

# The Man behind the Genius

In 1948, armed with a newly minted certificate from an Oklahoma City business school, 18-year-old Jerri Hodges responded to a job posting at the University of Oklahoma's School of Architecture. On the north campus, she located Building 604 and "walked into a world I did not know existed," she recalls.

Abstract art lined the walls; window ledges held fishbowls filled with ivy; and across the ceiling, twine had been woven back and forth into geometric patterns. With very little money, someone had transformed an old navy barracks into a work of art, a creative atmosphere where students could thrive.

"His door is open," the receptionist told her with a nod of her head. "It's always open." The young woman walked down the hall and found a man pouring through books scattered across his desk. He greeted her like a colleague, and began showing her works of Frank Lloyd Wright, Louis Sullivan and Mies Van der Rohe. He was so enthusiastic, she says, it was like he was looking at them for the first time. Finally, the girl confessed, "Sir, I don't know what architecture is."

The man laughed, "That's all right; neither do a lot of people."

So began the lifelong friendship between Jerri Hodges Bonebrake and Bruce Goff, the brilliant and controversial architect whom she would serve as personal assistant as long as he remained at OU.

"People remember him for his buildings," she says, "but he had a real gift for teaching and for putting people at ease." Unlike the theatrical Wright, Goff was unpretentious and totally accessible. During her job interview, Goff showed her around a fifth-year design class.

"I had never seen anything like it in my life," she says, her voice still filled with wonder. She stopped in front of one structure made from enormous bowls of glass. She told Goff she did not understand it.

"Do you take shorthand?" he asked,

handing her a paper and pen. He began dictating as the girl carefully recorded every word in practiced loops and scrawls. He then took the paper from her, looking it up and down before handing it back.

"I don't understand that either," he said, "but I could if I tried."

Bonebrake says she accepted the job on the spot. "He was teaching even then. He knew how to bring out the inhibited students and how to give direction and focus to those who were uninhibited."

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Goff was born in Alton, Kansas, in 1904 and moved with his family to Tulsa when he was 11. Acknowledging his son was a gifted artist, his father took him to visit the architectural firm of Rush, Endacott and Rush, where Bruce was apprenticed at the age of 12. While there, he and his high school art teacher were credited with designing Tulsa's Boston Avenue Methodist Church.

At 26, Goff became a partner in the firm and at 30, began practicing in Chicago. After World War II, he landed for a time in California, returning in 1947 to Oklahoma, where he was offered a job in the OU School of Architecture.

"You know I don't have a degree," Goff told OU President George Lynn Cross during his interview. Cross assured

him that he valued ideas above degrees in building his faculty.

Years later, Cross would write, "In careful retrospect, I consider the addition of Bruce Goff to our faculty as one of the most fortunate things that happened to the University of Oklahoma during my tenure as president. He brought almost immediate national and international visibility to our School of Architecture. He attracted brilliant students from throughout the world who profited immensely from his creative genius."

During his tenure at OU, both his private practice and the school flourished. The openings of the Ledbetter House and the Bavinger House attracted thousands of visitors to Norman, as well as gifted students and professors to OU. Mendel Glickman, a structural engineer for Frank Lloyd Wright, joined the faculty as did E. Fay Jones, who would later become a Taliesin Fellow at Wright's famous school.

"We had a traveling exhibit that would visit other schools," says Bonebrake, "and when the exhibit would return to OU, it was followed by a trail of transfer students from all over the nation."

Charles Graham, OU's current dean of the College of Architecture, says Goff was extraordinary for his time. "The forms of his designs were unique and most often inspired by nature, but he would add a modern twist to it."

Goff was among the first to use recycled materials—pieces of molten glass from a regional factory or dime store ashtrays, even discarded cake pans. "His creativity allowed him to use an almost unlimited palette of materials as fast as he could think of them, which he used in extraordinary ways that he would make work," says Graham.

Although known for his modern designs, Bonebrake says Goff was equally well-versed in music and counted Duke Ellington and Sergei Stravinsky among his personal friends. Both men visited him in Norman.



“When Mr. Ellington walked through the door, you knew why he was called ‘The Duke,’ ” says Bonebrake. “He was handsome, charismatic, outgoing, well-dressed. Mr. Goff wanted everyone in the school to get to know him, to have access to these people.”

Goff also brought in composer Harry Partch and contemporary architects from Alfonso Iannelli to Wright. At the end of his speech at Meacham Auditorium, Wright threw his famous black cape over his shoulder and parted by saying, “If you are studying architecture, you are fortunate to be studying it here.”

Goff left OU in 1955, moving to Bartlesville, where he designed Shin'enKan, the residence and studio for Joe Price, who became executor of Goff's estate. Bonebrake kept up with her former mentor throughout the rest of his life and was by his side when he died in 1982 in Tyler, Texas.

