

Renegades: Bruce Goff and the American School of Architecture

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Review of

Renegades: Bruce Goff and the American School of Architecture. Christopher C. Gibbs College of Architecture, The University of Oklahoma, Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, Norman, OK. January 23 – April 5, 2020.

It would be easy to mistake the sensuous hummocks, psychedelic spirals, feathered angles, crystalline towers, mysterious depths and lush otherworldly landscapes that beckon from the walls of the *Renegades* exhibition at the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art at The University of Oklahoma (OU) for mere idiosyncratic fantasy (figure 1). Upon investigation, however, one quickly learns that the imaginative generosity and visual diversity of this work stems from a uniquely humble approach to teaching architecture developed by Bruce Goff, Herb Greene and their colleagues during the 1950s and '60s at what is now known as the Christopher C. Gibbs College of Architecture at OU. We might call this 'student-centered' pedagogy – which rings somehow radical in United States architecture schools even today. This approach to teaching, in which student creativity and self-expression were cultivated over adherence to prevailing design norms, produced not only a dazzling array of form and space in drawings and built work but also a vulnerability to disdain and demolition. However brilliant the approach and giddy the work, a Midwestern context and Goff's homosexuality (for which he eventually resigned his leadership of the school) underscore the fragility of this

uniquely 'American School of Architecture' in a time of rampant Modernism and, that other Midwesterner, Frank Lloyd Wright's final career climax. It is perhaps still too easy to overlook the work of a gay man in 'fly-over' country.

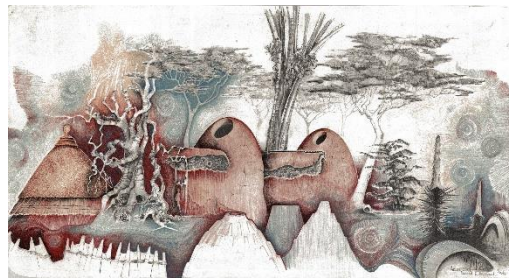


Figure 1
Ernest Burden, *Untitled, Advanced Study of Materials (Architecture 250) student assignment, 1955*. Ernest Burden Collection, American School Archive, University of Oklahoma Libraries.

The design team for *Renegades: Bruce Goff and the American School of Architecture* was led by exhibition designer Michael Hoffner, research and curation were led by Luca Guido and the richly illustrated exhibition catalog was edited by Luca Guido, Stephanie Pilat and Angela Persson, with a foreword by Aaron Betsky.

Consisting of a physical installation in the Nancy Johnson Records Gallery at the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, an online exhibit (accessible at: <https://gibbs.ou-create.com/reneradesonline/>) and the exhibition catalog, *Renegades* ran from January 23 to April 2, 2020 and, therefore, almost directly into the global COVID-19 pandemic that shut institutional doors beginning in March 2020. Just before the shutdown, the College of Architecture hosted a well-attended national conference entitled *Schools of Thought: Rethinking Architecture Pedagogy*, in which key questions around decolonizing pedagogy, experiments in teaching, participatory design and equity in architecture schools dovetailed neatly with the story of Goff, his colleagues and their students. Questions about architecture education in transition could not have been timelier, as this conference and opportunity to experience the exhibition were almost surely among the last in-person events for many of the attendees.

A gently spiraling floor plan and material palette dominated by plywood, brown kraft paper and heavy-duty corrugated cardboard transformed the gallery into a space reminiscent of the design studio. This material sensibility gave the space a feeling of being a work in progress, somewhat like a student study model – a reference to the importance of Goff’s pedagogy that was well-balanced by the sophisticated forms that reference his built work. The aforementioned spiral form floor plan is a clear reference to Goff’s Bavinger House (which features a logarithmic spiral in plan) while large-scale shingle configurations in the primary display walls gesture toward Herb Greene’s voluptuously shingled “Prairie Chicken House,” a study model of which can be

seen in the foreground of the exhibition view shown here (figure 2).



Figure 2
Exhibition photograph, *Renegades*,
photo credit Joseph Mills.

The theme of student-driven creative expression at OU’s American School, the astonishing professional work that grew out of this context and the ways that otherness expose both process and product to destruction are present throughout the exhibition. At the entrance to the main exhibition hall, the visitor encounters an installation of magazine spreads from the 1957 publication of the Annual Publication of the National Association of Students of Architecture, where the wall text reads, “No other school departed from the Bauhaus approach so clearly and so radically” (Wall Text 2020). Indeed, the spread depicting the OU student work stands apart in almost all possible ways, from the exuberant forms the students explored to the black background of the page – a literal contrast to the surrounding pages full of sober, rectilinear projects in the International Style. At every turn, the OU student and faculty work strides boldly in a novel direction. Neither formal language nor materiality hold the work together – rather a feeling of joyful camaraderie and delight in sensitive place-based architecture experiments weaves the cohort of people and projects

together. Quoting Arn Henderson, scholar of Goff's work and 70-year member of the OU community, the curators note that in the American School, "there was no formula or rules," (Wall Text 2020). Students learned via a Socratic method of inquiry rooted in a global history of the built environment and were explicitly not urged to imitate the work of the faculty or published work in the pages of architectural magazines. The colorful, vital results of this approach to empowering and amplifying student intellect and instinct populate the walls of the exhibition and include not just enthusiastic student work but also extensive documentation of built work by Goff, Greene and students who graduated the program.

The theme of loss plays a somber undertone in parallel to the productive and hopeful energy of the pedagogical story, student work and built works that flourished as a result of the American School approach in the mid-20th century. As the visitor is gently led to the center of the spiral, the vivid student work and breathless years of building give way to a story of demolition. In this section of the exhibition, "Lost Works of the American School Period," before and after photos mounted on headstone-like vertical panels memorialize buildings that have been demolished. This is a current story of loss in progress as many of these works, such as Chayo Frank's oceanic AmerTec Building (figure 3), have been torn down in just the last decade. One cannot help but think of these buildings in the context of other vulnerable structures at this moment in history, many of which share a tendency towards flamboyant form – such as Bertrand Goldberg's Prentice Women's Hospital (demolished in Chicago in 2013) (Stott 2013). The funeral

march concludes at the center of the spiral where two panels are devoted to Goff's Bavinger House.



Figure 3
Chayo Frank, *AmerTec Building*, Hialeah, Florida, 1967. Courtesy Chayo Frank.

Two large scale photographs showing the Bavinger House intact and during demolition are flanked by chalkboard panels that invite visitors to share a memory (on the left) and name a teacher who had a positive influence (on the right). The latter question seems to conclude the exhibition, leaving the visitor in a state of reflection on those who devote their lives to teaching and who, like Bruce Goff, privilege the development of a student's own individual strengths and intentions over the demands of prevailing style, so often dictated by elite coastal institutions in the United States. It is important that the American School led by Goff, Greene and their colleagues arose in the middle of the country. Here, distance from the most obvious centers of cultural power certainly played a role in both creating the space for this unique school of thought to flourish and in forming the conditions under which such abundant and energetic work can have been overlooked. Thanks to the curators, designers and researchers of the *Renegades* exhibition, the legacy of the American School at OU has a freshly

laid foundation for current and future researchers to learn how “not to remember” for themselves (Guido 2020, 71-72).

References

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