



The Modernist House

A preservationist,
partnering with
OU Architecture,
has intervened
to save an iconic
work of American
modernism for
future generations
to study.

By ANDY RIEGER



Julius Schulman/Getty Research Institute

Shortly after architecture professor Herb Greene moved into his signature Prairie House on a patch of windswept land in east Norman, a bus pulled into the driveway. The driver got out and approached Greene.

“Is this where the tornado hit?” the stranger asked.

That unconventional house, which has been mistaken for many things, remains today, having survived decades of storms, both natural and economic. All iconic structures don’t fare so well.

Legacies left behind in Oklahoma by organic modernist architects are slowly being erased. Former OU architecture professor Bruce Goff’s eclectic Bavinger House in east Norman was damaged by a storm and fell into disrepair. Nearby, Greene’s Prairie House was teetering and could have easily had a date with a track hoe and bulldozer. Through the efforts of a Norman preserva-

This 1961 image was captured for *LIFE Magazine* by famed architecture photographer Julius Schulman. Despite its remote location and unconventional design, Greene’s house boasted modern amenities, including a carport.

on the Prairie

tionist contractor in partnership with the OU College of Architecture, the Prairie House's future is brighter.

Janie Wilson, the Prairie House's longtime owner and resident, died in January 2016, and the home's future was uncertain. Wilson, an Oklahoma City club owner and entrepreneur, bought the home from Professor Greene in 1968, a few years after he left the College of Architecture. She lived in the iconic structure for nearly 50 years, often hosting parties there for friends but shying away from public tour requests.

"I certainly knew of the Prairie House but didn't know the story behind it," says Brent Swift, a 1996 OU communications graduate who has restored and preserved dozens of Oklahoma homes and buildings.

Swift and his partner, Alisse Ellis, purchased the home and its entire contents last summer from Wilson's estate. The home was a Norman icon for years with less of a public persona than the Bavinger estate, which annually hosted Mother's Day open houses for the curious.

"At the end of the day she was still preserving this property," Swift says. "She loved this house and it showed in her notes. She wanted somebody else to love the house."

The Prairie House, built in 1961, was featured in *Life* and *Look* magazines and newspapers throughout the world. Famed photographer Julius Schulman came to Norman and photographed the house. Greene, who studied at OU under Goff, is an architect, but also an accomplished artist.

"When I was a kid I played with modeling clay and I had a certain gift for mass and form and texture," he says. "I just had lots of imagination."

Greene says he chose the home's two-acre site in east Norman because he wanted to be out in the countryside away from other homes. Texture, he says, was most important to him.

He built the Prairie House with many student helpers. Greene stressed the words he remembers from Goff: "Seek your own individuality. Refresh yourself each time you do something."

Greene hopes students feel the warmth and texture of the Prairie House and find their own creative niche when they visit the structure.

"You do a space and you don't want to see the beginning or end of it," he says. "It sort of becomes in your presence."

Besides the textures, Swift, the contractor, sees an amazing space.

"When you think about form and function of architecture



A celebrated designer in his own right, OU College of Architecture Dean Hans Butzer (left) was thrilled to tour the Prairie House with its creator, Herb Greene. "It's truly legacy architecture," Butzer says.



Architect Herb Greene (right) and his artistic director, Lila Cohen, gaze out the semi-circle window of a former bedroom in the Prairie House. A piece of Oklahoma's architectural legacy will be protected thanks to a collaboration between the OU College of Architecture and preservationist Brent Swift.

this is all about form," says Swift. "There is nothing straight in it. Everything is on a curve."

Greene, a native of New York, left Syracuse in 1948 specifically to study with Goff at OU. After working in Texas he returned to Norman as an OU faculty member from 1957 to 1963 and carried on Goff's legacy. He taught for another 18 years at the University of Kentucky before moving to California in 1982.

"There's certainly a linkage from Frank Lloyd Wright to Bruce Goff to Herb Greene," says Swift.

Immediately after buying the home in 2016 Swift began



Lynette Lobban

Visitors stand on the roof of the Prairie House beneath a springtime sky. The home's outer layers of wooden shingles have been likened to feathers.

getting calls from architects around the country. "Friends of Kebyar," an organic architecture association with ties to Bruce Goff, was spreading the word.

"This may be all that's left in central Oklahoma and we need to preserve it," says Swift, a one-time television journalist who got his start building decks nearly 20 years ago. "It's a part of architectural history and it's right in our backyard."

That backyard is in east Norman off 48th Avenue Northeast, a timeless area where hay bales still dot the landscape. A metal carport reminds passersby the home was built in the last century and provides contrast for the unfinished wooden shingles inside and out. The home's outer layers look like bird feathers. The enigmatic work of artist John Hurtig, an OU architecture student three years younger than Greene, was one of the inspirations for the design.

"It almost looks like it's anchored to the earth," Swift says.

The first floor has a kitchen, living room, three bedrooms and a bathroom. The centerpiece of the master bedroom is a large, half-circle window facing west. The floors are granite and cork. A distinctive staircase ascends into an open space, also with a west window where Greene kept an office. A second staircase takes guests to the roof where there was once a screened porch.

Swift's game plan is to preserve the home and use it as a teaching tool for the university to embrace. He'll work with OU Architecture Dean Hans Butzer and others on a long-range plan for the property.

"I haven't done anything to it. I wouldn't want to start on it without their guidance," says Swift. "That house, along with the Bavinger House, put the OU architecture program on the map. We have quite a bit of work to do, but we'll get there."

Dean Butzer and Swift interviewed Greene in his Berkeley, Calif. home. The architect, now in his late 80s, lived in the 2,100 square-foot, two-story home with his family. After moving to Kentucky, he rented it for a few years before selling to Wilson.

Greene used simple wood construction on the home which, from a distance, resembles a chicken hunkered down on Oklahoma's wind-swept prairie. *Life Magazine* dubbed it the "Prairie Chicken House."

"One of the things that we can all be lucky to note is the landscape is still intact," says Butzer. "You still get that sense of the frontier."


Butzer envisions interest in the Prairie House could help the college re-embrace its architectural legacy. A mini-symposium this past spring brought Greene back to campus to talk with students and faculty about his career and his mentor, Bruce Goff. In 2004, Greene returned to OU for a symposium honoring the 100th anniversary of Goff's birth, but did not visit the Prairie House until this year. Butzer toured Greene's former home for the first time in 2016.

"I was like a kid in a candy store," Butzer says. "It's truly legacy architecture. The spatial complexity. It's a house created out of voluptuous surfaces. It's more about topography."

Butzer says the house was a great example of teachers like Goff being able to draw out the creativity of a student like Greene.

"It was designed around the will of the person. It was not built for resale," he says. "The house is indicative of what made the OU College of Architecture so important."

He envisions a small conference center on the site with students and scholars meeting to further OU's architectural legacy.

"It would be this incredible venue," says Butzer. "It has an image that elevates all Oklahomans in the eyes of the world." 

"Architects of the American School," a symposium hosted by the College of Architecture in August, is part of a series of events leading to a major exhibition, "The American School of Architecture: Building on the Plain," to be held spring 2019. For more information, visit <http://www.ou.edu/content/architecture/centers/americanschool.html>.

Andy Rieger is a longtime journalist and former managing editor of The Norman Transcript, as well as the former adviser to the OU Daily.