seem to hover over the lower floors. At night, when the veranda lights came on, the upper floor seemed luminescent and ethereal, drawing attention from afar.

The terrace was a crowded display of a variety of domed towers. All three towers claimed stylistic and visual references to Eastern architectural styles, yet none of them conformed exactly to those precedents. The corner tower called the Shiva tower was
Figure 1. Vedanta Temple in 1906. Courtesy of the Vedanta Society of Northern California Archives, Box 7, Item A.

Figure 2. The morphology of the San Francisco Victorians. Adapted from Anne Vernez Moudon, Built for Change: Neighborhood Architecture in San Francisco (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), p. 70.
Figure 3. Changes to the Vedanta Temple after 1908 when Swami Trigunatita added the additional towers, decorative elements and the upper floor in 1908. Courtesy of the Vedanta Society of Northern California Archives, Box 6, Item F.

Figure 4. Morphological layout of the temple as two back-to-back buildings. Drawings by Arijit Sen.
lifted from its original second floor location to the third floor after renovation. The temple guide explains the symbolic references of this tower to the Hindu deity Shiva. The space inside this tower was used as a Shiva temple (Shiva mandir). In 1908, a publication of the newly renovated temple described the tower as ‘a little specimen of the style of some of the old fashioned temples of the province of Bengal [in India]. Therefore, it might give to some, an idea of antiquity.’

A shorter tower with an arched window was built in a hybrid south Bengal aat-chala style on an octagonal plan (instead of the usual square base). Although the temple guide referred to the similarity between this form and the Shiva temples in the Dakshineswar Kali temple in Calcutta, in reality, the octagonal plan of the Vedanta tower was quite a variation. The dome on the western end of the terrace was supposed to be ‘an exact miniature of one of the temples of Benares’. In reality the bulbous garlic clove shape resembled Islamic petalled domes more than the temple tower of the Benares temples that the society brochure claimed.

There were smaller changes too in the western wing along Filbert Street. The Filbert Street entrance led to a one-storied public worship chapel with an attached store room, flower room and a terrace conservatory. The entrance to the temple along Filbert Street sported a multi-foiled pointed arched entry, a mix of a scalloped arch common in the West and a multi-foil cusped Indo-Saracenic engrailed arch (Figure 5). On top of the canopy was a carved eagle, its outstretched wings standing out in relief against the parallel lines of the wall siding and the elaborate cornice with trefoil moulding. A square box-like stunted bell tower topped by a dome sat on the top of the entrance. The temple guide claimed the dome to be reminiscent of ‘a bell-tower of a Christian church, and like a little mahomedan (sic) mosque, and which has a gross partial miniature style of the great Taj-Mahal of Agra, is used here as a conservatory, thus representing a partial symbol of nature and of natural growth’. Yet, as in all the other domes, the proportions of the present example differed from the so-called original.

In effect, much of these details we may read as exotic were stylistic elements tacked on to a familiar plan. The building façade acted like an architectonic skin wrapped around a wooden structure whereas the domes were similar to caps placed quixotically on the rooftops. The structural system was strange because it had to accommodate these ornamental additions using traditional building materials and construction systems. Unlike the masonry corbelling of traditional Hindu temples in India, the towers on top of the Vedanta temple were made of sheet metals welded together. An odd wooden framework lay below the circular spaces (Figure 6). A crawl space between the third floor addition and the second floor ceiling held electrical wires and services but also acted as a structural break. The new third floor had its own joists, distinct and separated from the ceiling joists of the second floor. The former transferred the load of the newly built addition directly to the vertical wall/column structure. A current resident remembered a comment made by Swami Ashokananda, the then society leader, during a renovation in the 1940s. The Swami wondered how the two structural systems (the lower floor and the upper floor additions) stayed together without the ‘upper stories sliding off the old building’ into the street below. The choice of material reflected the inability of the architect to use the kind of materials used in India. The new materials produced modified shapes. The odd construction leaked and as early as 1 November 1909, EC Brown wrote in the ‘Minutes of the Monastery’ that the ‘ceiling still leaks in various places from the roof above’. The separation between the skin and the structure produced a false sense of spaciousness from outside. In reality, the shrines were cramped and had a low ceiling height. A 1906 article from the
San Francisco Chronicle thus explained the imperfect replication of building materials but the faithful reproduction of symbols:

The models, from which the temple was designed, were built with marble, onyx, precious metals, and gems. The San Francisco temple is of wood and stone, but all the symbolism of the originals has been retained, and each of the picturesque minarets conveys a distinct meaning to the student of Sanskrit lore . . . So it is with the four towers, all of different architecture. They are all indicative of great principles. So with the decorations – the sun, moon crescent, trident,
This example shows the importance placed on visual symbolism over structural authenticity or plan layout. The reasons for this excessive reliance on visual symbolism can be traced back to the social and political contexts of the period. Nativist media reports in local media show negative public opinion in California following the increased immigration from India after 1906. The society and Hindu religion also came under the negative scrutiny of church
organizations and the national media. Most criticism came out of sensational accounts of Hindu culture, superstitions and religious practices as propagated by Christian missionaries in Christian journals. The majority of these stories were biased accounts of pagan religious practices. Christian journals such as the *Methodist Quarterly Review*, *Missionary Herald*, *Missionary Review of the World* and the more secular *Hampton-Columbian Magazine* unintentionally increased the visibility of Eastern religions in America through their articles. In 1902, an article in *The Christian Century* expressed the opinion that ‘the
susceptibility of so many women’s culture clubs to the teachings and personal influence of Hindu “Swamis” who, having participated in the Parliament of Religions remained in this country to lecture on their occult faith, is significant of the credulity of vast portions of our most intelligent citizenship.¹⁷ The comment was directed towards Swami Vivekananda who founded the Vedanta Societies and, despite its negative tone, the article nevertheless acknowledged the popularity of this movement among the educated elite, especially women, in the USA. According to Wendell Thomas, ‘Hinduism became more firmly established in America than in Europe. Theosophy, Christian Science, and similar religious movements further extended its sway, and when Hindu swamis (monks) themselves began to appear on the horizon, Hinduism suddenly advanced in all its pristine glory.’¹⁸

