

An Architectural Legacy Lingers

EDITOR'S NOTE:

The addition of the celebrated young architect Bruce Goff to the University of Oklahoma faculty was considered quite an academic coup in 1947. A disciple of Frank Lloyd Wright and Louis Sullivan, Goff played a major role in the so-called "modern" architectural revolution in America. Locally, he was a classroom celebrity, using his creative and teaching genius to attract gifted students to OU and his promotional abilities to make certain everyone knew they were there. No ivory tower for Goff; he believed in going public.

He used the location of his School of Architecture in the Oklahoma Memorial Stadium to full advantage. Football fans attempting to avoid traffic snarls by arriving early or leaving late were encouraged by Goff to fill the time with a visit to exhibitions of student and faculty designs.

No Sunday afternoon drive around Norman was complete without a slow swing down Timberdell Road with its cul de sacs lined with avant-garde houses by Goff, his students and colleagues. Meanwhile, just east of the city, a dollar would buy the visitor a guided tour of Goff's controversial Bavinger House, for many years a staple of OU's Mom's Day.

Goff left OU in December 1955 to

pursue a private practice in Bartlesville and Kansas City, then worked in Japan and several European and South American countries. To the distress of many of his former students, the Goff influence has faded at the School of Architecture over the years as the broader-based College of Environmental Design emerged at OU (Page 11). But his legacy lingers in the work of the architects he trained who are just now coming into their own as a definable group (Page 9).

One of this group, Donald MacDonald of San Francisco, paid tribute to the Oklahoma-born, uniquely American architectural tradition as guest editor of the special issue (November 1981) of *A+U, Architecture and Urbanism*, an international professional magazine published in Japan. Portions of that issue are reprinted on the following pages of *Sooner Magazine*, notably Bruce Goff's memories of his years at OU, written at MacDonald's request, which appear on Page 5.

Featured in *A+U* were works of 22 Goff-influenced architects, including University of Oklahoma Professor Arn Henderson and former OU architecture faculty member Herb Greene, who is living in Berkeley, California, while on leave from the

University of Kentucky. Sixteen of the 22 are OU alumni: MacDonald; Henderson; Californians Valentino Agnoli of Stinson Beach, Violeta Autumn and John Davis of Sausalito, George K. Muennig of Big Sur, Robert K. Overstreet of San Francisco and William R. Stover of San Rafael; Colorodans Robert A. Bowlby and W. Arley Rinehart of Denver and Varouj Z. Hairabedian of Aspen; Robert L. Faust of Auburn, Alabama; James A. Gresham of Tucson, Arizona; William Murphy of New York City, New York; Rex Slack of Manhattan, Kansas; and Takenobu Mohri of Tokyo, Japan.

Many of these same architects, including OU's Henderson, also were featured in a similar article in the June 1982 issue of the Italian magazine, *L'Architettura*. During the past year exhibitions of their work, emphasizing Goff's influence, have been held at Kansas State and Auburn universities.

In the midst of the heightened interest in his contributions to architecture, Bruce Goff returned to the OU campus as a distinguished visiting professor for the 1981-82 academic year, a visit cut short by the illness which eventually claimed his life on August 4, 1982, in Tyler, Texas, his home for the last 12 years. He was 78.

SOONER MEMORIES

By BRUCE GOFF

The School of Architecture at the University of Oklahoma in Norman invited me to join the faculty as professor of architecture in 1947. I had just completed my three-year enlistment in the U.S.N. "Seabees" (World War II) and had decided to remain in the San Francisco area to continue my own architectural practice. Many clients were asking me to work with them, but it was almost impossible to secure labor and materials. Therefore, the invitation from Oklahoma University was most propitious.

Although I had had no formal academic education since high school, I had previously taught design in the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts. As head of the design department (for Libbey-Owens-Ford), in Chicago and Toledo, my work continued to be of a teaching nature, as was my work with apprentices in my own architectural office, first in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and then in Chicago.

The question arises, "why did I not have a formal academic education in architecture?" I was apprenticed at the age of 12 to the firm of Rush, Endacott & Rush, architects in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1916. From 1922 to 1929 I spent full time in their office, doing most of their planning and design. In 1929 I passed the license examination and became a registered architect and partner in the firm Rush, Endacott & Goff and, upon Mr. Rush's retirement, a partner in Endacott & Goff.

A wealthy Tulsan and his wife, for whom I had done some work, kindly offered to finance an architectural education for me by proposing I should go to M.I.T. and then be "finished off" by attending the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris. I knew such an education was not for me; Rush

and Endacott knew it and advised me to continue in the firm. My parents thought I was a fool if I refused the gift, so I needed more "authority."

