

# Suspension of Light

Remembering architect Bruce Goff's unbuilt masterwork, the OU Crystal Chapel.

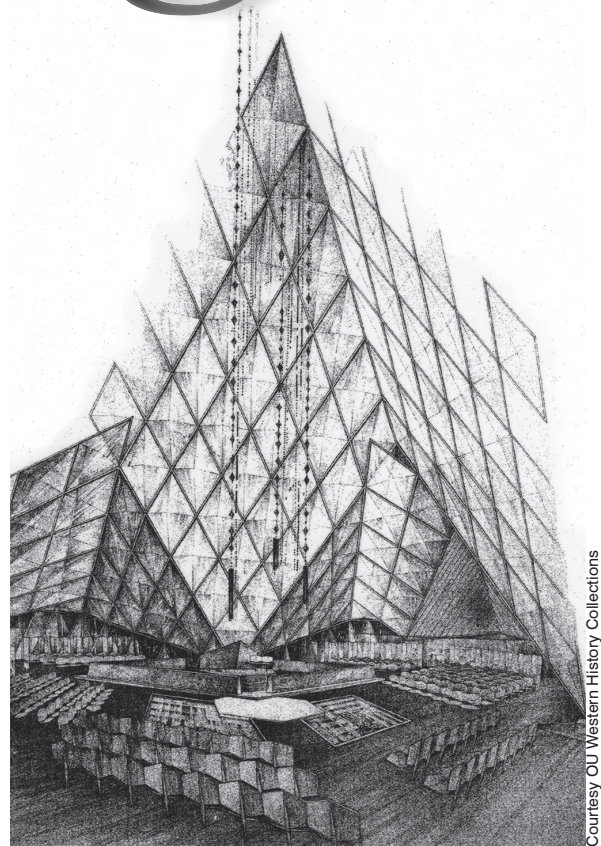
BY ANNE BARAJAS HARP

Imagine driving down Elm Avenue on a dark night, past the radiant, white façade of the University of Oklahoma's Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art and the spotlighted brick gables of the OU School of Music. And then, to your right, emerges a towering prism whose hundreds of crystalline facets glow with rosy incandescence.

The image in your mind—Bruce Goff's Crystal Chapel—might simultaneously be OU's least-known and most famous project, though it was never more than an idea. The design was so far ahead of its time that it inspired controversy, a minor revolt among OU students and faculty, and the devotion of many of the world's leading architects.

"Here, at last, is a rocket-flight use of techniques and materials never before available to realize a form of beauty and religious experience never before possible," Douglas Haskell wrote of Goff's design in the July 1950 issue of *The Architectural Forum*. "This ... marks the farthest point of advance in a long architectural quest."

Goff was already attracting national headlines when OU President George Lynn Cross asked him to create a nondenominational student religious center in 1949. The architect had been recruited to OU by Cross two years earlier. His organic design of Norman's



Rendering of the interior of the Crystal Chapel.

H.E. Ledbetter House had recently been featured in *LIFE* magazine, and Goff's dynamic makeover of OU architecture education was drawing students from as far away as Europe, South America and Asia.

"In the 1940s and '50s, schools of architecture were associated with a 'style,'" says Stephanie Pilat, director of the division of architecture at OU's Christopher C. Gibbs College of Architecture. "But Goff wanted students to develop their own, individual approach to design. The idea was radical at the time." ▶

Bruce Goff portrait, Norman, OK, 1947. Bruce Goff Archive, Ryerson and Burnham Art and Architecture Archives, Art Institute of Chicago. Digital file #195001.Port\_Goff



A portrait of Goff taken in 1947, the year he joined OU's faculty. In the background is one of Goff's paintings.

Goff's individuality was evident in every inch of the Crystal Chapel.

Described as "a vision of translucent crystalline geometry" by the late OU architecture professor Arn Henderson in *Bruce Goff: Architecture of Discipline in Freedom*, the 158-foot diameter design was composed from diamond patterns of prefabricated pink plate glass within a latticework of aluminum framing. The chapel, located where Goddard Health Center now sits, would rise to 75 feet at its top.

