

Robert L. Jones

Bob's contributions to mid-century and modern architecture dot the landscapes of Oklahoma's cities.

Chapter 01 - 1:14

Introduction

Announcer: Born in McAlester, Oklahoma, Robert Lawton Jones received one of the more elaborate educations in Modernist design. It started when he decided to head out to Chicago, reasoning that an aspiring architect should make his way to the most exciting city in architecture.

In 1949, he studied at the University of Notre Dame in nearby South Bend, Indiana. In 1951, Bob Jones began graduate school at the Illinois Institute of Technology. He then earned a Fulbright scholarship and studied in Germany under Egon Eiermann, one of Germany's most prominent post-war architects.

Bob came back to Tulsa in 1954 to design a civic center master plan. In 1957, he joined two local partners to open the architectural firm known as Murray Jones Murray. Their work included the Cox Business Center, First National Bank Tower, Center Plaza Apartments, Bishop Kelley High School, the terminal at the Tulsa International Airport and St. Patrick's Catholic Church in Oklahoma City.

The oral history interview you are about to hear was recorded five weeks before Bob's death on September 14, 2018. He was ninety-three. Architectural Engineer Tom Wallace joins this interview with Bob Jones, heard only on VoicesOfOklahoma.com.

Chapter 02 - 7:13

Influence of Father

John Erling: My name is John Erling. Today's date is August 20, 2018. Bob, would you state your full name, please?

Bob Jones: Robert Lawton Jones. I was born May 12, in 1925.

JE: That makes your present age,

BJ: Ninety-three, which also means that I'm one of the last architects standing of my generation—which was very exciting. I don't have any special honor in being old but I'm glad that it's been a full life.

JE: And it makes this recording even more important. So, thank you very much for what you're about to tell us.

BJ: Very good.

JE: Where are we recording this interview?

BJ: We're in (El Castillo) retirement center in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

JE: Joining us today is Tom Wallace of the firm Wallace Engineering in Tulsa. Tom, you have offices where?

Tom Wallace: We have five offices—one in Tulsa, one in Oklahoma City, one in Denver, one in Kansas City and one in Atlanta.

JE: Because we do these things with oral history, what is your date of birth?

TW: August 7, 1952.

JE: And that makes your present age,

TW: Sixty-six.

JE: Did you grow up in Tulsa?

TW: I did.

JE: Were you born in Tulsa?

TW: I was.

JE: When did you start your firm?

TW: I started my firm in 1981, a year after I got my master's degree. I got a bachelor's degree in architectural engineering from Oklahoma State in 1975; worked for a structural engineering firm, (Snowden) Engineering, for several years; went got my master's degree and went back to work for (Merv) for a year; and then decided to start my own firm because my wife had a good job and I thought I'd listen to NPR and write structural programs—until she caught on.

JE: (laugh)

BJ: (laugh)

JE: Again, that year was,

TW: That was 1981.

JE: 1981. What has been your association with Bob?

TW: Well, Bob's firm Murray Jones and Murray was the premier architectural firm in Tulsa for, I don't know, decades—forty years or something.

BJ: Maybe thirty...

TW: I always really wanted to do some work with them and I was fortunate enough to do that later on in Bob's career. He had an excellent structural engineer named Al (Saulknot) that

worked for him and on projects for him. When Al retired, I got an opportunity to do some work with Murray Jones and Murray.

JE: So, did the two of you then collaborate on a project?

TW: Well, I would say indirectly; Bob was running the design part of the firm and I collaborated with one of his designers, John (Lotti), and other architects that worked for him...

BJ: Yeah.

JE: Bob, where were you born?

BJ: In McAlester, Oklahoma, which was a town of about 20,000. I left there two weeks after I got out of high school because I was in the Navy. I (finished) the war in the (engine room of the ammunition ship) and immediately got into college with the GI Bill, which was a great benefit to people my age.

JE: Let's talk about your mother—your mother's name, her maiden name.

BJ: Troy, T-R-O-Y.

JE: And her first name?

BJ: Josephine.

JE: Where did she grow up?

BJ: In Detroit. Her father had come to Indian Territory. He was a medical doctor. And he had come to Indian Territory on the way to Arizona because of his health. And he stopped off in McAlester because he had some sisters that were nuns in a hospital. And he simply decided that he'd stay. But he brought a family of four with him to Oklahoma.

JE: And that's how your mother came to Oklahoma...

BJ: Yeah.

JE: What was your mother like—her personality like?

BJ: Very gregarious. She's also Miss Congeniality wherever she went. I was the only child, so they had a tremendous investment in me. And that's kind of what made the war difficult because, (laugh) I knew I really had to get back, you know.

JE: (mm-hmm) Your father's name?

BJ: Lawton Henry Jones.

JE: Lawton Henry Jones. And where did he come from?

BJ: He was born in Sheldon, Missouri, and was raised in McAlester as a young man. He became a general contractor, probably the best general contractor in southeastern Oklahoma. He was a very, very good builder.

JE: Your father then—his personality and his affect on your life.

BJ: Well, my parents never wanted to take responsibility for my mistakes. And so at a very young age, they said, "You're on your own." But my dad, very quietly, guided me away from a couple of big mistakes once.

But other than that, he was a fantastic guy, and one that I've grown to even appreciate more, as I understood what his life was all about.

JE: What did he do?

BJ: He was a general building contractor...

JE: Alright, so did that influence your life in any way?

BJ: Yeah, I imagine, I decided when I was twelve or thirteen, I wanted to be an architect. He never mentioned that to me, but you know how subtle references influence people. So I made my decision to be an architect at a very young age.

JE: So it could've been because of his work...

BJ: I think so.

JE: And you were around houses that were being built.

BJ: Yeah...

JE: And that type of thing...

BJ: Sure.

JE: And so that's your early influence...

BJ: Yeah.

JE: Tell us the first house that you remember.

BJ: That I lived in?

JE: Yes.

BJ: It had a giant water elm outside a glassy window. It was a nice location, near a large park. McAlester was a nice town to grow up in at that time, before the war...

JE: I suppose your parents told you, "If you don't do it here, you can go down the road to the prison."

BJ: (laugh) Well, they never suggested that, but that always was an alternative.

TW: (laugh)

JE: Right, so were you living in that house when you were ten, eleven, twelve...

BJ: Yeah, yeah...

JE: That first house...

BJ: That's the only house I ever remember...

JE: And you lived there through high school, and until you left...

BJ: Yeah, yeah.

JE: Let's talk about your education. You went to elementary school there in McAlester...

BJ: Yeah, high school.

JE: And, oh, high school...

BJ: (mm-hmm)

JE: What about high school for you?

BJ: I really had a great time. As soon as I was a freshman, I knew it was a different world. And I enjoyed it tremendously.

JE: Were you able to take courses directing you into architectural work?

BJ: Not at all. We didn't even have mechanical drawing. They didn't have art. They had nothing. So when I went to Notre Dame, I wondered, "Was I really prepared to do the job?" But I ended up at the top of my class, so I guess I was prepared well enough for the job that had to be done then...

JE: Right, so the mathematics you took in high school...

BJ: Yeah...

JE: Must have been strong enough for you...

BJ: Yeah, about three and a half years, yeah.

And, you know, when you talk about architecture, it's not quite as people might imagine it. To me, if you look at the 4,000 years of architectural history, it seems to me that there are almost three design imperatives. People had to work with nature; they had to deal with it. They didn't call it architecture then; they probably called it shelter...

JE: (mm-hmm)

BJ: But they had to deal with nature; they had to provide for the physical needs of their people; and they had to use the construction materials and methods that were available to 'em at that time, and I call those the Three Design Imperatives.

And I think that really gave it a lot of direction to my work...

JE: Yes...

BJ: For the rest of my professional career.

JE: What year did you graduate from high school?

BJ: Forty-three...

JE: In 1943.

BJ: (mm-hmm)

Chapter 03—8:28

Notre Dame

JE: Then when December 7, 1941, takes place, you're about 16 years old? Do you remember that day?

BJ: Oh yeah...

JE: And how you heard about it?

BJ: I was sitting in a (soda bar) with some friends, having ice cream in the middle of the

afternoon. None of us really understood the impact of it. But we remember that moment very well.

JE: Had you heard of Honolulu, Hawaii? Some people said they'd never heard of it—didn't know where it was.

BJ: I'm not sure that I did either...

TW: (laugh) Right...

BJ: (He lives) a long way from Tulsa, (laugh)

JE: And then rationing took place. How was your family affected by rationing?

BJ: I think gas rationing is the only thing that I recall that changed for us. We did a lot of walking.

JE: Explain then, the gas rationing—what that was.