The mention of ancient Vedanta traditions brought forth a more problematic issue associated with racial autochthony. The architecture of the building became part of a carefully crafted argument to the effect that followers of the Hindu religion were the true and original Aryan descendants, ‘better qualified to defend, to explain, and to practice all faiths, ancient or modern, eastern or western, spiritual or materialistic’, and also closely related to the white civilizations of the West.¹⁹ In the context of Western history, this notion may be seen as racist and exclusivist. It is an argument that has had a negative implication and which can be traced back to the Aryan myth popularized by German Orientalist scholars who had a great impact in Indian historiography of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.²⁰

Indians, however, had an ambiguous racial identity in the USA in the period under discussion. By 1907, a growing clamour from nativists in the USA urged the government to keep out Indians and deny them the rights to citizenship because they were not white or because they were culturally ‘unassimilable’. Werter Dodd wrote in *World Today* that the problem of the Indian labourer lay in his degraded culture. He argued that the immigrants were undesirable, did not fit in and were poor workmen.²¹ Yet the same commentators acknowledged that Indians were descendants of the Aryans. Fred Lockley wrote in *Pacific Monthly* in 1907:

> the Aryan race, embraces in its western division not only us who speak the English tongue, but also the Greeks, the Italians, the Celts, the Slavonians and the Teutons and, in the Far East, it includes the Iranians and the Hindus. Thus it will be seen the Hindus are our kinsmen. I can see you are balking at that term ‘kinsmen’ as applied to the Hindus; yet, no matter how much you may wish to repudiate the bond that binds us to them by the ties of blood relationship, the proof is too convincing to be set aside. Were we to disregard all historical evidence our language alone would be proof sufficient to establish our common origin.²²

However, despite his relatively less-biased tone, Lockley still concluded: ‘It may help us to decide whether the East Indians are desirable immigrants or not by glancing at the conditions which prevail in their home land. It is a land under a curse, or, rather under a threefold curse, that of the caste system, of gaunt-eyed famine, and of poison-breathing plague.’²³ Even while acknowledging the Aryan origins of the Indians, critics claimed that the new immigrants were ‘dirty and mean and will work for wages that a white man can’t live on’.²⁴ A few years later an editorial noted that ‘[t]he civic and social question concerns the ability of the nation to assimilate this class of Hindus and their probable effect on the communities where they settle. Their habits, their intense caste feelings, their lack of home life – no women being among them – and their effect upon standards of labor and wages, all combine to raise a serious question as to whether the doors should be kept open or closed against this strange, new stream.’²⁵

Taking advantage of their racial ambiguity in the USA, however, a certain group of immigrants from India were actually claiming Aryan ancestry as a way to legitimize their
presence in the country and demand citizenship. Taraknath Das, an Indian immigrant involved in the expatriate nationalist movement against British colonial rule in India, wrote in 1906 that ‘[i]f the Hindus who belong to the Caucasian stock of the Human Race have no legal right to become citizens of the United States, under what special law, the Japanese who belong to a different stock according to the statements of various scholars of all parts of the world, are allowed to declare their intentions to become the citizens of the United States?’

The years 1907 and 1908 (when the temple additions were being completed) were bad years for Indian immigrants on the West Coast. On 5 September 1907, riots broke out in the town of Bellingham, Washington, where local white mobs attacked immigrant homes. In November, 500 workers in Everett attacked local Indian labourers in a night of untold violence. Media reports of these anti-Indian incidents were often biased in favour of the perpetrators, but articles reflecting the immigrant perspective also appeared. For example, in the same issue of the *Overland Monthly* that carried a scathing anti-Indian article by Agnes Foster Buchanan, an Indian student named Girindra Mukerji offered a very different view of Indian culture. A student of the University of California and an Indian scholar, Mukerji was one of the Indian students who would later stay in the Vedanta temple premises, in 1909. In his article, he acknowledged the backwardness and superstitions that had crept into Hindu culture in India, but blamed it on the rapacious oppression of the British. He did not attempt to disprove detractors such as Buchanan. Instead he agreed with them that Indian civilization fell into bad times, a dark era that he ascribed to the policies of the colonizer. As it was the West that created this slide into the dark ages, they had lost the moral authority to criticize the same. Instead, Mukerji referred to the young educated Indian and Hindu students and the Hindu priests of the Vedanta Society as the new face of Hinduism and Indian culture – India’s ‘only pride and glory – in Philosophy – in Vedantism’, and he argued for ‘the exposition of the Vedantic Philosophy as the most rational of all intellectual conceptions of life and death’. Mukerji’s argument reclaimed the Aryan past and ancient Hindu religious philosophy as a sign of superior heritage and intellectual prowess.

The same symbolism as applied by Mukerji was repeated in Vedanta Society pamphlets and the organization’s journal *Voice of Freedom*. At the same time, the architecture of the temple became a symbol of a resurgent past. The given analogy emphasized that the unique architectural elements that one saw were not a sign of contrariety, but rather the symbols of variation within an ancient inclusive spiritual system. A pamphlet distributed to the general public explained that the architectural eclecticism of the temple building reflected the universality of Hindu Vedantic traditions from which all other world religions and cultures had emanated. It justified appropriation of elements from Christian, Islamic and Buddhist building traditions by construing a ‘common origin myth’. The temple was therefore a church, a mosque, a residence, a fortress or a monastery. In 1909, the prospectus of the society’s journal stated that Vedanta was the religion of an ancient race of Aryans who had migrated to the Gangetic Plains of north India in antiquity. Therefore, the San Francisco Vedanta Society and the practices within its Hindu temple were ‘organ[s] of the true explanation and practice of all thoughts and culture, ancient or modern, spiritual and secular, from the standpoint of the Aryans’, who were ‘the forefathers of the whole human race’.

