

Autobiography In The Continuous Present: An Interview with Bruce Goff

The following text was compiled from six hours of conversation between Robert Morris and Bruce Goff, recorded in Goff's office in Tyler, Texas in February 1979 and April 1980. ©1983 by Robert Morris

Cite: Most architects I know who are familiar with your work either don't like it or don't understand it.

Goff: I've been controversial ever since I started. I can't help it. I'm neither ashamed nor proud of it. That's just what happened. Still there's never been a time when my work was not published some way without my effort to do it. Never once. There is no mystery force that made me want to be an architect. It was strictly chance. If my father had not apprenticed me when I was twelve, I would never have done it on my own, although I did make drawings of buildings.

To me an architect should always keep growing throughout his life. If he just arrives at a method or formula to produce something, no matter how good it is, it gets old. Neutra asked me why I thought I had to change all the time. He asked me why I didn't take just one of my ideas and perfect it. I replied that I tried to perfect my work each time I did it. Mies told me that he didn't see any reason why I had to invent a new style of architecture every Monday morning. I replied that I didn't think it should be every Monday morning, but every time I did a new work. There is no beginning or end. I'm trying to write my autobiography in the continuous present. It's difficult since we tend to think of life as the past and future past.

Debussy wrote that he was suspicious of artists who were popular with the public. This is one of my favorite quotes from Debussy:

"On that distant day, which I trust is still very far off, when my works shall no longer be a cause for strife, I shall reproach myself bitterly, because that odious hypocrisy which enables one to please all mankind will inevitably have triumphed even in those last works."

Cite: Who were the most influential people in your life?

Goff: The composer Debussy. I learned more from him than any other creative person. I have managed to find some of his writings and have embraced many of his ideas as my own.

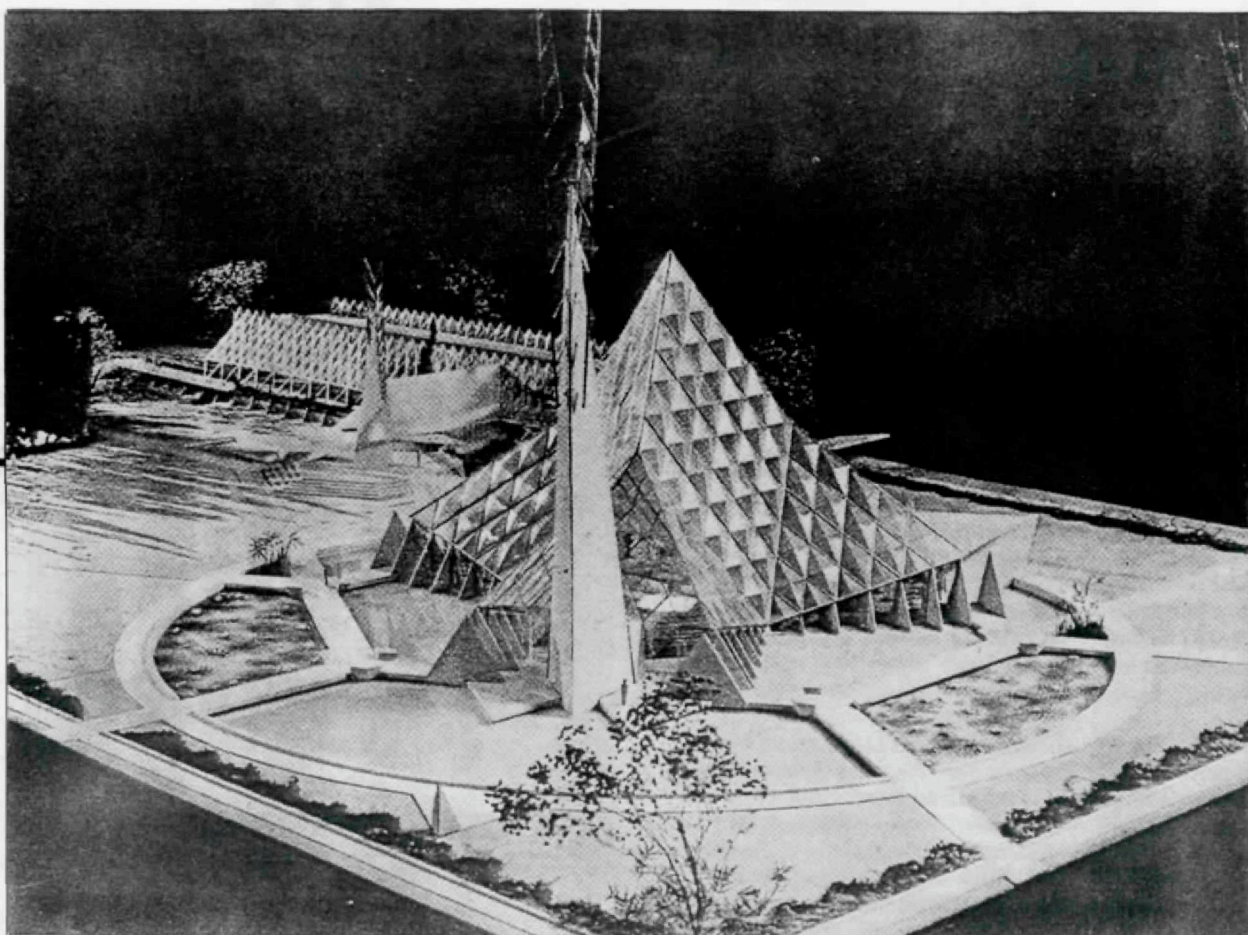
Of course I was influenced by Frank Lloyd Wright in my early years. However, I didn't want to carry on his work. Wright asked me if I would come to Taliesin, before he established the Fellowship, and become his "right hand man." I was very busy at that time in Tulsa, and was to be a partner in the firm I had apprenticed with, Rush, Endacott and Rush. I declined the offer then, and two other times also. On the third time I explained: "Mr. Wright, I regard you very highly and know people who have worked with you. There seem to be two groups of these people. One group thinks you are God on Earth and feel they cannot do anything. The other group hates you and thinks you stole their ideas. I don't consider myself either of these. You are too big a man for me to be close to, and I need to be away from you in order to keep the right perspective. I hope we can continue to be friends." Wright was silent for a long time. The he put his arms around me and gave me a big hug and said: "Bruce, I wish others knew me like you do." He never asked me to join him again.