BJ: Well, it meant that Bob couldn't drive a car or have fun with the girls...

TW: (laugh)

JE: (laugh)

BJ: That was the impact.

JE: Remember hearing news from the war, the bombing of Hiroshima, or anything like?

BJ: Yeah, I was overseas at that time...

JE: Okay,

BJ: I didn't think through the morality of the situation. I was just glad that the war was over...

JE: Right. So then, after you graduated from high school, then you went into the service?

BJ: Yeah.

JE: Tell us where you went and what you did.

BJ: Well, it's a rather funny story.

I wanted to be a naval aviator, so I signed up for naval aviation. By the time I graduated, they said there was no openings in naval aviation. So they sent me up to college for two years in Pittsburg, Kansas. I picked up some credits there that I used later.

Then they sent me to preflight school. At that point, they said, "Well, we have 36,000 cadets seeking 6,000 openings," and, "What are you gonna do?"

They gave us some options. So I elected to, then, stay in the Naval Reserve (and) work with the Merchant Marine, which is also an officer-training program.

I started off (wanting to be a flyer) and I ended up in the engine room...

JE: (laugh)

BJ: In a very interesting (shift).

People avoided (ammunition ships). They were always afraid of the opportunity for explosion. So it was kind of a, isolated life.

JE: Where did that ship go to?

BJ: Our first port was in Ulithi, which was a large staging area in the Pacific. We later got as far as the Philippines. That's where I was when the war ended.

JE: Never took any fire.

BJ: None. I heard some (depth charges) from time to time, but I didn't think I had enemy exposure.

JE: So then, how many years did you serve?

BJ: About two-and-a-half years.

JE: So you come out of the military in 19—?

BJ: Actually, I got out in December of 1945, and I enrolled at Notre Dame in March of '46.

JE: What drove you to the University of Notre Dame?

BJ: My dad thought they had a good football team.

TW: (laugh)

BJ: He also admired (Knut Rockne).

JE: Yes.

BJ: And I was a Catholic, and my mother thought that was a great idea. So I never reconsidered another school at that time.

JE: Did they have a strong architectural department?

BJ: By the time I left, I thought they did,

JE: (laugh)

BJ: They had a couple of professors from Hungary that really impacted the program and I thought were very good because they were doing a lot of experimental work in terms of climate and how climate affects building design. I thought that was a pretty important thing to deal with at that time.

JE: So you never waived on your mission to be an architect, from the time you felt it at 10, 11, 12—through your military training or anything—you knew what you were going to do.

BJ: I never waived.

JE: Were those good years there? Did you work for any Chicago firms? As an intern or...

BJ: Yeah, those were really nice years at Notre Dame. Notre Dame's only ninety miles from Chicago. And I worked with Holabird & Root, one summer, which is a very large firm. The other summer I worked with Perkins & Will, which is one of the three best firms in Chicago. After I graduated, I went to Perkins & Will; I was there for two years, and I became a licensed architect in Illinois. And then I quit Perkins & Will and went to Illinois Institute of Technology for two years to study under Mies van der Rohe, who was one of the four great architects of the twentieth century.

JE: Was he the man who was, "less is more?"

BJ: That's right. That's right. "I don't want to be interesting. I wanna be good."

JE: (laugh)

TW: (laugh)

JE: So, when you went to the Illinois Institute of Technology, what year would that have been?

BJ: I graduated in '53.

JE: All good experience for you there. But then you also studied in Germany.

BJ: Yeah, after I was finishing work at IIT, I applied for a Fulbright grant. I applied for England because I spoke the language.

TW: Yeah,

BJ: Then we had a child and I had to lay off and tell 'em no, and I went back next year. The Office of International Education had a place in downtown Chicago. I went and I says, "My second year, I applied for England; I didn't get it. What happened?"

They said, "Well, that's just the luck of the draw." Then they says, "You know, we wanna send 80 postgraduate students to Germany and we're having trouble filling our quota."

And I said, "Well, I don't speak German."

He said, "That's no problem. You'll pick it up."

So with that (sorta slender thread), we spent a year in Germany. That was really very valuable for me.

JE: Who did you study under in that Fulbright scholarship?

BJ: I was lucky. Germany's foremost architect after the war was named Egon Eiermann, E-I-E-R-M-A-N(-N). He was a very good architect. In Germany, they expected their teachers in architecture—their professors—to maintain an architectural practice along with their teaching, which is very (dareth) in this country.

Professor Eiermann said, "I'll give you an independent project."

And I thought about that, and I says, "Oh." When I realized that I didn't know really any German, I went to Eiermann's secretary and I said, "Tell Professor Eiermann, 'I want to sharpen his pencils.'"

JE: (laugh)

TW: (laugh)

BJ: She said, "You wanna work in this office?"

I says, "Yeah,"

She said, "We can't pay you. That's against the regulations."

I said, "Well, I'll work in the afternoons free."

So they said okay.

Eiermann, then, had a lease on three different apartments, because he had a marriage break up. He said, "Well, you can have one of my apartments free, if you'll pay for the utilities."

That was a remarkable encouragement for me.

Eiermann did the German Embassy in Washington, D.C....

TW: (mm-hmm)

BJ: The German Pavilion at the Brussels World's Fair, a lot of high-rises, a lot of industrial work. He did the Kaiser Wilhelm (Gedächtnis)kirche project in Berlin after the war. He was such an important guy, and he admired Mies van der Rohe so much, that I was able to kinda put those two guys together. And I thought, I think, it really did have an influence on my career.

JE: (hmm) Of these people that we're talking about now, who had the most influence?

BJ: Mies. Mies van der Rohe.

JE: And what was that influence?

BJ: Mies was very committed that architecture express the nature of our time. He saw science and technology as a real epoch in human history and he thought buildings should acknowledge this. I think that sort of logic made a great deal of sense to me.

JE: (mm-hmm)

BJ: Architects was in shambles in the nineteenth century, because architects were simply taking Greek temples, Gothic churches, Renaissance palaces and plastering (all) on the sides of buildings. I call this "slipcover architecture." Mies was the antithesis of that, so I think people of my generation sort of thought we were a part of a revolution. We thought we were on a mission and I think that gave us motivating force in our work.

JE: One thing stands out as you've talked about Eiermann—and I want young people to remember—you went back to him, said, "I don't care; I'll just sharpen your pencils." And you were willing to work for nothing.

BJ: Yes.

JE: You wanted to be that close to that man.

BJ: Yes.

JE: Didn't have to be paid. Didn't have to give me a job. Just let me sharpen (laugh) your pencils.

BJ: And he did little things, like, we were at a party one night—Germans like parties a lot—at eleven o'clock in the evening, he pulls some paper out of his pocket, started making notes. That made me think that, yeah, was really thinking all the time...

JE: (mm-hmm)

BJ: People like that were important mentors. To me, I was very lucky to run across guys of that caliber.

Chapter 04—4:04**Tulsa Civic Center**

JE: So is it correct then, in 1954 you came back to Oklahoma?

BJ: Yeah. Actually, I kinda stumbled into Tulsa. While I was in Germany, I was getting newsletters from the America Planning Association. (Erling Hahn) at the Tulsa Metropolitan Area Planning Commission indicated he wanted someone to help develop a master plan for the City of Tulsa. The City had a 20-acre site for a civic center and he needed someone to do this. So I quickly pulled together a résumé.

I had a lot of confidence then. I was twenty-eight years old; I was a licensed architect, so I had a master's degree. I understood architecture, I thought; I understood urban design as buildings relate to each other in the urban context. So I sent this résumé to him; he said, "Come on."

When I got to Tulsa, he said, "Well, I was not able to close the deal; the City did not authorize the planning commission to develop a master plan for the Civic Center." Instead, the architects had made a proposal to the City that we could do it better and cheaper. But they didn't know what to do, and so (Erling also) said, "I have this résumé from this guy who is in town now. Maybe you could hire him." So they hired me, and I was the only guy they interviewed.

JE: (laugh)

BJ: That's what I mean of "somewhat stumbled into Tulsa." That work lasted 11 months. (Our work) for the Civic Center was finished in eleven months.

JE: Who was the mayor then?

BJ: L.C. Clark.

JE: Was there a lot of public support to design a civic center?

BJ: Oh, yeah; there really was. Almost everyone supported except John Mayo, who owned the Mayo Hotel. You come across the Arkansas River on a bridge, you get on 5th Street, and you go right to his hotel. The closing of 5th Street created a problem, he thought.