Inside, decorative chains of silver and gold hung from the chapel's peak above a pulpit and a seated congregation of 300. The building was supported by triangular bases of pink Oklahoma granite forming bridges over a hexagonal reflecting pool flowing both inside and out.

Brian Eyerman, an OU 1999 architecture graduate and avowed Goff enthusiast, is owner of Oklahoma City's Skyline Ink architectural visualization and illustration firm. He spent a mind-bending 4,000 hours digitally recreating the Crystal Chapel for the 2010 Fred Jones Jr. Museum of

innovative," he says.

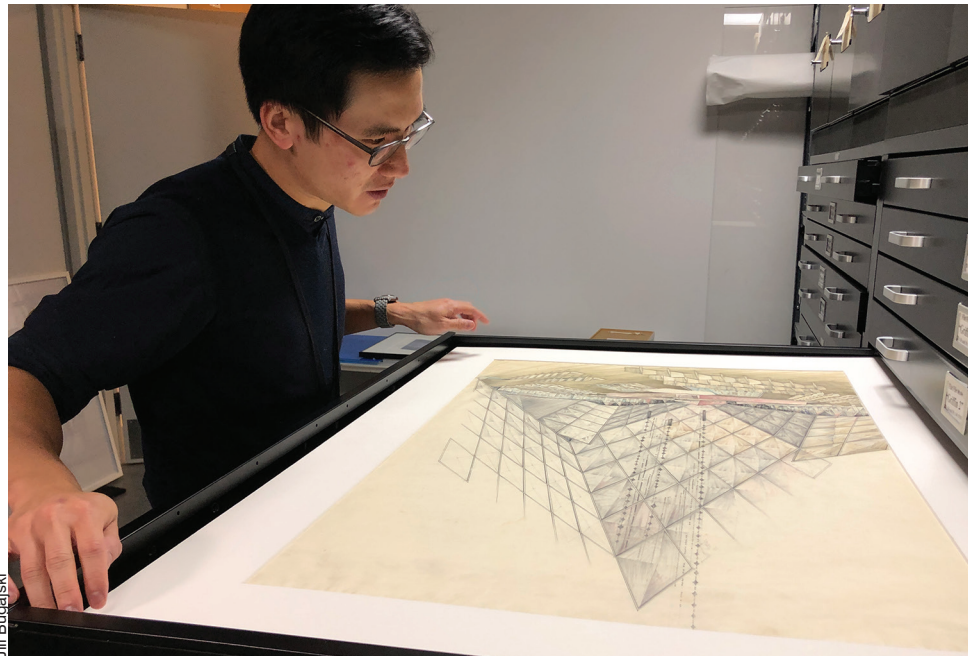
In another example of innovation, pink insulation layered between the chapel's glass panels would provide color, light diffusion and mitigate heat during the day. Cathode light tubes were concealed between the glass panels. "The interior would thus have been

bathed in soft, warm light [during the day] and at night ... would have made the building itself glow," wrote David G. De Long in *Bruce Goff: Toward Absolute Architecture*.

"It would have been magnificent," Pilat says simply.

To one side of the chapel would be a student center featuring underground parking, a large social hall, meeting rooms, a kitchen and a worship space for 40 people. And soaring over both buildings was a 136-foot spire with "wings" of aluminum and glass that would be visible for miles.

"You can pick out a Goff project because it's unlike anything else you've ever seen in your life," says Pilat, co-author of *Renegades: Bruce Goff and the American School of Architecture*, which accompanied the 2020



Jill Bugajski

Craig Lee examines Bruce Goff's original drawings of the Crystal Chapel in the archives of the Art Institute of Chicago. Lee and colleague Alison Fisher are preparing a major 2025 Goff exhibition.