One should not jump to any conclusions about the racism inherent in these statements by the Vedantists. Rather, it is clear that the religious leader of the organization, Swami Trigunatita, was keenly aware of the possible negative connotation of this argument. He was thus using distinctly different references to the Aryans from that of the version popular
in the West. In a speech in 1911, Swami Trigunatita carefully explained the non-racist reference to colour from his standpoint:

From whom, and from where, have you got the higher and refined ideas of white race, and of white color?... For who, and from where, have the present civilized Caucasians of the western world emanated? Is it not for the ancient Hind‘u Brāhmaṇaś?... White, scientifically, is the union of colors. So, when the idea of white is practically applied to the inner life of man (and not simply to the skin), it becomes a sign to represent such a race of mankind in whom there is no more distinction of colors and creeds; in whom all the latent differences between nationalities and religions, have already vanished; in whom all brethren, no matter to what nationality, to what caste or color, to what thought or culture, they belong, are really one.31

The Aryan origin myth was deployed to counter the racial paradigm of ‘white-only’ citizenship in the USA. In a 1909 story titled ‘Ancient Nation’ published anonymously in the Voice of Freedom, but presumably written by Swami Trigunatita, a brown Indian protagonist argues with a white anti-immigrant nativist, ‘We know whether we are of genuine white race or not; Brahmans alone are the white race. We are watching, through recent movements concerning foreign naturalization, what display of their knowledge of Anthropology the members of the US congress will make.’32

The same analogy of incorporation continued in the symbolism behind various architectural details used in the Vedanta temple. Although, the architect was Joseph Leonard, a well-known San Francisco builder whose work in the East Bay and Alameda included suburban housing developments, many of the details were suggested by the Indian monk Trigunatita. In his writings and lectures, Swami Trigunatita explained that civic symbols such as the American flag, national colours and the American eagle were in reality adapted Vedantic symbols – and could be re-read as Hindu icons. For instance, explaining the eagle on the top of the entry on Filbert Street, the Swami wrote:

The eagle has her wings wide spread, and an amiable or fraternal face. On its wings, underneath, are painted the American flags, well protected. In its mouth are put the three lights of American colors – red, white, and blue. According to one of the systems of Hindu philosophy, the color red literally means a symbol of Raja Guna (activity); white – of Sattwa Guna (righteousness); and blue – of Tama Guna (inactivity, dullness, darkness, ignorance). When these three gunas are in equilibrium, spiritual perfection will be very near. . . . The [American] eagle can be taken as expressive of the Hindu mythological bird Garurh (the sovereign of the feathered race), the symbol of great strength, exclusive devotion, and steady and rapid progress.33

The analogy between the American eagle and a mythological bird shows that much of the cultural coincidences were intentionally metaphorical rather than literal. In effect, it was part of a structure of arguments by which the members and leaders of the Vedanta Society re-imagined and connected established mythologies within the Vedanta discourse to American national folklore. They were the ways by which Vedantists could claim belonging and participation in the American society.34

By arguing that the Hindu religion encompassed and was the basis of all world religions and cultures, the Vedantists encouraged Americans to see, experience, possess and recognize a series of hybrid icons and artefacts of Hindu culture as familiar objects. The Vedanta temple became a visual symbol of a common ground between the two cultures. Such a reading was successful: as a result of the increased public interest in Eastern architecture and Oriental cultures during the Panama Pacific Exposition, the city officials of San Francisco saw the Hindu temple as a perfect representation of the enduring influence of Oriental
architecture on the skyline of San Francisco. The façade of the building acted as an advertising billboard. Already distinctly visible from afar as a result of its imposing size and architecture, the façade became highly visible at night when temple residents adorned the building with lights, flags, festoons and colourful objects during special civic occasions. Swami Trigunatita started the tradition of flying the US flag on the temple during national holidays such as the Fourth of July or during special occasions such as on Portola Day in 1908 when the Great White Fleet steamed through the Golden Gate or when President Taft visited the city. During the World’s Fair, the residents of the temple continued this tradition and displayed flags of different nations on the various nation-day celebrations. The organizers of the World’s Fair used lighting as a primary strategy to create chimerical scenes. The Swami followed suit by lighting up the temple building. It was visible from the fair grounds at night. In this way, the temple became a well-known architectural landmark and tourist site in San Francisco and Swami Trigunatita became known among the city’s political circles and the elected officials as the ‘Hindu Swami’.

The image of the temple became synonymous with Hindu religious and prayer space, and Americans acknowledged the Vedantists’ claim to Eastern spirituality. The architecture marked a domain of prayer, spirituality and religion set apart from the secular urban context. The façade and architecture got implicated in a complex boundary maintenance practice that engaged the actions and imaginations of San Francisco citizens, members of the society, the media, city officials and the Hindu priests. Making claims through architectural motifs was a creative way to respond to the racial, ethnic and cultural politics of the time. Despite negative stereotypes associated with the idea of Eastern spiritualism and mysticism, the Vedanta temple’s popularity is testimony to the imaginative power of those that articulated its physical presence.

**Laying out the interiors**

The experience of walking into the building was considerably different from the experience of seeing it from outside. It was an experience that was only available to those who could enter the building, and entry into the temple was highly controlled. The interior included a public chapel and a residential quarter on the first floor level, residential rooms on the upper floors and three terrace-top rooms. The public chapel was accessible from Filbert Street, through the elaborately carved entrance canopy. Photographs taken of the chapel between 1908 and 1910 give an idea of what the interior had been like (Figure 7). Upon entrance, visitors climbed a short flight of stairs and entered a narrow vestibule. They then turned left to enter the chapel and encountered a raised altar located on the east end of this rectangular room. The low ceiling, bland interiors, the central aisle and the altar looked very similar to the interior arrangement of a protestant church. A painting of Swami Vivekananda (the founder of the Ramakrishna Mission in India and the Vedanta centres in the USA) hung on the east wall aligned along the central aisle. A door connecting the chapel to the rectory was located on the altar. A high-backed wooden altar chair sat in front of the door. Altar vases, jardinières, teakwood taborets and an organ sat next to it. A full-sized wall-to-ceiling painting of Sri Ramakrishna, the patron saint, hung on the wall next to the altar. A smaller altar with a piano bench, taborets, stands, jardinière with fresh flowers stood in front of this painting. The floor had linoleum covering and sloped upwards towards the back of the room. The central aisle had a carpet runner. In addition to the north-facing windows, numerous pendant and hanging lamps with multiple bulbs washed the room with ample light. The high dado with a simple moulding was painted in lighter colour whereas the walls were in darker shades creating a sense of spaciousness. At least 100 solid wood-backed foldable chairs (and a few spindle-back non-folding ones too) were laid out on
Figure 7. Interior of the Vedanta Temple chapel between 1908 and 1910. The inside of the chapel resembled a Christian church. The chairs were laid out for seating with a clear aisle in between. In Ramakrishna Mission temples in India, devotees and the presiding priest sit on the floor facing the altar. Here the priest stood on the dais and faced the congregation. Also, note the picture of Jesus in a Hindu posture on the left wall. Courtesy of the Vedanta Society of Northern California Archives, Box 4, Item D.