JE: Oh, (laugh)

BJ: And (laugh) there's another guy named Jay Walker. I think he was a manufacturer of petroleum oilfield equipment. He opposed it pretty loudly because, he says, "In Europe wherever (there applause is) and people assembled, that's where socialism was strongest." So we had to work through that one. But it was very good experience; I really enjoyed it.

JE: So, did it come down to a vote of city commissioners? (For) moving forward on this? Or was there a public vote on it?

BJ: No, I think L.C. Clark had the authority to simply adopt that with whatever political procedures were required.

JE: Well, I imagine John Mayo was a pretty big force and so he...

BJ: (laugh)

JE: Had to overrule that...

BJ: Yeah, that was the case.

During that time, every Friday afternoon I had to report to a board of seven architects; they were my employer. David Murray was one of those seven. I respected Dave. That kinda led to a development of the Murray Jones Murray team—where Dave would be responsible for management and marketing; his younger brother Lee was—would be responsible for building technology and I would (look out for) design. They were both older than I were. It was really very much a team sport, we thought, as we approached our work.

JE: So that would've been David George...

BJ: Correct.

JE: And Lee Murray. You partnered with them...

BJ: Yeah.

JE: To become Murray Jones Murray...

BJ: And we were together for thirty years.

JE: Wow. That started in 1957?

BJ: Yes, correct.

JE: As you said, you came at twenty-eight and thought you knew a lot about architecture. I was reading where you stated your goal was to become Oklahoma's most respected firm within five years.

BJ: Yeah.

JE: Did you reach that goal?

BJ: I think so. Both the Dean of Architecture OU and OSU publicly said that. I think we probably had reached the level of confidence that we'd hoped for.

JE: In doing my research, I could tell you—I have it here, to (laugh) back up what you just said—that that was a fact. Those two schools. And it appeared that you had met your goal, so that had to make you feel very good.

BJ: It gave us confidence.

JE: Confidence?

BJ: Confidence.

JE: Were you always confident?

BJ: Well, (laugh) life is pretty uncertain, you know; there are ups and downs; but yes, I think we were confident.

Chapter 05—9:45**Tulsa International Airport**

JE: You were married, when?

BJ: In 1950, in Chicago.

JE: And your wife's name?

BJ: We call her Lynn, L-Y-N-N. Her name on her health insurance card is (Ethelyn). Her last name was Scott. She was from Fort Dodge, Iowa, and she was working in Chicago like I was. We were married, probably, thirteen months later.

JE: How did you meet?

BJ: I'd seen Lynn and her twin sister and another girl walking home from a twelve o'clock Mass or religious service near where I lived. I kept my eye on 'em and I stalked 'em.

JE: (laugh)

BJ: So the following week, I caught up with 'em. We were at a stop sign and I said, "I wanted a priest to introduce us but, since he wasn't able to do that, I wonder if you like to come to my garage apartment for a coffee." They says, "Yeah." And since I initiated this conversation just outside a bar, I always told people I picked Lynn up...

JE: (laugh)

BJ: Outside a bar...

TW: (laugh)

BJ: Which is true, but under very different circumstances.

TW: (laugh)

JE: (laugh) Well, you were confident then, too, weren't you?

Did you have children in your marriage?

BJ: We had seven.

JE: Seven children.

BJ: When we went to Europe, we went with a fifteen-month-old kid—which was kinda unheard of at that time—but, we enjoyed it. She actually became our passport. We could push this row of kids...

JE: (laugh)

BJ: Into every place you ever wanted to go. She fronted for us, 'cause people like little children. (laugh)

JE: Yeah. So then, they were all born and raised in Tulsa?

BJ: The first was in Chicago...

JE: The first one, but the six...

BJ: The other six were born in Tulsa...

JE: Did any of them take up architecture?

BJ: No, huh uh. I think one could've had a structural engineer like Tom but he went into social work. No, none of 'em did this.

JE: In '57, you partnered with Murray Jones Murray. Then comes along discussion about our Tulsa International Airport.

BJ: Yeah?

JE: How does that come about?

BJ: Tulsa had hired a airport consultant named Lee Fisher. He was out of Chicago and South Bend. He understood aviation, and he understood terminal buildings, and he recommended to this authority that they hire a young firm. Well that was pretty good because that cut out all the old guys in Tulsa and gave us a free ride. It was kinda interesting.

At that time, when we got the job in 1958—this is very important—there wasn't a single commercial jet in operation. There were five carriers in Tulsa and the representative of each airline told us there would never ever be jets in Tulsa.

JE: (hmm)

BJ: American Airlines decided they thought they'd bring a jet in because we had the maintenance facility there. But we had read enough papers; we kinda thought that the guys that we had contact with probably weren't looking at the whole thing and farther down the line. So we decided to approach the design, not as a tight glove, but as a loose mitten. We really want to design flexibility because we knew the thing was going to change in ways that were unknown to us.

For instance, in those days, everyone went from a gate lobby directly to the tarmac—rain or shine—got on a ladder or steps, went into an airplane. We thought that as aircraft got bigger, there would somehow be a technology or a way to get people directly from a gate lobby into the aircraft without going to the tarmac. But that meant you'd have to have a second level. So we designed all the footings and the roof load for our concourses to take care of the second floor that we thought would someday come. We used structural steel, 'cause it's flexibility.

So even sixty years later, we've been told that Tulsa's probably one of the good, medium-sized airports in the country because I think we were able to accommodate that flexibility rather easily.

JE: So you were really designing for ten, twenty years in the future.

BJ: It seemed like it.

JE: You had a budget to work with.

BJ: Apparently, we were able to stay within that.

JE: First airport was located at Apache and Memorial, and opened August 22, 1919...

BJ: (laugh)

JE: There's a guy by the—Duncan McIntyre. McIntyre Field had three hangars, a housed forty aircraft and a beacon for landings after sundown.

BJ: (laugh)

JE: He closed his airport during the 1930s, merged with R.F. Garland—Tulsa oilman, owner of the Garland Airport at 51st and Sheridan. He ran the airport, became the president of the new venture; and this airport would later become the Brown Airport at 61st and Yale. In 1940, he accepted a position—McIntyre did—with (Lockheed) Corporation.

Charles Lindbergh landed at...

BJ: (mm-hmm)

JE: McIntyre Field...

BJ: (mm-hmm)

JE: In 1927.

BJ: (mm-hmm)

JE: He'd been persuaded to visit Tulsa by Bill Skelly, and this field was not nearly up to the places that Lindbergh had normally landed. He had already landed at Oklahoma City Municipal Airport, Bartlesville Municipal Airport, and Muskogee's Hatbox Field. All of these were superior to McIntyre Field, and it says that Lindbergh pointed this out at a banquet given that night in his honor. (laugh)

BJ: (laugh)

TW: (laugh)

BJ: Amazing.

JE: That's fun to hear that background to our airport.

BJ: (laugh)

JE: And then, Tulsa claimed, in 1930, that it had the busiest airport in the world; and they had numbers to prove that—Braniff Airways, American Airlines, TWA were coming in there...

BJ: (mm-hmm)

JE: How did you decide on the design of Tulsa International Airport?

BJ: We selected steel because it was very flexible. We could add to it easily. But also, because we knew nothing about jets, I hired (Pope, Brannick & Newman) out of Boston. They were consultants. And they had done a lot of work with the military on jets. We simply wanted to find out how noisy these things were; what the thrust was; what sort of accommodations needed to be made. So they made recommendations to use concrete (fill on steel on the envelope) over the walls and the roof structure. We thought that was probably a pretty smart move.

I think after that we kept in mind the need for the future and did what we could to prepare for it.

JE: You use that flat roofline.

BJ: Yeah...

JE: Which you had also used in your house, which I'll talk about.

Talk to us about that design.

TW: How did you come to conclude that flat roofs were a good thing to do when so many of 'em leak these days?

BJ: Well, (laugh) 'course that's a roofing problem, and drainage, but...

TW: (laugh)

BJ: To simply add sloping roofs on multistory buildings, sloping roofs on airports, even sloping roofs on houses, to us didn't seem to be a straightforward approach.

JE: The community had to be excited about this? You broke ground in November of 1958 and opened November 16, 1961.

BJ: (mm-hmm)

JE: And then on August 28, 1963, the facility was renamed Tulsa International Airport...

BJ: Yes.

JE: Because then?

BJ: Whatever standards were required for that designation.

Tulsa, at that time, did have a 10,000-foot runway and they owned, I think, 5,000 acres of land.

So they were able to probably meet whatever qualifications were needed to establish us as an international airport. But I don't recall those circumstances too well.

JE: But it had to be exciting, the opening day and time...

BJ: Oh, yeah, it really was...

JE: A big celebration...

BJ: The community was really turned on by it. Yes, it was.

