Staged Disappointment

Interpreting the Architectural Facade of the Vedanta Temple, San Francisco

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The Vedanta Temple of San Francisco is an eclectic specimen of architecture incorporating stylistic features from Western and Eastern traditions. The temple’s design in 1905 and renovation three years later served specific communicative functions in the context of substantial Indian immigration and appearances by Hindu preachers in North America. The article examines the building’s active role in promoting cultural contact by arguing that the layout of the temple and its furnishings encouraged a sequence of choreographed spatial experiences that initially drew people in with a promise of the unfamiliar but brought them back by reproducing the comfort of the familiar.

A pedestrian approaching the southwest corner of Filbert and Webster Streets in 1906 San Francisco encountered an odd building: a two-story structure housing the first Hindu temple in the United States (fig. 1). The building, at first glance, seemed out of place in this neighborhood of quiet Victorian homes (fig. 2). But it was not merely the building’s grand scale that seemed “out of place.” Rather, it was the unique architectural motifs and form that attracted the attention of San Franciscans.

This article examines the Vedanta Temple’s active role in cultural contact. The Vedanta Society specifically designed the temple’s facade to serve an array of communicative functions. The building was a visible marker for anyone visiting San Francisco. Oriental motifs drew attention from afar, and its terrace spires could be seen from the shoreline, raising the building’s profile during the well-attended 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition. San Franciscans saw this building as an odd but important civic landmark that became part of the everyday urban landscape. Despite its strangeness, the building became part of the everyday life of local residents. Stories of the Vedanta Temple, with its arches and domes, entered popular consciousness. The Vedanta Society members sold and disseminated brochures and pamphlets in which they advertised the building as symbolic of Hindu culture and architecture. The leader of the organization gave lectures to lay American audiences explaining that being in this building could be spiritually enriching to them. As a result, the building also became an icon of Hindu religious experience.

The physical characteristics of the Vedanta Temple mediated the numerous ways that San Franciscans related to the unknown and alien cultures emerging in their midst during the first decade of the twentieth century. Vedanta Society members used the building and its architectural transformations as a hybrid language for representing their institution and religion to a large and diverse public. By focusing narrowly on the design of the facade and the most publicly accessible section of this building, I demonstrate how the experience...
of entering the building set the stage for cultural contact. By directing my attention to the users’ experience and kinesthetic engagement with this building, I explore the building’s active role in promoting such contact.

The Vedanta Temple’s means of mediating cultural contact was through the concept of staged disappointment. I define “staged disappointment” as the society’s intentional strategy of designing a sequence of choreographed—or staged—spatial experiences in the building interior. Affective impressions from somatic acts of seeing, entering, inhabiting, touching, and experiencing this building produced a unique embodied knowledge of the built environment. An individual’s experience of staged disappointment taps into his or her internalized ideological values.

Paul Connerton suggests that kinesthetic engagements create multisensory bodily practices that entail a combination of cognitive and habit memory. These performances reiterate systems of classification, beliefs, and ideologies central to the occupants.

Architecture can be a medium for visceral communication during cultural contact. In the case of the Vedanta Temple, the exotic and novel facade of this building excited peoples’ expectations and curiosity and attracted their notice. An individual who caught a glimpse of the Vedanta Temple in passing or who actually entered the temple referred back to preexisting knowledge, expectations, and habit responses in order to make sense of this new space. If the experience was unfamiliar, then the person interpreted and translated it based on prior knowledge, however incorrect, of what a Hindu temple might be. If the new experience was familiar, then it produced automatic—and perhaps expected—responses. Either way, an individual’s response to the staged spectacle depended on social and political contexts, and the response was ideologically informed and culturally sanctioned. But on entering the building, the interior experience was little different from that in a Christian church. Thus the architecture, layout, and furnishings of the interior circumvented the initial curiosity.

and expectations of the unknown. An initial expectation of novelty produced by the building facade was followed by a sense of disappointment when one entered the building. The facade of the Vedanta Temple was renovated a mere two years after its initial completion. The new facade even more forcefully staged a spectacle that initially drew people in with a promise of the unfamiliar but brought them back by reproducing the comfort of the familiar.2

The temple’s role in representing and popularizing Hindu culture in the North American context is not revealed by stylistic comparisons. Indeed, visual analysis of sculptural forms of the temple domes and temple typology shows that the architecture of the San Francisco temple did not replicate historic Hindu temples in India and was unlike any other place of worship built across the Indian diaspora during this period. The building’s plan was entirely functional, modern, and contemporary, while its architectural features such as domes, cornices, arches, and moldings, lacked decorative consistency. Thus, comparisons with other diasporic places of worship built by Indian immigrants in Fiji, the Caribbean, East Africa, and countries along the Pacific Rim during this period lack utility. Likewise, comparisons with more recent examples of temple building in the United States in Jackson Heights, Chicago, or Calabasas, are not appropriate because the internal dynamics, spatial practices, and politics of modern immigrants differ from those of a century ago. Relevant comparisons between the San Francisco Vedanta Temple and the Point Loma Theosophical Society complex, however, will be discussed below.

Instead, a social history of this building interprets its material culture within the social and political dynamics of the time. By the turn of the twentieth century Asian immigrants had changed the nature of the national debate over immigration.

2 These phenomena occur every day in Disney landscapes, thematic shopping malls, and ethnic spaces, such as Chinatowns. In these cases the exterior architecture is highly visible and exotic, but the interiors consist of standard retail stores and consumer goods.
The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was a xenophobic attempt to control the number of East Asians in America. By 1907 an influx of laborers from India alarmed the wary nativists and white workers. \(^5\) Riots against the Hindoos, as Indians were incorrectly called in North America, broke out in Bellingham and Everett, Washington, in the United States, and in Vancouver, Canada. \(^6\) By 1913 the passage of the California Alien Land Law prohibited Asians (including Indians) from owning property. The Asiatic Barred Zone Act of 1917 barred immigration from large parts of Asia, including India. While mass media reported the appearance of Indian labor along the West Coast as a frightening alien invasion, a smaller number of Hindu monks (or swamis) was welcomed onto the national scene. One of them built the new temple on Filbert Street.

These Hindu swamis did not come to the United States to attend to the needs of their working-class compatriots. There are accounts of Indian students and academics visiting and living in the temple but no accounts of working-class Indian immigrants ever visiting this building. The working classes went to gurdwaras, Sikh places of worship, which in the United States also served as social gathering spaces and centers of political activities. \(^5\) In contrast to the predominantly immigrant community patronizing the gurdwaras, the San Francisco Vedanta Temple attracted a growing number of Anglo-American worshippers. \(^6\)

The odd popularity of Hindu preachers at a time when anti-Asian sentiments were high can be explained by what historian Paul Carter refers to as a time of “spiritual crisis” in American religious life, which triggered massive internal migrations that overwhelmed urban ministries, and also by the intellectual challenges posed by Darwinists, scientists, atheist movements, and advocates of the “higher criticism” of the Bible. \(^7\) At this moment of spiritual and social turmoil, Hindu monks made inroads into American society, preaching a new religion and building religious centers and temples in San Francisco, New York, and Boston. 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.” \(^8\) Buddhism and newer religions, such as Theosophy, also made inroads, and in 1901 the Theosophical Society built a huge complex in Point Loma, south of San Francisco near San Diego. Demographic changes, political events, and geography made the San Francisco Vedanta Temple a center of cultural contact and social transformation during this period.

At a local level the landscapes of San Francisco neighborhoods were being transformed, too. The architectural facade of the Hindu temple was one of many changes sweeping the neighborhood of Filbert Street. \(^9\) The neighborhood had been known as “cow-hollow” until fifteen years before the temple was built, when the local lagoons were drained and all livestock were ordered out of the area to make way for encroaching residential developments. The 1900 Sanborn map shows corrals, factories, and vegetable gardens. In succeeding years the area developed quickly, and Victorian mansions and Edwardian-style homes appeared in the landscape. When the construction of the temple began in 1905, however, there were still a few vacant lots in the area. A photograph in the Vedanta archives from around 1908 shows the temple area still in flux (fig. 3). During this time the waterfront was along Bay Street, and small hotels lined Webster Street from the bay uphill toward the temple. \(^10\)
The Colonial Hotel is on Webster Street at right center. On the next block is the Il Vecchio Toscano Hotel. The Presidio Hay, Grain, Wood, and Coal Company is to the right of the Colonial Hotel, and next to it is a horseshoe repair store. Businesses changed hands frequently, however, and another circa 1908 photograph shows a shoe repair shop, smith store, and barbershop in the vicinity with to-let signs on their storefronts (fig. 4).

Mary Louise Pratt’s concepts of a contact zone and autoethnography frame the following discussion of the Vedanta Temple as the first physical outpost.


