

## Architecture

# Peacock Feathers And Pink Plastic

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

IT is hard to believe that the first major retrospective of the work of Bruce Goff is only now being shown in this country, packed into the tight quarters of the Architectural League. (Monday through Friday, 10 to 5, until Feb. 11, admission free, at 41 East 65th Street.)

On the other hand, it isn't hard to believe, because the Eastern Architectural Establishment doesn't really believe in Bruce Goff. He is apt to be dismissed as a figment of Midwestern imagination, inspired by Frank Lloyd Wright, a designer of *outré* fantasies which elicit a polite frisson along the elite East Coast axis that has produced a generation of cool corporate splendor spawned by the "correct" International Style.

Although no one has been paying much attention in these circles, Bruce Goff is alive and well and 65 and practicing in Bartlesville, Oklahoma. Since he was a fast starter, at 12, this is his sixth decade of active production. The impact of his work in this concentrated form—160 exhibition boards containing photographs, drawings and prints, plus transparencies, of about 50 built or projected works—is mildly mind-blowing. This is one of the most provocative manifestations of the American architectural genius.

Go to the League, gentlemen and ladies (architects are still in that order professionally), even if those gold and silver presentation boards and houses like starfish, viking ships and teepees give you fits. If you can shed that eugenically frightening New England - Calvinist - Harvard - Bauhaus - intellectual frigidity, if you can suppress a reaction to some obviously home-grown corn, there is an artist here. There is a consistent statement of art and purpose, a sensitivity to the land, a last-stand half-triumph of the romantic individualist in a world that is forcing the architect to conform increasingly to standardized formulas and business practices.

This is fantasy, and it is often seriously flawed. Tight budgets, cheap materials and an ingenuous and sometimes buckeye taste make it easy work to disregard. But there

is also, on occasion, poetry, and glimpses of horizons beyond brashly broken rules, rather than conventionally trained competence, as well as the inner belief of a man who follows his personal vision. For 58 years Goff has done his own thing. This architecture — so out of the mainstream — proclaims a faith in the individual in every philosophical sense. The clients, touchingly and sometimes incongruously photographed in their bubbles and saucers, share the vision.

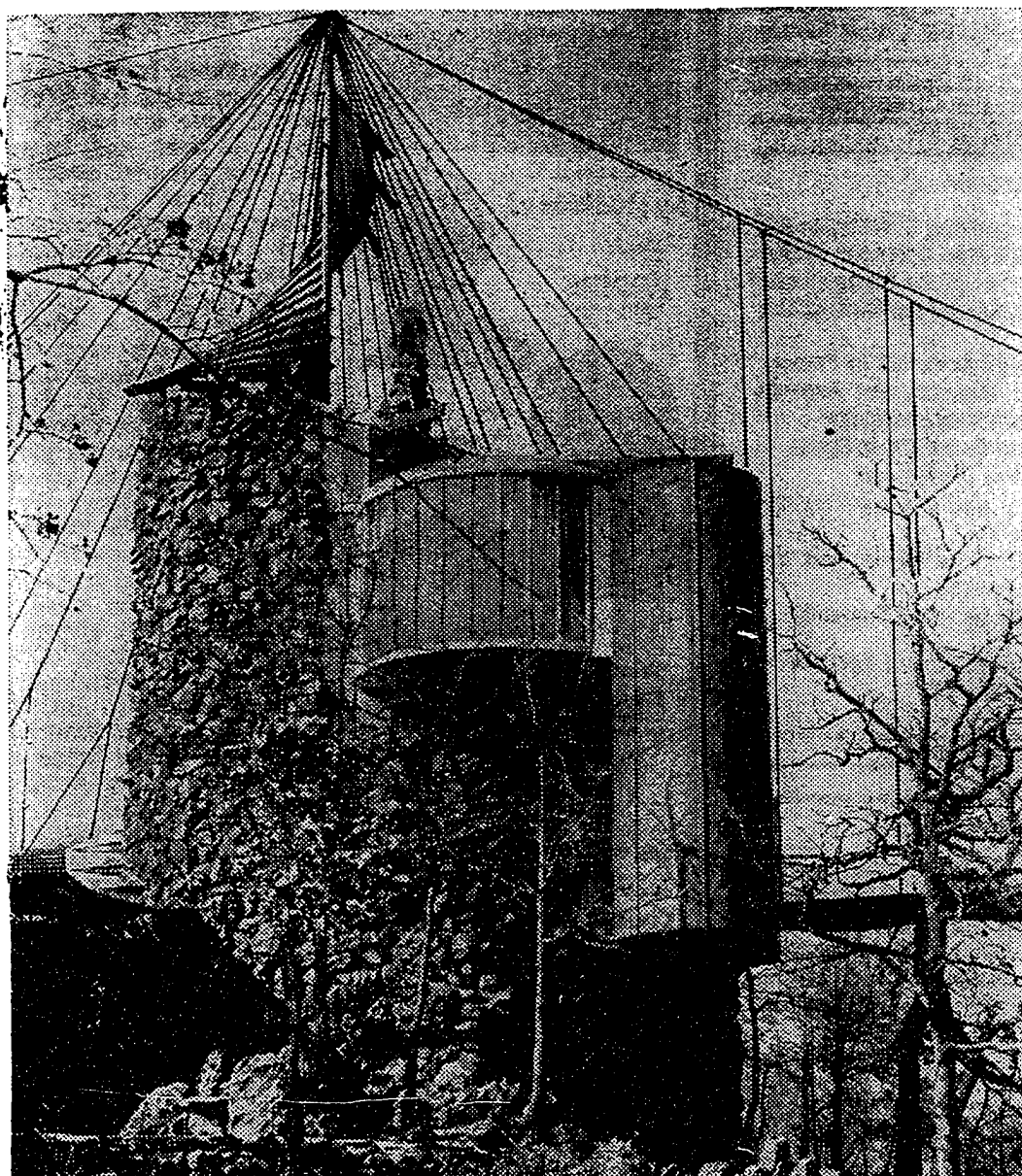
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Visions are not part of the status quo or the silent majority or the suburban subdivision. Goff in suburbia, seen glimpsingly in slides, is Martian esthetics. But seen in the drawings the vision is splendid. It is worth a visit for the drawings alone (note particularly the plans), both Goff's renderings and those of his former student Herb Greene.