both sides of the aisle in rows of six. Men and women sat on separate sides. The entire experience of being in the chapel focused the user upon the altar.

Two odd sights appear in the interior photographs of the chapel. On the north wall, between the windows hung a painting of Jesus sitting cross-legged in a yoga posture in the wilderness. Birds, rabbits, tigers and snakes sat around him referring to a quote from Saint Mark 1.13, ‘he was there in the wilderness and was with the wild beasts’ (Figure 8). Also the unexpected presence of a large number of indoor plants gave the altar a wild garden-like quality. On the occasion of Christmas Day in 1909, the ‘Minutes of the Monastery’ described the decoration of an altar in front of the painting of Christ:

The altar was a terraced platform about 3½ feet high, 6 feet long, and about 3½ feet at the bottom. It was placed in front of the Yoga Picture of the Lord Jesus Christ. . . . On the upper shelf were placed fruits and flowers, on the lower shelves cakes, vegetables, cups, saucers, plates and other dishes. . . . Flower pots were brought down from the Monastery roof and balcony and extended outwards from either end of the altar in the shape of a fan with a straight front to form a garden in front of the Picture, the entrance in the centre facing on the aisle. . . . The idea being, a garden in which the Lord, sits, in meditation, a holy place. . . . In this garden were placed all kinds of office materials, tools, books, kitchen utensils and every possible article in service in the temple that all be an offering to God, each with a deep meaning, and all to be consecrated by his grace to an increased usefulness for his work here.37
Figure 8. This painting by Theodosia Oliver still hangs on the chapel wall. Courtesy of the Vedanta Society of Northern California Archives.
The creation of a ‘garden’ in the interior was odd in the context of American churches, but interior embellishments such as the use of flowers and plants were popular in the Ramakrishna Mission prayer halls in India and middle-class homes in the eastern Indian state of Bengal. The reference to Bengal is important because the Indian monk in charge of the temple came from this region and his antecedents framed the way he re-envisioned the American chapel. Such spaces also made references to paradise (a Judeo-Christian concept) and hence served as a common reference point for most users. Jesus in the wilderness was a hybrid image of a Christian yogi. It united references to the Garden of Eden with that of a Vedic forest. As if in a continuation, it made the gardened interior of this ‘hybrid’ chapel truly a locus of cultural contact.

The worship in this chapel closely resembled Christian mass. Liturgical practices for the weekend and evening services, intentionally called ‘the vespers’, was a mix of practices taken from Christian mass and select Hindu rituals. During the vespers services the Swami stood on the elevated wooden dais on the altar platform to give a sermon. This separation between the congregation seated on chairs on the chapel floor and the Swami standing on the altar resembled the separation of the clergy and the congregation in a church. The resultant spatial separation between the altar/dais and the aisles defined the relation between the officiating Swami and the congregation during vespers. This form of worship in the public chapel in the San Francisco temple was unique as it differed from worship in the Ramakrishna Mission centres in India where, during the evening vespers, swamis and devotees sat together (separated by rows) on the aisle floor facing the altar. The entire congregation sang and prayed together accompanied by the lighting of incense sticks, a ceremonial fire and sounds of bells and gongs. In India, unlike in the San Francisco temple, there was no single designated leader facing an audience (such configurations were limited to lectures only).

In addition, as early as in 1903, Swami Trigunatita initiated a rule that men and women should sit separately (across the aisles in the temple) during worship. Such a rule had no precedence in the organization. Never was it done in San Francisco or in other Vedanta centres across America and this rule initially surprised old timers and other monks. The reasons for introducing this particular rule can never be ascertained. However, contemporary media reports give us probable cause to speculate. (Elsewhere I have written more on gender issues surrounding the organization and its politics. For brevity, this discussion skirts the issue of women members and their role in the Vedanta Society.) The American media’s anxiety had gone beyond their fear of Hinduism or the Indian Swami; they feared the increasing participation of women outside the domestic sphere. Reporters such as Daggett, Alexander and Reed feared that the resulting relationship with foreign men would destroy the institution of the American family and sully the moral virtue and racial purity of the unsuspecting and trusting Anglo women. In the formulation of Daggett and others, the USA was a ‘white nation’, and any attempt of interracial alliance within civic, economic, social or religious institutions seemed to threaten the purity of this national identity.

Between 1906 and 1908, as xenophobia and negative reports against Indians and Hinduism increased in the media, the Swami made small but important changes to the behaviour and practices in the public chapel. If we compare the rituals between 1907 and 1909, we find that the vesper ceremony evolved as the Swami made incremental changes to respond to the situation. In 1906, residents of the rectory used the door on the altar connecting the chapel to the ground floor of the rectory. After the vespers they would ‘race down the aisle, take the steps at two bounds and disappear through the door at the back’. By 1908, the Swami had reined in this practice and by the end of that year the door was...
out of bounds to everyone else but him. The new regulations meant that the building residents now had to exit the chapel, walk down Filbert Street and enter their residence through the Webster Street entrance. As the spiritual leader, the Swami was the only person who could move between the sacred altar and the residential quarters. By enforcing this impenetrable edge between the chapel and the first floor of the monastery, the Swami delineated the boundary of a sanctified domain. As the altar door was not used as a shortcut into the building, the separation between the residential and the chapel spaces was accentuated.