“The term ‘iconic’ is used haphazardly at times, yet **Goff’s designs** were singular, and there is a timeless element to his work.”

Art exhibit, *Bruce Goff: A Creative Mind*. "That was a huge deal for me and all pro-bono, for Goff," he says.

Eyerman points out one of the building's unique features, vital in a pre-air-conditioned world. Glass side walls extended down into the reflecting pool; water could be lowered below the level of the glass, allowing air to cool as it flowed across the water's surface and up to the ceiling. "That building was so



The student-made Crystal Chapel model was “so realistic that published photographs were often mistaken for an actual building,” wrote the late Goff biographer Arn Henderson.

exhibit of the same name. She explained that Goff is a leader of what’s now known as the “American School” of design, which has three hallmarks—originality, contextualism and resourcefulness in using materials. Those hallmarks are still central to every OU architecture student’s training.

“The instructor’s job in a student’s education is not to turn them into disciples,” she says. “If you look at our graduating students’ work, there isn’t a single, unifying style. We say, ‘That’s success.’ It means they are all tapping their interior creativity.”

“Goff’s work is his own trajectory,” agrees Alison Fisher, the Harold and Margot Schiff Curator of Architecture and Design at the Art Institute of Chicago. The museum holds Goff’s professional and personal archives. “There was no one else who was doing his kinds of geometry or interior complexities of space. He is resolutely his own maker.”

“You can see how Goff is exploring geometries and shapes; I think that’s what I find exciting and

compelling,” adds Craig Lee, the Art Institute’s Daniel F. and Ada L. Rice Postdoctoral Curatorial Fellow in Architecture and Design. “What makes this building particularly Goff is his inventive, creative use of available building materials like insulation and making them a central design feature.”

Lee and Fisher have immersed themselves in Goff’s work and visited OU several times while planning a major 2025 Art Institute retrospective exhibit on the full range of Goff’s creative practice, which crossed genres to include painting and music.

“The term ‘iconic’ is used haphazardly at times,” Lee says, “yet Goff’s designs were singular, and there is a timeless element to his work.”

But in 1949, not everyone was excited by the chapel’s design. When Cross and Goff presented the plan to a prominent Oklahoma City banker and civic leader, the president received a polite, firm letter the following day.

“The design and architecture of the proposed chapel

submitted by Mr. Goff was something unique and novel,” the banker wrote. “In fact, it is something so new and unusual, as to design and material, that I have doubts.”

“Crystal architecture” wasn’t new—in fact, Fisher says, Goff was likely inspired by European avant-garde design from the early 1900s—but it wasn’t widely known in the United States. Goff’s design predates Wayfarers Chapel built by Lloyd Wright, son of Frank Lloyd Wright, and comes more than a decade before the famed U.S. Air Force Academy Cadet Chapel.

Undeterred, Cross sought financial backers. He placed Goff under contract while the architect refined his drawings, and his \$800 fee helped pay for an elaborate model created by students. Goff’s papers also include an estimated \$410,000 project construction budget, comparable to \$4.6 million today.

Word of the design and model spread like wildfire through the architecture community.

“What’s this we hear about your rose-glass chapel?” the *Architectural Forum’s* Haskell wrote Goff, requesting first rights for publication. “If your model is as stunning as we hear, it ought to be photographed in black and white and in color so *Forum* can do a preview of it.”

When the article ran in July 1950, Haskell’s review was exuberant. “For centuries, one aspiration of church architecture has been a crystalline purity of emotion based on otherworldly wonder ... Now in Oklahoma’s crystalline chapel, worshippers will have the sensation of being miraculously suspended in a prism of warm light whose structural frame will be little more noticeable than the leads of a stained-glass window.”

Editors at *LIFE* magazine reached out to Goff about a story on the future of church architecture shortly before Cross shared Goff’s design with new potential donors. The couple, flourishing Oklahoma City business owners, hoped to honor a child they’d recently lost in a tragic accident. They produced a vision statement for a nondenominational, nonsectarian chapel serving students and faculty and began touring university chapels nationwide.