12 The exact location of this photograph is difficult to determine. The temple archives note that these images were taken from the temple, which would place the stores along Filbert Street. However, the building numbering suggests otherwise. Sanborn-Perris Map Company Ltd., 1899–1900 San Francisco Sanborn-Perris Fire Insurance Maps, 3:320; Sanborn-Perris Map Company Ltd., 1905 San Francisco Sanborn-Perris Fire Insurance Maps, 3:299–300, David Rumsey Map Collection.
of Hindu religious practice and culture in the New World. A contact zone is a space where multiple groups grapple with each other, often in circumstances of unequal power. One of the communicative and interactional practices of a contact zone is autoethnography, defined as a form of self-representation in which people adapt and reuse representations and stereotypes of themselves made by others. The term “autoethnography” for purposes of this study refers to individuals’ use of familiar representations as a strategy to gain legitimacy and acceptance within a difficult social context. For the members of the Vedanta Society, this strategy allowed them to promote and popularize their religion and organization to San Franciscans. By taking ownership of these forms of representations, the autoethnographer becomes an agent in a strategy of resistance to more powerful discursive practices.


Ibid., 35.
Not only was the temple a location where Americans went to learn and practice an Eastern religion, it was a place for autoethnographic representations. To Americans, architectural stylistic features such as onion domes, trefoil arches, or temple shikhara (towers) were visual forms that many had seen in newspaper and journal accounts of the exotic East. Nigel Rapport writes that stereotypes are important because they provide a well-recognized syntax and cognitive structure for all. Rapport calls this “discursive stability,” where stereotypes are a stable and widespread discursive currency, and they provide significant initial points of reference … a source of consistent, expectable, broad and immediate ways of knowing of the social world; a ready means by which to embody and express a multitude of complex emotions; a shortcut to generalities, to future possible regularities and uniformities.” Rapport explains that individuals engage with stereotypes by adopting and adapting them to suit their needs. Stereotypes allow individuals to personalize and contextualize their relationship to others as well as their presentation of self in everyday life. In the case of the Vedanta Temple, the architecture borrowed stereotypes from Hindu, Islamic, and Western styles to represent a crafted image to the general public. The Vedanta Society used these stereotypical forms and a visibly eclectic facade as representational shorthand in order to gain acceptance among San Franciscans. The success of this autoethnographic strategy depended on arousing emotional responses and affective interpretations.

The momentary element of surprise and amazement when a San Franciscan saw the temple for the first time is akin to the initial moment of cultural contact described by Stephen Greenblatt in which shared language, previous experience, or comparisons fail because two cultures are so different. These cultural encounters are relational, local, and historically contingent “engaged representations.” Greenblatt refers to that initial moment of wonder, which “precedes, even escapes, moral categories,” as one in which the parties have no objective way to categorize or judge an experience and no way to know if they love or hate what they have encountered. Although the experience of seeing the Vedanta Temple from the street was less dramatic than Greenblatt’s examples and not completely novel due to San Franciscans’ prior knowledge and prevalent stereotypes about the East, nevertheless the facade produced a sense of awe and wonder.

That initial moment of wonder was followed by imaginative and cognitive acts such as recognition, translation, and interpretation. Paul Carter explains how European explorers such as Captain Cook used their prior knowledge and memories to interpret the new landscape of Australia, assigning familiar names to the new topographies. The wondrous unknown gave way to European taxonomies of interpretation and translation for surveying and ultimately possessing the continent.

Both Carter and Greenblatt emphasize language and written accounts that fail to address the performative and affective responses from individuals and groups encountering each other and the built environment. Studies that focus on the human experience of material landscapes suggest a useful counterpoint to those approaches and provide useful comparisons with the Vedanta Temple case. For instance, in her description of Mississippi blues joints, Jennifer Nardone examines the moment of encounter by focusing on the human experience of theambience, interior layout, signage, and lights on the building facade that help to define a juke joint as a familiar and recognizable space for members of the in-group. Outsiders remain oblivious of these nuances and feel unwelcome in the juke joints because of their unfamiliarity with these spaces. In another instance, Sewell demonstrates how turn-of-the-twentieth-century department stores invested in highly visible storefronts along main streets in order to encourage female customers to venture inside. By their very location, storefronts became a site of cultural contact and a transitional space between indoor and outdoor realms. The storefronts were highly visible, filled with “objects of desire” meant to entice potential consumers. Those storefronts also

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17 Ibid., 281.


19 Ibid., 20.


23 I borrow the term “objects of desire” from Adrian Forty’s book by the same name. Forty examines the marketing and production of consumer items since the Industrial Revolution, arguing that
became political spaces where posters and information about suffrage were prominently displayed. In the same vein, recent work on immigrant stores and markets demonstrates that storefronts continue to be staged by store owners to solicit emotional reactions from potential customers.24

I argue that the Vedanta Temple’s facade and interiors engaged its users’ senses and emotions in ways similar to the above examples. Human bodies encounter the material world, including the Vedanta Temple, via sensory and symbolic stimuli, and such engagements are culturally coded. Upton argues that physical registers, such as building edges, building types, and physical edges between multiple domains, organize the ways humans understand and experience their world.25 He identifies procession movements—walking, smelling, seeing, and hearing across these physical registers—as ways that we experience the material world and argues that such engagements with the material world are often politically and ideologically coded. Those who saw, entered, and used the Vedanta Temple building during the first two decades of the twentieth century encountered a series of physical and symbolic registers that were encoded into the architecture. A brief history of the Vedanta Society provides context for understanding the underlying purpose for encoding the temple building.

A Brief History of the Vedanta Society

A talk by a Hindu monk from India, Swami Vivekananda, was one of the highlights of the World's Parliament of Religions, an international gathering of religious scholars held in Chicago in conjunction with the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition. The event was organized to create a global dialogue of faiths. Following his huge success at the parliament, Vivekananda embarked on a tour of the United States. His popular and well-attended lectures in 1893 and 1894 were much publicized in the American press. During these visits Vivekananda set up branches of the Vedanta Society in various American cities and drew a large following among Anglo-American urban social elites.26

These societies studied and practiced an ancient Indian theology called Vedanta, referring to a branch of Hindu philosophy that examines the forms and processes of self-realization and an understanding of the ultimate nature of reality.27 At the turn of the twentieth century various religious and reform movements in India used Vedanta to reframe Hindu discourse and practice. Swami Vivekananda and his monastic order produced a unique interpretation of the philosophy of Vedanta through their texts and lectures in India and abroad.28 Nationalist leaders in India and in the Indian diaspora employed the same resurgent and revivalist interpretations of Hindu traditions in their rhetoric against British rule and Christian missionary propaganda. By rediscovering Hinduism’s progressive, scientific, and philosophical origins, nationalist and religious leaders countered the colonizers’ argument that Indians were politically and culturally deficient and hence in need of “civilizing” British rule or Christian religious conversion.29

The San Francisco branch of the Vedanta Society began as the “Vedanta Class” on April 14, 1900.

27 The Vedanta teachings are commentaries on the concluding portions of the ancient Vedas, such as the texts called the Upanishads. Thus Vedanta teachings are also known as uttara mimamsa, or the latter inquiries. Vedanta teachings have accumulated over the years as different religious scholars have added commentaries and interpretations.
This class became a full-fledged society under Swami Turiyananda, sent by Vivekananda from India in 1900 to direct the San Francisco center. The San Francisco Vedanta Society’s two centers of power were a society board served by lay members who decided financial matters and an Indian monk in charge of spiritual practices. This dual system of authority made the monk the sole exponent and translator of Hindu philosophy. However, with no access to funds and no power over the organization’s operations, the monk was reduced to a titular head.

In 1903, when Swami Trigunatita succeeded Swami Turiyananda at the San Francisco Vedanta Society, he was the lone Indian in an organization dominated by Anglo members. The membership of the Vedanta Society totaled twenty-five at its founding by Swami Vivekananda. Marie Louise Burke, Swami Trigunatita’s biographer, guessed that the number was probably unchanged when the new swami arrived in 1903. She based her estimate on the number of people who attended a reception for Swami Trigunatita on January 7, 1903. By April 13, 1903, the number of members increased to forty as Swami Trigunatita worked tirelessly to increase membership numbers.  

Trigunatita’s goal was to build consensus and unity within the congregation and to produce a strong identity for this organization. When he came to San Francisco, he met a congregation that was divided by interests. On his arrival the swami began systematically reducing the political influence of the old guard and the lay board in order to bring discipline, coherence, and organization into a deeply divided congregation and to consolidate his authority within the organization. Nine days after his arrival Trigunatita held a meeting in which officers of the society, in consultation with the swami, decided “upon a reorganization of the Vedanta Society upon a more definite basis.”  

By January 15, 1903, Trigunatita had produced a new pamphlet, *The Vedanta Society, San Francisco.* The subheading read, “Represented by the Ramakrishna Mission, Belur Math, Calcutta, India,” and the seal of the Ramakrishna Mission of India was imprinted on the back of the document. The Ramakrishna Mission was a monastic Hindu organization founded in India by Swami Vivekananda in 1897. The American Vedanta Societies were designed to be under the spiritual leadership of the Ramakrishna Mission and were meant to be the Western branches of this Indian organization. Trigunatita’s pamphlet clearly mentioned that the Ramakrishna Mission of India was the primary and only parent body under which the San Francisco society operated. The swami’s public reiteration of the importance of the Ramakrishna Mission shows its centrality to his definition of the society’s identity. Since Trigunatita was the sole representative of Ramakrishna Mission in San Francisco, this declaration also confirmed that his position and power over the San Francisco Vedanta Society were paramount. Creation of the pamphlet was the first of many actions that he would take to reiterate and consolidate his control over the organization.

