

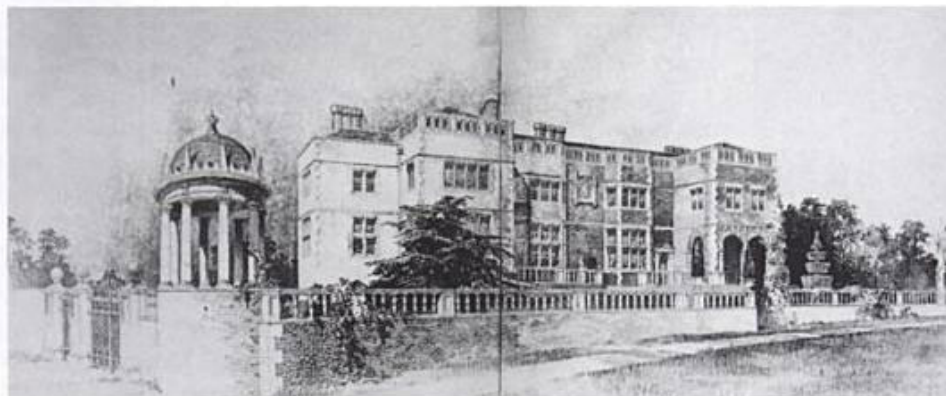
**Edwin T. Earl House
Wilshire Blvd.
Los Angeles**

In another respect, however, the Scott house is very different from anything Lutyens produced. Judging from Coxhead's drawings, the design makes no attempt to emulate the exquisitely crafted fabric found in the best contemporary English work. The skills necessary to create such effects did not exist in San Francisco. Rather, his drawings suggest a tough, planar box, which is twisted, turned, and decorated with raw vigor. The effect might have been too harsh in Edwardian England, yet it seems quite at home in the land of extremes.

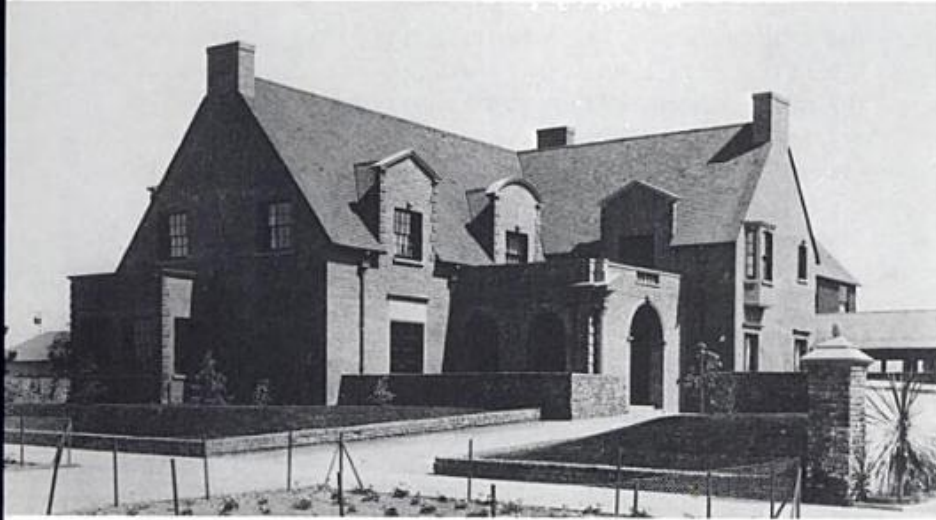
No realized design shows Coxhead's uninhibited use of classical precedent more fully than the residence of Edwin Tobias Earl in Los Angeles (1895–1898) (Figs. 162, 163). The house was originally designed and built as a rambling, unobtrusive shingle pile, but fire wrought extensive damage shortly before completion. Coxhead then revised the scheme, retaining the informal plan and adding new elevations inside and out.¹⁸ In its final form, the Earl house, while still suggesting a rustic cottage, is fortified with a dense, tight wall of brick. An abstract, reductive simplicity enhances the exterior's strength, yet the effect is also made somewhat disquieting by the use of small, isolated pieces of ornament, the most conspicuous of which is a single Ionic column surrealistically supporting a tiny slice of entablature and pediment at the corner of the entrance porch.