Another man who helped me a great deal in all this was the artist Erté. I used to buy *Harper's Bazaar* magazine, not because I was interested in clothes or fashion, but because of the beautiful covers he designed. They were knock-outs! In one of Erté's articles in the magazine, he stated that he was against the mode, meaning fashion, because clothing should express the nature of the individual; clothing should not be a matter of fashion. In architecture, I felt the same. Erté asked me, on the occasion of our meeting in 1980, if I had been accused of being "Art Déco." I replied, "Yes, I suppose you have been too." He said it was true, and that it astonished him.

I asked him, "In all your 86 years of experience, what do you think is the most important thing the world has lost?" Without any hesitation he replied, "The thing I miss most is extravagance." Unfortunately, people today think extravagance is something bad and shameful, but we need it now as we needed it then.

Cite: Considering the handcrafted nature of your work, how have you found people to construct your buildings?

Goff: I have a hard time. My problem is that I never do the same thing all the time. However, no one has ever



Project: Crystal Chapel, Norman, Oklahoma, 1950. "On one of Wright's visits to Oklahoma University when I was there, he said of this project: 'That's a

beautiful crystal, Bruce, but a crystal doesn't need a spire.' I stated: 'I don't believe it is a crystal, Mr. Wright. I think it's a chapel.'" (Photo, Julius Shulman)

lost money on my jobs. There are some fine craftsmen out there, if you know where to look, and they turn up in the most unexpected places.

Cite: You have remarked that you don't work for, but with, your clients. How do you find clients?

Goff: I don't find them! I have never gone after a job in my life! I wouldn't know how to get a job if I had to. Clients come to me and ask me to help them. Many people ask me to show them something typical of my work. How can I? It's like asking to see something typical of nature.

If you give your client only what he wants, then he will not like it much after he's got it, because there will be nothing there for him to grow on. There are more people who want something special than there are architects to give it to them.

Cite: Your buildings, particularly in their decorative inventions, seem musical. How has your love of music influenced your work?