JE: Because they had voted. They had to vote on this...

BJ: That's right. It was their airport.

TW: Modern steel construction of that sort and of the sort that you designed your house, those are things that are somewhat common and have been around for a long time—for my generation—but at that time, I'm surprised that the citizens of the City of Tulsa thought that was a good thing, 'cause they hadn't seen anything like that...

BJ: Well, that...

TW: How was that reception by the citizens of Tulsa? Was it automatic? Or, did you have to sell it to the citizens of Tulsa?

BJ: Well, you know, the fact is that the world was really open to changes a little bit more then. And I don't think it was a tough sell. I think we could just proceed in the manner that seemed logical and most people could buy into that.

In fact, there was a problem with an architect in France named (Le Corbusier). He once said, "Architecture has nothing to do with style." Now think about that...

JE: (laugh)

BJ: Architecture has nothing to do with style. That's really quite true. You solve problems in a logical way; you satisfy the physical and psychological—that includes art—but architecture really (doesn't know how to do this now). Every project, every program probably has its own unique needs; and you try to meet these needs without preconceived ideas. I think that's the way you move forward.

JE: Were there any major challenges to the airport that?

BJ: I don't think so. Even later and later years, when they got into very sophisticated security systems for baggage claim, we were able to expand and deal with that pretty easily, too. I don't think we encountered any problems really.

JE: I want to know how many times you went through that airport, people didn't recognize you, and you could of said, "I designed this airport." (laugh)

BJ: Oh. (laugh)

JE: So, how many architects worked on that?

BJ: Well at that time, we probably had an office of about ten or twelve; and I imagine we had a staff of about four or five, plus our consultants—mechanical, electrical, structural, acoustical—so it became a multidisciplinary team when you do projects of that sort.

JE: Were there any other airports in the United States built to this design?

BJ: I think Love Field in Dallas had just been completed. I think we visited maybe one in Portland. But, I don't think there was too much of a path for us to follow.

JE: Yeah.

BJ: I think we were all kind of moving in a new direction, together.

JE: Yeah.

Chapter 06—8:17

Bob's House

JE: You referenced your house. That house was your residence, I think, in 1959.

BJ: Yes.

JE: That was before the airport.

BJ: About the same time, within a year or two.

JE: Describe the house that became your personal residence.

BJ: Well, I purchased a two-acre site on 47th Street between Lewis and Utica. It had forty native pecan trees. And these were very big trees—they were very mature—trunk diameters two and three feet. We wanted this house in these trees.

JE: (mm-hmm)

BJ: That meant that some of these trees were within five feet of the house and that posed a certain danger because we knew limbs would fall one day. So we got (Al Sanock to design us) (laugh) a steel house. And that did happen later; there was big limbs that fell on it, but it didn't make a dent.

JE: (laugh)

BJ: Minor roof repairs and that was it.

But we had a large family on the way. I was very interested in privacy and community so we had very, very small bedrooms for each kid, and then larger space for community—er living together.

I wanted it to be a "passive solar," which means that we take advantage of southern exposure. With proper protection you can get the deep sun penetration in December, but no sun at all in the house in June. So we had a glass wall that was 8 feet high and 58 feet long, (over the ceiling). Then we also took 57-degree well water, which we found at 19 feet, and used that for cooling for the summer. Then we (voided) that water into a swale that went to the back of the lot to feed the horse, and develop a great crop of watercress, because we had all that cool, (intense), moving water.

The house was very economical to operate. The air conditioning bill was about one-fourth of what people were spending on homes of that size, and the heating was very efficient. We used a perimeter heating system that distributed air continuously over all the glass surfaces. There was never any condensation, never any noise of fans going off and on. It worked pretty good, yeah.

JE: (mm-hmm)

TW: I might point out that people talk today about geoechange being a new technology—some people call it geothermal heating and cooling system—and that's what was used at the Guthrie Green, for instance, the entire Guthrie Green. Part of its function is 600 tons of heating and air conditioning underneath the Green that serves AHHA and the Philbrook Museum and all those projects...

BJ: (mm-hmm)

TW: But people don't realize that some pioneers like Bob were doing geoechange or geothermal heating and cooling back then...

JE: (hmm)

TW: And it just sort of disappeared for many generations because energy cost is so low...

BJ: (mm-hmm)

TW: But people would pay more anyway...

BJ: (mm-hmm)

TW: Four or five times more but...

BJ: (mm-hmm)

TW: His house was a geothermal or geoexchange house back in the '50s; it's incredible.

JE: Yeah. Why did it come back?

TW: The price of energy. You know, now it makes a big difference. We put geothermal energy or geothermal pipes underneath our parking lot at our office building...

BJ: Geez.

TW: Because my energy bill is less than 50 percent...

BJ: (mm-hmm)

TW: Of what it would be otherwise...

BJ: Amazing.

TW: But it wasn't a new idea that some professors at OSU, a Dr. Bose, sort of regenerated this idea back in the '70s and started doing experiments and actually calibrating it. But Bob was doing it by the seat of his pants and intuition, I think. Maybe there were calculations; I don't know...

BJ: Oh, we probably had a little help from Jim (Netherton), who was the mechanical and electrical engineer. We depend on engineering a lot.

JE: Would your house be the first house since (Elsa) to use that form of heating?

BJ: Uh huh, I think that's probably true.

JE: It gained a lot of attention. The style of it. We can talk a little bit about that, uh, Modern design?

BJ: Yeah, it did attract some attention. It was published in architectural journals in this country, Switzerland and in Germany, 'cause I think it was thought to be, probably, a different approach.

JE: It was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 2001 when the house was only forty-two years old. And that's significant because it was listed before the fifty-year-old accepted age for the structures.

BJ: Yeah. About that time, I thought that—if we could get the house on the National Register for Historic Places—it might discourage its being demolished. Because that happens—people come in; you have a two-acre lot; they buy the house, tear it down and put three houses on it.

So I went to the Office of Historic Preservation in Oklahoma City and I said I'd kinda like to pursue that. And they said, "Well, it has three problems. One is, it's forty years old instead of fifty. The other is, the architect is still alive." And I said, "Well, I think that's gonna change"...

TW: (laugh)

BJ: And then they said, "The third thing is, you need an architectural historian to prepare a nomination." You still filled out three pages of paper and (floated by), so I (conned Jen)

Jennings—who was a tenured professor at Cornell, and longtime friend of ours—and she agreed to prepare our nomination.

It was sixty pages long with forty pages of appendix, and Oklahoma City said it was the most complete one they had ever received. It went to Washington and had to be reviewed three times by different people in order to make the cut. I think we accomplished our purpose.

It was later purchased by Rita Newman—a lady that was very, very wealthy. She liked the house a lot and, after her husband died, she bought the place and spent a tremendous amount of money on the interiors—even including double-pane glass for these large areas.

After her death, Marty Newman—who’s on the board of trustees for the Tulsa Foundation for Architecture, and also the National Foundation for Historic Preservation—he’s the present owner. So the thing really is in great hands. I think it’ll survive here for a while.

JE: Well, it is; I drove by it the other day because I knew I was going to be talking to you and yes, there it is. The style, again then, is similar to what you took to the international airport.

BJ: Right.

JE: That’s interesting that you did that. Nobody pushed back on it. You have a lot of attention to your house. It was cited as the first International Style residence built in Oklahoma and included many hallmarks of Modern design.

BJ: The term “international style” is rather interesting. In all my years of education and contact with academia, I’d never heard the word International Style. We simply called it the new architecture. But historians tend to put things in pockets and, I guess, the word International Style could satisfy some purposes like that.

JE: *Look* magazine, a major magazine back then, called it the International House of Style, so you had national attention for the house.

BJ: I didn’t know about the *Look* magazine story.

TW: (laugh)

BJ: That’s new to me. There—, it did because it’s on the National Register.

With communication being what it is now, it did have a lot of exposure that we wouldn’t have expected. For instance, there’s some website on the west coast that selected 10 homes in the United States that were done by unknown architects that they thought were very good—(Marcel Broyer had) done a house of his own; Phillip (Johnson had) done a house of his own; we were one of the 10 unknowns that made the cut.

JE: (hmm)

BJ: And that’s all because of the exposure that it is able to get through the Internet and the National Registry.

TW: I don't know the history, uh, sequence in time but were you ever in contact with or have any inspiration by Charles Eames?

BJ: His house was before our house in, was it, Venice, California?

TW: I think so...

BJ: It was a very interesting house. He wanted to use off-the-shelf building materials and it is a very, very good house. I later met Charles and Ray Eames, but long after their house was built. That house did attract a lot of attention at the time. I imagine it was built probably in about '50 or '51 maybe.