The stripped elevations also act as a foil for the decorative performance inside. Each room is a remote world, with such striking

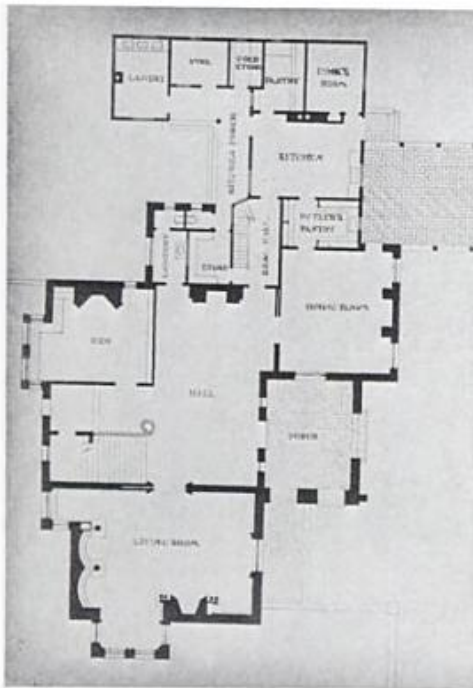
161. Cram, Wentworth & Goodhue. Design for a country house, ca. 1897. Drawing by Goodhue. (*Brickbuilder*, December 1897, plates 97–98)



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162. Coxhead & Coxhead. Edwin Tobias Earl house, Los Angeles, ca. 1895–1898; demolished 1957. (Courtesy John Beach)



163. Earl house, plan. (Courtesy John Beach)

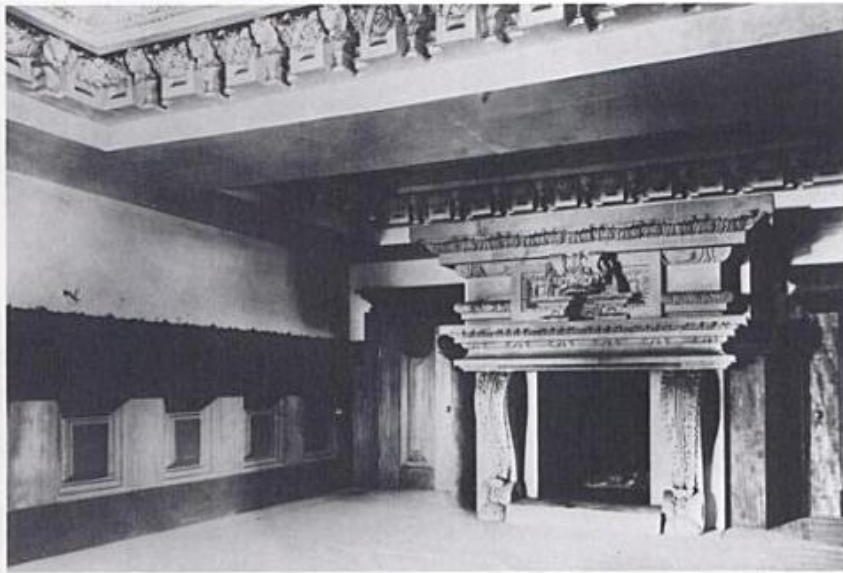
ON THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

polarities of large and small scale, and ornate and simple embellishment, that it hardly seems like a house at all. In the living room a great scrolled pediment looms above the fireplace, suspended as if it were a trophy from Baalbek hung on the wall of an art academy (Fig. 164). Its size is made even more outrageous by the low ceiling and flanking tiers of miniature orders. Across the room, Corinthian columns are isolated, again like fragments, punctuating curved bookshelves. The components are separated from their conventional context, and interact in an irregular space that is charged with contrasts between light and dark zones, plain and decorated surfaces.

