

**W**hen Sul H. Lee was a graduate student in international relations at the Michigan State University during the 1960s, he dreamed of becoming a diplomat for his native Korea. The growing political unrest in Korea at the time pre-empted that dream and prompted Lee to make two life-changing decisions.

“First of all, my wife, who is also Korean, and I decided to stay in this country,” says Lee. “Second was to choose another career.”

He had worked in a public library during his undergraduate days and could feel the rumblings of an “information explosion” rising to the surface. Lee called the Toledo Public Library, where they not only offered the bright young man a job but also gave him a scholarship in library sciences at the University of Michigan. He commuted three hours between the two cities, putting in a 40-hour work week at the library on evenings and weekends, while carrying a full load of graduate courses during the day. Lee finished his degree in one year and set to work building an international reputation in his field.

But the Fates had not entirely forgotten Lee’s earlier ambitions, and this past summer his usual duties as dean of the University of Oklahoma Libraries took on a diplomatic flair. Lee became one of a handful of Americans and the only Oklahoman to receive a royal invitation to the grand opening of the British Library at St. Pancras in London. According to Lee, “grand” was an apt choice to describe the \$1 billion, seven-story facility and its elaborate opening ceremony, which was attended by the queen herself.

“She looks exactly as she does on television, only taller,” Lee observes. The royal procession passed within a foot or two of Lee, whose impressive height and demeanor caught the attention of the Duke of Edinburgh. “I was very honored and privileged to be a part of it,” says Lee, who for years has enjoyed a close working relationship with British officials at the libraries of Oxford University.

Lee describes the new London library as “absolutely magnificent,” fitting of the most expensive publicly funded structure built this century in the United Kingdom. “It is a very contemporary building, yet it still exudes a warm, welcoming feeling,” Lee says.

This is a compliment of the highest order from the man who worked to imbue those very qualities in one of the largest and most controversial building projects in OU

history—the 1980s addition to Bizzell Memorial Library. The library had long been the physical and intellectual centerpiece of the campus and many held strong reservations about tampering with its structure. Hired as the new library dean in 1978, Lee hit the ground running and made his first order of business the task of bringing the beloved campus icon up to date.

“When I came to OU, we had a 1930s building with a 1958 addition,” says Lee. “But the 1950s addition was really poorly designed. It had cramped low ceilings, intrusive columns and was very awkward.

“My assessment was we needed to build a library that would take us into the next century,” Lee says. “So I went to the Board of Regents with a \$30 million proposal.”

The reaction was a collective gasp. Eventually they pared down his budget to \$12 million, with half raised from private sources.

OU President William S. Banowsky wanted the new library to be sensational, Lee recalls. The first architect designed a five-story building, which floated on

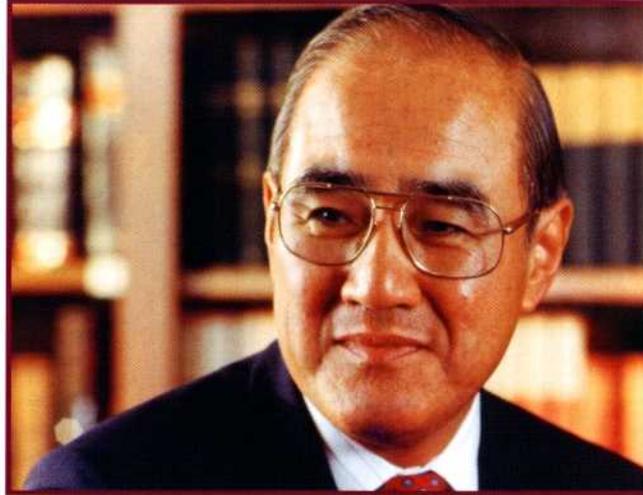
stilts between Adams Hall and the old library. Lee looked at the plans as one observing impending doom.

“That library would have been a disaster,” Lee says. “Can you imagine getting all those heavy books and computers up those stilts?” he asks. “I didn’t want to diminish anyone’s enthusiasm for the project, but I was really concerned.” After the design was approved, OU’s student newspaper, *The Oklahoma Daily*, sported a front page story and headline that read, “Banowsky’s Spaceship Takes Off.” Eventually, the powers that be decided the new building should be brought down to earth and annexed to the existing facility.