The only two architects I knew I could trust to see it my way were Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright, so I wrote to them, explaining my predicament and asking them what they thought I should do. Sullivan answered promptly: "I have had precisely that same education you speak of, in Boston and in Paris, and have spent my entire lifetime trying to live it down; I can't see what anyone would want with it!" Wright replied: "If you want to lose Bruce Goff, go to school." This gave me the needed "authority" and left me free to continue with my own education.

Most architectural schools of that time were either directly or indirectly (teaching) according to Beaux Arts methods and programs, imitative of the historic past, and preached that art died with the Greeks. Other schools thought art died with the Romans, the Romanesque, the Renaissance, the Gothic, the Baroque, etc., etc. Anyway, they all seem to agree that art had died and that the proper, gentleman-architect should follow one or mix several of these historical styles with "taste" and "respect" into a watered-down kind of eclecticism quite apart from our own times.

The idea that anyone might think he had something within himself to develop, as an individual, was "heresy" and "dangerous" and forbidden. These schools regarded structure, mechanical engineering and new unusual materials as "necessary evils" which had to be covered over with architectural "facials" and "makeups." The word "facade" never got much below the surface.

I do not mean to imply that the

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styles these schools admired were, originally, of so shallow a nature. They were not. They were modern in their own time, healthy and vital. But these academic schools seemed totally ignorant or unaware of architectures of the past besides those they so blindly followed. To wit: Egypt, India, China, Japan, Central America, and wonderful ethnic constructions by non-architect builders all over the world. I believe we should know a great deal about all of them and learn what we can from all of them, but forget it all when we need to create architecture of our own. Do not try to remember!

I informed the University that I had no academic degrees for such a position on the faculty. . . . Then George Cross, president of the University of Oklahoma, said, "We are after men with ideas, not just degrees." I joined the faculty in February 1947.

There was no "head" of the School of Architecture then, nor was it accredited. The budget was one of the lowest of any school of architecture in the U.S.A. "Basic Design" was a service course offered by the Art School. The School of Architecture was a part of the College of Engineering, and "Structural Design" was furnished by that college. "Architectural History" followed Sir Bannister Fletcher's "bible" and Space, Time and Everything was to show up later. There was, however, some mention of Sullivan and Wright.

Design assignments were attempting to be up-to-date including such problems as shopping centers, ticket booths at a county fair, etc. Some of the teachers would give their classes a clue as to what they wanted by referring their students to pages so and so in one of the current architectural



BAVINGER HOUSE: Bruce Goff, architect; Norman, Oklahoma.

magazines. Then the class made a rush for the library to see what the teacher liked so they could please him and get a good grade. This practice existed in almost all of the schools then. No one seemed to be concerned about the student being a creative individual with a potential for growth dedicated to the art of architecture!

Soon after my arrival, I was elected "chairman" by the faculty. This was approved by Dean William Carson of the College of Engineering and also by George Cross.

It was obvious to me that we needed to teach our own beginning design courses and have our own architectural structures teachers. We also needed a course in architectural materials and our history of architecture courses needed to be revamped to include the other great architecture of the past and present.

The architectural library had to become a place for study and a more vital place for research under the guidance of competent librarians who could inspire the student's growing curiosity about the individual creative drive in all architectures of all

times. It ceased to be just a "morgue."

Better coordination was necessary to relate working drawings, professional practice, etc., in all possible ways, to the concept of a building becoming a complete whole in all its parts for the desires and needs of people.

We were able to interest Mendel Glickman, Frank Lloyd Wright's structural engineer for such works as the Johnson Wax administration building, Falling Water house, the Guggenheim Museum, The Synagogue in Philadelphia and the Greek Orthodox Church in Milwaukee and the Price Tower in Bartlesville.

We also invited J. Palmer Boggs, structural engineer and architect who was well known for his constructions of rammed earth in Colorado and who had great interest in the creative aspects of design and structure as "One." He had been teaching in Florida.

The third, and youngest structural man was, and still is, William Wilson, a brilliant and clear structural thinker who was a former student at

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O.U. He was structural engineer for several of my own buildings which I did while at OU, such as the Ledbetter-Taylor house in Norman, the Bavinger house near Norman, Hopewell Church in the oil field near Edmond, Oklahoma, the Julius Cox House at Boise City, Oklahoma, and the Ford house in Aurora, Illinois. He was especially interested in the structural principles of elasticity.

