

June 1, 2017

The Palace of Gold

On the top of a hill that is on one side overlooking the Appalachian hills and valleys and on the other the Americanized Hindu community, the Palace of Gold at New Vrindaban West Virginia is an impressive product of American interpretations of Hinduism.¹ The community, started by Keith Gordon Ham who was to become known by his Hindu name, Kirtanananda, was an effort to make Hinduism accessible to Americans. Moving towards this goal Kirtanananda relied extensively upon his teacher, Abhay Charanaravinda Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada a man of seventy years old by the time he first came from India to America to spread Hinduism.² In addition to teaching Prabhupada created an international Hindu network to connect Hindu projects all over the world. As part of these goals of spreading Hinduism Prabhupada encouraged the first North American Hindu community to be created and so New Vrindaban was born. Not only in how the devotees chose to interpret and practice Hinduism, valuing some parts of the religion more than others, but also the ideological differences of these American Hindus versus traditional Indian Hindus are displayed in the architecture at New Vrindaban. The main temple room of the Palace of Gold can be seen in figure 1 and will work as a jumping off point for the analysis of how Americanized Hindu architecture contrasts with Hindu temples India both in terms of materials present as well as how these materials are utilized in construction.

¹ "Attractions," America's Taj Mahal Palace of Gold, last modified 2013, accessed May 29, 2017, <http://www.palaceofgold.com/attractions.html>.

² Mahalingum Kolapen and Sañjay Kolapen, *Hindu Temples in North America: A Celebration of Life* (Orlando, FL: Hindu University of America, 2002), 134.

Approaching the Palace of Gold visitors³ as well as devotees and volunteers who live in the community more long term must make their way through various gardens and pass through the community. Climbing the hill all the way up to the palace that stands massive and overbearing one must take in this awesome sight above before reaching the building. Into the building and off through its rooms people wind their way to the main temple room which is a dazzle of gold. Luxurious materials coat the interior of this long and expansive room to give the immediate impression of grandeur. Standing at the far end of the temple room, facing the devotional statue, six columns at equal intervals draw the viewer's gaze towards the intended focal point of the room: a statue of Prabhupada. The symmetry of the room not only draws the eye towards this central point but also gives the feeling of harmony and balance which we see in so many classical works. A high ceiling and massive chandelier display the large scale of the room as well as give the association of luxury. Without any furniture except for a small glass case off to one side the temple room is spacious both in reality and in the affect lack of furniture gives. The high ceiling expands the space and makes it feel bigger even though it does not add space for human movement.

It is a rectangular room with rectangular columns placed on a floor of geometric patterns composed of squares and rectangles creating sharp and orderly lines. The columns center the viewer, and direct them towards the shrine. The photo of the room in figure 1 which taken from the position of someone standing in the room demonstrates how the columns would not be in the center of focus but would rather create a path which guides the eyes towards the statue of Prabhupada. Only in the details do we find softer curves apart from the arched ceiling in the center. This soft curve of the ceiling coincides with paintings consisting of delicately curving lines. The

³ There are many as New Vrindaban has become a popular tourist attraction.

paintings, contained within circles are surrounded by airy blue skies, suggesting to the viewer open and tranquil skies. Even while the top of the columns blossom into curling foliage, the lines of the four corners of the rectangular column remain all the way up to the top where they connect with a part of the ceiling dropped slightly lower to meet the columns. Vastly more prevalent are the squared lines in this room than any other lines, meaning that they generally flow in the room either horizontally, on the walls and ceiling, or vertically, on the columns. These lines collectively lead towards the shrine making it the focus of the room. Though the columns are vertical their equal intervals guide one's eyes from one to the next and so bring attention towards Prabhupada. These lines come together to create a sense of order. The topmost ceiling is the part which breaks away and utilizes an arch shape running the length of the room at its peak height.