The details of what transpired over the next two years are muddy—Goff clearly was confident that his plan was moving forward, as were supporters at OU and within the architecture world. But hints that the donors had other wishes began emerging in documents. By January 1953, Cross relayed to Goff that the family was committed to a more conservative, restrained design and had hired another architect.



Erikah Brown

Stephanie Pilat looks over a copy of Goff’s Crystal Chapel blueprints held at the Christopher C. Gibbs College of Architecture library.

“I tell you this with the deepest regret and keenest appreciation of the fine work that you have done,” Cross wrote.

Within days, images of a red-brick, Georgian design were published in *The Oklahoma Daily*, OU’s student newspaper. The story announced groundbreaking was soon scheduled on the south oval location where Dale Hall now sprawls. That event was part of a weeklong celebration of OU’s 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary and Cross’ 10<sup>th</sup> year as president.

The announcement unleashed a brief, but powerful storm within OU and the architecture profession. Concerned that the worth of modern architecture at OU was being challenged, members of the American Institute of Architects’ student chapter launched a letter-writing campaign to many of the world’s top architects and designers; several had visited their classrooms thanks to Goff. The letter asked for responses “so that it be known that the basic principle being denied in this situation is fundamental ... in the



Courtesy Skyline Ink

Digitally recreating the Crystal Chapel took Brian Eyerman more than 4,000 hours in 2010. He updated the “flythrough” renderings in 2018 as part of OU’s exhibit, *Renegades: Bruce Goff and the American School of Architecture*.

future development of this country.”

A pile of outraged missives poured in from international architects and industrial designers, including Eero Saarinen, creator of The Gateway Arch in St. Louis and Washington, D.C.’s, Dulles International Airport terminal; expressionist and art deco pioneer Erich Mendelsohn; industrial designer Alfonso Iannelli; and Philip C. Johnson, then director of the Museum of Modern Art’s Department of Architecture and Art and an acknowledged master of modern architecture.

Johnson called Goff’s design “the most beautiful project for a church that has come to our attention since the war,” while William Wurster, whose San Francisco houses became the standard for midcentury organic design, reportedly was moved to tears when he first saw Goff’s model and said he believed the chapel “had the possibility of being one of the most distinguished and outstanding buildings of our times.”

“Bruce Goff’s building, built, would have been something equal, if not superior, to the greatest architecture of all time,” wrote “Eichler Homes” innovator Robert Anshen.

A plan to publish the letters in a newspaper series alongside several from OU faculty members reached Cross. Supportive, yet savvy to the political risks facing Goff’s program, Cross wrote to one faculty member, “there is nothing to be gained and much to be lost.” Instead, he committed to helping students educate

University stakeholders about the importance of OU’s architecture program and its future.

As emotions cooled, the letter campaign dissipated. The chapel project broke ground as planned, yet hung in limbo. The donors explored other ideas, including an unproductive visit to Goff’s mentor, Frank Lloyd Wright, then 89 but still designing at his Wisconsin Taliesin studio. By 1960, the concept of a campus chapel faded into oblivion, perhaps due in part to church-associated student centers cropping up nearby over the ensuing years.

However, the brilliance and importance of Goff’s design for the Crystal Chapel—and his OU legacy—have never died away. And some still wonder what it would be like to sit within the warm, dazzling light of Bruce Goff’s creation.

“Imagine walking through the chapel, with the sunlight coming through the pink glass and hearing the water,” reflects Pilat. “That would be a bodily experience you’re not likely to forget.”

“I think the Crystal Chapel would have remained an OU architectural landmark,” Lee concurs. “And I think it would have held the same appeal and wonder now as it did in 1949.”

---

*Anne Barajas Harp is editor of Sooner Magazine.*

To tour Skyline Ink’s visualization of the Crystal Chapel, visit <https://vimeo.com/271929377>.