Exhibitions

THE ARCHITECTURE OF BRUCE GOFF, 1904–1982: DESIGN FOR THE CONTINUOUS PRESENT
The Art Institute, Chicago
9 June–4 September 1995

Kisho Kurokawa Gallery, the Art Institute of Chicago, view of the exhibition *The Architecture of Bruce Goff, 1904-1982: Design for the Continuous Present*, installation by Bart Prince

Bruce Goff has long fluttered at the margins of American architecture. Over his protracted career, from 1916 to 1982, he projected some 500 buildings, of which close to 150 were constructed. They were mostly houses for private clients; he designed a respectable number of churches and commercial structures but realized few of the institutional projects that the architectural profession takes seriously. More problematic still was his systematic rejection of architectural conventions, including his own: this largely self-taught man who apprenticed at age twelve to an architectural firm in Tulsa, Oklahoma, treated each commission as a unique set of circumstances to be addressed imaginatively through an unprecedented design. If the idiosyncratic results earned him occasional praise for his innovative approach to materials, geometry, and space, they also baffled the classifying impulse of critics. Although in 1987 the American Institute of Architects gave its award for an influential building twenty-five years old or older to his Bavinger House in Norman, Oklahoma (1950), the prejudice persists that "Goff's contribution to American architecture is still open to question" (Philip Berger, "Bruce Goff," *Chicago Reader*, 23 June 1995). Even in death, when he can no longer surprise us with something new, his image as an architectural maverick continues to haunt him. This architect, though he craved recognition of what is in fact his coherent as well as culturally grounded work, has yet to find his place in our history.

Standing on Michigan Avenue in front of the Art Institute of Chicago, and looking up at the green and gold banner announcing the Bruce Goff exhibition, the architect Bart Prince remembered his visits with Goff to Chicago in the 1970s. He speculated that Goff would have protested such an unlikely event and been delighted at its prospect. Goff of course knew the city and its suburbs well, both because he had lived in the area from 1934 to 1942, and because the work of Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright, two architects he particularly admired, was woven through its landscape. Implicitly, the banner seemed to say, Goff had been accepted as their peer.

Joe Price, Goff client and the executor of his estate, gave the Bruce Goff Archive of architectural drawings, paintings, writings, correspondence, photographs, and other materials to the Art Institute in 1990. Price based his decision in part on the geographical facts of the architect's career. Ignored on the East Coast, where he produced only three buildings (in Georgia and Florida), Goff practiced primarily in the Midwest and West: Oklahoma, Texas, California, and Illinois in that order boast the most commissions, while many of his greatest works are located in Oklahoma and Illinois. Chicago, as the cultural center of the same American heartland that Goff represented in his architecture, is the logical city for his archive.

In publicizing the Goff archive, both the exhibition, curated by Pauline Saliga, Mary Woolever, and Sidney K. Robinson, and the accompanying catalogue, edited by Saliga and Woolever, seek to answer the question of Goff's historical meaning through a comprehensive survey of his career. The curators made a conscious attempt to involve several of the architect's key associates and friends in shaping their answer in creative as well as critical terms. Bart Prince, who completed Goff's projected Pavilion for Japanese Art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art after his death in 1982, designed the exhibition installation and

delivered the opening night lecture. David De Long, author of *Bruce Goff: Toward Absolute Architecture* (New York, 1988) and organizer of the archive, articulated the exhibition's critical structure with an essay whose reconsideration of Goff guided the curators in their presentation of the architect's work. Sidney K. Robinson provided further critical perspective in his ambitiously wide-ranging essay on Goff and music; Joe Price, Jack Golden (a former student), and Philip Welch (a former colleague) each offered more personal testimonials in the catalogue, while Timothy Samuelson contributed an essay on Goff's architecture in the Chicago area, and Annemarie van Roessel assembled a useful inventory of Goff's extant and demolished buildings.

By any standard, the Art Institute's architecture gallery is an unfortunate space. The visitor descends precipitously into a cramped, annular corridor wedged behind the apse of the Ryerson and Burnham libraries, which it overlooks through lunettes running at floor level along the gallery's inner wall. To make this space work as the setting for Bruce Goff's architectural drawings, with only a modest budget at his disposal, Bart Prince conceived a simple solution in two parts. First, he painted the gallery walls a dark, almost nocturnal, green; second, he threaded one mile of hemp rope in taut, angled planes between the gallery walls. The result immediately evokes Goff's sensibility, and the rope in particular prompts memories of his ad hoc use of rope and string in projects extending back to the Lounge and Star Bar at Camp Parks in California (1944). For Prince, however, the scheme resulted more directly and pragmatically: the darkened walls disappearing into nothing would at once deemphasize the actual space and cause the lighter drawings to leap out at the viewer; the yellow rope, dramatically set off like the drawings against the green background, would transform the gallery into a series of interpenetrating pools, each with its cluster of exhibited works. A tribute to Goff's formally abstract yet physically sensual way of thinking, this installation was psychologically as well as visually effective.