Chapter 07—2:42

Charles Eames

JE: Charles Eames.

BJ: Charles.

TW: Charles Eames.

JE: Tell us who he was.

BJ: He was (trained) as an architect (at) Cranbrook Academy outside Detroit but his real interest is in furniture. He did a lot of furniture (mixed out of) prototypes that still exist today. He—he was outstanding. He and his wife collaborated; they were an outstanding couple in that design field.

TW: Some of the things that they pioneered were, for instance, splints for soldiers made out of plywood...

BJ: (laugh)

TW: It's a piece of artwork, now. You can buy a splint made by the Eames factories. The Eames chair, the famous Eames lounge chair, is one that is still sold today and revered by architects and designers and people that just like that Modern style.

BJ: And that chair and ottoman today, list price, for \$5,000.

TW: That's right. It's interesting that, that (Bowhouse) period and Eames—all of those people, in one way or another—wanted to create furniture and houses for the masses that was good quality, good design and available to everybody...

BJ: (mm-hmm)

TW: But one of the things that has happened is, particularly, those well-made pieces of furniture—like the Mies van der Rohe chairs that we're sitting in—command a high price because of their such good design. So they didn't all become furniture for the masses and housing...

BJ: (mm-hmm)

TW: Charles Eames' house, as I recall, was a case-study house...

BJ: Yes.

TW: That was intended to be mass-produced, as Bob said, from off-the-shelf parts of steel and window mullions and things like that. So the idea was an approach that was intended to help humanity, as Bob said in the beginning of the interview; architects view themselves as having their creations help move humanity along.

BJ: It's kinda interesting, though, Modern architecture has been more easily accepted in every building type except houses. People want to think of their grandmother's old rocking chair. Apparently, you know, public taste—as far as residential design—is far different than that in other fields.

TW: (mm-hmm)

JE: You know, after the war, didn't Sears Roebuck have mail-order homes? You could order your home in a catalog.

BJ: After the first war, even.

JE: That was after the first war?

BJ: Yeah...

JE: Okay. So, they did that for the masses...

BJ: That's right. This is one of those (places in Iowa). It's kind of amazing; it's all pre-cut lumber and (laugh) just amazing what—, that's right. That was their intention.

JE: Well, they were kind of thinking, you know, here we have Henry Ford, what he did for the masses...

BJ: Right...

JE: For cars, and they start thinking for the masses for houses...

BJ: Exactly.

Chapter 08—4:10

Bob's Buildings

JE: I've a long list of buildings here that you were involved in, Bob. The Tulsa Assembly Center in 1962. What are your recollections of getting involved in some of the issues on that job?

BJ: Edward Durrell Stone was the architect for the Assembly Center, the Convention Center. We were simply associates that looked after the construction. Later, there was a 100,000-square-foot addition that was made and we were the architects for that addition to the Convention Center.

- JE:** The Tulsa Civic Center and Municipal Building. What ground did that cover?
- TW:** There was a 20-acre site that was set aside for several municipal buildings.
- BJ:** The 20-acre site was the Civic Center. And all (the buildings that) followed (through) the library, the City Hall, the Convention Center, the police and municipal courts, and county court house...
- TW:** And next door—maybe included in that 20-acre site—was the federal building, across the street...
- BJ:** Across the street, (mm-hmm)
- TW:** So, all of those buildings together are what we commonly call the Civic Center.
- JE:** Right.
- BJ:** They all fit into this one 20-acre site.
- TW:** Several well-known, local architects—plus Stone, that did work on the projects—they kinda put a team together...
- BJ:** Yes.
- JE:** And each one took a different building and worked together to create the Civic Center conglomerate of buildings...
- BJ:** Yeah.
- JE:** How were you involved in all of that, Bob?
- BJ:** I was responsible for the initial master plan; and Murray Jones Murray, the last building we did there, was the City Hall.
- JE:** Alright, on to other things. First National Bank Tower in 1970.
- BJ:** The original bank building for First National was done by a New York firm, whose name I can't recall, and this was probably done immediately after the second war. Then much later, the bank wanted to expand facilities including an office tower with rental space in it. It was kind of a challenge because the site was rather narrow. The second problem was that they wanted all the floors to line up with the existing building.
- JE:** (hmm)
- BJ:** Floor-to-floor dimension was only 11-foot-6. In multistory buildings, you really like twelve and thirteen now. (Kinda hard) to get mechanical systems between the ceiling and the roof structure above. Plus the fact that we went to fifty stories—which is probably then the highest building in the state—but the narrow dimension of the site was eighty feet, so the building kinda (stands to) wanna be a buggy whip. It didn't have the ground plan that made the structure very easily workable. We went to concrete there and it turned out to be a very good building.
- JE:** Fifteen East 5th Street.
- BJ:** Yeah. And then we have an underground connection to a large parking lot across the street—1,200 cars, maybe. The First National Tower was able to take advantage of that

parking facility without putting their own money in parking, which was a plus; it was good economics.

JE: Tulsa was so well known for Art Deco.

BJ: Very true. Before and after the first war, it seemed like most of the major buildings were done by Kansas City architects and that was the period of Art Deco which immediately preceded what we would call Modern design. Art Deco was a very frequent (expression of) architecture and Tulsa still has a good inventory of that building type.

JE: Did you have an appreciation for that?

BJ: Well, (laugh) I think we appreciate good work that's all been done in the past...

TW: (laugh)

BJ: But it didn't result in any of our efforts to imitate it at all.

JE: So nobody said, "Well, we're 'Art Deco Capital of the World,' and you should include some of that in some of your buildings or the airport"...

BJ: It was never mentioned at the time...

JE: Yeah, it was history that we're proud of...

BJ: That's exactly true.

JE: What part did you have in designing Bishop Kelley High School?

BJ: We were the architects. At that time, (was a) coeducational facility but they wanted separate academic classrooms for boys and girls. It's been added on a number of times now. I think it's quite different.

Chapter 09—7:28

St. Patrick's Church

BJ: One of the projects at that time, if I can jump ahead, was St. Patrick's Church in Oklahoma City...

JE: Yes.

BJ: That was unusual in many, many ways. The client, Monsignor Donald Kanaly—Monsignor's an honorary term; it's given to some priests, between the ages of fifty and sixty probably—and Monsignor hired us without ever interviewing us, just on the strength of a mutual friend. So we begin our work making diagrams of the relationship between the altar, the baptistery and the people. How many different configurations could we come up with that would satisfy some of the changes in liturgy or Catholic worship that were comin' out of the Vatican Council in 1965.

So we were on this business of making the diagrams when I got a call from Monsignor one day, and he said, "I'm in Mexico City, and I'd like for you to come down here. There's a structural engineer named (Félix Candela), and I want you to see his work."

And I said, "Monsignor, we're very acquainted with Félix Candela; he has an international reputation."

What he was doing, he was working with hyperbolic paraboloid—which is like a saddle, curved in both directions—and it's enabled him to use concrete (all its- and) compression. So he was able to span pretty good spaces with thin concrete in rather sculptural forms.

But I told him we already had a structural engineer, and Monsignor was very persistent.

About a week later, he called and said, "There's a plane coming from St. Louis to Tulsa to Oklahoma City, to Houston to Mexico City, and I'd like you to be on it in two days, because we're gonna go to Mexico City together to see Candela's work." So I kinda knew who the structural engineer was going to be at that point. It had been decided. We went and we met with Candela for breakfast the morning after we got there. He was a very impressive guy. He's probably his mid-fifties and, I was twenty years younger and, he was very continental, he had black hair, black tailored suits and a black Mercedes. He'd come to the Mexico City from Spain after the Civil War because he had been on the wrong side. But we finished our breakfast and then I, rather naively, pulled out my diagrams for how the church might be configured—some of the different opportunities—and he looked at it and he said, "I don't believe this is the right direction." I turned over the diagrams, picked up a pencil and I quickly drew the form of a foot. And I said, "We wanna start with the foot. And, when the foot is right, we wanna put leather around it. We wanna call that a shoe."

And he said, "I'd start with the shoe and want to put the foot into it."

JE: (laugh)

BJ: So, we thought that was a point of departure. We didn't argue that point, but I think we understood each other very quickly, in the period of thirty minutes.

Then we went to see a couple of churches that he'd been involved in. One of 'em was terrible. And the other was nice. What really turned us on, we went to see a warehouse where he had used the same structural system. I'll never forget to call 'em umbrellas—a large, roof surface supported by the single, central column. I was very impressed by those structures in the warehouse.

