

# THE URBAN DESIGN STUDIO

A UNIQUE PROGRAM COMBINING  
CITY PLANNING AND ARCHITECTURE  
SENDS OU-TULSA GRADUATE STUDENTS  
INTO THE COMMUNITY.



**F**ifteen years ago, when Robert Lawton Jones began the University of Oklahoma’s innovative Urban Design Studio in Tulsa, he compared it to the OU Medical School, started in Tulsa during the 1970s.

The Urban Design Studio, Jones told a reporter, would be “a place offering a laboratory for study, just like the medical profession has a teaching hospital here and uses clinical services as an instructional laboratory for its students.

“Medical students are involved with real patients in a real world. By coming to Tulsa with this graduate program, our students will have the opportunity to work with real projects in this community.”

An award-winning architect, Jones had been serving as OU’s director of architecture in Norman while maintaining a practice in Tulsa. Jones was agreeable, then, when in 1988 President Frank Horton and College of Architecture Dean Raymond Yeh approached

BY RANDY KREHBEIL

The innovative 15-year-old Urban Design Studio, directed by OU-Tulsa’s Shawn Schaefer, is producing graduate architects with broad-based experience in city planning and community development.



Robert Taylor



OU-Tulsa

■ A valuable feature of the Urban Design Studio program is combining full-time jobs with local firms and OU-Tulsa classes, such as this one attended by Joe Spence, left, Sarah Gould, Sherry Heim, Director Shawn Schaefer, Francis Fynn Entsuah, Samir Mehrotra and Kang Sang Chul.

him about starting a new program in his hometown.

“Both of them felt a presence in Tulsa would be interesting for the students and beneficial to the University,” says Jones, now retired from both teaching and architecture.

The program was called “urban design” because it combined the large-scale elements of city planning with the small-scale concerns of architects. Jones, with degrees in both architecture and urban planning, was especially suited to head the studio.

“We didn’t want to make it theoretical,” says Jones. “We introduced students to classes in law, in real estate, in marketing, in value engineering. That gives them an interesting scope.”

As further incentive, Jones helped students find full-time employment in local design firms. “The biggest difficulty we had at the time . . . was that people would get through their five-year (undergraduate) program and have a lot of student loans and debt, and they would say, ‘I need to get a job.’”

The relationship that developed between the design

studio and the city’s professional firms alleviated this problem by providing employment for outstanding student architects whose classes were arranged to fit their work schedules.

The studio, says Jones, was intended “not only to provide a service to the community, but real world applications for the students . . . The studio is a fantastic resource for Tulsa that is not always fully appreciated.”

With federal support for urban planning and design fading, the Urban Design Studio’s mission is more important than ever. Now directed by Shawn Schaefer, a student of Jones’ and graduate of the Tulsa program, the studio incorporates a wide range of disciplines and studies in two graduate architecture degree programs. Through these two tracks, OU trains professionals in architecture and urban planning while providing valuable services to Tulsa and surrounding communities.

These neighborhoods, towns and cities are the studio’s classrooms. Here problems big and small are attacked, teaching by solving, and in so doing creating a dynamic learning environment.

“We try to do projects that are community-based, not just academic,” says Schaefer. “We want the studio to be a community resource. We do a lot



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■ Working on a model of their Urban Design Studio project are students Tracy Anquoe, left, Dee Short, Roberta Olmstead and Terri Endres.

of jobs that wouldn't get done otherwise."

And provide experiences students might not get otherwise.

"With (undergraduate) architecture you deal primarily with building. There are some site issues, but it's primarily building," says second-year Urban Design Studio student Weldon Bowman, a native of nearby Skiatook. "The Urban Design Studio opened my eyes to, I guess, what you would call the politics of it—urban planning, zoning issues, urban environment. It's been educational on a different level.

"The whole urban design concept is to get involved. I've learned how the city really operates. I've met all of these people I never knew existed who make it work."

The studio offers a post-professional master's degree for those who have completed an undergraduate architecture de-

The program attracts a surprising variety of students, from newly minted architects from traditional undergraduate schools to city planners in mid-career to veteran private practice professionals. The youngest have been in their early 20s. The oldest was an architect in his 60s. All bring something different to the studio—and take something different away.

"Some programs crank out people who fit into a certain slot," says Schaefer. "Our students have a broader perspective."

Architecture embraces more fields of study than laymen might suppose. Besides the obvious design and engineering skills, it requires an understanding of such things as zoning and environmental law, city planning, transportation, data gathering and client relations.

"The program introduced me to the reality of architecture," says Trung Doan, who finished his degree in 1996 and is

ture firm Matrix while studying in Tulsa. "Financially, that was the only way I could get my master's degree."

His time at Matrix, though, was profitable professionally as well as financially. "I learned so much from those guys." Trung's experience launched him on a career that first took him to Seattle and then to Vietnam as a Fulbright Fellow.

Although the Urban Design Studio dates from just 1988, OU's connections to Tulsa's architectural heritage go back much further. In the 1920s and 1930s, when oil money added some of the country's most stunning art deco buildings to the Tulsa skyline, a largely self-taught architect named Bruce Goff won acclaim for his design contributions to such structures as the Tulsa Club and Boston Avenue Methodist Church. Goff soon became a rival and friend of the famed Frank Lloyd Wright; later, he served as chairman of architecture at OU, where he influenced a new generation of architects—among them such noted Tulsa designers as Charles Ward, Blaine Imel and Jack Arnold.