The very act of exiting the chapel and walking around the building to enter the residence—a very extended and elongated edge—was an embodied form of experiencing this boundary. At the same time, by retaining the rights to use the door to move between his study and the altar, the Swami maintained his hierarchical position as the spiritual leader of the organization. As the spiritual leader he could pass through this boundary with relative ease. The door between the altar and the office floor was a rather thin edge, in both physical and psychological terms.

Mrs. Edith Allan, a close disciple and member of the society, wrote to fellow disciple and the author of the ‘Minutes of the Monastery’, EC Brown, in 1927 that during his initial years in San Francisco, Swami Trigunatita stood at the entrance door of the chapel and shook hands with the members of the congregation as they filed out after vespers. What she was remembering were changes in certain procedures that the Swami implemented in 1908. Once the additions to the temple were completed, the Swami exited directly into his residence through the door on the altar instead of meeting the congregation after the vespers. The Swami’s reluctance to stand at the door to shake the hands of the congregation or allow the congregation to walk up to the altar was not a departure from a ‘Western way’ to a more ‘Eastern way’ as Mrs Allan seems to suggest. Rather this was an attempt to maintain multiple rules of engagement for the different constituencies, some more public and formal than the others. In the chapel, the Swami played the formal role of a lecturer and officiating priest. The experiential quality of the public chapel was designed for total public access. Anyone could enter this chapel during public services. The diversity of the audience necessitated rules and order. Separation of sexes, hierarchy during services and disciplined social interaction enhanced order during services. As a result, intimate and personal interaction with the Swami became limited too.

Interior layout, decorations, materials, sounds and wall colours also contributed to the creation of this experience. The sweet-smelling floral arrangement, incense and bright lights enhanced the same. Devotee and long-time society member and ‘corresponding secretary’ during the initial years, Cara French wrote in her reminiscences that formality and demeanour became part of this production of space from around 1908:

Swami Trigunatita constantly stresses the sacredness of the Temple Auditorium. If we must talk, not to do so inside: wait until we reached the sidewalk beyond the door. And [he] urged us not to dissipate in idle, useless chatter all the good derived from the meditation [session] or from listening to the lecture.43

Burke reports that Cara French remembered the Swami’s instruction that the temple chapel should be considered as a sanctified space, ‘free from any worldliness and material desires; a place of holiness’, in which the ‘Supreme Spirit remained an abiding Presence.’ In the Rules and Regulations Governing Vedanta Centers, Swami Trigunatita asked members to ‘Please try to avoid introducing any system of amusement, refreshment or any such thing that has a social aspect into Vedanta Centers. Because this will bring in many troubles and desires afterwards and will slowly take away the right spirit of religious culture from
such centers. This disciplinary order worked, because French commented that many Americans ‘leery of the strange Indian religion of Vedanta’ would go away from the chapel ceremony reassured that the ceremonies in the temple were familiar, rational and indeed ‘spiritual’ in nature.

The residential section was not open to the public. Only society members in good standing, residents and monks could enter the monastery. Women (except the person who cleaned and female residents who lived with their family on the upper floors) were not permitted. The residents were subject to the strict disciplinary regimen of a monastic ascetic. Swami Vivekananda, the founder of the Vedanta Society and Hindu ascetic who popularized Vedanta practice in the USA, wrote that mental and bodily discipline helped spiritual development.

His writings on yoga practices (raja yoga, karma yoga and jñana yoga) were available to members of the San Francisco society. The monk in charge of the society during the first decade of the twentieth century, Swami Trigunatita too wrote:

In this country [United States] the vast majority of people live to eat and to drink, to wear costly garments, according to changes of fashion, and these lead to insatiable desire to live the life of the senses. The problem of food and clothing is most formidable to those of ample means, and so on, until with many it is the sum and aim of life. . . . However, a simple life does not necessarily imply that one must forsake the world, go to live in the woods or in caves, but it does mean absolute obedience to the laws that immutably govern our mental, moral, spiritual, and physical being . . . . Again, simplicity does not mean only outward plainness of garment, meager diet, a modest dwelling. It means self-control, which makes one master over nature. Simplicity is the result of the highest education, the most vigilant moral and spiritual training of the soul.

Careful discipline of body and mind as spiritual practice, according to many rules and regulations, governed life inside the residential section. These rules enforced bodily discipline in the form of cleanliness, time discipline and behavioural modifications. A strict regimen of cleanliness and orderliness became a method to control the sensory landscape and ensure the appearance of sanctity in the residential interior. By keeping the interiors clean, the residential section seemed to be less of a profane place to eat, sleep and live and more of a domain of spiritual life – holier and distinct from the material world that lay outside it. Eating is an activity that traditionally caters to the pleasure of the senses. But Swami Trigunatita clarified that monastery meals were not meals but offerings to God, and according to the ‘Minutes of the Monastery’, the ‘Swami inaugurated prayer and chanting by one member in turn at each meal [so] that the very act of eating should be[come] worship.’ The building had a strong smell of incense. The incense, generally associated with religious rituals, was a strong reminder of the sanctity of this space. Finally, the use of clocks and regimented schedules enforced time discipline in the monastery.

As we focus on the daily practices and human behaviour in different areas of the temple, a new order emerges. This order, otherwise invisible, is based on multiple enacted contexts. As the physical and social contexts change, so do human behaviour and practices. Enactments are performative in nature, as Erving Goffman shows in his Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. Physical space is the stage where such performances take place, but unlike a theatrical stage, the former is more than a container or a setting. Rather the arrangement and symbolism of the spatial environment actively determines the nature of the performance. In the case of the Vedanta temple, neither the enactments nor the spaces were random – for they were planned into the building’s layout and the façade treatments, well thought out, challenged and negotiated and actively regulated by continuously changing sets of rules and conventions.
Figure 9. Tower shrines between 1908 and 1910. The shrines in the tower chapels resembled those in Ramakrishna Mission temples. A picture of Sarada Devi is prominent in the left. The deity and the worship paraphernalia lay on the floor and worshippers had to squat on the floor as customary in India. Swami Trigunatita procured this ritual and worship equipment from India at considerable cost and bother. Courtesy of the Vedanta Society of Northern California Archives, Item 19.