In his essay, David De Long questions Goff's own dating of the phases of his career according to the places in which he lived. Noting that Goff was "essentially rootless," that "wherever he was, he created an internalized world" (17), De Long argues that his career should instead be divided into three artistic periods: the early years, 1916–45, when Goff's work remained derivative; the mature years, 1945–1956 (which corresponded to his tenure at the University of Oklahoma), when he produced his typologically most original work; and the late years, 1956–82, when he refined his discoveries of the previous decade but also retreated to a more decorative architecture. The curators duplicated this artistic chronology in their organization of 100 drawings representing nearly 70 different works. They were equally faithful to De Long, and by extension to the published wisdom, in their selection of the projects and buildings on display.

The first section reached from Goff's early and still imitative works in Tulsa, like the Boston Avenue Methodist Church and the Riverside Studio (both from 1928), to such assured products of his Chicago practice as the Irma Bartman House (1941), "Triaero," in Louisville, Kentucky. The second section predictably included such masterpieces as the circular Ruth Ford House in Aurora, Illinois (1947), and the spiraling Bavinger House, as well as the fantastically non-Euclidean studio project of 1953 for Joe Price in Bartlesville, Oklahoma. The third section began with the studio actually built for Joe Price (1956) and ended with the posthumously completed Pavilion for Japanese Art. To supplement the architectural drawings, some executed by Goff and some by assistants (though the curators were incomplete in their attributions), architectural models of four unbuilt projects were specially commissioned for the exhibition. The gesture, one assumes, was inspired by the example of New York's Museum of Modern Art, which regularly produces extravagantly detailed models for its architectural exhibitions. Unfortunately, those on display at the Art Institute were less satisfying (if also obviously less expensive), particularly since the use of drably monochromatic bass wood for most of the models misrepresents Goff's polychromatic and materially eclectic architecture.

As a coda to the architecture, Sidney K. Robinson assembled a fascinating exhibit of Goff's musical compositions. An amateur yet avid listener whose tastes began with Debussy and went forward to modernists like Edgard Varèse, Goff wrote music but mostly composed directly by hand cutting the paper rolls for player pianos. These rolls, several of which could be seen and heard on a video recording, document Goff's lifelong interest in the correspondences between music and architecture: the holes cut into their surfaces function doubly as a form of musical notation and as spatially abstract compositions.

Including the music, the exhibition's layout usefully allowed one to trace the whole of Goff's career and thus discover the patterns of development that relate his otherwise so apparently different works; De Long identifies these patterns with Goff's formulation of two plan types (20): a central vertical volume of space surrounded by compartmented spaces, and a continuous band of interlocking spaces around a central service core. The treatment of individual works provoked only a few objections. The Boston Avenue Methodist Church was credited without justification to Adah Robinson as well as to Goff, even though her role was limited to self-promotion and interfering obstruction (see De Long, *Bruce Goff*, 22–30). The Helen Unseth House in Park Ridge, Illinois (1940)—with its ingenious plan and liberating use of a triangular geometry—was inexplicably missing (though Samuelson discusses it in the catalogue). More generally troublesome was the dating of Goff's architectural maturity to 1946, as if he needed World War II to come of age. De Long states (21) that Goff "seemed to concentrate more on exterior forms than on innovative organization" in such designs as Triaero, and yet this house—its illusionistically suspended roof hovering weightlessly over a single space shaped by triangular planes of glass and corrugated metal—is the conceptual breakthrough leading to the Don Leidig House, projected in 1946 to have suspended circular roofs floating like lily pads over the spaces below. There is also room to wonder whether Goff's work after 1956, culminating with the single major institutional building of his career, the Pavilion for Japanese Art, can so easily be qualified as recycled ideas sometimes verging on "self-parody" (De Long, 26).

The exhibition acknowledged Goff's debts to European architects like Eliel Saarinen and Erich Mendelsohn along with Sullivan and Wright, and took particular

care to explain how Wright's organicism at once profoundly influenced Goff and demarcated their architectural differences: Goff accepted wholeheartedly the organic premise that each design must be specific to its client, yet his typically internalized and self-sufficient works ignore the Wrightian correlate that each design should also be specific to its site. Curiously, this difference betrays the one glaring omission in an otherwise scrupulous tracing of influences, since it points straight to Wright's eldest son— Lloyd Wright, nowhere mentioned in either the exhibition or the catalogue—who created similarly internalized worlds in such Californian works from the 1920s as the Sowden House. Bart Prince remembers Goff's confessing during a visit to this house that it was the only one by another architect which he would like to own. Recognizing the bond of admiration as well as friendship that related Goff to Lloyd Wright would illuminate their shared struggle with the sometimes overwhelming heritage of their common architectural father, Frank Lloyd Wright.