Jones, trained at Notre Dame and Illinois Tech and an adherent of the modernist Bauhaus movement, arrived in Tulsa in the 1950s and soon made his mark. His concept became the basic design for the city's civic center, and in 1955 he became a founding principal of Murray Jones Murray.

By the early 1980s Jones was teaching on the Norman campus while continuing to live in Tulsa. He also frequently contributed his ideas on architecture and urban planning to the opinion pages of the Tulsa newspapers.

"Substance, not style is needed," Jones wrote in 1987. "We recognize this need not only in our physical environment but in our political and social structures as well."

Goff and Jones brought to Tulsa, the state of Oklahoma and the OU architecture program widely divergent philosophies. Goff's designs were fantastic—rocket ships to Mars, he called them—but often difficult to build and impractical once constructed. Jones preached economy, harmony and functionality. The differences in their styles can be seen by comparing the Tulsa International Airport terminal or St. Patrick's Catholic Church



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■ Members of the Southwest Tulsa Chamber of Commerce listen to a presentation by Urban Design Studio student Roberta Olmstead, part of the team that conducted the Southwest Tulsa Project, an extensive assessment of the area's assets and potential.

gree and a master's for individuals from non-architecture backgrounds. Both take about two years to complete, and each has about the same number of students.

From the start, the strength of the Urban Design Studio has been its faculty. Much of the teaching is by practitioners in particular specialties. Kevin Anderson, an architect and developer, teaches real estate. Jay Chandler, an attorney with a prominent Tulsa firm, teaches law.

now an associate principal with Morris Architects in Houston. "For instance, you learn about real estate. You have to find how to acquire property for projects.

"We were able to apply what we learned about design to real situations. All the projects we worked on while I was there were in downtown Tulsa, and so I came to understand the city really well."

Trung, who completed his undergraduate work at the University of Louisiana-Lafayette, worked for the architec-

in Oklahoma City, both designed by Jones, with Goff's Spotlight Theater and Adah Robinson house in Tulsa.

"I can't think of two more opposite architects in their outlooks than Bruce Goff and Robert Lawton Jones," says Schaefer, who studied under Jones and was recruited to the Tulsa program by Jones in the early 1990s. "Bob is a rational modernist. Goff was very eccentric, very eclectic."

This tradition and the heritage left by other architects created a rich laboratory for the Urban Design Studio. Tulsa's cityscape includes everything from large undeveloped tracts to the 54-floor Bank of Oklahoma building, and from old oilfield shotgun houses to the Oral Roberts University Prayer Tower.

Each year, the studio engages in a group project, which helps Tulsa and other towns in the vicinity understand themselves better. These have included surveys of Turkey Mountain—a large and largely undeveloped urban park—as well as downtown Tulsa, the Okmulgee parks system and the historic Brady district. The studio's most recent project was for the Southwest Tulsa Chamber of Commerce.

The history and character of the area west and south of the 90-degree bend in the Arkansas River near downtown Tulsa is quite distinct from the rest of the city. The area's first producing oil well was drilled here in 1901; subsequent discoveries led to the construction of refineries, storage facilities, rail yards and pipelines. Many oilfield and refinery workers settled in the communities of Red Fork, West Tulsa, Carbondale, Berryhill and others. All since have been incorporated into the city of Tulsa, but the area retains its small-town feel.

The Southwest Tulsa Chamber of



Robert Taylor

■ Director Shawn Schaefer, standing, offers comments on an Urban Design Studio project being viewed by graduate student assistants Kang Sang Chul, left, and Francis Fynn Entsuah.

Commerce was trying to figure out how to better market the west side when two of its members—both students at OU-Tulsa's Schusterman Center—happened upon the Urban Design Studio and Schaefer.

"They asked, 'What can you do to help us?' and he said, 'Quite a bit,'" explains David Breed of the Southwest Tulsa Chamber.

"This area is fairly unique because of its connection to the early oil industry and the railroads," Breed continues. "It's really a cluster of communities, many of which were incorporated at one time as separate towns. With the older residents starting to disappear, we wanted to get an idea of what may happen to the community and the younger people. We wanted to better understand what we had going for us, what our resources were."

The Urban Design Studio put together demographic data drawn from the

2000 census and assessed the area's assets and potential. Last spring the studio presented a lengthy report that has given the Southwest Tulsa Chamber a good deal to think, plan and dream about.

"The studio was the glue that brought together a lot of things we've been wanting to do," says Breed. "We feel like it's been a real door-opener. Once you show this to people, it really gets them going."

"We came up with 10 regional recommendations," Schaefer says. "Some were kind of big picture. For instance, we wanted the city to preserve Lookout Mountain (a rocky, wooded ridge overlooking downtown) and Turkey Mountain. They are both still pretty much in their natural state and really close to the heart of the city. A lot of cities would kill for areas like these.

"Other recommendations were sort of nuts and bolts kinds of things. A multi-jurisdictional task force, for instance, because we're dealing with Creek as well as Tulsa County, several different school districts and different municipalities."

Later the students focused on a single project—beautifying and revitalizing the stretch of old U.S. 66 winding through west Tulsa as Southwest Boulevard. "Southwest Boulevard is really kind of the Main Street of west Tulsa," says Breed.

Among other things, the studio conceptualized a commercial area around the old 11th Street Bridge, an abandoned span across the Arkansas River originally built in the 1920s and later widened.

The studio now is turning its attention to Tulsa's effort to identify and prioritize development projects favored by the region's residents. Considering the studio's mission, Schaefer says, "It's such an appropriate project for our studio." ■