The main temple room at New Vrindaban looks quite different than any room within a Hindu temple in India. One reason for this is the materials used in the different works. 254 tons marble and onyx, of 50 varieties make up the Palace of Gold.⁴ Tiles of the marble and onyx make up the intricate floor of the main temple room. The walls are fashioned out of “subdued white Italian creamo”⁵ which is a smooth and polished marble, mimicking the creamy luxuriousness of the temple floor. Six columns made of wood, metal, and stone support the structure. The golden hues of the wood, with dark graphic detail, topped with equally ornate golden capitals stand in contrast to the light marble.⁶ The chandelier, hand crafted and designed by devotee Isani devi dasi in the center of the room dazzles with many fine crystals imported from Austria and Czechoslovakia.⁷ Gold leafing along the chandelier’s structural pieces juxtaposed to the other gold leafed details prevalent

⁴ Kolapen and Kolapen, *Hindu Temples*, 136.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Dravida Dasa, "The People Who Built the Palace," *Back to Godhead*, July 1, 1981, accessed May 16, 2017, <http://www.backtogodhead.in/the-people-who-built-the-palace-by-dravida-dasa/>.

throughout the room result in a pleasing synchronicity.⁸ The high arched ceiling mirrors the intricacy of the floor; the intrados covered in paintings in the uppermost region and stained glass windows in bright ultramarine and deep sensuous alizarin crimson running parallel along either interior wall of the arch. The lower, unarched, part of the ceiling is also decorated with repeating kaleidoscopic designs reminiscent of Persian tapestries, painted in mauve, brilliant fresh green, and of course detailed in gold. The dark wood of the frames bordering the paintings matches that of the shrine which stands at the end of the aisle.

The luxury of the materials used at New Vrindaban is striking and yet this wealth is not discussed in any description of how the Palace of Gold was made. These descriptions, such as Dravida Dasa writes in *Back to Godhead*, the magazine devoted to Krishna Consciousness which is practiced at New Vrindaban, focus solely on the fact that the devotees made the palace with their own hands. It focuses on them learning as they went and on the impromptu approach of building that was guided by their spirituality, connectedness, and do-it-yourself books.⁹ However, just getting and cutting all the marble in this one room would be extremely expensive and something definitely not all done by the devotees themselves. This inconsistency between the claims and focus of the communities writing and how their work looks reveals some discrepancy. Going forward we see how claims of being devoted to Hinduism are contorted as we investigate how materials were used in Hindu temples in India. Perhaps through imaginations of how the proper Hindu devotee is to act the people at New Vrindaban blurred their reality to make it come closer to how they thought Hinduism should be represent. Perhaps they thought that to build a monument with their own hands, as they may have presumed poor Indian Hindus do, for the person they followed would build

⁸ Dasa, "The People,"

⁹ Ibid.

some sort of cultural alliance between themselves and Indian Hinduism. Whatever the reason these people certainly embraced many western concepts in lieu of how the traditional Hindu temple is made that takes material use in a completely different direction.

While the Palace of Gold uses a vast array of stone imported from all over the world, Hindu temples usually are made with a few select varieties of stone and often times out of just one kind of stone. Where New Vrindaban can pride its use of many materials, the Hindu temple of Kailashnath seen in figure 3 is respected for it having been made out of a singular rock carved from the top down.¹⁰ Examples such as these display the architectural approach to building a temple which strives for purity and unity rather than diversity of material which is avoided as displayed by the fact that even when there are a few different types of stones used architects strive to hide them. Although limited material use was due to resource inaccessibility, intentionally disguising multiple materials as one material displays that this unified look was also a design choice. Kailashnath is an extreme example, however, we can see this fondness for few materials displayed in all the Hindu temples throughout India. As discussed in George Michell's, *The Hindu Temple An Introduction to its Meaning and Forms*, Hindu temples characteristically are made out of stone and while different types of stones are discussed for different temples no temple is made of stones imported from different places. This is partially due to the fact that the removing of stones from the earth is an important process in building the temple that involves blessings to the god or gods that the temple is devoted to which is something that would be disrupted by ordering stone from abroad. Great importance is placed on the carving of the stone and never it is mentioned that different types stones were placed together in arrangements which accentuate the differences. Given the lack of material variation visible in Hindu