By September 1905 the swami abolished the annual meetings of the society’s lay board. Instead, he called occasional business meetings for members after his evening classes. During such meetings he would step down from the altar platform to the floor of the auditorium. 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, thereby clarifying his emerging control over the spiritual as well as secular administration of the organization.

By 1907 the swami had successfully attracted a core group of educated Anglo patrons devoted to Vedanta practices. A large number of them were women, many foreign-born, who used the Vedanta Temple as a place where they could exchange spiritual knowledge and prepare to contribute to public life. The temple’s cornerstone document lists sixteen women as contributors to the 1906 purchase of the property. Women such as C. F. Peterson, Mrs. Wollberg, Mrs. Bartle, Cara French, and Ida Ansel were not only important donors and devotees but also members of the board.

The decision in 1908 to add an extra floor to the existing building only two years after completion of the temple was entirely Swami Trigunatita’s idea and seems to have symbolized his consolidation of power. Officially, the reason for the expansion was an impending visit of Swami Brahmananda, president of the Ramakrishna order in Calcutta. Swami Trigunatita explained that the president of the order would occupy the top floor of the building.

50 Marie Louise Burke, *Swami Trigunatita: His Life and Work* (San Francisco: Vedanta Society of Northern California, 1997), 75, 93; handwritten notes, Vedanta Society of Northern California Archives.  
51 Burke, *Swami Trigunatita,* 58.  
53 Jackson, *Vedanta for the West,* 89–98.
while visiting.\textsuperscript{34} His visit to the United States would be a monumental event that could establish a diasporic and global Hindu center in San Francisco. His visit also would have immense symbolic value since it would show the president’s full support for Trigunatita’s cause. Since Swami Brahmananda never came to San Francisco, however, and there was never any surety that he would, the temple’s expansion more likely was related to considerations within the society membership.

Many older members of the society were hopeful that Trigunatita’s presence was temporary.\textsuperscript{35} Cliques and infighting among the disciples made it difficult for Swami Trigunatita to carry out his work. The swami’s decision to expand the temple represented a focus on organizational and ecclesiastical work in the city.\textsuperscript{36} The temple addition was a symbolic act that helped Trigunatita consolidate his vision of the organization within an urban context. The building’s new architecture was a material expression of a new urban spiritual center.

Elsewhere I have examined how the building of this temple and its architecture reflect the politics of power and control within the Vedanta Society.\textsuperscript{37} Here it suffices to state that buying land, owning property, building the temple, determining the facade details, and sanctioning use and behavior inside the building were strategies that gave the swami political and financial independence and the freedom to direct the organization. Thus, building the temple was no simple act but, rather, a planned process in which the architectural design played a symbolic part in the swami’s wrestling of political and spiritual control from an increasingly divided board.

The analysis in the following two sections explains how the temple building engaged its users. The first of these sections describes the nature of the “first sight”—an initial moment when one encountered this building—and the symbolic and material qualities of its facade. The second section examines the bodily experience of entering and using the public chapel. The entry sequence—how one entered, what one saw, and the nature of the procession—was the first in a series of such secondary experiences.

The Exterior at First Sight: “A Throng of Curious and Interested Spectators”

The approach to the building and one’s vantage point and distance shaped a person’s first engagement with the Vedanta Temple. The eclectic architecture of the building became evident when viewed from a few blocks north of Filbert Street. While walking up Filbert Street from the east, on the other hand, a minor hill hid the building until one reached a block away. From most other angles, especially if viewed from the sidewalks of Webster Street, traveling uphill from Union Street, one saw nothing unfamiliar. The residential portion of the building looked like any other neighboring two-story frame building with large bay windows. A photograph taken in 2000 reconstructs what a pedestrian saw from Webster (fig. 5). Unlike the decorative treatments on the Filbert Street side façade (see fig. 1), the decorative architectural moldings on the bay windows along Webster Street were similar to those used in neighboring buildings. From Webster Street only the dome on the terrace was visible. A viewer had to cross Webster and Filbert Streets and stand on the northeast corner of these streets in order to fully view the eclectic architectural motifs that made this building distinctive.

As a result of the differing architectural treatments on the temple’s various elevations, 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.”\textsuperscript{38} Oddly, the reporter failed to mention the bulbous, double-onion dome on the northeast corner of the building. If he approached the building from Webster or Fillmore Streets to Filbert Street, entering through the public entrance there, the dome may not have been visible. A 1908 Vedanta Society publication described this dome on the northeast corner of the building as “a little specimen of the style of some of the old fashioned temples of

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\item[34] Brahmananda was more than the head of the organization; he was also a colleague and friend of Swami Trigunatita, and both belonged to the founding group of monks who began the parent organization in India.
\item[36] Trigunatita’s predecessor established a center for meditation and retreat called Shanti Ashram in picturesque San Antonio Valley, Santa Clara County, away from the city. Trigunatita’s focus on expanding urban outreach in San Francisco and surrounding areas was resisted by many disciples. Ibid., 135–37.
\item[38] Newspaper clipping, “Resident Priest Tells of Faith,” San Francisco Chronicle, January 7, 1906, Vedanta Society of Northern California Archives.
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the province of Bengal [in India]. Therefore, it might give to some, an idea of antiquity."

The highly visible public entrance to the temple along Filbert Street that had caught the reporter’s eye sported a multifoiled, pointed arched entry, a mix of a scalloped arch and a multifoil cusped Indo-Saracenic engrailed arch found in buildings such as the Lotus Mahal, built between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries in Hampi, India (fig. 6). A Sanskrit inscription on the spandrel around the mosaic arch over the Filbert Street side doorway expressed a dedication to Shri Ramakrishna, the patron saint of the organization (fig. 7). Atop the canopy was a carved eagle, its outstretched wings standing out in relief against the horizontal lines of the wall siding and the elaborate cornice with trefoil molding. That carving was placed intentionally to symbolize the American eagle and the temple’s American identity. On special civic occasions, national holidays, and festivals, that claim was further substantiated. The building was decked with American flags and the Filbert Street entrance draped with two large flags (see fig. 18). Standing outside this entrance, viewers’ eyes would be drawn up from the flags to culminate at the American eagle.

Curiosity and expectations of the bizarre drew onlookers and passersby to the temple’s opening on January 8, 1906. A reporter from the San Francisco Chronicle noted “a throng of curious and interested

Fig. 5. Webster Street entrance, photo 2000. (Arijit Sen.)

40 The words Om Namo Bhagavatey Ramakrishnaya are inscribed in tiles. The first word is Om, a symbolic word for “the absolute,” chanted and repeated during meditation. The rest is translated as “salutation to the blessed Lord, Ramakrishna.”
41 Original manuscript, Ernest C. Brown, “The Work of Swami Trigunatita in the West,” ca. 1908, 24, Vedanta Society of Northern California Archives. This work was published later in Ernest C. Brown, “The Work of Swami Trigunatita in the West,” Prabuddha Bharata 33 (January–December 1928). A similar description appeared in “Dedication of First Hindoo Temple,” San Francisco Chronicle, January 8, 1906, quoted in Burke, Swami Trigunatita, 178. The swami explained the decision to place the eagle by referring to American and Hindu mythologies: “The eagle has her wings wide spread, and an amiable or fraternal face. On its wings, underneath, are painted the American flags, well protected. ... 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.” This analogy between the American eagle and a Hindu mythological bird shows how the swami reimagined and connected established mythologies within the Vedanta discourse to American national folklore. “General Features, The San Francisco Vedanta Society and Hindu Temple”; Burke, Swami Trigunatita, 307–73.
spectators, who filled the halls to the door and overflowed upon the sidewalk long before the hours set for the exercises. Many were attracted by a genuine interest in the Vedanta faith, but many more were attracted by the expectations of beholding some form of Eastern mysticism or symbolism in the dedicatory ceremonies.”

Yet, in 1906 the public saw none of that. Instead, according to the same reporter, “the ceremonies, however, were very simple; the only touch that at all resembled Orientalism being the robe and tunic of Swami Trigunatita, expounder, missionary, and lecturer of the Vedanta philosophy.”