The discrete uses of sacred space is also well understood if we study the terrace-top rooms. The room on the northeast corner, under the double-onion dome, served as a Shiva mandir or a shrine to the deity Shiva. This room was the second dedicated prayer space in the building, and unlike the chapel downstairs, there was no chair seating (Figure 9). Instead of the altar worship, objects were set on the linoleum-covered floor. The altar consisted of three images set on short wooden pedestals of the trinity worshipped in all Ramakrishna Mission temples in India: the founder Swami Vivekananda, the patron saint Sri Ramakrishna and his consort Ma Sharada Devi. In addition to this trinity there was also a Shiva-lingam, a geometric representation of the male and female principles of this Hindu divinity.

Most of the assorted equipment came from India. None of these articles was available in the USA in 1908 and Swami Trigunatita asked his friend in India, Purna Seth, to send these to him. This equipment was used to perform Hindu ritual worship called aarti puja commonly seen in temples. During this ceremony the five elements are symbolically offered to the deity through circular motions. These actions – again, in the state of Bengal – are accompanied by singing, recitations, drumming and blowing of conch shells. The equipment included containers for holy water, a ceremonial fan, incense stick holders, mortar and pestle to grind sandalwood into paste, conch shells (blown during worship to create a horn-like sound), lamps with one (camphor flame) and five flames (made of wicks symbolizing the five senses), various kinds of pots (kalashas), a brass bowl (tamra kunda), brass ritual spoons (kosha-kushi, representing the womb or yoni) and a small smoking pot. In addition, there were a small round bell-metal plate (kansar) and a bell. The last two were used to produce sounds to accompany the ceremony.
The existence of this shrine on the terrace was unknown to the general public (although during the opening ceremony there was a tour of these towers, such tours were not repeated later). Only a few society members were allowed in here. The Swami was very careful about how this shrine was photographed and seen. To reflect on the difference between the haptic qualities of the shrine and chapel spaces, we need to return to Sunday, 5 April 1908, when the opening celebrations of the new temple and its addition took place. Mrs. Allan described this in a letter (mentioned above) to society member Mr. EC Brown:

After the words at the dedication, I did not take them down, but as you probably remember, it was at that service that Swami said that they had been following Western ways to a certain extent, but from that night things would be done more in the Eastern way of doing things, that he would no longer stand at the head of the stairs and shake hands with people as they passed out, that he would not mingle with the people, yet he was there to serve in the very highest way possible and that he would gladly lay down his life even for an animal if by so doing he could help an animal. His whole talk was on service and self-sacrifice for the good of others. And as you may remember he announced that ice cream would be served upstairs but he didn’t not come upstairs & some people thought it dreadful for the Swami to cut himself off in that way.54

What actually happened on 5 April 1908, however, was related by Cara French in her diaries. She wrote that while the rest of the congregation was busy in the ice-cream party, the Swami led a group of very close devotees up the back stairs to the Shiva temple on the terrace. According to French, activities that followed in the Shiva temple ‘linked us with India and Vedic rites’. The 28 February 1909, ‘Minutes of the Monastery’ written by EC Brown describes a similar Hindu ceremony on the terrace on the occasion of the birth anniversary of Sri Ramakrishna:

Swami Trigunatita gave an example of the temple worship … of which the waving of lights in a sacred lamp was a very beautiful part. After the ceremonies, the men members stood in a row on the left hand and the lady members of the society stood in row on the right hand of the portico while prasad [sanctified food] was distributed (sugar sweets). During waving of the lights the Monastery members stood against the wall of the temple. Mr. Kruger and Mr. Page beat the gongs and Mr. Buchanan and Mr. Brown beat the brass plates while Mr. Horvath and Swami Prakashananda blew the conches.55

Although worship rituals such as the blowing conch shells, beating cymbals and lighting incense were common in India, these practices were carefully avoided in the first-floor public chapel. Mrs. Allan’s claim that Swami Trigunatita’s decision to change his behaviour during the vespers was a turn towards ‘the Eastern way of doing things’ was therefore not strictly correct, for then, worship rituals such as those occasionally practiced in the terrace shrine would have entered the public chapel. In the Vedanta Society, there was no singular way of doing things that could be neatly termed as ‘eastern’. Swami Trigunatita’s demeanour varied with the context, and so did the rituals and practices. Contrary to Mrs. Allan’s statement, the Swami was not cutting himself off but instead redefining the nature of his engagement with various groups and alliances, as well as with the carefully articulated space of the public chapel.

