Fig. 1. Project for Chemistry Building, University of New Mexico, by Walter Burley Griffin, 1915
Main elevation. (Courtesy of Northwestern University)

EAST ELEVATION

Fig. 2. Project for Chemistry Building, University of New Mexico, by Walter Burley Griffin, 1915
Plan. (Courtesy of Northwestern University)

FIRST FLOOR PLAN

Fig. 3. Projected Campus Plan for University of New Mexico by Walter Burley Griffin, 1915.
(Courtesy of Northwestern University)

SECTION-CD

Fig. 4. Palace of the Governor, Uxmal, Yucatan. Reconstruction.
(From G. O. Totten, Maya Architecture, Washington, D. C., 1926)
Behind the modest Old Chemistry Building on the University of New Mexico campus lies a notable, though complex, architectural history. Chosen as architect by the small University, which then numbered only 135 students, was a man who had recently attained international recognition by winning the competition to design the new federal capital of Australia—Canberra—which, in 1913, was comparable to the honor of being architect of Brasilia or Chandigarh. The conditions of the competition required Walter Burley Griffin, the American prize winner, to voyage down-under. This trip introduced complications and delays in the fulfillment of his commitments in New Mexico and finally resulted in the Old Chemistry Building assuming its present form under the direction of Griffin’s associate Francis Barry Byrne.

Since only two visual records remain by which we can reconstruct Griffin’s original concept our analysis is greatly restricted. Extant is one preliminary drawing for the “Future Chemistry Building” that includes elevations, plans, and a section (figs. 1 and 2) and also a group plan for the entire campus that, unfortunately, illustrates only two vertical sections taken through the complex of buildings (fig. 3).

Walter Burley Griffin proposed a monumental, symmetrical design composed of sharply defined and simply organized masses which would have read with great clarity under a bright New Mexico sun. The two story building was to have high ceilings thus allowing the windows to be carried over the doorways and organized in a horizontal band. As seen from the exterior these square first floor windows were the vehicle for a “concentration of external ornament (thus) enabling the accentuation of black voids with perforated enrichment.” This was to be the only decoration on the otherwise plain facade. To achieve the effect of a high unbroken attic story the fenestration for the second floor was to be treated as a clerestory reversed so that the windows were organized around a shallow light well over the lower ceilinged second floor corridor (see section, fig. 2). This ingenious arrangement left the upper portion of the facade unobstructed and enhanced the impressive character of the edifice.

Although the concept underlying this design was extremely personal for an era dominated by the mission style or some form of classicism, one may legitimately inquire into those sources which offered inspiration to the architect. Such an inquiry necessitates a look into Walter Burley Griffin’s background. In 1901, after graduating from the University of Illinois, Griffin entered the office of Frank Lloyd Wright where he stayed about five years during which time the Larkin Company Administration Building at Buffalo, and Unity Church at Oak Park, were on the drawing boards. Once on his own it took until about 1911 before the characteristics of his personal style began to supersede those acquired during his association with Wright. The feeling for mass and solidity found in the Larkin Building and Unity Church was transferred by Griffin to domestic architecture and became his hallmark in America and Australia. Architecture, however, was always Griffin’s secondary interest. The delight he took in planning and landscaping led him to enter the competition for Canberra which, when won, turned his attention to the southern hemisphere for the remainder of his career. In consequence he became a nationally known figure, not in the United States, but in Australia.

The massiveness evident in the design for the Chemistry Building reflects both Griffin’s association with Wright and his sympathy for the pre-Columbian architecture of Mexico. While no immediate source can be isolated for the Griffin project, the Mayan Palace of the Governor at Uxmal, Yucatan, expresses a similar spirit with its tripartite symmetrical composition, low horizontal massing in which the upper half is treated as an attic story, and strong demarcation separating this section from the lower portion (fig. 4). Except for these points of comparison the Griffin design is manifestly different with its severe (as opposed to ornate) treatment of the attic, the projecting soffit at mid-elevation, and the banded arrangement of windows over the doors. It is more the spirit of pre-Columbian architecture which has attracted Griffin than the specific forms, and if not for the fact that this spirit was discernable in much of Griffin’s other contemporary work one might question the validity of such a comparison. Griffin himself did not make specific reference to the ancient architecture of Mexico but, perhaps for the sake of the clients, related the design to the New Mexican tradition by saying that “My interpretation of the pueblo type is governed only by its ideal of simplicity and directness of adapting the means inherent in the local materials, climate, and the atmosphere in its broad sense.” While pueblo architecture is similar to that of the Mayans with its emphasis on cubic form, mass, and severe planear surfaces, the Griffin project, while sympathetic to the local Indian tradition, was certainly more akin to the southerly neighbors.