These three structure teachers — all different from each other, and all harmonious as creative individuals, helped the students to realize more freedom, structurally, in their increasingly imaginative designs. The creation of a course in the nature of materials also extended their knowledge of materials and their suitability, or unsuitability for various purposes.

The importance of textures, colors, costs, labor problems, and psychological associations and orchestration, as integral with design concepts, were studied. Interior furnishings and materials also were investigated, as well as landscape and planting materials. All of these helped the students to realize that all such matters could and should be part of their design concepts.

The classes in interior furnishings and materials were first taught by Bill Oglesby, who had much experience in this direction. Architectural design classes were taught by Joe Smay, Richard Kuhlman, William Burgett, Henry Kamphoefner, Jim Fitzgibbons, John Rawlings, Norman Byrd and others.

Being such a low-budget school, we often had to ask the faculty to teach several kinds of classes. Professor Richard Kuhlman, for instance, offered courses on the elements of town planning, taught design and served as campus planner for the University of Oklahoma. Professor Burgett taught design and medieval and renaissance architectural history. Professor Joe Smay taught sanitation of buildings, wiring and illumination and specifications and contracts. He

was also the secretary and past president of the Oklahoma Chapter of A.I.A. and was on the board of governors for licensing architects.

Among the instructors, during this time, special note should be made of Philip B. Welch, architect and skilled photographer who came to us from Illinois. Joseph Wythe, architect, was an excellent design teacher. Eunie Fay Jones came from Arkansas and taught working drawings. He later became head of the School of Architecture at Arkansas University in Fayetteville and is also doing fine architectural work. Professor Anatol Hellman came from Poland and was a valuable addition to our design staff.

Besides my duties as chairman of the school during my entire tenure, I taught beginning design in the first and second semesters and advanced design principles in the beginning of the fourth year. I also taught ancient

Frank Lloyd Wright, never well-known for liking architecture schools, had a special fondness for OU.

and modern architecture history classes . . . Besides my school work, I carried on my own architectural practice. Sometimes students volunteered to do drawings for me outside of class on their own time, without school credit.

Our school participated in "round-robin exchange exhibitions" with most mid-western schools of architecture. As a result, we had many transfer students of the best from other schools, but they gained none of ours. Therefore some of the other schools stopped showing our exhibits, but we always displayed theirs!

Ben Alan Parks was a fine librarian for our school. He was not fond of what he had previously learned was supposed to be "modern architecture." But the students' enthusiasm for architecture became contagious, and he was caught up in it and became equally enthused and was often of great assistance to them.

Elizabeth Mock was also part-time librarian. Later she spent some time with Taliesin and wrote an excellent

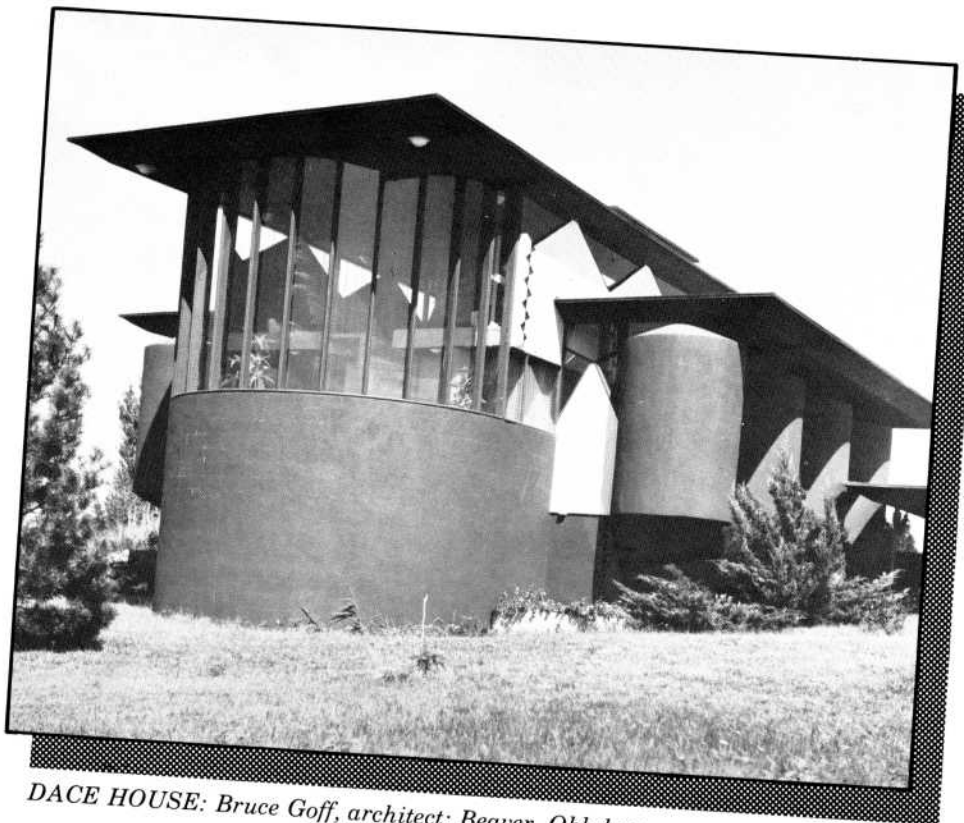
book sponsored by the New York Museum of Modern Art on "Bridges." She remarked about her experience at OU: "This is one case where we have not ruined individuality of students, but have developed it."

