

The Internationalism of Eclecticism: Walter Burley Griffin's Lucknow Office

On the eve of his first visit to India, the American architect Walter Burley Griffin (1876 – 1937) was asked by a journalist if he would follow the Indian style. Griffin's response, according to his architect-wife Marion Mahony (1871 – 1961), was "No, I'm going to lead it." This summer I used a Student Travel Grant from the MIT Aga Khan Program in Islamic Architecture (AKPIA) to fund research into Mahony's and Griffin's India practice with the hope of deciphering his quip. Although Mahony had meticulously preserved presentation drawings and photographs from their Lucknow office, the provenance of the many commissions they accepted and executed in Lucknow between 1935 and 1937 were unknown. I set myself the brief of reconstructing the various design problems that Mahony and Griffin had encountered by investigating their patrons. By examining correspondence, diaries and publications authored by their Indian clients, I aimed to develop a richer understanding of what Griffin might have meant when he proclaimed an ability to 'lead' rather than 'follow' 'the Indian style.'

Preliminary research in the United States and Australia had led me to conclude that Griffin's most significant patrons in India were the *taluqdars* (feudal landlords) of Jehangirabad and Mahmudabad—two estates in Oudh. Personal interviews and correspondence with the children of these two landlords helped me piece together the sequence of friendships and commissions that defined Griffin's India practice. Prior to visiting India in 1935, Griffin had advised an Indian contractor on the construction of a temple for the Theosophical Society—an international esoteric movement devoted to defining philosophical alternatives to mainstream Christianity. Although Mahony and Griffin never joined the Theosophical Society, they did join two of its offshoots (the New Renaissance Society, and the Anthroposophical Society) and had been widely featured in Theosophical journals beginning in 1926. Several of their Australian

and Dutch clients were active members of the Theosophical Society, and it was an Australian Theosophist and client who recommended Griffin as a project consultant for the Theosophical Society's temple. Griffin's professional services won him the far more lucrative commission for designing the Tagore Library at the University of Lucknow—a project that was underwritten by the Jehangirabad and Mahmudabad families.

Friendship with the Jehangirabad and Mahmudabad *taluqdars* resulted in Mahony and Griffin building a *zenana* (harem) in Jehangirabad in 1936, the Pioneer Press Building in Lucknow also in 1936 (*The Pioneer* was an English-language daily owned by Jehangirabad and Mahmudabad), and the pavilions for the 1936 United Provinces Industrial and Agricultural Exhibition, which was held in Lucknow. In addition, in 1937 the newly installed head of the Mahmudabad family asked Griffin to design a library to house his collection of Persian, Arabic and Urdu manuscripts. Of these projects, the 1936 Lucknow Exhibition is the only commission for which I was able to locate a sufficient run of records.

Jwala Prasad Srivastava, an Indian politician and Provincial Minister for Education and Industries within the colonial state, raised the idea of hosting an industrial exhibition in 1935. Minutes from his meetings with colonial civil servants reveal that he wished to use the exhibition to counter the growing influence of the Indian National Congress. Specifically, Srivastava imagined that the exhibition would offer India's landed aristocracy an opportunity to purchase imported agro-processing equipment, thus enabling the aristocracy and peasantry to earn more from agricultural land. Srivastava's Lucknow exhibition, thus, differed from industrial conventions hosted by the Indian National Congress, which had emphasized self-rule as a basis for reversing the under-development of India's manufacturing sector.

Although bureaucratically supported by the colonial state, Srivastava would raise funds for the exhibition from Indian landlords, including Jehangirabad and Mahmudabad. This combination of administrative oversight by the colonial state and patronage by the native landed gentry resulted in two American architects (Mahony and Griffin) being commissioned to build the exhibition pavilions in the Indo-Saracenic style, which by the 1890s had become the official style of the colonial state. Mahony and Griffin responded to their client's demand to clad utilitarian structures with 'traditional' ornamental decoration by refusing to incorporate locally derived motifs and religious iconography in their designs. Instead, they built *folies* through combinations of disparate fragments that lacked historical precedent. Their design implicitly critiqued the binarism of both colonial rule and anti-colonial nationalist thought. Rather than polarize 'tradition' and 'modernity', their project interrogates the construction of 'style' as a marker of identity and a source of moral instruction.

Put differently, to presuppose an 'Indian style' was to ignore the tension inherent in the specifically colonial conception of this very term. On one hand 'India' was understood to be locked in the timelessness of its customs. On the other hand, 'style' provided a rubric for introducing temporality to a place like India. Accordingly, it would be possible to designate certain motifs as belonging to one period rather than another. Such temporalizing would allow India to graduate out of 'timelessness' and accede to a particularly Indian modernity. Crucially, Mahony and Griffin did not propose a universal modernity in place of this indigenous modernity. Instead, their critique of the culturalist assumptions of Indo-Saracenic architecture underscores the unevenness of economic globalization wrought by imperialism, and the impossibility of redeeming such inequality through anti-colonial nationalism, or even through the reform of

empire into a free-trade commonwealth as advocated by the aristocratic sponsors of the 1936 Lucknow exhibition.