

# Bruce Goff: an architectural prodigy

By CRAIG PIECHURA

Lawrence Institute of Technology students have the rare chance to design Utopia in a class taught this spring by American architectural titan Bruce Goff.

Students are invited to exercise "unrestrained architectural creativity" in lectures taught by an architect who lives by that credo.

But Goff doesn't want students to be influenced by his imaginative work. In fact, when asked who left the greatest impression on his work, this country's most durable and versatile living architect responds with the name of 20th century composer Claude Debussy.

The 75-year-old Goff explains the influence of Debussy with a quote from the composer:

"THE STRUGGLE to surpass others is never really great if dissociated from the noble ideal of surpassing oneself, though this involves the sacrifice of one's cherished personality."

Some might be puzzled by the response after learning that internationally-known architect Goff, was a friend and confidant of America's most beloved architect, Frank Lloyd Wright.

The two started corresponding when Goff was 12. Two years later the architectural prodigy was commissioned to design his first house.

At the age of 11, Goff started work at

Tulsa's most prestigious architectural firm, Rush, Endacott and Rush. He got the job after his father dragged him downtown to show the architects his son's sketches of houses.

Goff, a resident of Tyler, Texas, was interviewed Thursday at the Affleck house, built in Bloomfield Hills in 1941 by Wright, the dean of American architects. The Wright home was recently acquired by LIT in a gift from Mary Ann Lutomski, daughter of the Afflecks.

In his second visit to the Affleck House in almost 40 years, Goff talked about his relationship with Wright.

ALMOST EVERY architect who designs homes ends up being compared to Wright.

Goff says he was first accused of copying Wright at the age of 12, two years before he saw any examples of Wright's distinctive style.

It seems some of the older architects at the firm resented competition from a 12-year-old and accused young Goff of stealing Wright's designs.

"I was pretty green when I started," Goff says. "I knew I liked wide eaves and a flat roof for a kind of horizontal effect. I drew long rows of windows that opened up in pairs — eaves and windows. I'd never seen anything by Wright."

"Some of the architects said, 'Hey, we've got a Frank Lloyd Wright Jr.

here.' They said, 'That's where you got it!'

"I said, 'Got what?' I thought I'd made it up. I couldn't understand why they fell I'd copied it."

"Now this was 1919 and I asked them who Wright was. They said that he was a crazy nut up in Chicago — nothing very complimentary — who wears his hair down to his shoulders, funny corduroy suits and big, funny scarves instead of a tie. They said he was a blue beard. I figured that meant he had a blue beard.

"These guys kept running him down, they thought he was a real weirdo. I thought if he's crazy, what does that make me?"

FORTUNATELY for Goff, the elder Rush, who headed the firm, took him aside and told him that Frank Lloyd Wright and Louis Sullivan were the greatest architects in the United States. But what of the architects in the office who made fun of Wright?

"Very simple," he said to me, "they're stupid."

Rush let the 12-year-old pursue his cherished, tattered copy of the March 1908 edition of the Architectural Record, featuring the work of Wright. The article was eight years old at the time and Goff wanted to know more about Wright's recent projects.

He dashed off a letter to Wright, amid hoots of laughter from the older architects in the firm.

"I took quite some time, but one day a wood box, with fancy lettering and Wright's red square trademark, arrived in the mail. Inside was two portfolios of Wright's architectural drawings.

Goff said he still has the drawings, worth at least \$5,000 each, but wishes he'd had the foresight to save the wood-box.

SEVEN YEARS later he met Wright in person and they'd often get together to celebrate their birthday which fell on the same day, May 9.

It was Wright and Sullivan who helped Goff convince his parents that it wasn't necessary for him to attend college. Wright wrote back, "Dear Bruce, if you want to lose Bruce Goff, go to school."

Sullivan sent a note saying that he received a formal education and I spent my entire lifetime trying to live it down."

"That suited me to a T and seemed to assuage my parents," Goff said. He went on to pass his architecture license exam.