Our school was so unlike most academic institutions that it was looked upon with suspicion by many of the other schools. Not long after I came, it was time for an accreditation visit. When we met the accreditation team at the airport, they warned me that they considered the trip useless as they were certain they would not be able to accredit our school. They

work! So after much checking and verifying, they reluctantly (?) accredited OU.

More and more students came from Hawaii and from Japan, Turkey, Norway, England, Bolivia, Venezuela, Greece and other countries. In 1956, when I resigned to carry on my own practice, I felt grateful for my own time as a student, and I still think of myself as having been more a student than the chairman. I was happy to be "B.G." instead of "Professor" or "Chairman" to the students.

Frank Lloyd Wright visited our school several times. He was never



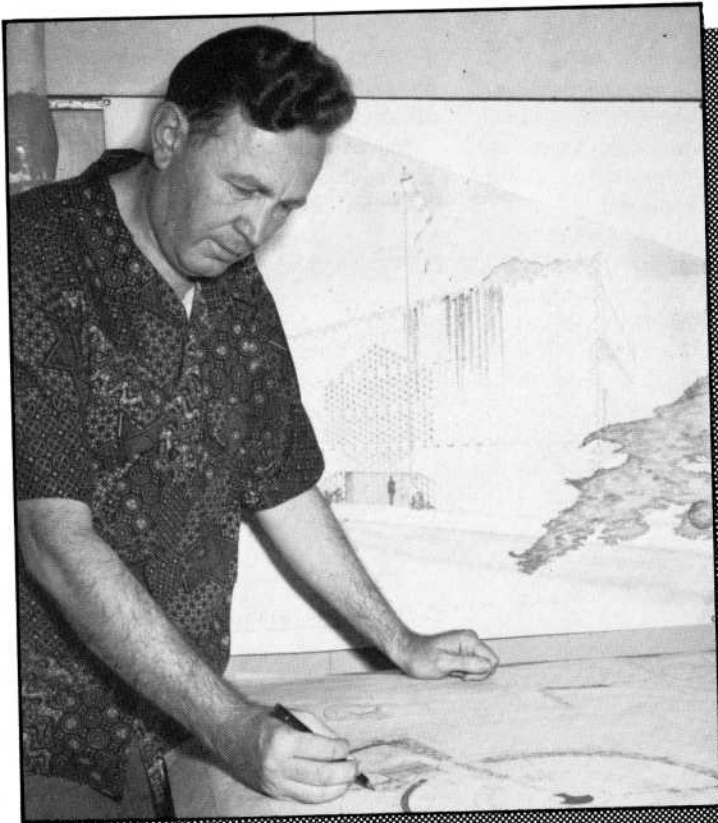
DACE HOUSE: Bruce Goff, architect; Beaver, Oklahoma.

were astonished that we had such good relations with the president's office and at the square footage we had use of under the football stadium, and the square footage of exhibition space, where work by all of the students was always showing.