The social construction of the sacred
The Vedanta Society has since moved from its original location. A new temple, located a few blocks away from the old one, accommodates most religious and monastic activities.
The ‘old temple’, as the original building is now called, houses the Sunday school, a guest house and many revered memories. What makes the old temple a sanctified space? Is the building sacred merely because certain religious activities and spiritual practices took place in this location? Is it only people and their activities that produce values and is the building merely a record retelling this past? The example of the Vedanta temple shows us that a building is not a neutral container wherein inhabitants play out their lives as they wish. Instead, buildings are actively engaged in the way that events, experiences and memory are shaped inside the premises. This case study shows the important role of the architecture in practices of world making. This building was a transforming stage where life unfolded in the form of a dialectical relationship between the social and the material worlds. Because of its plan layout, the interior spaces of the public chapel and residence could be used, experienced and reproduced only in certain ways. Because of its hypervisible façade, society members could produce a powerful narrative that simultaneously made references to Hinduism being exceptional and familiar. The layout of the temple had a salient part to play in the experience of the sanctified interior domain of the Vedanta temple. The bimorphic layout of the building played a central role in physically separating the public chapel from the interior spaces in clear and effective ways. The circulation spaces (hallways, corridors and stairs) and their location within the plan layout added to the effectiveness of this separation. The altar door served as a thin boundary whereas the exterior stairs connecting the chapel to the terraces created a thicker edge. The serpentine stairs between the two chapels never entered the residential section. Instead they connected the public chapel to the terrace rooms via the flower room, basement and the second floor greenhouse. Thus, the edge between the public (ground level) and private (terrace level) chapels was separated by the expanded spatial and temporal gap of the stairways and punctuated by spaces related to rituals and prayer. To reach the upper chapels, a devotee had to cross multiple boundaries and make a concerted physical effort. Weaving in and out of the building via a circular staircase, crossing over to a steep side stairs and precariously climbing on to the rooftop was an experience that made one aware of their surroundings, their actions and their destination. It was an extended and embodied form of experiencing a boundary. Taking this trip served instructive functions – it re-created an extraordinary set of experiences that reminded users of the sacredness of the building. In the same way, returning to the monastery after prayers was a prolonged event that engaged the body. This haptic production of environmental awareness was part of the process by which society members were initiated into the sanctified domain and the inner circle of Vedantic worship. These temporal bodily experiences of entering, crossing and travelling were epistemological frames that made one aware of their position within the sanctified world of the Vedanta Society. Repeating this sequence naturalized this experience. The experience of traversing this building in repeated sequences was a central didactic form of learning by which close disciples and residents learnt about (and practiced) Hindu spiritual discipline.

The Webster Street entrance separated the residential from the religious. The entrance choreographed the experience of a living space in very particular ways. This was no simple residence. It was a monastery, a space of austerity and spiritual growth. The daily experience of living and inhabiting the residential domain itself became a meditative and disciplinary practice. Living, eating, sleeping and cleaning the house were initiating acts that made the residents part of the inner circle. Physical and mental discipline produced subjects ready to embark upon the difficult world of spiritual practice. These different meanings and experiences of sacredness in the Vedanta temple were a result of the physical spaces as much as enforced human activities and transcendental practices.
The layout influenced the way sanctity was produced. The Swami was the fountainhead of spiritual knowledge. Vedanta was not read and learnt in a passive manner, but through practice. The Swami was the only person who could direct this visceral learning of Vedantic knowledge through everyday practice. The persona of the Swami embodied the spiritual discipline and knowledge that the devotees wanted to learn. Hence his living space was nearest to the sanctified realm. The distance between the chapel and the Swami’s office was punctuated by a thin edge – a door on the altar. His lower floor office was off bounds and separated from the residential stairs by a parlour. At dusk, the temple dwellers lit lamps in the corner office room to fill the room with bright light. The upper floors and the exterior veranda on the third level lit up too. From outside, the bright luminescence at the top and northeast corner made the temple and the Swami’s office into ethereal realms.

Layout also impacted worship. Even today, in the new Vedanta temple, the distinct practices of the two chapels are retained. On special occasions, Hindu worship rituals such as those in the terrace chapels are held in the new temple. On other evenings, regular vespers resemble much of the activities in the front chapel of the old temple. The ceremonial separation between the various zones within the temple complex resembles those seen in the old Vedanta temple. Within this context, we begin to appreciate the role of an individual in creatively circumventing frames and social structures during the process of world making. If engagement with the building resembled the ‘ritual process’, then the role of the individual in the performative act brings up questions of power and agency. Swami Trigunatita’s ability to transform the interior of this temple into a complex and functional space, residence and monastery, shows his skilful ability to construct a world that responded to the unique context of twentieth-century San Francisco. As an individual he negotiated the many worlds and systems within which he lived and worked. Religion was not merely a moment of worship sequestered from the secular life. Rather Vedanta became a form of living in the everyday world and the physical structure of the Vedanta temple was the vehicle that allowed such an existence.

At the same time, the material qualities also set limits to the flexibility of the building. The cramped terrace towers, leaking roofs and the difficulties of communicating with people living in different parts of the building were real limitations that necessitated behavioural responses and adaptations. The material world was not an arena of limitless possibilities – rather, it held a certain finite potential that was the animated by recurring events, experiences and memories. This argument suggests that not just any building could have the same kind of presence as the old temple. The layout of the interior spaces and the laying out of the interior experiences produced a unique domain that could never be replicated. In addition, the layout of the building also influenced the ways in which multiple forms of Hindu worship became institutionalized within this organization. In other words, material and embodied forms of experiences influenced (or maybe delimited) how one apprehended the spiritual.

This complex relationship between form and experience, between physical and the social environment alerts us to a unique ontological condition of immigrant world making. World making is simultaneously embodied and embodying, situated and emergent, visible and potential, and incessantly re-imagined. Only architectural documentation can never explain the spirit of a building. Merely studying people and their activities is not enough either, because the built form is as much implicated in the world-making process as the human agents (albeit not with agency and intelligence that is typical of the latter). Buildings may indeed be products of culture, but once built, they exert some influence (and limitations) on the way we live in them. The built form holds within it certain emergent qualities that are animated or thwarted by humans living in these spaces.
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Notes