¹⁰ Eugene Kim, "Magnificent Indian Temple Carved from One Giant Rock," My Modern Met, last modified October 8, 2012, accessed May 29, 2017, <http://mymodernmet.com/kailashnath-temple/>.

temples as well as the lack of material variation discussed by Michell, I come to the conclusion that the use of many different types of stone does not come from Hindu architectural practice.¹¹

Another possible reason for this contrast is that the goal of New Vrindaban is to make Hinduism accessible to Americans. Because traditional Hindu architecture takes such a leap away from anything Americans are used to this could have been a way to make people feel more at home there and so encourage new members to join. Additionally, the devotees, having never been trained in architecture could have been going off of whatever they had been surrounded by in their lives and the vast majority never having been to India made it up based on their own experiences and the architectural books that they could find. Dasa writes that much of their work was done from “do it yourself books” so their access to these books which would teach Hindu temple architecture in particular was probably fairly limited.¹²

The material one uses is always significant in some way because it tells us about the choices that went into making the building. We can see the wealth with our own eyes in the gold and the marble and the crystal chandelier. This monetary wealth that produces the Palace of Gold feeds into ideas of capitalism and materialism, placing great importance on these constructs that make the building possible. Participating in this market to get all the materials needed displays the ideological differences in the devotees at New Vrindaban versus the people who traditionally built Hindu temples in India. In India, finding the materials to make a temple is extremely important. One is not supposed to use materials that have been previously used in a temple because they have already been imbued with another god. One is supposed to take materials from the ground so that they can be blessed along the way and given to the god or gods who will come to live in the temple that will be

¹¹ George Michell, *The Hindu Temple: An Introduction to Its Meaning and Forms* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 78-80.

¹² Dasa, "The People,"

constructed out of these materials. Ignoring these traditional methods and instead importing materials from all over the world, and being proud of it at that, informs us about the lack of importance placed on parts of Hinduism. This is not just ignoring architectural values but also ignoring the religion itself because the religion is practiced through architecture. This tells us that the devotees at New Vrindaban were willing to set aside following some parts of Hinduism for their personal aesthetic needs. We can see that the Hindu practices in this community are not true to the Hinduism practiced in India. They place having what they see as beautiful materials over having ones that were in the area and less enviable to make a building out. This shows how they can excuse fully following Hinduism when it does not meet how they want to do things or how having a building that is considered beautiful by western standards may affect tourism and thus the financial support of the community.

Not only does New Vrindaban break away from Hinduism in how they access their materials but they also approach working with these materials in fundamentally different ways. The Palace of Gold was built by taking many different materials from all over the world and putting them together to create a space whereas in India temples are built out of few materials which are carved away, to create the designs of the temple. Where one is additive the other is subtractive. The process of gold leafing a mold is just the opposite of carving the design out of stone. The labor that goes into carving an entire building is an intellectual exercise that is incredibly laborious. Carving out of one giant chunk of stone means that if you make a mistake there is no going back. It is about precision, accuracy, and thoughtfulness in every move. However, the process of adding materials instead of taking away is one of being able to start over, of being able to make a mold that once made can be repeated the same over and over, of cutting marble with high powered machines that don't involve

the discipline of the human mind to work but rather the precision of the machine which is set to make exact cuts. One can make all of the separate pieces of the building elsewhere and then in the end put them together. Designers coming at the work from many different directions, as they did at the Palace of Gold, do not have to work together, they do not have to be creating the building with a unified idea.¹³

Stone as well as brick and mortar, commonly used in Hindu architecture today as well as historically, are considered “the most sacred of building materials.”¹⁴ Unlike the use of marble in New Vrindaban which we either see on the walls as solid slabs or on the floor as cut into many small tiles, the material’s sizing is far less polarized and instead is made of regularly sized pieces. Either the temples were built from “excavating into solid rock”¹⁵ or “drystone structural masonry in which stone blocks are laid one upon another without any use of mortar.”¹⁶ Both traditional Hindu techniques involve taking materials of uniform size and building a balanced building in terms of the sizing of the separate pieces involved.