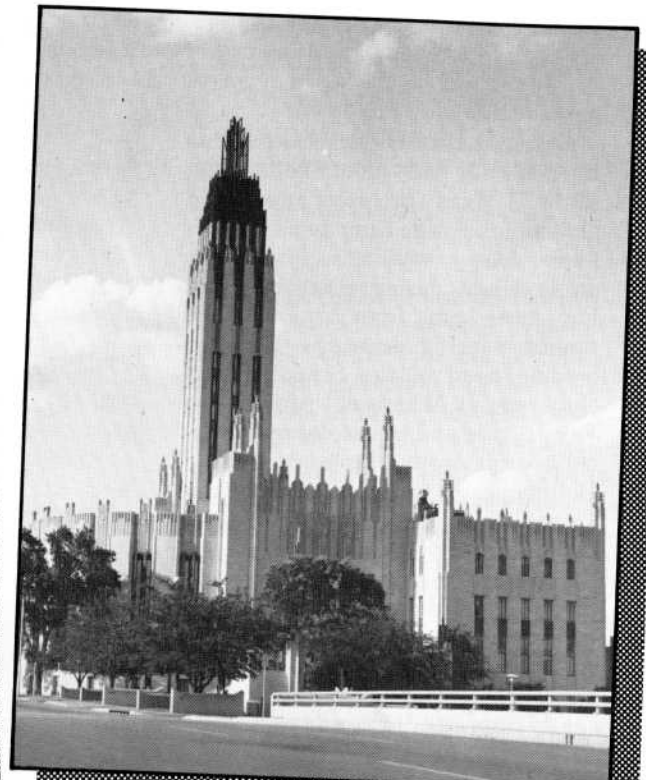
They were amazed at our curriculum and could not believe that first-year work was done by first-year students. They quizzed the students about that and asked them to admit if the faculty had "touched up their designs for them." The students denied that our faculty ever touched their

well-known for liking schools of architecture, but he had a special fondness for OU. After visiting OU in 1953, he said: "I, myself, once upon a time, believed the function of a university to be to awaken sleepers, and the School of Architecture of the University of Oklahoma has encouraged that belief by its teachings. This already is well established by its own young architects' work, which has done more to put Oklahoma in the front rank of cultural pursuits than anything else it can show."

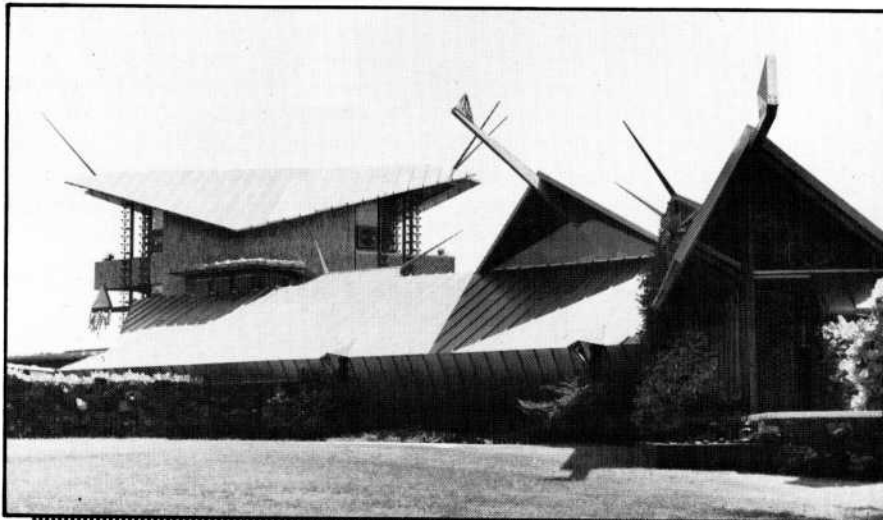
Eric Mendelsohn, during one of his



Goff poses for a 1948 Sooner Magazine with plans he and Bill Wilson designed for an apartment house to be built in Norman.



Boston Avenue Methodist Church in Tulsa, publicly attributed to another architect, was designed by Goff at 22.



SHINENKAN: Bruce Goff, architect; location withheld.


several visits to the school told the students: "I congratulate you yourselves that you can work in this school. Because I have been, in my long life, in many schools of architecture, not only in this country but all over the world, I think it is very fortunate for you to be studying in this school of architecture."

My lifelong friend, Duke Ellington,

also visited the school and gave a fine impromptu talk on "How to tell the real thing." Harry Partch, one of our most individual music composers, also talked with us and won many friends. Lloyd Wright, oldest son of FLLW, gave a fine lecture and show of many of his outstanding works. Alfonso Anelli was also a visitor and showed many of his posters and

We tried to give the school direction and discipline in freedom.

photographs of his sculpture on the Midway Gardens and with Barry Byrne, George Elmslie and others.

What made the School of Architecture of the University of Oklahoma so "Different?" First we all agreed that education should be a matter of bringing something creative and individual out of a student instead of packing his head full of a pre-fabricated education which would make him, at best, only a follower or imitative. We believed, with Thomas Carlyle: "The ideal is within yourself. Your condition is but the stuff you are to shape that same ideal out of." Gustav Klimt, the great Viennese painter, said: "There is only sense in being a teacher and that is if you can liberate the genius in others." That is what we tried to do at OU and it gave the School of Architecture *direction and discipline in freedom.* 

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