Then we went to one of these very, very large, open-air markets in Mexico City where he'd used similar structural methods to provide shade; permit breezes to come through; serve, once again, as umbrellas in the market. Then we went to a place for lunch. I think it was a-, kind of a botanical garden called (Sachamelco. It has) beautiful, heavy vegetation, little canal through it, people in canoes. He had done the restaurant there. And it was really a very, very good building. Concentric building.

Then after lunch, we stepped out a veranda there to overlook some of the scenery. Candela pulled out a piece of paper from his pocket and he said, "St. Patrick is the name of the church."

And Monsignor says, "Yeah."

Candela said, "St. Patrick is very important to Ireland because he used the shamrock and its three parts to explain the Blessed Trinity."

Monsignor acknowledged that was right.

Candela says, "I think the church should be in the shape of a shamrock."

JE: (hmm)

BJ: And, I didn't even stop to think; I just said, "Monsignor, you've hired the right architect and the wrong engineer, or you've hired the right engineer and the wrong architect."

JE: (hmm)

BJ: And that really shut the conversation down. So we went back to Tulsa, Monsignor to Oklahoma City. Next Sunday, I wanted to go over and meet at his parish there at Holy Mass or religious service in a very small gymnasium, which was part of an elementary school. It was the first building on a rather large site.

And I was talking to one of the guys after church. I said, "It was pretty crowded in there. You have service at eight, ten, twelve and five."

And he said, "Yeah, it's really crowded." He said, "During the spring when the weather's nice, like at Easter, we'll build a temporary wooden platform out on the grassy playground area and then all people could come to this single service. But," he said, "Then it rains."

I said, "I think there's a solution to that." So we went back to Tulsa, and I came up with a roof plan. A 180 by 120 feet roof—that's about two-thirds the size of a football field. The whole thing was supported by twelve of these umbrellas that I'm talking about...

JE: (hmm)

BJ: That had a dimension of 60 by 30 (feet) with that single column in the middle. And then we proposed, just outside this very large roof area, freestanding concrete walls that would provide privacy 'cause you didn't want peering from the street. And then inside this big space were these screening walls. We put a glass box, and that box was the church. It seated five hundred people. Then we had (an identical) lighting and sound system outside this glass box so people could move from the interior of the church into this large, protected area, so it would be possible to have a thousand people, if needed, at a single service. And the Monsignor accepted that design. It was kind of a simple procedure but he had to go through a (Diocesan Planning Commission) that had five priests on it, and they had to approve the design. They looked at it and said, five to zero, "No. No way."

Monsignor, I mentioned, he's persistent. He quietly went into the Bishop's office, explained his case.

The Bishop says, "I would never build this church myself, but I will not stop you."

JE: (hmm)

BJ: So we were off to the races. Candela never ever liked it. To him, it wasn't a church, like his grandfather's church or like he grew up with.

JE: (mm-hmm)

BJ: But it did have (acceptance), by the people. And then the North American Liturgical Conference (gave it the Cardinal Lercaro award—it's) the number one parish church that'd been built in that year. And the Church Architectural Guild, a Protestant organization, did the same thing the same year. I don't think that's ever happened before or since, and it did receive quite a bit of publicity.

The archivist for the church, years later, told me that it has received honors or been published—in newspapers, journals, whatever—on over thirty occasions. It was a fun project and one that we probably didn't make any money on. (laugh)

JE: (laugh)

TW: But Candela did provide the structure for it as...

BJ: And he...

TW: One of his warehouse structures.

BJ: And, he was well paid. (laugh)

TW: (clears throat)

BJ: Yeah, it was his structure.

Chapter 10—2:06

More of Bob's Buildings

JE: You went into interesting detail—which I enjoyed—about St. Patrick's. So then, let me ask you, of all the buildings you have worked on, what brings you the source of pride and pleasure as you sit here today?

BJ: Well, I don't believe I can say. I think there were probably 10 buildings or so that I liked a great deal, but I don't think I ever had a favorite really.

JE: Well, I don't know to what degree you were involved but Doctors Building at 21st and Lewis that we all drive by, built in '57.

BJ: Yes.

JE: Texaco office building at Twenty-First and Lewis.

BJ: Yes. That was an interesting building, 'cause Texaco had a very tight time schedule. And they also came to us and said, "We only want 20 percent of glass. We don't want a lot of glass in the building." So we went to a precast concrete system that met their time schedules, met their budgets. I remember it pretty well because we had to go down to Houston to get final approval from the vice president of the Texaco region or som'n. And the president, his name was (J. Howard Rambin), he later became CEO of the entire Texaco operation...

JE: (mm-hmm)

BJ: So he was a very talented guy. We met with Mr. (Rambin) and some of his staff, and we show 'em what color rendering. The grass was green and the building was white, and he looked at it and he says, "It looks like, to me, the grass was planted by the engineers,"

JE: (laugh)

BJ: "It's maintained by maintenance, and it's fertilized by marketing." (laugh)

JE: (laugh)

TW: (laugh)

BJ: (laugh) He bought the building.

JE: (laugh) You have great recall. City Service Research and Technical Center...

BJ: We were associated with HOK out of St. Louis on that, I think.

TW: (clears throat)

JE: You were involved in the Chapman Hall School of Nursing at The University of Tulsa?

BJ: Yeah. That was a pretty good job. (McCune & McCune) was the prominent firm in Tulsa. Their next-door neighbor was the president of the university. They established a very personal relationship. And (McCune) was the architect for all the buildings, except the Chapmans came along and said, "We want to select our own architect." That is a good building.

Chapter 11—4:52

Frank Lloyd Wright

JE: Architects. There is a famous one by the name of Frank Lloyd Wright.

BJ: Yes, I've heard of him. I mentioned before great architects of the century. Actually, Frank Lloyd Wright of this country; (Le) Corbusier of France; Mies van der Rohe of Germany, who later ended up in Chicago; and Walter (Gropius), who later ended up at Harvard—these are the four important people. Frank Lloyd Wright did a building in Tulsa for Richard Lloyd Jones in about 1924. The building is mentioned by Wright in his

autobiography. He referred to Jones as “a printer in Tulsa who claims to be a cousin of mine.” (laugh)

TW: (laugh)

BJ: Which is a typical Wright description of people.

JE: Well, you kinda wonder, because he was born Frank Lincoln Wright and then he became Frank Lloyd Wright,

BJ: I didn’t know that.

JE: Which makes me believe that he had to feel pretty close to that Jones family and was related to them.

BJ: It was a Welsh family of origin. But eh, probably, yeah, I’m sure the family relationship is correct, yeah...

JE: Yes.

BJ: I visited his place a couple of times in Spring Green, Wisconsin. Once was with two of our college professors from Notre Dame that I mentioned, two Hungarian twins. When they came to this country in 1947, they were just like little bees going all over the country smelling all the flowers. And they went up to Frank Lloyd Wright’s place, maybe a year later. Some of us got in our two cars and we went up to visit Wright. And he turned to me and says, “Are they teaching you that International Style?” I didn’t know what the hell to say. I didn’t know what the International Style was.

But (laugh) on another occasion, when he was in his eighties, he was lecturing for the Chicago chapter of AIA; and I was a student in graduate school and we couldn’t afford the (banquet tickets so they gave up some folding chairs) immediately behind the speaker’s platform so I was about ten feet behind Wright, to his back. Preceding Wright was a slideshow, talked about photography being an art. So Wright began his forty-five-minute talk, explaining to that group of architects how photographers were not artists (laugh) and he went on and on from there.

JE: (laugh)

BJ: And finally his wife reached over and grabbed him by the coattail and yanked twice. And he looked like he’d been shot. He said, “Now, I think I’ve talked enough,” and sat down. (laugh)

He had a-, really had a very interesting personality. And did very important work. He was more into the crafts. I think industrialization—or science and technology—didn’t have the same appeal to him, but he was very good at what he did. And he was a great liberating influence. He taught all the people of our generation that there was another path, you know. I didn’t choose that path but he was a man of great force.

TW: At Crystal Bridges they have a Frank Lloyd Wright demonstration house and they tell a story about Frank Lloyd Wright had to testify in court once about some building project

and they asked him what his profession was, and he said that he was the “greatest architect in the world.”

JE: (laugh)

TW: And his wife came up to him after he had given his deposition or whatever, his testimony, and said, “Why did you say that?” And he said, “Well, I was sworn to tell the truth.”

BJ: (laugh)

JE: (laugh)

BJ: Another story. When Mies van der Rohe came to IIT in Chicago in 1938, the local architectural community had a big banquet. It was probably the Parlor House attended by probably two or three hundred people—important people from all over, deans from other schools. So, Frank Lloyd Wright was gonna introduce Mies van der Rohe to this crowd of architects, and he says, “Now I present to you Mies van der Rohe, and God knows you need him.”

