A mind’s eye

Always unconventional, many of Bruce Goff’s architectural visions have gone unseen ... until now.

BY JOE WERTZ

Architecture was merely the center of Bruce Goff’s imagination.

He was a painter, a musician and, above all, a collector. Like the spire positioned in the middle of the Eugene Bavinger House, his building designs are the most publicly visible. But as the Norman home uncoils like a great seashell, encapsulating nature while simultaneously redefining it, so, too, did Goff’s mind.

Environments, ideas and advice were absorbed and re-imagined. Elements, disciplines and materials otherwise independent became integral and interconnected.

Goff had a hand in some 500 designs throughout his career, which began in 1929 when — with no formal education or training — he was made partner of an architecture firm in Tulsa. By the time he died in 1982, 140 of his designs had been built, many right here in Oklahoma. But others went beyond the means — financial and material — to be made. Until now. 

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SKETCH TO SCREEN
The Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art in Norman and the Price Tower Arts Center in Bartlesville are the co-curators of a new exhibit highlighting 11 of Goff’s unrealized designs. The unbuilt structures include the Crystal Chapel, a nondenominational church proposed for the University of Oklahoma; the John Garvey House, planned for Urbana, Ill.; a proposed design for Oklahoma City’s Cowboy Hall of Fame; and the Viva Casino and Hotel, which was almost built in Las Vegas.

The exhibit includes scores of original sketches and a handful of his paintings, but organizers realized early on that two dimensions alone wouldn’t do justice to Goff’s imagination. The idea began with FJJMA director Ghislain d’Humières, a France native who said he knew of Goff’s Bavinger House well before he knew anything about Oklahoma. Shortly after arriving at the Norman museum in 2007, d’Humières started building the framework for the exhibit, which he hoped would detail not only Goff’s unrealized projects, but the architect’s work as an artist and his legacy as an influence to all creative disciplines.

“It’s amazing how inspiring Bruce Goff has been with generations of architects, but also painters, musicians and artists,” he said.

D’Humières quickly set about contacting The Art Institute of Chicago and the Price Tower, collecting information and securing permissions for sketches, plans and paintings. Things fell into a fairly traditional art show format, until he met with Brian Eyerman, an OU-trained architect and president of Skyline Ink Animation Studios in Oklahoma City.

“That’s when everything switched,” d’Humières said. “I was going to have all the sketches and maybe one or two TV screens with virtual renderings, but he came about and said, ‘Why don’t we do everything virtual?’”

Eyerman and his Skyline team started with sketches. Some of the drawings were “presentation images” penned more for visual and investor appeal than architectural accuracy, while others were detailed with dimensions, elevations and written descriptions. Eyerman digitized the images and fed them into a computer-aided drafting program, which allowed Skyline to build a three-dimensional framework for the buildings. The calculations were then transformed into a series of virtual, animated tours, which explore each of the 11 nonexistent structures and the Bavinger House, the only building in the exhibit still standing.
“You can’t have a Goff exhibit in Norman without including the Bavinger House,” d’Humières said with a laugh.

Three walls of the gallery space are devoted to four of Goff’s buildings. A series of sketches on each wall leads to a flat-panel screen, which plays a 2-3 minute animation of what the structure would look like, had it been built. At the center of the room rests a faceted, translucent enclave dubbed “the pod,” a 180-degree video booth that offers visitors an immersive, 8-minute virtual tour.

Eyerman estimated Skyline spent about 4,500 hours creating the animations, all at no cost to the museum. “Goff was really the main reason we wanted to do this,” he said. “It was an opportunity to learn more about his projects and study them in detail.”

Accuracy was a big concern for everyone involved. With a finite supply of sketches and specific instructions, and without the architect present to explain his intentions, organizers began with a slew of questions and data gaps.

“The exhibit was 95 percent accurate,” d’Humières said.

The missing 5 percent came down to details, many of them dealing with building interiors, including furniture, embellishments and decoration, which Goff designed, too. D’Humières filled in the holes with the next best thing to the architect himself: his students.

D’Humières reached out to 25 of Goff’s former students, including ones who worked on the unbuilt projects. They were an “immeasurable asset” to the exhibit, he said.

A SOUND MIND

In 1942, Goff accepted an offer to teach at OU’s School of Architecture. The mostly self-educated architect was named chairman of the school in 1943.

Goff was interested in any technique with potential to stir creativity, d’Humières said. He piped music into his classroom and personal studio, and encouraged students to take design cues from the textures created by classical composers, particularly Debussy.

While researching Goff’s work for “A Creative Mind,” d’Humières questioned the architect’s former students and compiled a list of his favorite composers and arrangements. The playlist provided a soundtrack for the shorter animations, and Eyerman played music selections for inspiration as the Skyline team hunkered down in the studio and recreated the virtual structures.

Several of Goff’s artworks are included in the exhibit, including tempera and watercolor paintings on boards and mixed-media pieces on paper.

D’Humières was eager to show off the often-overlooked Goff traits, but was most excited about how the architect continues to inspire creativity today.

An illuminated PHSCologram hangs on one wall of the exhibit, which was created by a team led by Chicago artist Ellen Sandor. The imaging technique, pioneered by Sandor, combines photography and holography with sculpture and computer graphics. Sandor’s piece, “Perfect Prisms,” is based on an image of the Crystal Chapel, and refracts light to make the facets of the architect’s design extend into space.

D’Humières spoke with Sandor and mentioned the exhibit in passing, and she studied the architect on her own. “When she showed me the photo, I said, ‘This is it. I want to show how Bruce Goff’s creative mind could influence young artists,’” he said. “Sixty years later, someone with nothing to do with Bruce Goff discovers his work and creates their own work.”