There was a reason why the Filbert Street facade spoke of difference and visibility. Although the society brochures claimed this as self-evident, only a few laypersons must have actually comprehended the stylistic significance of the unfamiliar architectural facade and its eclectic forms. Prior expert knowledge was necessary to identify the inaccurate renderings of these architectural styles and the lack of historical precedents. But no expertise was needed to respond to the temple’s unique foreignness. To many who had never seen a Hindu temple or examples of Oriental buildings, the temple facade along Filbert Street opened up imaginative possibilities. The act of seeing the spectacular facade evoked feelings transforming how people construed and experienced the building. The Vedanta Temple appeared novel and enigmatic, simultaneously producing alienation, amazement, and attraction in the American layperson. Walter de Vecchi writes in his memoirs, “Without doubt the most awesome, the most spooky, the most spine-tingling curiosity in all Cow Hollow [was] that which frightened ‘most’ of us kids ‘the most.’ I describe none other than the Vedanta Temple #1. Well I’ve always tried to forget it! … Not even the biggest clown among us ever made jokes about its weird signs and magic symbols; not even the bravest among us ever dared to trespass its haunted, threatening soil.”

**Fig. 6.** Alexander John Greenlaw, Lotus Mahal, Hampi (Vijayanagar) Bellary District, photo ca. 1856. (South and South East Asian Collection © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.)

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42 “Dedication of First Hindoo Temple.”
43 Ibid.

The Webster Street entrance led into the monastery and living quarters where the swami, his close monastic disciples, and married members lived. The entrance foyer resembled local Victorian duplexes and apartment buildings (see figs. 2 and 5). In the Webster Street facade, unlike the Filbert Street one, Victorian order was maintained in the additions to the upper-floor residential zone. Compared to the Filbert Street elevation, the Webster Street residential elevation did not stand out as visually distinct from the surrounding facades.

Fig. 7. Filbert Street entrance after renovations, photo 1910.
This residence-temple duality was possible because of a clever reconfiguration of the corner plot and skillful manipulation of its architectural context. 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 (fig. 8).45 In the case of buildings located on a corner plot, the bays run perpendicular to the street on which the entrance is located. Although the Vedanta Temple was located on a corner plot, the layout of the building was slightly modified to create two separate zones. The internal bays of the residence, perpendicular to Webster Street, maintained the Victorian structure. However, these bays did not extend into the temple and chapel portion of the building. Instead, the chapel had a separate entrance along Filbert Street, and its interior plan with deep roof beams created a large open space. The first-floor plan in figure 9 (along with fig. 8, top) shows the two zones. Two narrow bays with circulation and living spaces abutting Webster Street constituted the residential zone. The large public hall along Filbert Street and a side stairway leading to the first-floor terrace made up the temple zone. The building was conceived as a private residence and a public temple—two independent, back-to-back buildings sharing a common wall.

By April 1908, two years after its original opening, the society had expanded the temple, added a floor, and made the architecture more eclectic and even more sensational than before (fig. 10). The new temple, with its architectural elements taken from Hindu, Moorish, Russian, and European building styles, was impossible to miss. Most of the new additions were on the eastern section of the building. According to Ernest C. Brown, a society member and temple resident, the “new” third floor had “a large front living room, kitchen, bedroom, and bathroom, all fitted with every modern convenience. It was in every way a modern living space.”46 Yet the impression from the outside was different, and modern living quarters were hidden by an elaborate breezeway that added to the visual exotica (fig. 11). Fish-scale shingles, common on Victorian houses, imbricated the wall and roof surfaces on the third floor and terrace above. The multifoil 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; instead, the architecture of the colonnade produced a visual illusion of lightness and buoyancy that 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 modern residence was all but invisible. Instead the viewer saw the “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.”47 In 1915, during the Panama-Pacific International Exposition, the temple became an urban landmark, and its exotic architecture became the very symbol of San Francisco’s claim as the gateway to the Orient. The city advertised this building, and postcards of the building were sold to exposition visitors. For members of the Vedanta Society, architectural visibility became an important strategy in gaining acceptance in the United States.

The addition also may have been influenced by external factors, including increasing visibility and acceptance of the organization in San Francisco and a popular interest in Eastern cultures preceding the Panama-Pacific International Exposition. By 1907 Swami Trigunatita was recognized as a leading proponent and scholar of Vedanta philosophy in San Francisco. Despite infighting within his organization, he received recognition for his work from northern California academic and religious studies circles.48 The intensive use of Oriental architectural motifs in the building addition was a self-confident way to express emerging Hindu and Eastern spirituality as a tangible and visual reality in the San Francisco skyline.

The Architectural Additions and Their Inauthentic Mimicry

A 1914 article from the San Francisco Chronicle reveals that the building materials used in construction did not match those used in India to build similar edifices.49 For instance, during

47 Ibid.
48 In October 1907 he spoke before a religion class at the University of California, Berkeley. He returned on November 26, 1907, to speak to a larger crowd in the University’s Greek Theater on Aryan mythology of India. In May 1909 he spoke to the Golden Gate branch of the Theosophical Society. Burke, Swami Trigunatita, 194.
the 1908 expansions, instead of marble, onyx, precious metals, and gems, the San Francisco temple was constructed out of locally available wood and stone. Yet the report argued that minarets, towers, ornaments, and architectural details were carefully chosen for their symbolism. The exotic facade drew curious people into the chapel during prayers and lectures.

The architect of the temple was Joseph Leonard, owner of the San Francisco and Suburban Home Building Company, a well-known San Francisco builder whose work in the East Bay and Alameda...
included suburban housing developments. Despite his architectural expertise, Leonard was unfamiliar with Hindu and Indian cultures. The swami made most decisions regarding architectural styles.

Following the 1908 additions, the third-floor terrace became a crowded display of a variety of domed towers (fig. 12). Two of the new towers claimed stylistic and visual references to Eastern architectural traditions, yet none of them conformed exactly to those precedents. The southeast tower directly over the entrance to the residential wing had a crenellated pattern that, according to a guide published by the temple, resembled the battlemented parapets of European castles. The northeast corner tower, called the Shiva tower and originally located on the second floor terrace, was lifted from its original location to the third floor after renovation. The temple guide described the tower as symbolic of the Hindu deity Shiva. The form of the tower and the elaborate trellised entrance was supposed to resemble a shiva lingam, a phallic symbol on a flat base representing the male and female principals of creation. The space inside this tower was used as a Shiva temple, or shiva mandir. Although the temple brochure claimed this tower to be architecturally similar to Indian temple tops, the dome was more onion-like than temple domes (shikhara) from India.

A shorter tower with an arched window was built in a modified South Bengal aat-chala style on an octagonal base, rather than the usual square base. Although the temple guide refers to formal architectural precedents from Bengal such as the Shiva temples in Dakshineswar or the Kali Ghat temple in Calcutta, I suspect that many of the stylistic details of the temple were suggested by the swami since Leonard did not have any experience with Indian architecture. I have not uncovered any evidence of Leonard’s familiarity with Indian architectural styles.


the San Francisco temple tower’s octagonal plan deviates markedly from its references (fig. 13). The finial on top of this tower, with a crescent, sun, and trident, represented an unusual fusion of Islamic, Hindu, and pagan Roman symbols—not common practice in India.

The dome on the western end of the third-floor terrace, supposed to be “an exact reproduction of one of the temples of Benares,” is a highly stylized version of the elongated beehive-shaped tower with overlapping layers that is part of the Kashi Vishwanath Temple built in the North Indian Nagara style of architecture (fig. 14, and see fig. 12, left). However, the bulbous garlic shape on the Vedanta Temple resembled Islamic petalled domes more than it did the temple tower of Benares.

Small-scale changes were made in the western wing along Filbert Street, too. The Filbert Street entrance led to a one-story public worship chapel with an attached storeroom, flower room, and terrace conservatory. A square box-like, stunted bell-shaped tower topped by a dome sat atop the Filbert Street entrance (see fig. 10). The temple guide claimed the dome to be reminiscent of “a bell-tower of a christian church, and like a little mahomedan mosque, and which has a gross partial miniature style of the great Taj-Mahal of Agra,” used here as a “conservatory, thus representing a partial symbol of nature and of natural growth.” As for the other domes, the proportions of the Taj Mahal–like dome over the Filbert Street entrance differed from its supposed prototype.


53 The San Francisco Vedanta Society and Hindu Temple.
Unlike the masonry corbeling of traditional Hindu temples in India, the Vedanta Temple towers were made of sheet metal welded together along seams. The choice of material reflected the builder’s inability to use Indian building techniques, and the available materials modified the towers’ shapes and affected spatial experiences in these spaces.\textsuperscript{54} In the absence of Indian materials, techniques, and knowledge, the domes were made of a formwork of wood and frames covered with a skin to mimic the circular forms (fig. 15). The separation between the skin and the structure produced a false sense of spaciousness from outside. In reality, the rooftop shrines under the domes were intimate spaces with low ceiling heights resulting from the double structure. The
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\textsuperscript{54} In 2009 these terrace domes were in urgent need of repairs. Patches covered leaking, rusted sheeting, and the interior framing battens had been damaged with frequent water leaks.