TW: (laugh)

BJ: And he sat down. (laugh)

JE: He had an interesting personal life. I don’t know which wife you were talking about...

BJ: The last one.

JE: He had Catherine Lee “Kitty” Tobin; he left her. He went for Mamah Cheney. And then there were murders at his estate...

BJ: Yeah...

JE: In 1914...

BJ: Yeah.

JE: Then he had a marriage, his second wife Miriam Noel. And then he had a relationship with Olga (Hinsberg), who became his third wife in 1928.

BJ: I guess that was the woman that...

JE: Who tugged at his coattails?

BJ: Yeah.

JE: He called his work “organic architecture.”

BJ: Which kinda meant that it grew outta the needs. It wasn’t imposed, from external influences, but kinda grew outta the needs. And to him, nature was very important. I guess you would call him a natural architect, yeah...

JE: Yeah.

BJ: But that was the term he used, “organic.” Which meant different things to different people.

JE: So you respected him enormously, but chose a different path than he.

BJ: Correct.

Chapter 12—5:45**Bob's Influence**

- JE:** Were there building designs that you had to really sell, because people thought it couldn't be done, or people thought it was just a poor design?
- BJ:** I don't think we encountered too much difficulty. I think we could, pretty well, make a sound argument for our work. I don't think it required a great deal of persuasion.
- JE:** Yeah. Did any of you design a building, and it comes to fruition, and it's built, then an interior designer comes and you say, "Oh, no. Did they trash my building?"
- BJ:** (laugh)
- JE:** Does that ever happen to you?
- BJ:** Yes it has. I'm not sure I can recall a specific instance but it has happened. I mentioned Bishop Kelley High School was a very good building. But after a couple of other architects get a hold of it—over the years—I don't think it's too good, you know. So, it's not just interiors you can mess up. You can mess up bigger elements of architecture just as well, but it does happen, yeah...
- JE:** Yeah. I'm not sure that many people are aware how much buildings give humans feelings and, when we walk into a structure, it'll give you a certain attitude. You walk into another, it'll give you a certain feeling. You're nodding on that. Talk to us about that...
- BJ:** It has a lot to do with space, how space is organized. And, often times, how natural light—or any light—is handled. I think those are things that people respond to rather quickly. And of course, color, (and issues of that sort are) important but, I think you're right; people walk into space, and there is a response.
- JE:** You'll hear people walk into something say, "Oh, this makes me feel real good." Maybe I'm mostly talking about residence, probably, but...
- BJ:** Yeah.
- TW:** What about some of the people that you taught? I don't know if you taught any courses in architecture but I know you started the Tulsa Urban Design Studio...
- BJ:** Yeah...
- TW:** At OU, right? You have a number of students and, later, architects that started their own firms, did some magnificent work in town and—all that I know—attribute a lot of their approach to architecture to you and what you taught them. How did you teach them?
- BJ:** Well, I think you mentioned one thing that was kind of an important part of my life. At the age of 60, I was approached by the Dean of Architecture at the University of Oklahoma, (Raymond Yeh), asking if I'd be a visiting professor and have a (fifth-year) design studio. So I commuted to Norman for a couple of years, for two days a week.

The college of architecture had a-, five departments—architecture, construction, science, interior design and planning, and something else—and architecture had a faculty of twenty-five.

By the second year, he asked that I head the architectural department—I didn't understand why—but he says, "(You don't have any gray hair), and that's what I need."

TW: (laugh)

BJ: "I'm approaching accreditation; and I'm afraid of it; and I want you to head the department while we go through the accreditation process."

So I accepted that. I said, "But I might have some problems. The faculty may not accept me. I'd like a two-year contract." And he said, "Well, we don't give contracts." Then he said, "Well, why don't you talk to the president."

President said, "Oh, give him a contract." So I did that for two years, which (made me), at that point, four years with the university.

Then (they) asked that I establish a master's program in Tulsa, and that really was a lot of fun because I got to organize my own curriculum, select my own faculty. The difficult part was recruiting my own students. But, all together, I was at OU for ten-plus years—from the age of sixty to seventy-two.

But I was very busy during those years because, at the same time, I was campus planner for The University of Tulsa. So I was really working fifty-five-hour weeks and, at the age of seventy-two, I said "I think I'll go 'cold turkey;' I'll take no consulting work; I'm gone." But, back to your question. At Murray Jones Murray, we did have numbers assigned to every employee as they came aboard. Over a period of thirty years, we had about 250 people that'd moved through the office. Sometimes they called us "Murray Jones Murray University" because we did train a lot of—or work with a lot—not sure we trained 'em; I think we worked with a lot of talented people. A lot of 'em did establish their own practices in Tulsa. As far as going back to the students that I had at Norman, it's too soon to say. I didn't keep track with those guys. I really don't know what influence I had there. Except one of my students later did become head of the Urban Design Program in Tulsa, (Shawn Shafer). He was a very good student, and he's done a very good job there. But I can't attest to any influence other than general associations I had with people.

JE: But you were both an instructor and director at the University of Oklahoma School of Architecture...

BJ: Yeah.

JE: You had to influence many of them who will never come back and say, "You influenced me."

BJ: That's true and so many of them were foreign students, too. I had students from Malaysia, China, Japan, Mexico, Venezuela, Sweden—you do lose track of those guys, 'cause they came to this country for their education. I've lost track with students but I did keep in

contact with guys that worked in our office. Some of those people really had very, very successful careers of their own.

JE: Right.

BJ: After they left.

TW: And I can tell you, they attribute a lot of that success to what you taught them. They talk about, “Well, when I was at Murray Jones and Murray,”

BJ: (laugh)

TW: “I heard this, or Bob said that,”

BJ: (laugh)

TW: “And what have you,” so...

BJ: I remember one day, I sat down with one of our staff, and he says, “Let’s clean off this conference table, so I can think clearly.”

I thought, “You’re my kinda guy.”

TW: (laugh)

BJ: “I think you’ll make it.” (laugh)

Chapter 13—4:12

Past-Present-Future

JE: You know, the two of you sitting here-, I’m talking about technology of today. And the tools that Tom at Wallace Engineering is able to use on the Internet, and the technology, that you did not have to use...

BJ: True.

JE: I know you lived a full life and we probably don’t often wish we’d lived in another time, but do you have some envy that you could’ve used some of that technology?

BJ: Well, I don’t think it’s a-, I think we were very satisfied with what we were doing. But you’re right. It seemed to (us, right off the bat, that) computers made a tremendous difference because you could explore possibilities and design structures that were not anticipated during my career...

JE: (mm-hmm)

BJ: We mentioned Frank (Gehry) or some other prominent architects of this time. That’s as it should be. Technologies change. And we would expect architecture to be responsive to that change, and be able to express it. So, it is a different period. And one that I was kinda at the edge of.

JE: Yeah.

BJ: Not at the beginning of.

JE: And Tom, for you, you're young enough to have seen it be born, and become part of your business...

TW: Yes.

JE: And now, you're right in the middle of it all...

TW: Yes, and I'm very envious that I'm maybe more towards the end than the middle...

BJ: (laugh)

TW: Of it. And I've seen technology go from handheld calculators as a major tool, to computers. Some of the things that I'm very envious of, in the future, are the various ways that you can build a building in virtual reality. Today, if you have the right skills, you can design a building and walk through it in virtual reality that wasn't possible many years ago...

JE: Wow.

TW: But there are some other things that are starting to happen, like buildings that move. There are some sculptures that, (I think a Swedish) sculpture, can't remember his name off the top of my head right now but, they were called "strand walkers" that are made out of PVC and originally out of bamboo. They catch the wind and they walk across the earth...

BJ: (laugh)

TW: And there are some people that have proposed buildings that walk to other locations. There are already buildings in the Middle East that turn like a cam on a center shaft. So that you can wake up to the sunrise and be in another room at sunset, and adjust that sort of thing...

JE: Uh huh,

BJ: (laugh)

TW: There's some great architects in Seattle that have just renovated the Space Needle. And put a lot of engineering effort into it that I'm envious of that—it's a whole glass floor, now, that rotates, 360 degrees so you can—I presume; I haven't been there yet—you can have dinner...

BJ: Yeah,

TW: Sitting at a table, several hundred feet above the ground, and look down and see the (experience) music project that we were fortunate enough to work on—I think it's called something else now...

JE: (hmm)

TW: Where the Space Needle is located.

