Op Arch

Perspective from a Goff House

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The twenty-five year award given by the AIA in 1987 to Bruce Goff's Bavinger house may draw some renewed attention to Goff's work, but there is something so out of step about it in the midst of current infatuations that such interest will likely be short lived. My attention to Goff, never very strong I admit, has been substantially increased after moving into the Ford house in Aurora, Illinois, designed in 1948 immediately before the spiraled rock and tensile Bavinger house in Oklahoma. Sitting inside the Round House, as it is locally known, has given a new perspective to the way architecture is being presented and re-presented today. The temptation to heap significance on this peculiar house, just because I live in it, will be indulged in succeeding paragraphs.

The Ford house is George Jetson and ancient grotto. It is shattered conventions and traditional truths. Its insistent materiality resists abstraction, and its metaphorical potentiality incites imaginings that leave presence far behind.

Goff's work around Chicago was produced as a result of his being displaced from Oklahoma by the Depression. Goff responded to Alfonso Iannelli's invitation to leave Tulsa and join him in Chicago. After realizing that they had less in common than Iannelli imagined, Goff set out to practice architecture in the Chicago suburbs, work for Libby Owens Ford Glass and teach part time at the Chicago Academy of Art. There he met a painting instructor, Ruth Van Sickle Ford who was from Aurora, an industrial town 35 miles west of the Loop. After Goff's time in the Pacific with the Seabees, he eventually returned to Oklahoma as chairman of the architecture school at Norman. In 1948 Ruth Ford contacted her pre-war colleague as a client with her husband for a house in Aurora. It was finished in 1950 on a flat lot at the west edge of town.

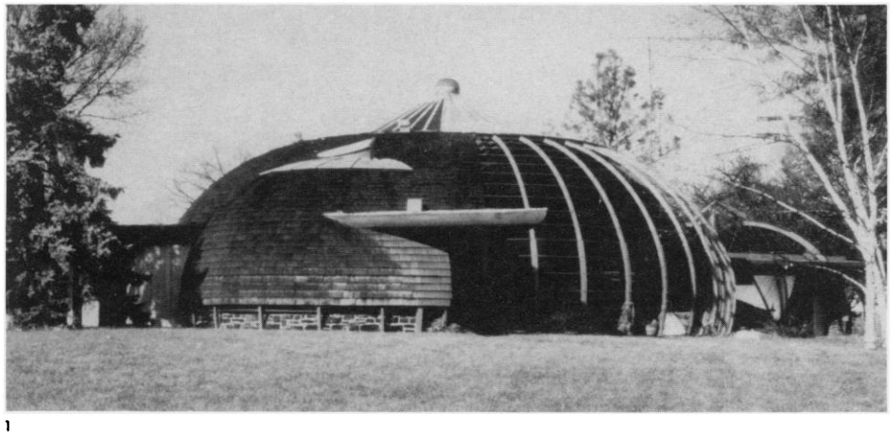
Today, it is the same house and yet other things. The following description and photographs demonstrate one of the house's challenges: it is unrepresentable. A radial steel structure encloses a domical space with a 50-foot diameter. Two thirds of the forty Quonset hut ribs are covered with cedar shingles. At the edges of the uncovered remaining third, vertical planes of glass enclose the covered portion. These glass walls extend past the steel ribs to enclose two lower quarter domes which house the bedrooms. The inside of the domes is finished with lapped cypress siding in a repeating chevron pattern. The low, flat ceiling areas connecting the large dome with the smaller quarter domes are ribbed with 1 inch rope, looking for all the world like giant corduroy. Along the base of the dome, opposite the glass walls and inside the steel ribs, is an 80-foot arc of random ashlar coal 7 feet high. (No it's not dusty in the least. It's very hard, black, diamond-like coal.) Inset in this black wall are two- to three-foot patches of green glass chunks 6 inches to 10 inches in size. The concrete floor with radiant hot water tubes imbedded is painted black and the steel ribs are orange red.

Inside the dome these ribs turn down and converge at the center of the circle where they are received on a ring around a 30-foot-high copper-clad cone 8 feet in diameter at the base. This is a chimney for interior and exterior fire places. Centered on the copper mast, a 20-foot diameter skylight rises up in a flattened cone above the converging ribs. Under the skylight is a cantilevered, circular mezzanine reached by stairs along the glass walls (and past the 20-foot-high rubber trees growing inside). Below the mezzanine a circular area sunk 30 inches, inside and out, contains the two hearths and the kitchen.