The large corroding, gaping holes in the metal sheets may not have been there in 1908, but the deterioration clearly shows the architect’s and building contractor’s inexperience in using these materials in these forms.
odd construction also created leaks, and as early as November 1, 1909, Ernest C. Brown wrote in the monastery minutes that the "ceiling still leaks in various places from the roof above."\textsuperscript{55}

What generated these imperfect architectural imitations? Their mimetic dissonance cannot be ascribed solely to the unavailability of materials and technologies in America or to the architect’s inability to reproduce accurate facsimiles. Rather, the society placed importance on visual symbolism over structural practicality. Encountering the Filbert Street facade of the temple in early twentieth-century San Francisco raises further questions. Despite its overall form, with Victorian motifs and bay windows, why was it important for the makers of this building to promote this architectural “idea of antiquity?”\textsuperscript{56} Selectively reviving the past seemed to mark this building as alien, a blatant exhibition that seemed out of place at a time when negative


\textsuperscript{56} Similar use of symbols via architecture is associated with this religious group in other instances. Thirty years after the construction of the San Francisco temple, the Ramakrishna Temple at Belur, India, was built. Consecrated in 1938 from plans and ideas generated by the founder of the organization in 1899, the Ramakrishna Temple was another eclectic edifice in which architecture was used to make a symbolic statement of unity. Unlike the Vedanta Temple, the Ramakrishna Temple was a mixture of multiple architectural styles found in India. The motifs were taken from Buddhist temples and monasteries, North Indian \textit{Nagar} style temple architecture, Rajput and Indo-Saracenic architecture from the western states, the fusion of Mughal and vernacular traditions in Bengal temples, the thatched roofs of local huts, and South Indian temple styles. In each of these temples (and others, such as the 1938 Los Angeles temple), architectural styles served a symbolic function of uniting disparate cultural systems.
reports of Hindu religious practices were discussed in California’s Christian and popular media. An answer to that question may lie in the way the members of the Vedanta Society addressed the anti-Hindu media reports. Instead of defending their faith and practices by countering the media reports, the society members turned the media arguments on their head. Yes, they agreed, Hinduism and Hindu symbols certainly seemed foreign to Americans. But rather than being alien to Western culture, Hinduism seemed alien because Western societies had forgotten its roots. The Vedantists argued that Hindu culture was the root of Western civilization.

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 arguing that the Hindu religion encompassed and was the basis of all world religions and cultures, the Vedantists were encouraging Americans to see, experience, possess, and recognize a series of hybrid icons and artifacts of Hindu culture as familiar objects.

According to Pravrajika Madhavaprana, a current monastic member of the Vedanta Society of Northern California, San Francisco, the swami had explained to a close disciple that his reasons for adding architectural elements, such as the towers as well as the American eagle, were psychological. “He knew that prejudice against other peoples, religions, and cultures, was deep-seated in the human mind, and this bad trait would hurt others as well as impede an individual’s spiritual growth. So he introduced some of these methods to disarm and break down prejudice and bigotry, and ignorance [in order to] harmonize and make the path smooth for those who would follow and carry on the work.” The building was marked with Hindu


58 “Resident Priest Tells of Faith”; Burke, Swami Trigunatita, 177.
Fig. 14. Temple of Vishveshwar, Benares, India, 1899. From James Fergusson, *History of Indian and Eastern Architecture* (London: J. Murray, 1899), fig. 258, 460. (Printed Book and Periodical Collection, Winterthur Library.)
symbols as well as American ones, pointing toward a hybrid identity. The temple architecture supported an argument of religious autochthony made by Swami Trigunatita—that Hindu religion was the springboard for all other religions and civilizations and hence the original spiritual and cultural fountainhead.69 Such an argument countered the Christian media’s criticism that Hinduism was a degenerated and inappropriate form of religion that had no place in North America by arguing that even Christianity was a subset and outgrowth of Hindu spiritual thought. Hence, the architectural symbolism of the new additions in conjunction with the staged experience of encountering the facade promoted the idea that Hindu culture shared the fundamentals of American values and culture.

Most criticism against Hindu traditions came out of sensational accounts of culture, superstitions, and religious practices written by Christian missionaries in their journals. Many returned from India with stories of their visits, often biased accounts of pagan religious practices. Typical of these reports is one in the Christian Century dating to 1905 in which Hinduism is described as “debauched with deeds of lust and blood. … Many of the Indian deities, given to lustful amours, are especially worshipped by the people. … It is not surprising that religion in India is not only divorced from morality but married to vice. … Much indecency exists in India under the guise of religion, many of the temple dancing girls are merely consecrated prostitutes, and in many cases respectable women are led to lives of shame.”61 These accounts encouraged monetary contributions toward proselytizing efforts in the East from the lay congregations at home. Christian journal articles, such as the Methodist Quarterly Review, Missionary Herald, Missionary Review of the World, and the more secular Hampton-Columbian Magazine, ironically increased the profile of Eastern religions in America. In 1902 an article in the Christian Century expressed the fear 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.”62 That comment was directed toward 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 United States.

The renovated facade of the temple was purposely designed to respond to negative media and public opinion in California following increased immigration from India after 1906.63 The years

62 Charles Clayton Morrison, “Enthusiasm and Sanity,” Christian Century 19 (January 30, 1902): 9. See also description of Hinduism in publications such as Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society of the Presbyterian Church (Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.); Women’s Foreign Missionary Society of the Presbyterian Church, Hospitals in India (Philadelphia: Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society of the Presbyterian Church, 1908), http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HMS.COUNT:991752 (accessed October 21, 2013).
63 In 1907 British revenue policy, land reform, and political acts brought about economic hardship for the farmers of Punjab. The policies of the British government set off a large-scale migration of young unemployed men to cities in search of jobs. Many Punjabi villagers applied for jobs in the British Indian Army but could not get a job with the armed forces. As a result, there was a spike in the number of immigrants from India to the United States. Between 1891 and 1900 the total number of Indians who officially entered the United States, according to immigration records, was sixty-eight. Between 1901 and 1910, the total number spiked to 4,713. W. Peter Ward, White Canada Forever: Popular Attitudes and Public Policy toward Orientals in British Columbia (Montreal: McGill Queen’s University Press, 1990), 75; Jensen, Passage from India.
1907 and 1908 were difficult for Hindu laborers on the West Coast. On September 5, 1907, local white mobs attacked immigrant homes in Bellingham, Washington. In November five hundred workers in Everett attacked local Indian laborers in a night of violence. Media reports of these anti-Indian incidents were often biased in favor of the perpetrators, but occasionally articles reflecting the immigrant perspective appeared in some journals. In an 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 take on Indian culture. A student and Indian scholar at the University of California, Mukerji lived with other Indian students from Berkeley in the Vedanta Temple in 1909. In his article he disagreed with detractors such as Buchanan, referring to educated Indian and Hindu students and the Hindu priests of the Vedanta Society as the new faces of Hinduism and Indian culture, locating India’s “only pride and glory” in philosophy and in Vedantism. He argued that the Vedantic philosophy was “the most rational of all intellectual conceptions of life and death.”

Mukerji’s rhetoric reclaimed ancient Hindu religious philosophy as a sign of superior heritage and rational, intellectual prowess. The very culture that Buchanan criticized, rediscovered, and traced back to its origins, was posited as a perfect exemplar. Mukerji’s was a very powerful form of autoethnographic text that inverted the logic of nativists.

Mukerji’s references to symbolism and history were repeated in Vedanta Society pamphlets and the organization journal called *Voice of Freedom*. This time the architecture of the temple became a symbol of this resurgent “past knowing” and semiotic inversion. The analogy emphasized that the eclectic architectural elements were not a sign of contrariety but rather symbols of variations within an all-inclusive spiritual system. According to the *Voice of Freedom*, the combination of Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic, and European architectural elements reflected the universality of Hindu Vedantic traditions from which all other world religions and cultures had emanated. In other words, these arguments appropriated disparate building traditions by construing a “common origin myth.” In 1909 the prospectus of the journal claimed that because Vedanta was the religion of an “ancient race of Aryans” who had migrated to the Gangetic planes of North India in antiquity, the San Francisco Vedanta Society and the practices within its Hindu temple were therefore “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.”

The mention of Aryan antiquity and Vedanta traditions brings forth a problematic issue associated with racial autochthony. The architecture of the building became part of a carefully crafted argument that claimed 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.” In the context of Western history, the racist underpinnings of this argument are clear. The Aryan argument was being used publicly in the United States to argue against Asian immigration, for racial purity, and against miscegenation. The Vedanta Society pamphlets, however, used the term “Aryan” in the Indian sense, which had little to do with its connotations of white racial privilege and citizenship in the United States.

In India *arya-sanskriti* (Aryan culture) and *arya-dharma* (Aryan religion) are references to Vedic and Vedantic culture and practices. By the 1900s the Aryan origin of Vedic religions suggested by Orientalist scholars was already an accepted narrative among the reform religious movements in India, including the Vedanta Society. Arya Samaj (founded in 1875), Brahmo Samaj (1828–90), and the Ramakrishna Mission were religious organizations whose goal was to reform Hindu religious practices of polytheism, iconolatry, animal sacrifice, caste and untouchability, *sati* (widow immolation), and child marriage, arguing that these rituals were not original and lacked the sanction of the original Vedic principles. Historian Romila Thapar argues that the term “Aryan” was used as a marker of superior social status in India but not within the same context of social Darwinism and biological determinism framing the nineteenth- and twentieth-century race discourse in the West.