Although some metal is used in Hindu temples it is mainly there for structural support such as in the form of iron clamps and wedges which were used to stabilize stone and is never the focal point to the work.¹⁷ Therefore, the use of gold in the Palace of Gold contradicts the tradition of carving which “lies at the very root of the endeavour of the Hindu artist, and architecture itself is considered as a mass which requires sculpting.”¹⁸ This importance of stone carving and lack of metal is something we don’t see reflected in New Vrindaban as patterns which would be used in carving

¹³ Dasa, "The People,"

¹⁴ Michell, *The Hindu*, 79.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Michell, *The Hindu*, 85.

¹⁸ Michell, *The Hindu*, 82.

are displayed instead in gold which is created through a quite different process that involves gold leafing, and making molds for repeated shapes rather than the individual carving of each pattern into the temple. All of the stone in the main temple room of the Palace of Gold is perfectly smooth, lacking the organic feeling of drystone, construction, or careful excavation from a singular stone.

Hindu temples are either built out of one stone or multiple kinds of stones are used and disguised as one. Through the use of carvings and plaster we see that the appearance of a unified building material was important for the final result of the architecture. This contrasts strongly with the look of the Palace of Gold which is that of a mosaic of different materials positioned side by side in contrast with each other. The materials' only similarity may be their association with refinement and luxury. Michell discusses achieving the illusion of unity in a piece of architecture when he writes:

The favoured technique of carving a building was still adhered to even after temples were erected in structural stonework... The fact that stones were finely carved so as to achieve an almost invisible jointing system only enhanced the massive quasi-monolithic quality of the structural stone temple.

Another leading feature found throughout the history of Hindu temple architecture is the emphasis on the carving of the surface ornamentation as the principal visual language. Carving lies at the very room of the endeavour of the Hindu artist, and architecture itself is considered as a mass which requires sculpting.¹⁹

Not only is carving used to create the illusion of one rock being used, it is a central method that is focused on the fabrication of the temple. These stone carvings are a huge void in the Palace of Gold when they are a practice that is so foundational to Hindu architecture. These carvings are not only part of the way the building looks but part of an entire ideological method which approaches the work as something to uncover within the raw materials. Putting different marbles next to each other

¹⁹ Michell, *The Hindu*, 82.

in patterns is creating something out of many different things, carving a temple out of a stone is revealing the beauty under the earth, not having to move things around but rather take what is already there and allow it to reach its fullest potential.

Moving away from these foundational aesthetic principles and methods displays the focus of the community which was made up of American devotees. Many of them joined because they felt directionless in life or as if they were lacking some spiritual necessity.²⁰ Their use of Hinduism served to provide for this need and gave these people something to focus on and find meaningful. However, they did not completely leave behind the world they were came from and Hindu values such as building a temple room in a sacred way were missed. Blessing Hindu gods in the proper way was less important for these people's lives than the act of praying many times a day and caring for cows and the earth. These activities being taken up in which a person can directly be acknowledged for what they are doing as it is displayed and display the culture of individualism and rush that these people came from. At New Vrindaban they do work that can be quantified by westerners unlike the carving of stone which take long hours for slow progress westerners would not understand as they come from a culture where hardly anyone is doing this. We however can all look at a palace made out of gold and marble and understand how difficult something like this would be to attain. The Palace of Gold's beauty strikes one as soon as they see it. It is obvious and powerful. However, the beauty is not in the details as we see in tiny Hindu carvings. Furthermore, because "The Palace of Gold is tailor-made for group tours"²¹ these elements not only display the importance that the devotees placed on their own work it also displays how they used building a Hindu temple to serve their own capitalist gain. Just by looking at the architecture we can see that the community was more

²⁰ Dasa, "The People,"

²¹ "Considering a group trip to the Palace of Gold?," Tour Groups, 2013, accessed May 26, 2017, <http://www.palaceofgold.com/tour.html>.

focused on some aspects of Hindu life than others. Taking ideas about Hinduism and incorporating them into their own lives in unique ways made it so that they departed from much of what they followed.