With the accompanying photographs, these words attempt the impossible: to re-present this house. It doesn't make much sense in words, or pictures or drawings. You must be in its presence just to figure it out, not only to pick up the nuances. In a world where architecture is judged, conceptualized and analysed by printed representations, places like this stand apart. If Victor Hugo was as right as he seems to have been when he proposed the death of architecture by the impact of printing, this Goff house predates Gutenberg. The book has not killed this architecture.

When the academy reaches back for precedents, it finds them in books. Students search them out and learn to draw from a tradition of representation. Encountering the Ford house for the first time, they are often at a loss to know what to do with it. No category of their architectural experience prepares them to receive this architecture. They didn't know things like this could be done. So 40 years after it was designed, the house remains a challenge to architects. Maybe more so now than then.

Its rich materiality: coal, glass, rope, steel, wood; and its colors: black, green, orange, unpainted wood; give it an insistent presence. But its abstract diagram and geometrical regularity provide a conceptual armature which organizes the varied sensory impact. It is "original" in a way that refers back to



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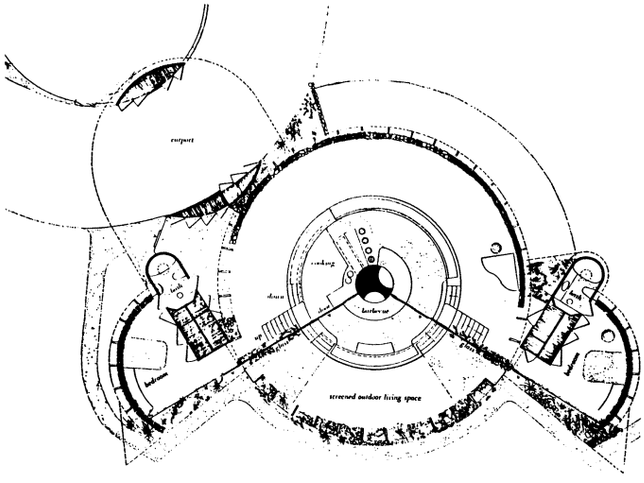

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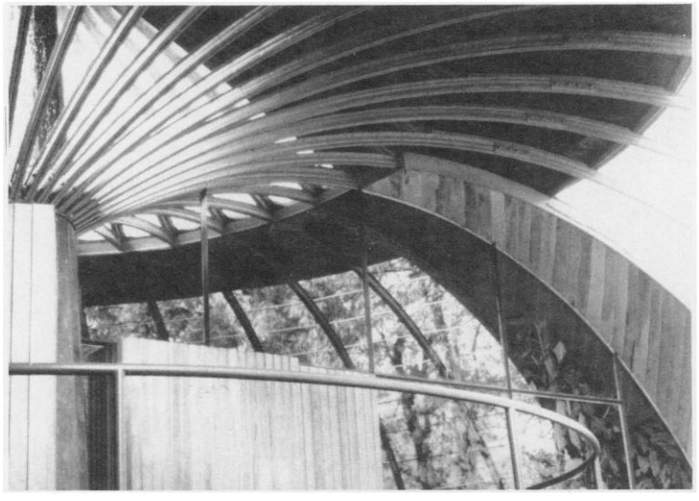

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primitive house forms and, by seeming to set aside all intervening conventions through an act of individual imagination, it disturbs the obedient guardians of tradition.

In a world of electronically generated sensory experience, the house sits there like a fact of nature, its form and materials persisting and enduring. The trees inside and the ambiguity between inside and outside obviously intensify its connection with the natural world. The fact that it is warm in the summer and cold in the winter also serves to remind its denizens that they are not cut off from the climate. It is only fair to say that energy costs in 1950 made heating far less expensive than it is today. Under those economic conditions, the welcome summer cooling effects from the vents separating the coal walls from the roof would not have been so uncomfortable when they made their appearance as winter drafts.

Vincent van Gogh noted in one of his letters to his brother how the impact of these natural variations is felt only by the poor and artists. The bourgeoisie make it a rule to separate themselves from nature's changes. For them comfort is the highest good. Artists, because they choose to open themselves to natural occurrences and poor people because they haven't the means to muffle their impact, keep in touch with nature much more closely. Of course, the bourgeoisie will set aside time specifically to contact nature through picnics or camping trips which they record on film "to really enjoy" when they are back in the comfort of their cozy homes. I have found myself sitting in a sweater taking delight in pictures of the house taken in the summer. This house is less of a protected micro-climate than the housing market ordinarily expects today. It is more like camping out: when it creaks in a strong wind, it feels like a starched tent. And the black wall protects like a cave.