Swami Trigunatita was aware of the racist genealogy of this discourse in the West. In a speech in June 1907, he rebuked the article that claimed that because Vedanta was the religion of an “ancient race of Aryans” who had migrated to the Gangetic planes of North India in antiquity, the San Francisco Vedanta Society and the practices...

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66 The San Francisco Vedanta Society and Hindu Temple; Burke, Swami Trigunatita, 307–73.
1911 he carefully explained that his references to an Aryan past were not the same as the discourses of race and color prevalent in the United States.

From whom, and from where, have you got [sic] the higher and refined ideas of white race, and of white color? ... 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.69

United States government agencies defined whiteness using very different criteria. Six racial categories were available in the 1910 census, and the census takers classified Asian Indians as “others.” In a footnote, the census takers clarified that although Indians were “ethnically white,” these “pure-blooded Hindus” did not fit the “popular conception” of the white race. This popular conception, explained the authors, referred to Caucasians of European descent. India, they argued, represented a civilization distinct from Europe.70 Rules were applied differently in courts where court clerks often determined status by looking at the skin color of the applicant and them making a subjective decision on race.

In 1906 Taraknath Das complained about the rejection of his citizenship application in California in the New York Outlook, in an open letter titled “British Indians and Citizenship in White Men’s Countries.” Das asked Attorney General Charles J. Bonaparte if “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 descent. India, they argued, represented a civilization distinct from Europe.70 Rules were applied differently in courts where court clerks often determined status by looking at the skin color of the applicant and them making a subjective decision on race.

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By 1923 the US Supreme Court weighed in, unequivocally ruling that Indians were not white.72

The ambiguities in the way race, whiteness, and identity were understood provided a unique opportunity to legitimate the presence of Hindus in the United States. The references to Aryans situated Indians in a liminal and ambiguous racial position, opening up possibilities of passing as white.

Although many of the religious references to Aryans in the Vedanta Society documents related to Vedic religion and texts, some articles in the Vedanta journals addressed the racial logic of naturalization and citizenship in the United States very directly. In a 1909 story, “Ancient Nation,” published anonymously in the Voice of Freedom but presumably written by Swami Trigunatita describing his own trip from India, 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.”73

Such autoethnographic inversions continued in the explanation of the architectural details used in the temple. It was a sense of familiar-yet-different that was intrinsically a part of the process of “staged disappointment.” After that initial moment of wonderment, the architecture of the new Hindu temple facade became a place where familiar images were reemployed to comprehensibly translate otherwise esoteric ideas of Hindu identity and difference. The temple facade became part of symbolic and interpretive translations of existing stereotypes.

The swami took advantage of the increased public interest in Eastern architecture to convince San Francisco city officials that the Vedanta Temple architecture best represented the enduring influence of Oriental architecture on the city skyline. By 1907 he had secured tax exemptions for the entire temple by convincing the bureaucrats in City Hall that the Vedanta Society was a spiritual center that needed their support. In the same year he obtained

71 Taraknath Das, “British Indians and Citizenship in White Men’s Countries,” Outlook 87 (September 7, 1907): 7–8. See also letter from Taraknath Das to Attorney General Charles J. Bonaparte, September 21, 1907, file 97415, RG 118, National Archives, Washington, DC.
72 In 1923 Bhagat Singh Thind used Das’s argument to demand naturalization into the United States. This time the court disagreed and ruled that “it may be true that the blond Scandinavian and the brown Hindu have a common ancestor in the dim reaches of antiquity, but the average man knows perfectly well that there are unmistakable and profound differences between them today.” United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind, 261 U.S. 204 (1923), http://supreme.justia.com/us/261/204/case.html.
73 “Ancient Nations,” Voice of Freedom 1 (December 1909): 129–30. This story may be autobiographical since Swami Trigunatita himself had undertaken a similar journey when he sailed for the United States from India.
permission to sell Vedanta books without a sales license. A postcard showing the Vedanta Temple sold as a city souvenir (fig. 16). The swami asked the engraver to embellish photographs to produce what he thought were desired effects and appropriate images for an American audience. He left handwritten instructions on the back of original photographs to remove the gaps between the wooden boards on the third-floor breezeways and to draw “some pattern on the boards to look like a carpet design” or to “take off the shades from windows” from the photograph of the terrace-top chapel (fig. 17, and see fig. 11).75

In addition, the swami increased the visibility of the temple by using the facade as an advertising billboard. Already distinctly visible from afar as a result of its imposing size and architecture, the facade became visible at night when temple residents adorned the building with lights, flags, festoons, and colorful 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 May 6, 1908, when the Great White Fleet steamed through the Golden Gate or when President Taft visited the city in 1909 (fig. 18).76

By 1909 the temple appeared in the San Francisco Call under the title, “Fancy and Fantastic Architecture in San Francisco.” Stating that “this city has employed the ideas of all the world, and originated new ones of its own,” the article listed the temple as a proud statement of innovation and reemergence from the ashes of the earthquake.77

During the 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition, the temple flew the appropriate flag during various nation-day celebrations. Just as the exposition organizers used lighting as a primary strategy to create chimerical scenes, the swami followed suit.78 The lighted temple building was visible from the exposition grounds at night. In this way the temple became a well-known city landmark and tourist site, and Swami Trigunatita, as the owner of the building, became known among the city’s political circles and the elected officials as the “Hindu Swami.”79

San Francisco visitors expected to see something exotic following the late nineteenth-century development of new religious movements such as Theosophy and New Thought. Orientalist scholars and elite Anglo-Americans who regularly attended meetings of New Thought, Theosophy, Unitarianism,

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74 Similarly, on August 9, 1912, after calling on the mayor and board of supervisors, he obtained immediate permission to take two feet from the sidewalks adjacent to the temple. The swami argued that, in view of the upcoming Panama-Pacific International Exposition, the proposed landscaping would add to the attractiveness of the temple and street. The society began work on a 3-foot-high retaining wall for a garden with trees and flowering shrubs at the same time. Burke, Swami Trigunatita, 262–63.

75 Quotations from a handwritten note with instructions on the back of the photograph in fig. 17, dated ca. 1910, Vedanta Society of Northern California Archives.

76 Burke, Swami Trigunatita, 203; Madhavaprana, “Swami Trigunatita.”


78 The General Electric Company designed the lighting scheme for the Panama-Pacific International Exposition Company. Carefully hidden spotlights creating indirect and masked lighting shone on the buildings, producing a “fairyland” ethereal glow. A barge named Scintillator in the San Francisco Bay carried forty-eight searchlights to create a backdrop to the exposition buildings. Steam was released into the atmosphere to reflect these lights, and the bay fog helped in this mystical lighting. Robert A. Reid, The Blue Book: A Comprehensive Official Souvenir View Book Illustrating the Panama-Pacific International Exposition at San Francisco, 1915 (San Francisco: Robert A. Reid, 1915), 41.

79 Burke, Swami Trigunatita, 262–63.
and Christian Science produced serious scholarship, while journals such as New World, Open Court, and Biblical World published many academic works on comparative religious studies. The American Lectures in the History of Religions and the Haskell Lectures on Comparative Religions further popularized Eastern religion among the American intelligentsia.80

80 The American Oriental Society, formed in 1842, marked the beginning of scholarly interest in the religious traditions of the East. Transcendentalists such as Henry David Thoreau (1817–62) and Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–82) wrote on Eastern

Fig. 17. [R. J.] Waters and Co., San Francisco, third-floor breezeway, photo retouched to show carpet-like pattern, photo ca. 1910.
Loma, California, was similar to the Vedanta Temple in its local landmark status and architectural eclecticism. Like the Vedanta Temple, the academy building and Spalding residence in the Universal Brotherhood and Theosophical Society complex were landmarks seen far and wide, their large domes with skylights brightening interiors during the day and glowing with interior electric lights at night (fig. 19). Built at Point Loma near San Diego, California, in 1901, these buildings mixed South Asian, Egyptian, Victorian, and Greek architectural elements to promote the unity of these various cultures and to argue for a true amalgamation of these diverse thoughts in the teachings and practices of Theosophy.

The Vedanta Temple was a very early example of architectural eclecticism. During the first decade of the twentieth century and in anticipation of the Panama-Pacific International Exposition, San Francisco was much discussed as the gateway to the East.81 Oriental architecture became fashionable in these discussions. Raymond Head points out that the decade of the 1920s saw the culmination of such interests with the building of residences, movie halls, and pavilions in the “Oriental style.”82

The Vedantists claimed a place in San Francisco public imaginations by using Western Orientalist stereotypes as a way to open a dialogue. The lay Anglo congregation, San Francisco white society, the media, and city government acknowledged the Vedantists’ right to talk about religion and spirituality with considerable legitimacy. While speaking of religion, the swami cautiously—and skillfully—interjected issues of race, politics, and citizenship that he could not otherwise openly discuss.