The hall is no less remarkable. Huge, classicizing motifs are placed in a cavernous space with no direct source of natural light (Fig. 165). The ceiling, which meets the walls without moldings, is penetrated by three recesses so large that the lower plane becomes little more than a series of inflated plaster beams. The wainscoting, composed of colossal panels topped by a garland, adds to the sense of confinement. At one end, the fireplace mantel projects outward in alternating slices of classical regalia and dressed blocks, rising precariously above

164. Earl house, living room. (Courtesy John Beach)





165. Earl house, hall. (Courtesy John Beach)



166. Nunnery, Chichén Itzá, Mexico. (Frederick Catherwood, *Views of Ancient Monuments in Central America*, plate 21)

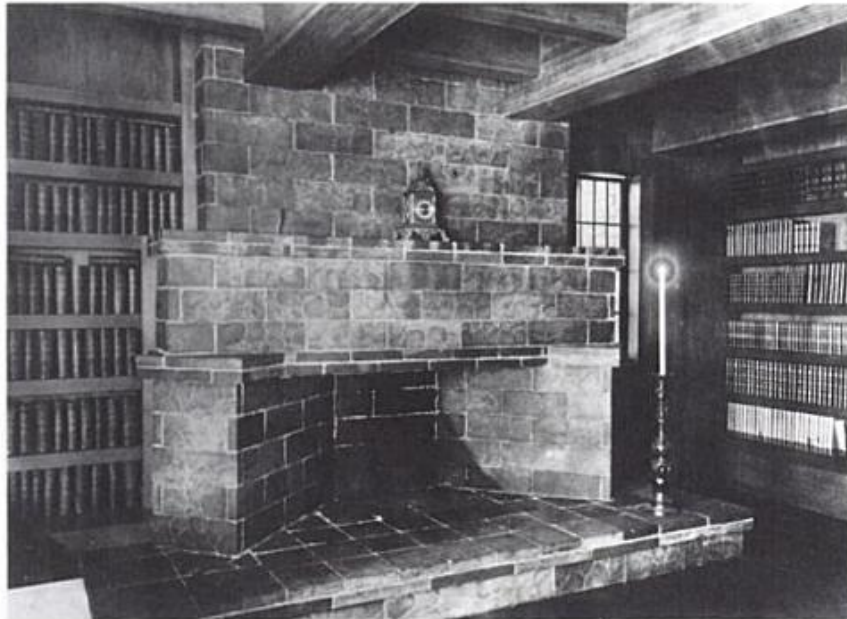
a pair of Serlian consoles. While precedent can be found in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English interiors, the character of the heavy scale and the agitated, compressed decorative elements ignores the stability inherent in the classical tradition.

Mayan architecture seems to have influenced Coxhead in the design of the room. Significantly, the resemblance to the plates of

Frederick Catherwood's *Views of Ancient Monuments of Central America* (1844), then the major pictorial reference on the subject, are more pronounced than the resemblance to the actual buildings, which neither architect nor client had probably seen (Fig. 166). Mayan sources also are suggested in abstract form in the library fireplace (Fig. 167). Indeed, the entire room contrasts with the hall, being devoid of ornament and moldings. Bookcases, boxed beams, and wall panels are treated as planar surfaces joined at crisp, beveled corners, detailed in a manner similar to Irving Gill's simplest interiors of the next decade. The Earl house is the most sensational example of Coxhead's unorthodox sense of composition, and is the only occasion when he may have turned to non-Western sources for ideas.

Unfortunately, nothing is known about Earl's role in the project. This self-made millionaire, who was an ardent promoter of the region's special character, must have wanted a design that no local architect could provide, for securing the services of an outsider was a highly unusual course for southern Californians to take at that time.¹⁹ Did Earl share Coxhead's love of the unconventional, desiring a house so markedly different from the norm? Or was Coxhead simply reflecting

167. Earl house, library. (Courtesy John Beach)



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the fantasy world that Angelenos were boosting, pulling out all the stops with a nouveau riche client who believed the design to be “authentic”? Whatever the circumstances, Coxhead would never surpass the eccentricity displayed here.