After his death, she sent a note to all the current owners of Goff houses, asking if they would be willing to open their homes on a tour in memory of the architect. “Every single one said ‘yes;’ they had that much respect for Mr. Goff,” she says.

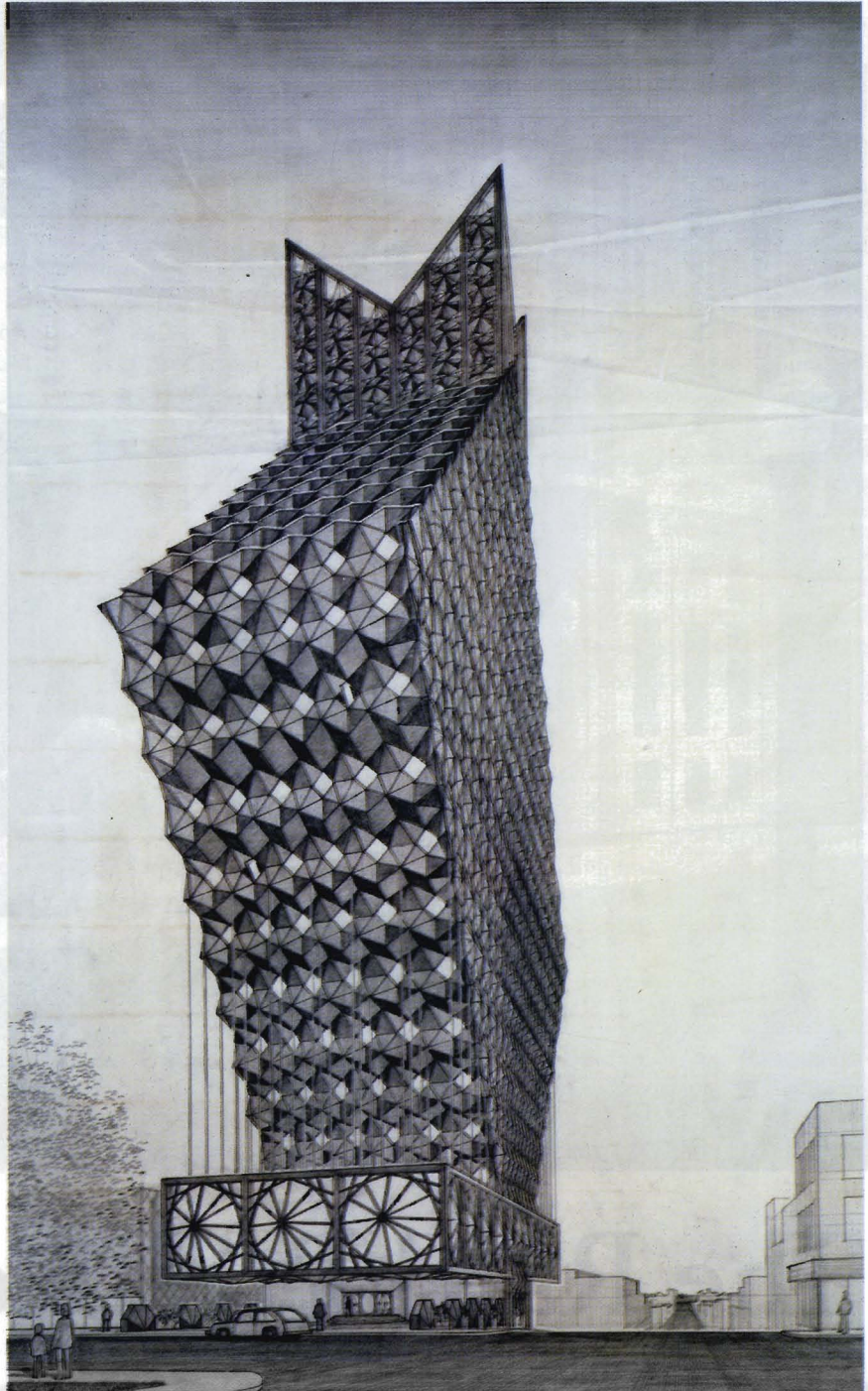
Goff's ashes are buried in a Chicago cemetery, within sight of Mies Van der Rohe's grave. Friends of Goff who wished for the architect to rest in Oklahoma soil provided a piece of Frankoma Pottery to hold his ashes.

Goff once wrote: “Oklahoma—a young state, not blessed or cursed with dusty outworn traditions or invasions of European style, is fertile ground for the development of an indigenous, creative architecture, truly expressive of the pioneering and democratic spirit of our people.”

He had found the perfect place for innovation.

“OU was lucky to have him,” says Graham.

—Lynette Lobban



Although designed forty years ago, Goff's First National Bank of Independence, Missouri, is still fresh and vibrant. Drawing, Gift of Shin'enKan, Inc. 1990.871.8 The Art Institute of Chicago Photograph by Robert Lifson. Reproduction ©The Art Institute of Chicago.