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 1981. ©1979 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 that. The trouble is that there's never going to be 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 through out 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 changed all the time. He asked me why I didn't take just one of my ideas and stick to it. I tried to explain that I think I work each time I did. 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 work. There is no beginning or end. I'm trying to write my autobiography in the continuous present. Once 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 I perish, you will no longer cause for strife, I shall reprove myself bitterly, because that odious hypocrisy which enables one to please all at once and will inevitably have triumphed even in those last words.

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 died. I replied, "Mr. Wright, you're a right hand man." I was very busy at that time in Tulsa, and I promised I would go there if I ever retired. Wright and I were friends 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 as a very influential person, 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 your environment."

One of the most interesting things I have learned is that we can continue to be friends." Wright was silent for a long time. He let his arms around me and gave me a big hug and said, "Mr. Goff, if I gave you the money, I wish I 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 knockout. In one of Erté's designs, he placed a woman, 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 first meeting, 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 a sense of community. This generation believes today that transcendence is something bad and shameful, but we need it now as we needed it then."

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

Goff: I have a lot of 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. "One of the finest Architectural Unifications." - Frank Lloyd Wright. I think it's a chapel." (Photo, Julius Shulman)

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 at all but once the important thing is we notice it. It is 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 solving the problems of flight, and you consider deavor, you realize that architecture, as it is practiced today, is still in the cave-man period. As artists we are following the old idea of doing something new because of the technology of communications. It's almost the same as the old idea of discovering an unusual stone or a new color 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 course from musicians. I have found 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 discovered and that 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. Why should we be more interested in more natural than things which I find inorganic? If we think of oil as inorganic, I should remember that it was organic material first. Frank Lloyd Wright said that the tree is Man's best friend. Some architects believe that wood furniture either is natural or is organic. Hell! Well, the tree has a bark as natural as the trunk. 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 more on than one occasion.