The Vedanta Society’s strategy depended on visitors’ reactions following the initial wonderment at the sight of the temple. The second stage was the disappointing realization that the interior spaces were not as exotic as expected nor were the activities based on Oriental mysticism and magic.83 In fact, the practices and behavior inside the chapel were akin to those in Protestant churches. This church-like interior space transformed wonderment into reason and similitude by bringing in people and making them feel comfortable enough to engage with the organization.

Inside the Building: “Free from Any Worldliness and Material Desires; A Place of Holiness”

How did American neophytes who entered the temple experience the public chapel on the Filbert Street side? Unlike the facade, the chapel’s layout, use, and ambience seemed familiar and reassuring. Erving Goffman, in his work on behavior in social institutions, proposed the terms “front” and “back” to explain sociospatial domains produced during human interactions in everyday life. Front and back zones in the Vedanta Temple separated domains such as inside/outside, private/public, informal/formal, and community/civic. These zones were akin to stage sets, encouraging interactive social engagements and influencing human behavior. The chapel functioned as a front zone.

A visitor did not see the public chapel and altar immediately upon entering. Instead, he or she entered a very dark zone and mounted a short flight of stairs to a landing. To the left was the chapel, a spacious, high-ceilinged, light-filled room with the raised altar located at the farthest end (fig. 20). The long perspective made the altar seem a point of destination, the warm wooden paneling and the blinding light entering the north-facing windows creating a very bright interior. In addition to the windows, numerous pendant and hanging lamps with multiple bulbs bathed the room with

81 The Panama-Pacific International Exposition brochure commented, “The proximity of the site to a world gateway is a wonderful advantage. Through the portals of the Golden Gate the nations of the earth can bring their richest offerings to the wonderful advantage. Through the portals of the Golden Gate.”


83 A reporter from the San Francisco Chronicle noted that there was no sign of any Oriental mysticism. “Dedication of First Hindoo Temple.”
ample light. Experienced in sudden contrast to the windowless cave-like entrance, the chapel had a heavenly ambience. The high dado with simple molding was painted in a lighter color than the walls, creating a sense of spaciousness without sacrificing intimacy. The linoleum-covered floor sloped upward toward the back of the room, accentuating the focused experience of walking down the carpeted central aisle toward the altar. At least one hundred solid, wood-backed foldable chairs (and a few spindle-backed nonfolding ones, too) were laid out on each side of the aisle, with six chairs per row and men and women on separate sides.

Initially a photograph and later a painting of Swami Vivekananda, the founder of the Ramakrishna
Mission in India and the Vedanta centers in the United States, hung on the eastern altar wall. The image, centrally aligned with the aisle, created a focal point. A door to the left of this portrait and behind a high-backed wooden altar chair connected the chapel to the rectory. Altar vases, jardinieres, teakwood taborets (small portable stands), and an organ sat next to the altar. A large number of indoor plants gave the altar a wild garden-like quality. The plants were grown in a conservatory and greenhouse on the first-floor terrace (fig. 21).

A full-sized wall-to-ceiling painting of Sri Ramakrishna, the patron saint, hung on the left altar wall, producing a second focal point. A smaller altar in front of this painting sported a piano bench, taborets, and a jardiniere with fresh flowers. On the north wall, punctuated by the blindingly bright 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 Mark 1:13, “He was there in the wilderness and was with the wild beasts” (fig. 22). In 1906 Swami Trigunatita wrote that Hindus respected Jesus’s teaching and claimed that “the Jesus of Nazareth of the Christians was educated in India. If you are familiar with his life you will know that there is a blank in his life from his youth until he had grown to manhood, until he began his teachings. Those years unaccounted for [were] passed in India. Nicolas Notovitch, the Russian explorer and author, found a manuscript in an underground library in Tibet that told of the work and studies of Jesus of Nazareth.” Notovitch’s claims in *The Unknown Life of Jesus Christ* (1890) were popular during this time among Western Orientalist scholars, and the swami claimed that he came across this story in Tibet before he arrived in the United States. The swami added that Vedantists “believe in the Jesus of Nazareth, but not as the Christians do. We do not name him, and we believe him as only one of the many incarnations of God.” By 1908, however, the swami had reclaimed Jesus as part of the Hindu pantheon by commissioning a lay devotee, Theodosia Oliver, to paint a portrait of Jesus to hang in the chapel. Cara French, in her reminiscence, claims that Swami Trigunatita had a vision of this Tibetan picture of Christ.

A visitor’s initial experience of the chapel was of a warm and brightly lit room punctuated by two focal points centered on divine and holy images of Swami Vivekananda and Sri Ramakrishna.

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84 “Resident Priest Tells of Faith”; Burke, *Swami Trigunatita*, 177.
85 Nicolas Notovitch’s book, *The Unknown Life of Jesus Christ* (1890; repr., Radford, VA: Wilder, 2008), originally published in 1890, was a travelogue of his trip to India via Kashmir and into Ladakh in Tibet. While in Tibet, Notovitch claimed that a lama told him of a story of someone called Isa, who came to India in order to study Hindu and Buddhist religion. Notovitch claims to have seen historical manuscripts. Vedanta monks, such as Swami Abhedananda, traveled to Tibet to discover the texts forming the basis for Notovitch’s claim.
86 “Resident Priest Tells of Faith.”
Although the ceiling was high, the perspective from the landing made the room intimate. Although not laid out along the central axis of the room, the long perspective from the landing produced an illusion of the altar’s centrality. During ceremonies, when the congregation filed in one by one, their attention must have been caught by the sight of the presiding swami seated in the long-backed wooden chair on the altar.

The spartan interior may have been due to dire financial straits but nevertheless reduced its resemblance to an ornate Hindu temple and increased its similarity to a neighborhood church interior. That mimicry was intentional as the swami wanted a church-like layout in order to seem familiar to the curious public and novice members.

The only significant difference from a church interior was the abundance of potted plants and flowers. On Christmas Day in 1909, Ernest C. Brown, a disciple, society chronicler, and resident of the temple, described decorating 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 center 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.87

Fig. 20. [R. J.] Waters and Co., San Francisco, interior of the public chapel.

87 December 22, 1909, entry in Brown, “Minutes of the Monastery,” 84.
The creation of a “garden” inside a building may be odd for an American church, but interior embellishments, such as the use of flowers and plants, were popular in Ramakrishna Mission prayer halls in India and middle-class homes in the eastern Indian state of Bengal (where Swami Trigunatita grew up). In addition, such spaces also made references to paradise (a Judeo-Christian concept) and hence served as a common reference point for most users. The smell of flowers and burning incense produced a subtle olfactory character. Its theological significance and sensory qualities made the garden interior of this “hybrid” chapel truly a locus of cultural contact. Even today, the Vedanta Temple chapel retains this characteristic smell; it transports us to a world whose uniqueness is subtly marked by a sensorium that unites references to the Garden of Eden with that of a Vedic forest.

The temple’s similarity was not only in the architecture of Christian churches but also in the worship format. Worship in the first-floor public chapel closely resembled Catholic Mass. Liturgical practices for the weekend and evening services, intentionally called “the vespers,” were a mix of practices from the Catholic Mass and selected 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 in chairs on the chapel floor and the swami standing on the altar resembled the separation of the clergy and the congregation in a church. This form of worship was unique to the public chapel in the San Francisco temple and differed from worship in the Ramakrishna Mission centers in India, where during evening vespers swamis and devotees sat together 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 there was no separation between the swami and the congregation (except that the swamis sat in the front row), and the service had no designated leader facing an audience—such configurations were limited to lectures only.

In addition, as early as 1903 Swami Trigunatita initiated a rule that men and women should sit separately across the aisles during worship. Such a rule had no precedent in other Vedanta centers across the United States, and this practice created opposition from old timers and bafflement from members and
other monks.\textsuperscript{88} The likeliest reason for introducing this separation must have been in reaction to media reports questioning the presence of Anglo women in this organization led by a foreign and nonwhite man.\textsuperscript{89}

Visitors to the Vedanta Temple encountered invented traditions that responded to social conditions of the period.\textsuperscript{90} Between 1906 and 1910, as negative reports against Indians increased in the media, the swami accordingly adjusted the vespers services in the public chapel.\textsuperscript{91} In 1906 residents of the rectory used the door on the altar connecting the chapel to the ground floor of the rectory. After vespers they would “race down the aisle, take the steps at two bounds and disappear through the door at the back.”\textsuperscript{92} By the end of 1908, the swami became the only person who could use the door to move directly between the sacred altar and the residential quarters. His new rule meant that other building occupants had to exit the chapel, walk down Filbert Street, and enter their residence through the Webster Street door. By blocking the sole connection between the residence and chapel, the swami not only separated the domains of prayer and living but also maintained strict privacy of the living spaces. Figure 23 shows the swami’s office, bedroom, and support areas that served as the back zone to the adjoining public chapel.