1. The word Swami will be used in this article to refer to a Hindu monk. The word originates from Sanskrit.
2. Head, Indian Style, 159.
8. Vernez Moudon, Built for Change, 52–96, 70.
10. The architectural style of one terrace-top room was not based on Eastern precedents. The southwest tower had a crenellated pattern that resembled the battlemented parapets of European castles.
16. Christian missionaries flocking to India (since 1812 such missions were sponsored by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions) brought back stories of their visits.
20. Murti, India; Figueira, Aryans, Jews, Brahmins.
23. Ibid., 595.
24. Mangum, Letter from author to his mother, 1907.
25. ‘Hindu, the Newest’, 3.
27. The use of the word Hindu, or Hindoo, in the US media during the first half of the twentieth century was a solecism. In reality, immigrants from India during this period were mostly Sikhs. In addition there were Hindus, Muslims, Christians and Parsees too. To the media, however, any immigrant from India was a Hindoo.
30. ‘Prospectus’, i.
32. Swami Trigunatita, ‘Ancient Nations’, 129–30. This story may be autobiographical because Swami Trigunatita himself had undertaken a similar journey when he sailed for the USA from India.
34. In 1906, Swami Trigunatita wrote that ‘our Gita . . . was written 2,000 years before the birth of Jesus of Nazareth; yet in many places in your new testament the words are identical with that of the Gita of 2,000 years before.’ By 1908, the Swami had reclaimed Jesus as part of the
Hindu pantheon by commissioning a lay devotee, Theodosia Oliver, to paint a picture of Jesus that he claimed he dreamt or had a vision of. Cara French, in her reminiscence, claims that this was a Tibetan picture of Christ, a claim that corresponded with Swami Trigunatita’s 1906 note on the subject. ‘Resident Priest’; Burke, *Swami Trigunatita*, 177.

35. By 1907, the Swami secured tax exemptions for the entire temple because the City Hall felt that the Vedanta Society was a spiritual centre that needed their support. In the same year, he obtained permission to sell Vedanta books without paying any license for sales. A postcard with the picture of the Vedanta temple sold as a city souvenir. On 9 August 1912, he called on the mayor and the board of supervisors and obtained immediate permission to take two feet from the sidewalks adjacent to the temple by arguing that, in view of the upcoming Panama Pacific Exposition, the proposed landscaping would add to the attractiveness of the temple and the street. Burke, *Swami Trigunatita*, 262–3.

36. As argued above, the discourse of Eastern spiritualism had a history in the American continent. Writings by Jefferson and Thoreau, transcendentalists and theosophists, missionaries and comparative religion scholars abounded. Thus, despite negative stereotypes associated with the idea of Eastern spiritualism and mysticism, people listened to Swami Trigunatita and acknowledged his expertise in this matter.

41. Being inaccessible to all but the Swami (and very infrequently to a select group of devotees) the altar became the most sacred space inside the chapel. The Swami maintained the sacred nature of the altar and ensured that he used this space solely for religious discourses and sermons. After he abolished the annual board meetings in September 1905, Swami Trigunatita occasionally called for a business meeting after his evening classes to discuss important bureaucratic issues with society members. During such meetings, he would step down from the altar platform on to the floor of the auditorium to discuss ‘business’. In this way, he attempted to set apart the areas where he held spiritual service from the areas where he conducted secular and business meetings.

42. Burke, *Swami Trigunatita*, 204; Allan, January 6, 1927. Alan’s letter to Brown exists as an unpublished manuscript at the Vedanta Society Northern California Archives. Mr. Brown’s reminiscences were serially published in *Prabuddha Bharata*, a journal of the Ramakrishna Mission in India, in 1928. The article series was titled ‘The Work of Swami Trigunatita in the West.’

43. Quoted in Burke, *Swami Trigunatita*, 208. Cara French’s ‘Reminiscences’ are located in the Vedanta Society of Northern California Archives. This manuscript is not accessible to the public.
44. Burke, *Swami Trigunatita*, 175.
45. Ibid., 108.
46. Ibid., 192.
47. Anglo-American residents of the monastery such as the Petersons were married. As of 3 June 1908, Charles Kruger, J. Hovarth, August Merkins, Arthur Schenderlein and Ernest C. Brown lived in the monastery section.
50. Swami Trigunatita’s goal was to produce an army of workers for the Vedanta cause. Such demanding rigor was akin to trial by fire, or the mechanisms of what Swami Vivekananda called the ‘purity drilling machine’ (while referring to discipline in the Ramakrishna Math in India). Swami Trigunatita explained that one ‘must go thorough the path of intense suffering and anguish. It is a matter of requirement, and without this you cannot grow so finely, if I may use such an expression, nor can you make such rapid progress, or wipe out karma so quickly.’ For instance, residents were to ‘walk on the balls of one’s feet around the house lest others be disturbed’. Arguing that behaviour inside ‘a monastery’ should be about spiritual and bodily discipline, posters of ‘Dos and Don’ts’ hung at various points in the building. Residents could neither receive nor give any gifts or spend time in leisurely pleasurable activities in the upper
floors. However, such regulations, although enforced strictly, became a source of daily irritation and Burke mentions many instances where residents knowingly broke rules or creatively bent the regulations, much to the Swami’s chagrin. Brown, ‘Minutes of the Monastery’, January 1909; Burke, Swami Trigunatita, 212–20.

51. In an attempt to keep out unwanted smells, Trigunatita restricted most cooking activities to the basement. Saying that the food in the monastery should conform to the meals suggested in the *Gita (Bhagvat Gita* 6:16 is part of the Hindu epic *Mahabharata*) he prohibited the preparation of rich aromatic food such as meat, fish, fowl, eggs, lard, onion, garlic and cake within the temple premises. According to the ‘Minutes of the Monastery’ in 1908, Swami Prakashananda arrived from Calcutta to help Swami Trigunatita. He cooked meals for himself and the residents in the basement kitchen. Burke, Swami Trigunatita, 212; Brown, ‘Meals’.

52. Residents could not laze around – the Swami required the residents to get up early and to get to work on assigned house duties. A list that hung in the toilet recorded the time residents went to sleep and rose from bed. Punctuality and adherence to the timetable was strictly enforced. Clocks were installed throughout the space and synchronized to the second with Lick Observatory time. We see in the discussions of the monastery’s life that keeping time and being punctual was the most difficult form of monastic control for the American devotees. The Swami pushed it to the limits. Burke, Swami Trigunatita, 399.

53. Goffman, *Presentation of Self*.

54. Edith Allan to Ernest C. Brown, January 6, 1927, noted in Brown, ‘Reminiscences.’ Also see Burke, Swami Trigunatita, 203–5.

55. Quoted in Burke, Swami Trigunatita, 208. Cara French’s ‘Reminiscences’ are located in the Vedanta Society Northern California Archives. This manuscript is not accessible to the public.


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