Yeah, I've been fortunate enough to see computers be a significant part of our architecture and engineering. But it is at such infancy now. Twenty or thirty years from now, just trying to imagine what can be done with architecture and having architecture and engineering be part of our design philosophy. I went to the Oklahoma State

University School of Architecture hundred-year anniversary several years ago, and there were already several people that I went to school with working on what's called "net-zero buildings"—buildings that use zero energy. It's just an exciting time and...

BJ: Yeah.

TW: In the same way that Bob's generation, in some ways, made society progress and improve with architecture—and like the Eames did—I can see architects and engineers having a positive impact on the future.

BJ: Very true...

TW: More and more because of computers and...

BJ: Yeah.

TW: Using that technology that really isn't available yet...

JE: (laugh)

BJ: Exciting. Very exciting...

JE: It's fun (laugh) to hear these two generations here. And the generations that will listen to this—thirty, forty years from now—will hear what you're talking about. You're just thinking about it and hoping to see it, but they are able to take it to areas that you and I, in this room, never even thought you could.

BJ: Yeah.

TW: I'm sure they will.

JE: Quickly...

Chapter 14—4:23

Three-dimensional

JE: It's interesting when we see an architect draw a line from here to here, what a line means in your world.

TW: It's funny when you work with a client and, I think architects and engineers both assume, that everyone can interpret drawings. It's kind of shocking and it happens, even to me now, when you show some drawings and you're talking to people, they're nodding their head yes, but they really don't know what you're talking about...

BJ: (mm-hmm)

TW: Because they're looking at two-dimensional drawings. And that's one of the incredible things about the technology that I was talking about. I was working with an architect and a landscape designer—both very capable—and talking to client, communicating a design and the client was just not really happy with what they were saying. They weren't

unhappy; they just weren't feeling, you know, "Yeah, that's the direction we wanna go." The young architect said, "I will spend the weekend and model this up on the computer, and have some things ready for you on Monday." And on Monday, they showed the client this three-dimensional image, with known landmark buildings around it. And was able to fly through the area from a bird's-eye view, look at what the project was gonna be like, move around it and discuss it and—if the client said, "Well, what if this happened?"—could change it on the fly, on the computer. And, right then and there, a light bulb went off. And, all of a sudden, there was excitement; there was enthusiasm for the project. There were ideas and input that couldn't be made based on an elevation and a plan...

BJ: Yeah.

TW: (And section). That is one of the real exciting things. Architects for, I guess, hundreds of years, have been able to draw perspectives—developed a technique for perspective—and could create a three-dimensional view of something. But not instantaneously...

BJ: Yeah,

TW: Not fly through it. Not walk through it...

BJ: No,

TW: Sometimes, 'cause you can, you shouldn't necessarily. There are (laugh) some things that could be done now that maybe shouldn't be done...

JE: (mm-hmm)

TW: But one of the other incredible outcomes of computerized design is 3D printers. There are people working right now with three-dimensional printing of buildings. So you put it in the computer, and you have it spit out concrete or steel or plastic, and it creates your building. Right there in piece-wise fashion. That's happening today. Not very much, but in the future.

Again, one of the things that amazed me about 3D printing—and what kinda turned the light bulb on in my mind about it—was a guy that demonstrated a wrench and said, "Okay, so, you're in outer space. And you need a wrench. But you can't stock all these wrenches in the space station. But you can stock a very strong plastic there. And if you need a wrench or a particular tool, you print it out."

BJ: (laugh)

JE: Yeah. Amazing.

BJ: Fantastic.

JE: Do you think you had to be a better architect, back when Bob was, to get these big jobs? That today, maybe an average architect—taking advantage of all the technology—experiences a successful career...

TW: It's very similar. You have to have the confidence that he had, to sell your design philosophy. But, I think, that the tools that were used by all architects back then were pretty similar...

BJ: Yeah.

TW: And I think that the tools that are used now. There are architects that still draw by hand, and there are architects that use simple programs like AutoCAD; there are architects that use programs that do three-dimensional generation of buildings, and there's programs that can print out the building afterwards.

JE: (mm-hmm)

TW: And everything in between. There's the capability to go take a laser device and put it in a building and have it measure the existing building down to an eighth of an inch...

JE: (laugh)

BJ: Gee,

TW: There aren't very many architects that are doing that, but there are some in Tulsa. One architect might go take a week to field-measure an existing building, and another architect—with this technology—can go spend half a day and get the same thing.

BJ: Gee.

JE: (laugh) Bob is looking at you with amazement...

TW: (laugh)

JE: And shaking his head...

TW: Yeah,

JE: As you talk about that.

Chapter 15—4:32

Student Advice

JE: What advice do you give to generations now, coming out of school, maybe going into architectural work? What kind of advice would you give to these young people who will listen to this interview?

BJ: I have a grandson that's in his fifth year of architecture at the University of New Mexico. The thing that I am anxious that he do is explore as many different possibilities as he can as a young person. And I used to tell our students, the first five years you're out of school are as important as the five years you were in school. And you don't wanna get pigeonholed too quickly. You wanna have a broad range of experience from which you can develop your own directions. I think kids these days are probably open to that. I certainly hope so.

JE: Tom, do you have anything to add to that? Advice?

TW: I have advice that I've given to architecture students and engineers, kinda tongue-in-cheek. And this is the advice I gave my daughter who is an intern architect now. She decided in about seventh grade that she wanted to be an architect...

BJ: Great.

TW: And asked me about the profession. And I said, "Well, it is the most difficult education, for the least amount of money, and the most responsibility,"

BJ: (laugh)

TW: "And the most stress, of any profession that I'm aware of. But, if you love it, and you like doing design work, you're working with the upper-two percent of society who have money, vision, creativity and the ability to let you practice your profession."

JE: (laugh)

TW: "So, if you want that, great. If you're looking for a job where you can make a lot of money and spend a lot of time at parties, then that's not the thing to do."

JE: Very good.

TW: Now, with engineers, I say, "It's like taking a math test every hour, and you better be right,"

BJ: (laugh)

TW: "Or if you're not, you better make a mistake on the conservative side."

But it is a high responsibility to design structures or electrical engineering or whatever it is, so that it doesn't hurt people. And hurt property.

JE: Yeah.

TW: So there's an excitement and a responsibility for that.

But it's very exciting to go into a building that's under construction and—for the whole time that it begins construction until the time that it ends construction—it's sort of your baby. It's your territory. You get to watch it grow from nothing. And you get the excitement of saying you've created something from nothing.

Help them accomplish their vision. But, it is a serious industry. And you have to be willing to do the hard work to make sure you don't make mistakes.

BJ: Talk about the seriousness of it. Mies van der Rohe also said, "Architecture is the battleground of the spirit. It's not a playground for either the young or the old."

JE: (laugh)

BJ: There's a (popular) architect that I'd worked for in Chicago, Larry Perkins. He says, "The architect gets a million-dollar education, and it's all at the expense of the client."

JE: (laugh)

TW: (laugh) That is a fact.

BJ: (laugh)

JE: That's right. Well, I want to thank both of you.

First of all, thank you, Tom. Why did you bring Bob's name to my attention?

TW: Well, as you recall, we were at a library fundraising dinner. I was interested in what you were doing, and *Voices of Oklahoma* is a fabulous program that you're doing.

And, I think you asked me, "Is there anybody that I should interview?" I immediately thought of Bob. I'm not sure exactly why, but I just think it is a great thing that we've got this recording now of some of his thoughts and some of the history of what Bob, and Murray Jones and Murray, brought back—the high level of quality and sophistication to Tulsa.

I'm proud that I was able to touch a little piece of it. One of the funny things that—as you were talking about the First National Bank Tower—I worked one summer as a draftsman for (Napkin) Mechanical Contractors. Bob doesn't know this but I actually detailed the actual pipes, the links, and the welded connections on the (chilled 'n hot) water,

BJ: Oh,

TW: That went up into that building (laugh) and so, you know, I wouldn't have had that job if he hadn't designed that building.

BJ: (laugh)

JE: Wow. That's a great story.

BJ: Well, I really appreciated visiting with both of you. And I wish you well on your project, *Voices of Oklahoma*.

JE: Well, it's my pleasure. This has been fun. Thank you, Bob and Tom, for this time; and it's fun to follow a man's career that meant history to our state and our town...

BJ: Yeah.

JE: That's great. Thank you.

Chapter 16—0:33

Conclusion

Announcer: This oral history presentation is made possible through the support of our generous foundation funders. We encourage you to join them by making your donation, which will allow us to record future stories. Students, teachers and librarians are using this website for research, and the general public is listening every day to these great Oklahomans share their life experience. Thank you for your support as we preserve Oklahoma's legacy, one voice at a time, on VoicesOfOklahoma.com.