Why or when Walter Burley Griffin first became conscious of pre-Columbian architecture is uncertain. His earliest major commission of 1901 showed a preference for massiveness but not of the Mayan type. His first contact with this exotic architecture probably occurred while in Wright’s office, for among the master’s drawings is a study for a brick and concrete building dated 1904 which vaguely recalls certain ruins at Mitla while simultaneously hinting at Griffin’s later window treatment in the Chemistry Building project. But although there exist some questionable relationships or parallels of earlier date it remains a fact that Frank Lloyd Wright was not profoundly effected by pre-Columbian architecture until 1915 (or shortly thereafter) when its message became clear to
Fig. 5. Aline Barnsdall House, Los Angeles, California
By Frank Lloyd Wright, 1918-20
(Courtesy of H. R. Hitchcock)

Fig. 6. Old Chemistry Building, University of New Mexico, by Francis Barry Byrne, 19
(Photoby David Gebhard)
him and led to a strong influence on his work; stronger than any other to which Wright was to succumb during his long career. The most striking examples are the A. D. German Warehouse, Richland Center, Wisconsin, of ca. 1915, the decoration project for the Bogk House at Milwaukee of 1916, and the Aline Barnsdall House at Los Angeles of 1918-20 (with sketches for this design going back to about 1917). Thus Griffin’s project for the Chemistry Building at the University of New Mexico was at least contemporary to, if it did not pre-date, any of Wright’s major essays in this direction. A comparison between Griffin’s design of 1915 and Wright’s Barnsdall House of 1918-1920 immediately suggests that the New Mexico project was the key to Wright’s design (fig. 5). But the Griffin drawing was not published and although it was sent from Australia to his Chicago office it would be impossible to ascertain if Wright saw it. Thus the intriguing question of whether the Chemistry Building project was to constitute a major source of inspiration for Frank Lloyd Wright must remain unanswered.

We may regret that Griffin’s project gave way to a less ambitious scheme for, in spite of a certain stiffness of composition, this admirable design would have been an impressive addition to the campus. In fact, had Griffin’s original ideas materialized, the entire campus would have been developed as a unified architectural concept. The arrangement was to be fairly tightly organized around the main building complex with low appendages radiating out from the core. The architectural character was to be similar to that of the Chemistry Building except for the dominant central motif composed of freely extending lateral planes supported by vertical posts and screens. Griffin, in a letter of 29 August 1915, summed up his ideas by saying “the general scheme is a compact, continuous pueblo, to afford a maximum of shelter, convenience and coziness. The whole group is low-lying (1 and 2 stories) with economical plain masses, ... and all dominated by a lofty pyramidal central structure and rendered attractive by a wide variation of correlated courts and axial vistas.” From the standpoint of planning this arrangement would have been most interesting, if provocative, since the idea was at variance with the normal university campus layout wherein individual buildings were organized in a pattern around an open mall instead of in continuous sequence. But no thorough analysis can be made of Griffin’s thoughts from these sparse records which lack even a ground plan.

Our discussion up to this point has accounted for those two designs created in absentia by Griffin in 1915, but not for the Chemistry Building now part of the University. Before his departure for Australia in 1913 Walter Burley Griffin made arrangements with Francis Barry Byrne, a former colleague in Frank Lloyd Wright’s studio, to return from California and, in association with Griffin, to take over the latter’s Chicago office for a period of time to ease the rupture caused by Griffin’s absence. As the years passed cooperation diminished and, although the contract of January 5th, 1916, between the University and the architects was signed by both men, the blue prints for the Chemistry Building, dated April 15th, 1916, carry only the name of Byrne.

While ostensibly related to the Griffin proposal in emphasizing mass, cube, and blank wall pierced by windows organized in a horizontal band, the executed building is, in effect, virtually a new conception (fig. 6). The feeling of pre-Columbian architecture is no longer preserved and except for a similar vague relationship to a pueblo, the design is free from historical precedent. Francis Barry Byrne later remarked that “it mingled the influence of Sullivan and Wright, allied with my preception of the values that existed in the simplifying tendencies of Irving Gill, whom I had known during a visit to California.” Irving Gill, too little known in the United States, was then doing severe work in Southern California not unlike that of the Sezession architect Adolf Loos in Austria. Although the feeling for mass in the Chemistry Building is very similar to that expressed by Irving Gill, the fenestration and plan of the building are not. The reference to Louis Sullivan is not as inappropriate as it would seem since Byrne always felt that Sullivan’s greatest message was to be found in his organization of mass and simplification of form; certainly the Chemistry Building embodies these ideals.

The plan also differs from the Griffin project since the rooms are arranged around an open court instead of a central corridor and, although the building is still bilaterally symmetrical with a tripartite massing of the main facade, the entrance section is projected rather than recessed. The clean-cut window openings neatly ordered against the plain elevations offer only partial relief to the rigorous composition. The only minor concession is found in the in-set rectangular panels placed between the window voids. Otherwise the building is an essay in stark simplification.

Both the earlier project by Walter Burley Griffin and the executed building by Francis Barry Byrne share many common characteristics of design, yet one emphatically strives (and not without success) for monumentality while the other is content to be unpretentious; one is conscious of style (in the design sense) while its counterpart seeks only to be unobtrusive. Both designs illuminate a phase in American architecture and simultaneously suggest an aesthetic not unsympathetic to the International Style of the following decade.

NOTES

1. Letter of 29 August 1915 from Walter Burley Griffin to George L. Brooks, President, Board of Regents, University of New Mexico.

2. Ibid.

3. William Emery House, Elmhurst, Illinois. Executed as a private commission while Griffin was in Wright’s office.


5. Dimitri Tsionos in his provocative article on “Exotic Influences in the Architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright” (MAGAZINE OF ART, XLVII, 1953, pp. 160-169) traces the influence of pre-Columbian decoration on Wright back to 1895, yet the first clear instance of the building form being so effected was the A. D. German Warehouse of ca. 1915.