The exhibition and catalogue addressed the larger question of Goff's historical significance on several levels. While Goff was only a limited publicist, he did propose two theoretical objectives for his architecture: the idea of an aesthetically "absolute architecture" freed from constraints of either representational content or utilitarian function, which De Long appropriated to title his monograph on Goff; and Gertrude Stein's historical idea of a "continuous present," which Goff reinterpreted spatially to explain the experience of his architecture, and which the curators used to label their exhibition and catalogue. Yet De Long suggests in his essay (29) that these concepts have only a limited value in characterizing the work of Goff: "Perhaps out of a sense of competition with Wright, he strove to establish a theoretical position, and in this, I think, he was less convincing." Part of the problem is that Goff's idea of an "absolute architecture" is contradicted by his insistence that each design result directly from the client's particular needs; indeed, apart from the occasional hypothetical project (and, notably, his musical compositions), Goff was at his creative best when responding to the functional limits of a client's program. But the real objection to these concepts is that, in the end, they remain intellectual window dressing for an innately intuitive architect.

De Long's doubts inform what is potentially the most valuable insight of the entire exercise of exhibition and catalogue. Attacking once again the problem of Goff's elusive place in American architecture, De Long argues that his work actually represented not the elite conventions of high art, but rather the exuberant vulgarity of America's popular culture: its vernacular landscape of "shopping centers, gas stations, and the like" (17). De Long does not pursue his insight, which in any case needs the clarification that an architect with Goff's highly developed degree of aesthetically self-conscious individuality is, by definition, outside the vernacular. Even at the risk of reviving Charles Jencks's cruelly mistaken jibe that Goff was the Michelangelo of kitsch (in *Architectural Design Profiles 16: Bruce Goff* [1978], 48), however, the vernacular indicates the context in which we should be trying to understand the work of Goff.

It is worth reminding ourselves that the vernacular is shaped by daily life. The biographical as much as social dimensions of Goff's vernacular are touched on impressionistically in the essays by Golden, Price, and Welch, though the same reticence that hampers De Long seems to constrain their testimony. Goff can certainly never be understood until the conspiracy of silence that still surrounds his homosexuality is replaced with a fuller comprehension of the circumstances of his life. Goff's clients, many of them as remarkable as those of Frank Lloyd Wright, also require the sort of historical consideration that Wright's clients are now receiving. That Goff's work has a particularly and necessarily personal dimension was intimated by Bart Prince in his opening night lecture, when he gently corrected the tendency to objectify Goff by speaking of his friend in consistently subjective terms.

The historically concrete rather than theoretically abstract nature of Goff's work and career may explain the mistrust of him that persists in academic and professional circles (whose representatives were for the most part conspicuously absent in the crowd of Goff clients and friends attending the exhibition's opening night and lecture): his work does not reduce conveniently to pat intellectual formulas. But the possibility that he practiced, pragmatically and without pretension, what Robert Venturi more theoretically and archly preached in *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1966), should stimulate those circles to take Goff more seriously.

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Publication related to the exhibition:
Pauline Saliga and Mary Woolever, editors, *The Architecture of Bruce Goff, 1904–1982: Design for the Continuous Present*, with contributions by David G. De Long, Jack Golden, Joe D. Price, Sidney K. Robinson, Timothy Samuelson, Annemarie van Roessel, and Philip B. Welch. Chicago and Munich/New York: The Art Institute of Chicago and Prestel-Verlag, 1995, 120 pp., numerous b&w illus., 33 color. $24.95 (paper). ISBN 0-86559-138-5. $50.00 (cloth). ISBN 3-7913-1453-X.

TEMPLE OF LIBERTY: BUILDING THE CAPITOL FOR A NEW NATION

Madison Gallery, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
24 February–24 June 1995

The bicentennial of the laying of the cornerstone of the United States Capitol served as the impetus for *Temple of Liberty*, an exhibition on that seminal and symbolic building, featuring a wealth of architectural drawings, four large models, and a range of other objects from engravings and portrait busts to a teapot and a bandbox. Curated by Pamela Scott and designed by George Sexton Associates, with funding provided by the James Madison Council of the Library of Congress and the Philip Morris Companies, Inc., the exhibition drew on extensive recent research by Scott and others to present the highly complex story behind the central edifice of the country. At the same time, by utilizing the rich collections of the Library of Congress, as well as those of the Architect of the Capitol and a variety of other sources, this presentation in the James Madison Building of the Library of Congress was intended as part of the effort to establish there a Center for American Architecture, Design, and Engineering.

A relatively long, narrow hall just off the main entrance of the third and most recent of the Library of Congress's buildings on Capitol Hill, the Madison Gallery features