The chapel’s carefully produced spatial qualities recreated a culturally sanctioned experience of sacredness that Americans understood. Interior layout, decorations, materials, sounds, and wall colors contributed to the creation of this experience. Cara French, a close disciple of the swami’s, described how a sanctified zone was marked and reproduced in the temple’s front zone. “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.”\textsuperscript{93} She explained that according to Swami Trigunatita a sanctified space was “free from any worldliness and material desires; a place of holiness,” in which the “Supreme Spirit remained an abiding Presence.”\textsuperscript{94} 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.”\textsuperscript{95}

The front chapel was more than a functional meeting or prayer space. It was a territory where embodied practices and sensory experiences reproduced certain behaviors. The very act of being in this place was expected to produce spiritual beings.

Mrs. Allan, another disciple whose notes are in the society archives, mentioned that during his initial years in San Francisco, Swami Trigunatita mixed and socialized with the congregation after the prayers. After vespers he would stand at the entrance door and shake hands with the members of the congregation as they filed out, a practice common in Christian churches. 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.

Halting the practice of shaking hands and forbidding the congregation from walking up to the

\textsuperscript{88} Burke, Swami Trigunatita, 259. See Jackson, Vedanta for the West, 58.

\textsuperscript{89} Many media reports from this period mentioned the presence of women members and their role in the Vedanta Society. These reports claimed that white women were both bearers of American culture and, at the same time, susceptible and gullible. Without the protective presence of white men, women were viewed as easy targets of Hindu swamis. In other words, the productive and reproductive division of labor in society and women’s position in it—already questioned in the unfolding suffrage movement—now seemed threatened by the heathen influences of foreign men. Reporters’ anxiety went beyond their fear of Hinduism or the Indian swami; they feared the increasing participation of women outside the domestic sphere. Reporters feared that this relationship with foreign men would both destroy the institution of the American family and sully the moral virtue and racial purity of American culture and, at the same time, susceptible and gullible. These reports claimed that white women were both bearers of

\textsuperscript{90} Ibid., 175.

\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., 108.

\textsuperscript{92} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., 108.

\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., 175.

\textsuperscript{95} Ibid.
altar did not represent a shift from stereotypical Western to Eastern behavior. Rather, this was an attempt to maintain multiple rules of engagement for different constituencies, some more public and formal than others, but each producing a different persona. In the chapel the swami filled the formal role of lecturer and officiating priest. By limiting any intimate and personal interaction with the swami, the formality of the chapel and vesper ceremonies was enhanced. It was not the swami’s human contact that was important in the chapel but his symbolic and ceremonial role as facilitator, spokesperson, and teacher. The spiritual practices and sacred ambience of the chapel were paramount.  

96 Ibid., 192.
These strategies worked since French commented that many Americans "leery of the strange Indian religion of Vedanta" would leave vespers reassured that the ceremonies in the temple were familiar, rational, and indeed "spiritual" in nature.97

The experience of the temple’s residential space by selected disciples and established members of the society contrasts with the experience of public interiors and reflects nuanced distinctions within the in-group. Figure 24 shows the various spatial gradations of privacy inside the temple. A comparison between the terrace shrine and the public chapel demonstrates the difference between front and back zones. The third-floor room on the northeast corner under the double-onion dome that served as a shiv-mandir, or shrine to the god Shiva, in the back zone differed greatly from the public chapel in the front zone in that there was no chair seating (fig. 25). Instead, the altar and worship objects were set on the linoleum-covered floor. Worshippers had to squat, as is customary in India, to worship. Other practices in this room were different from the vespers held in the public chapel. Its unique sensory experience was described by long-term society member Ernest Brown in the February 28, 1909, monastery minutes. The ceremony was noisy due to the chanting of prayers, beating of brass plates, and blowing of conch shells. Brown spoke of prayers where the swami waved sacred lamps, and the devotees distributed sanctified food. Unlike the controlled formality of the public chapel, terrace shrine practices as described by Brown resembled prayer rituals in Indian temples that engaged the senses and the human body. Popular, if exaggerated, accounts of shocked Western missionaries returning from India describing the

97 June 3, 1908, entry in Brown, "Minutes of the Monastery," 22.
strangeness and carnality of Hindu practices often mentioned the same practices in a negative way. It was no surprise that terrace shrine worship was closed to the general public. During the temple’s opening ceremony, the public was allowed to see these towers, but these tours were discontinued.

The temple’s renovation in 1908 and the strategy of staged disappointment could be explained as an example of creative references to ethnicity. Stephen Stern and John Cicala write that “choosing an ethnic expression, applying it to diverse situations, and transmitting it through time and space are based on decision making and community interplay that require a great deal of creativity and inspiration.” The Vedanta Society’s minority position required the swami to constantly monitor and adjust its relationship to the San Francisco community. Explaining the changes above as a move toward American or Hindu traditions would be overly simplistic and would ignore the social context and human agency in transforming religious practices during the first decade of the twentieth century. The invented traditions point to the creativity and innovation that religious organizations such as the Vedanta Society exhibited when responding to their social and political context. These changes reflected internal and in-group pressures to change and modify the activities and practices inside the building as well as macro conditions and politics in the larger American and San Francisco society.

The strategy of staged disappointment was an ingenious response to the racial, ethnic, and cultural politics of the time, bridging the micro world of individuals and their needs to the larger cultural context of San Francisco and the Western world. This strategy involved both changes in the architectural facade that visually engaged the viewer and caused her to marvel as well as hybrid and modified forms of spiritual practice in the interior that made a foreign religious tradition seem increasingly familiar to new American members of the congregation. While the former was a move toward increasing alterity, the latter was a simultaneous attempt to make the rituals inside the building more akin to Christian ecclesiastical practices.

By 1908 the strategies had worked. The message of the Vedanta Society had spread, and the congregation had diversified. Swami Trigunatita was invited to speak at various religious and secular organizations, including the Mesa Redondo Club in approximately 1909. Burke, Swami Trigunatita, 192.

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99 In May 1909 he spoke to the Fellowship Society of San Francisco, in 1910 to the Socialist Party, and in 1911 to the Bethany Congregationalist Church. He also spoke before many women’s organizations, including the Mesa Redondo Club in approximately 1909. Burke, Swami Trigunatita, 192.
and curiosity among visitors increased. Many drifters, dilettantes, and nonbelievers too attended vespers. In fact, the public chapel's attendance was so unregulated that in December 1914, a disgruntled and occasional visitor named Vavara came in with a bomb and set it off, fatally injuring Swami Trigunatita.

His untimely death brought the congregation into some disarray. However, the president of the board and Swami Prakashananda, who just a few years before had left the San Francisco temple in order to start his own Portland branch, worked together to stabilize the shaken organization. The congregation continued to grow until 1959, when they moved to a new building at the intersection of Vallejo and Fillmore Streets, a few blocks south of the old temple. By the midfifties the political and demographic character of the congregation had changed. Since the 1946 Luce-Cellar Act, immigration restrictions on immigrants had loosened. Californians were more accepting of Indian immigrants and Hindu culture. Addressing a different audience and serving a different social world, the new building did not need to stage an eye-catching spectacle. In direct contrast to the old temple, the new temple's massive art deco facade was a familiar but imposing presence.

Conclusion

Writing architectural history of a building part—in this case the front facade and chapel—is a strategy that looks beyond the building as a whole to focus instead on the human experience of encountering the temple's public spaces sequentially, in bits and pieces. From the outside facade we move through the building room by room, unaware of what is happening in another room or on a different floor. In other words, our experiential engagement with a building is piecemeal and fractured. This sensory experience of a building is different from the way we construe it as a singular cultural artifact. The unit of analysis for building types and architectural styles is the entire structure. While still accounting for authorship (in other words, who made the building,
why, and how), the technique of analyzing a building’s constituent parts allows us to examine visceral engagements with the built form to write histories of spaces and places as experienced by their users.

Separate readings of the Vedanta Temple’s facade, entrance hall, and public chapel showed that the observer’s visceral experience depended on his or her location, use, and background. The experiences of the temple’s residential rooms differ from those of the chapel as the activities and social roles people perform in these different contexts change. Such microhistories challenge the adequacy of a single narrative for a building and suggest that stories of places can be told as stories of bodies in motion and accounts of temporal experiences.

The argument regarding the building facade also showcases how the builders of this temple used history and the past to respond to the needs of the present. From the point of view of an architectural scholar, this creative and political process and multiple microanalysis shows that humans experience, reproduce, and inhabit the material environment around them in polyvalent ways. The Vedanta Society’s ability to use the “first Hindu temple in the West” in this way emerged from the facade’s combination of visibility and opacity. On the one hand, the eye-catching elements made the facade highly visible. The domes and arches publicly marked this building as foreign. Indeed, the quantity of newspaper reports, positive and negative, on this building between 1906 and 1914 can be ascribed to its visibility. Due to its symbolism, form, and imagery, the Vedanta Temple produced a powerful shibboleth mediating cultural contact. Formal categories and methods for understanding the building are incomplete. Instead, the discrepancies, variations, and inaccuracies show how a minority religion invented and adapted traditions in myriad forms.