Lee still marvels at how quickly the project took shape. “In 1978 we had the idea, in ’79 the approval. The groundbreaking was held in 1980, and in 1982 we moved in, with the whole project paid for. \$13 million. To my knowledge, it’s one of the fastest projects ever completed at OU.”

The new addition was not without its pitfalls. “We must have gone through a million bricks to find a color that matched the original,” Lee says. “We wanted a design that would complement the original architecture in a contemporary way.”

There were many decisions—how many desks, how many chairs—and many sleepless nights. About three months away from completion, Lee received a call from the



OU Libraries Dean Sul Lee’s status among academic librarians was demonstrated this year when he was one of only a handful of Americans and the only Oklahoman to receive a royal invitation to the grand opening of the British Library at St. Pancras in London.

architect who said there was not enough money to complete the fourth floor as planned. They would have to go with cheaper flooring, lighting, etc. "I insisted that we would get the money and that he should continue," Lee says. "The money came in three phases. It was very complicated. But we didn't cut corners. Aesthetics were so important to me."

To take his mind off the building, Lee began his own personal construction project, a doll house of several thousand pieces for his daughter, Melissa. "I'd be up at 3 a.m. in the garage. That was my therapy, my stress reliever," Lee says.

In 1982, Bizzell Memorial Library opened the doors to the 150,000 square-foot Doris W. Neustadt Wing, and Melissa Lee had a doll house any little girl would be proud to own. After 16 years of use, only the library still looks new.

Maintaining that opening day polish is extremely important to Lee. Any trash or graffiti is taken care of immediately. An aesthetics committee reviews every piece of art entering the building; knickknacks are forbidden. The result is an uncluttered simplicity within that reflects the clean lines of the architecture.

"It is such a beautiful building. We hear that all the time from visitors," Lee says. "But, it's also very functional. If we ever want to change the delineation of bookcases, we can also reach up and click the lights into place the other way. The ability to grow and change is very important to a university library."

Another major change was the reorganization of the internal library system. In 1978, each floor had different subject areas, which was fine for a small library, Lee says, but maddening for faculty and students doing interdisciplinary research. Faculty members literally were running from floor to floor collecting research materials in a time consuming scavenger hunt. Lee reorganized the system, integrating information into one central reference center. He also established the library's microcomputer center, which opened in 1986.

One of Lee's pet projects was the refurbishing of the Great Reading Room, which had fallen into disrepair since



Dean Sul Lee, right, escorts the late Doris W. Neustadt on a 1982 dedication tour of the Bizzell Memorial Library wing that bears her name.

its heyday of the '30s and '40s. Workers replaced the fluorescent lights of the 1950s renovation with fixtures from a church catalog. The heavily worn velvet curtains on the magnificent two-story east window were removed, allowing natural light to flood the room.

All the other original furnishings, including the tables and chairs, were preserved. Crews spent weeks refinishing the intricately carved woodwork along the walls and crown molding, giving the room's guardian angels, who wield the Book of Knowledge and the Shield of Truth, something to smile about.

Lee also has worked to improve the library's professional associations.

OU is a member of the exclusive Association of Research Libraries. In 1980, OU Libraries joined the prestigious Research Libraries Group, which includes Harvard, Yale, Princeton and Columbia. "OU has one of the finest library facilities in the nation," says Lee. "I am very proud of it."

His goals for the next few years are ambitious and clear-cut. He would like to strengthen endowments for library collections, increase the availability of professional journals, enhance electronic resources for students and faculty and expand the library's human resources.

"Costs of operating our library of journals has continued to escalate, sometimes 100 percent. It's going up every year," explains Lee. "Because the journals are so expensive, we have not bought books in recent years, so we also would like to expand our collection of books. We also want to expand our human resources, so we can provide better programs for our faculty and students. That, I think, is very important."

Recently the library received a boost from an unexpected source. OU basketball coach Kelvin Sampson and his family pledged a personal gift of \$100,000 to the University, with half designated for the libraries. "I was delighted," says Lee.

Does this mean the library dean will be spending more time at OU basketball games? Possibly. After all, he studied to be a diplomat.

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—LYNETTE LOBBAN