The Ford house, in part because of its rich materiality, presents the mind with many footholds and encourages it to expand its response. It suggests something to almost everybody: architect, neighbor, pizza delivery man. For all its clear object status, it is not a singular thing after all. Its "originality" sets free a swarm of associations.

Let's take the Ford house's overall shape first. It is a pumpkin with ribs and stem. It is a drop of dew with that peculiar sagging outline resulting from surface tension and gravity. It is Mongolian yurt, all ribs and shaggy skins. (This image was used by the client and probably by Goff himself.) From inside, the radial ribs flowing up and out from the center remind one of a flower or an explosion of fireworks. The red color suggests something oriental, a lantern or umbrella perhaps.

Goff's experience in the Pacific gives preference to metaphors of a marine origin. The curvature of the dome is very like a sea urchin shell, ribbed, with a hole in the center. Ships make extensive use of the rope that covers all the flat ceilings both inside and out. The feeling of being inside an overturned ship is generated by the lapped boards on the curved dome and the ribs become those of a ship or, even more wonderfully, the skeleton of a whale. The low rope ceilings, circular skylights and lapped siding instead of tile make stepping into the bathrooms a descent below decks. And the inlaid mother of pearl and teak mirror frame identifies the ship as a China Clipper. Further descent under water is suggested by the blue-green light filtering through the glass chunks. Even the copper-covered chimney could be a smokestack on a ship.

The spaceship imagery, flying saucers and all, is immediate to younger minds. In fact the conjunction of futuristic form and earthy materials provides a wonderful link between two worlds that often

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seem directly opposed to each other. For all its specific qualities, it appeals to prepared and naïve imaginations alike.

The overwhelming conclusion one is led to by this Goff house is that the very power of the material object both focuses the imagination and explodes it. Its status as a piece of modern architecture, redolent of the 1950s, is unquestionable. Whatever references it makes to architectural tradition, and there are many, "swerve" away from the conventions used to reference that tradition. Grotto, dome, arbor are all here. Machine analogies can be found in its discs and ribs of steel and copper. But unlike mainline Modernism, which it was always in opposition to, it reaches other worlds as well. By standing aside from architectural convention, by being bizarre by comparison, the Ford house not only breaks free from the convention, but reestablishes contact with a vernacular imagination that is perpetually intrigued by it. The schooled often need to recapture their capacity to appreciate it, while the unlettered find it immediately fascinating. Its publication in LIFE and Popular Mechanics supports Charles Jencks' characterization of Goff as "The Michelangelo of Kitsch." High culture is apparently assaulted by popular culture in this neighborhood. The timid and the fastidious wrinkle up their noses in disdain.

The perspective of current architectural culture from the Ford House highlights the tensions between media architecture and material architecture, between architectural compositions that insist on their pure-blood pedigree and free compositions that, like an expanding universe, invite multiple readings. Like a crumbling bridge support isolated in the midst of a flood, architecture tries to save itself by concentrating very hard on solid foundations. "I meant what I said and I said what I meant; an architect's faithful, one hundred percent." Such self-absorbtion creates an opaque architectural tradition demanding submission. The act of building is crushed with its own significance. Compared to other cultural endeavors, architecture siezes on endurance as its special province and aligns itself with the most permanent things we know about. Together, history and geology in the form of ruins and stone have become our paradise. For Victor Hugo, the invention of the printing press caused the cathedral to slip from the hands of the priest into the welcoming embrace of the architect. No wonder the title "Architect" has acquired cosmic overtones.

And that is why a house with marbles in four colors stuck in the mortar of a coal wall with an orange baby grand piano in front of it, designed by a man who was never anointed by the academy strikes some as less than serious. Goff has produced a tent or a dew drop which they hope will be gone with the morning breeze. Somehow Goff has managed to slip out from between tendentious categories to create joyfully buildings that are material and mind together. As Thomas Pynchon has one of his characters in *Gravity's Rainbow* say in an argument over the relative merits of Rossini and Beethoven: "There is more of the Sublime in the snaredrum part to *La Gazza Ladra* than in the whole Ninth Symphony."

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