The use of Prabhupada's statue in the main temple room, and the placement of him as a god not only in this sense but also in the devotion of the building to him differs from Indian Hinduism in that a temple would never be devoted to a human, but rather is always built for a specific god or specific gods. The gods are meant to live in the temple. In this case the Palace of Gold was built for Prabhupada to live in and then when he died before its completion they had him live there the same way gods live in temples: in spirit. The devotees created their community with the advice of Prabhupada guiding their way. The focus on him as a godly figure in the Palace of Gold displays their connection with him as their guide being stronger than a connection to Hindu gods.

Architecture can be used for a variety of purposes and in Hinduism we see aestheticism being embodied in the work but also a carrying out of the religion's approach to the world in the spaces people create. Through looking at the architecture in the main temple room of the Palace of Gold at New Vrindaban one can see those alterations the devotees there made to Hinduism so that it would serve their purposes. This Americanization that moves away from Hindu values can tell us more about what parts of Hinduism the devotees valued and their lives outside of the community ultimately could not be separated at all from their lives as they attempted to be Hindu. Perhaps the thing that was bigger than themselves that they felt they could be connected to was Prabhupada and his international Hindu society, perhaps he was enough to serve their spiritual needs and perhaps their worshipping of him rather than his gods in this instance was their own way of following Hinduism that they found they could access and form a connection with.

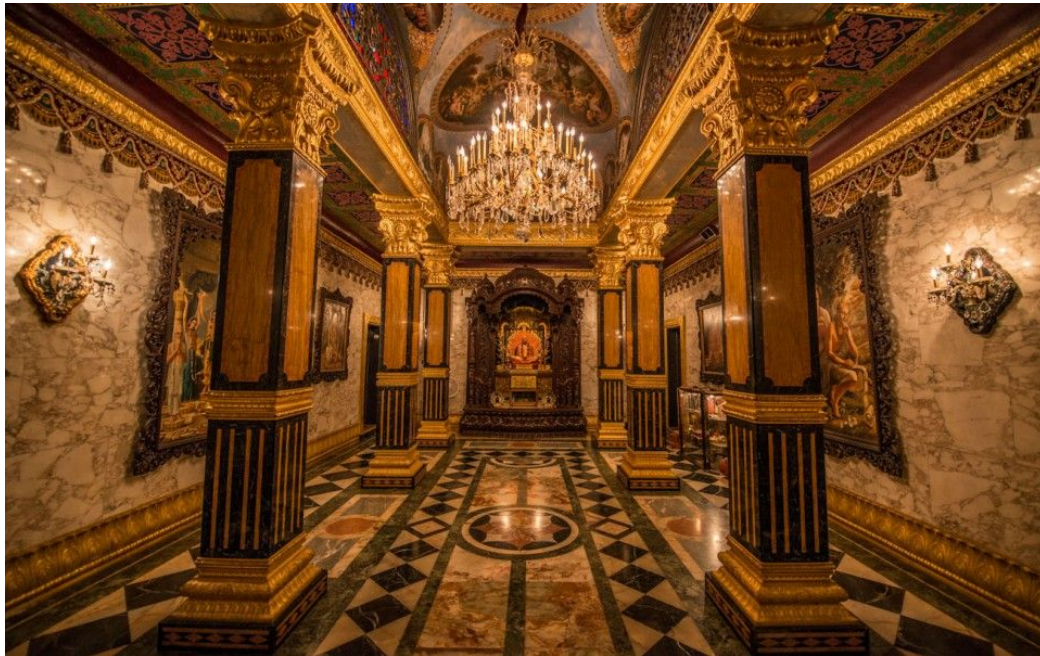


Figure 1 The main temple room at the Palace of Gold in New Vrindaban, America.²²



²² Kolapen and Kolapen, *Hindu Temples*, 136.

Figure 2 The shrine to Swami Prabhupada at New Vrindaban.



Figure 3 The Kailashnath Temple excavated out of a single rock in Maharashtra, India.²³

²³ Kim, "Magnificent Indian," My Modern Met.