Goff: Architecture uses the same devices that music does: rhythm, proportion, scale, ornament, harmony, symmetry, asymmetry; materials take the place of different instruments. One of the main differences between music and architecture is the use of structure. In a building, structure is thought of as a necessity to hold up the building, and thought of, too often, as a separate thing from the form. In music the idea of structure is the basis for constructing the form of the music. It is much more an integral process than most architecture.

Cite: How should structure be used in architecture?

Goff: I don't think structure is anything to hide or glorify. Some architects make a fetish out of structure and I know it can be beautiful. A human skeleton can be beautiful. But who wants to shake hands with it? The thing I don't like about the Renaissance is the borrowed forms, with little or no regard for the structure. In the so-called International Style, structure became not so much the function but the appearance of being functional. For instance, Mies's desire to make a floor slab six inches throughout to express simplicity was, as he said, "telling the truth," because "God is in the details." Well the truth wasn't in the floor slab, and that's for sure, as Mr. Nervi has shown us. Now in so-called Post-Modernism, the idea is to make structure that looks like structure that isn't structure. These architects say, "Why should a column serve a function?" I say, "Why shouldn't it serve a function?" What's so great about making a column that doesn't touch the floor to show that it's only an object? The idea is refined by not having the column touch the beam to show it even more. I suppose the next step is to not show it at all!

Cite: You have said that you consider one of your most important achievements to be "the resolution of duality." What does this mean?

Goff: When I was young, the differences between things seemed very clear-cut. Later in life I began to think that there might be a fusion where one part stops and another begins. For instance, when does red stop being red before it becomes violet? Any color perception is actually light vibration. To say that red, yellow and blue are the bases of color is really stupid. Light is a sliding scale. How many things are red that are not at all alike in color?

Something beautiful to one person may be ugly to another. This is often the case when we encounter some-

thing new. "The Rite of Spring" by Stravinsky was considered the biggest calamity in music when it was first presented to an audience. Of course it is accepted today as a great work of art.

Cite: Do you think art ever has a universal appeal?

Goff: Anytime we experience a work of art for the first time, the only reason we notice it at all is because it completes a circuit within us and engages our attention. We may not comprehend it all at once but the important thing is that we notice it. It's important to try and refrain from criticizing the work, simply to respond to it naturally. In order for a work of art to survive the moment of surprise the work must contain mystery. It's nothing anyone can give a formula for. No matter how much you know it—as in knowing nature or people—the mystery is what keeps our interest. For example, I have about two dozen recorded interpretations of Debussy's "La Mer" and every time I listen to any one of them I hear something new. I can never say I know it, any more than I can see the ocean and know it.

Cite: What do you think is the fundamental scientific problem in architecture?

Goff: I don't think there is enough science in architecture today. If you consider men going to the Moon and all the technology required and developed for this endeavor, you realize that architecture, as it is practiced today, is still in the cave-man period. As artists we are able to perceive more about whatever art we create because of the technology of communications. It's almost impossible for any significant evolutionary art event to take place anywhere in the world without the rest of the world knowing about it immediately.

One of the immediate things architects can do is to take a cue from musicians. Since the cost of producing recorded music in the studio is prohibitive for many musicians, they are using the synthesizer in order to compose and produce music. Similarly, architects can learn to use the computer to solve problems and to be cost effective. Eventually, the architect will be a person who can conceive and execute a building almost entirely himself. Of course, he must first have some ideas.

We should consider science fiction as a valid tool for contemplating our future. I have lived long enough to experience many "miracles." *Star Trek* energizers seem a fantastic idea to many people. However, I think that whatever the human mind can conceive can be accomplished. There has to be a strong need for ideas to be developed and there is a great need for many things to be developed today.

Cite: When architects hear the word "organic" they may think of Frank Lloyd Wright. What association does it hold for you?

Goff: It's really nothing new. The eighth-century Japanese tatami mat module, the garden-house relationship and the use of natural materials were organic concepts. When we say organic, are those things any more natural than things we call inorganic? If we think of oil as inorganic, we should remember that it was organic material first. Frank Lloyd Wright said that the tree is Man's best friend. Some architects believe that letting wood weather naturally is organic as Hell! Well, the tree has a bark as natural protection. When you remove that protection, the naked tree is defenseless. Therefore, paint becomes the synthetic bark. The Chinese developed lacquer to protect wood. Wright painted wood on more than one occasion.