Greene, in particular, draws like a demon on a permanent high. His delicate colored-pencil Arabian-nights-of-the-future imagery is architectural graphics on an extraordinary level. His own fantastic shingled shambles of a prairie house in Norman, Oklahoma, has been referred to by the English Architectural Review as a "wounded buffalo."

Bruce Goff is a phenomenon, part of an indigenous American tradition of the unspoiled, romantic, land-loving loner that the Review has labeled the American grass-roots mythology. This fascinates Europeans and embarrasses Americans. The architects who complete their concrete and steel bank buildings with hard-edge abstraction are made a little uneasy by a man whose tastes run to rusticity, orientalia, peacock feathers and pink plastic. When he is published by American architectural periodicals the tone is uncomfortable and ambiguous. Not surprisingly, his work is flashily offbeat enough to have been discovered by the full color, popular press. Professionally, it is treated more sympathetically abroad than at home. "L'insolite Bruce Goff," *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* called him in 1962—the unusual Bruce Goff.

What happens to his un-



Bavinger House, Norman, Okla., by Bruce Goff

*'An unwinding stone snail, part cave, part greenhouse'*

usual designs? About half have been built. They are to be found chiefly in Oklahoma, Texas, Florida, and places where tastes are open and grass-roots mythology strongest. His houses have often been do-it-yourself, with the clients constructing them lovingly over a period of years under the architect's tutelage — or they are cost-no-object jobs. The Bavinger family built its own house in Norman, Oklahoma, charging the pilgrims and the curious a dollar a head toward the construction fund. This 1950 design is an unwinding stone snail, part cave, part greenhouse, the color of late, color-drained autumn leaves.

At the other end of the scale, the house for Joe Price was a Playboy dream, if Playboy were an architect. (Price is the son of the wealthy clients who commissioned Frank Lloyd Wright's Price tower in Bartlesville, the building in which Goff has lived and worked.) This playhouse was enlarged in 1967, after Price married, and now, as the Joe and Etsuko Price house, has such touches as a \$10,000 Japanese bath that is a kaleidoscope of

mosaics topped by a glass fish pool.

One wonders if either a communications or a generation gap really exists between, say, Yale and Oklahoma; there is so much of supergraphics in Goff's uses of color, mirror and pattern. There is also his theory of continuous composition that prefigures the popular academic anti-formalism or "endless architecture" of the 1960's.

Anyone who doubts Goff's serious competence need only look at the working drawings for the Price house in the show. They are an exhaustive, painstaking documentation of the resolution of the special details of dream houses. It is also clear that short of an unlimited budget, any architect could lose his shirt doing this kind of thing. *Ars longa, profit brevis.*

The Price house, a chef d'oeuvre of untrammled, sybaritic fancy in gold-anodized aluminum nylon-carpeted floor and walls, goose feather ceilings and hanging plastic "rain," is superGoff. LesserGoff or pure disaster, can be seen in the realization of the sketch for

the 1960 Gryder house in Ocean Springs, Miss. Here execution turns impossible flying curves into chewing gum and a precisely poised inverted cone into Dairy Queen. However, the shingled, redwood-sided cubes of the Wilson house in Pensacola, Fla., are something else again: architecture, not Mother Goose.

Except for a few bits of common vocabulary that include recurrent glass or plastic conical domes, the penchant for organic theory and things on the bias, and those colored pencil renderings, resemblance to Frank Lloyd Wright decreases after the early work. Goff is Goff, even in Las Vegas. His unexecuted 60-story Viva Hotel and casino, in a style that might be called Space-Camp, would have raised Vegas to a creative level that its humdrum hotel caricatures have always lacked. Another unbuilt project, for the Giacomo Motor Lodge in McAlester, Oklahoma, looks like a petrified forest with balconies. Both are pure Pop Environment. In today's world of exploding conventions, that is a hard act to follow.