BUT GOFF didn't become a disciple of Wright or Sullivan or adopt the sleek, low lines of the prairie school of architecture. He harkens back to the advice of Debussy.

Goff's built more than 800 buildings in his 61 years in architecture and says he defies anyone to put a label on his work or pigeon-hole his style. He's designed everything from a \$7,200 farmhouse with a screened-in porch in Gower, Mo. to the multi-million-dollar glass-spired Crystal Chapel at the University of Oklahoma.

"I have no style of my own," Goff says. "I never built a building I'd want. I try to do a building for them, the client."

Goff says he doesn't strive to be unique for the sake of innovation, but

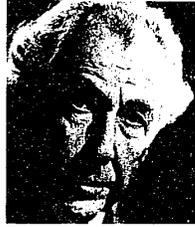
he never wants to build "an average home for the average guy."

Having concentrated on house architecture for all his life, current inflation rates for home mortgages disturb Goff.

BANKS AND the government should have the courage to allow new types of pre-fabricated homes to be built, he says. Grain bins could be connected and insulated to form low-cost housing if building codes permitted it.

"Unfortunately, the trouble with bureaucrats is they have the authority to say no but never the courage to say yes," Goff says.

His lectures, taught with LIT Prof. Harvey Ferraro, are open to the public 7:30 March 13, 12 noon April 8 and an unspecified date in May in the campus architectural building.



Frank Lloyd Wright (above) befriended Goff at an early age. Goff still saves a collection of drawings Wright once sent him.



Bruce Goff: "The struggle to surpass others is never really great if dissociated from the noble ideal of surpassing oneself, though this involves the sacrifice of one's cherished personality."

## Police detain holdup suspect

A 25-year-old Westland man charged with the Aug. 3, 1979 holdup of the Diamond Boutique jewelry store in Farmington is back in custody after eluding police and missing a scheduled appearance in Oakland County Circuit Court.

Delford Holcomb, charged with armed robbery and possession of a firearm in the \$12,000 heist, is being held without bond in the Oakland County jail for failure to appear in court last month.

Holcomb was arrested by Livonia police last Thursday afternoon who responded to an unfulfilled call of a burglary in progress and found the suspect hiding under a bed in a Grandon street residence.

Farmington police, who believed Holcomb had fled to Florida, had issued a charge of interstate flight to avoid prosecution against the suspect.

"The federal warrant won't hold since he came back to Michigan," said Farmington Police Lt. John Santomauro.

"We arraigned him on our warrant and remanded him to the Oakland County Sheriff's Department."

Another suspect in the robbery, Pamela Ann Schannault, 20, also of Westland, was bound over for trial in circuit court on charges of armed robbery and possession of a firearm following a pretrial examination March 3 before Judge Francis O'Brien.

Possession of a firearm carries a maximum two-year prison term and armed robbery a maximum life term.

Police recovered 200 diamonds taken in the robbery. It was the second largest jewelry store theft in Farmington's history. The first occurred at Duquet Jewelers in 1976 when \$200,000 worth of jewelry was stolen.

## Gas stations hit — again

Two Maverick gas stations were the target of armed robbers last week. Farmington Hills police are looking for two suspects who escaped from the station at 28775 Grand River Wednesday night with \$670.

That station has been the site of several robberies in the past year.

"It had lots of problems when it was full service. This is the first robbery since it switched to self-service a month ago," said Farmington Hills Detective Dennis Rochford.

A 16-year-old attendant was on the scene when the suspects pulled into the station at 10:34 p.m. demanding gas. According to police, one of the suspects popped out a glass window with his fists and pulled a gun on the attendant and took money from the counter.

They fled in a blue Ford. The suspects are described as a white male, early 20s, with a heavy build and a moustache; and a black male, early 20s, six feet tall.

Both were armed with handguns. Farmington police also are looking for a lone suspect who robbed the Maverick station at 32663 Grand River of \$40 last Saturday.

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