

# ARCHITECTURAL RECORD

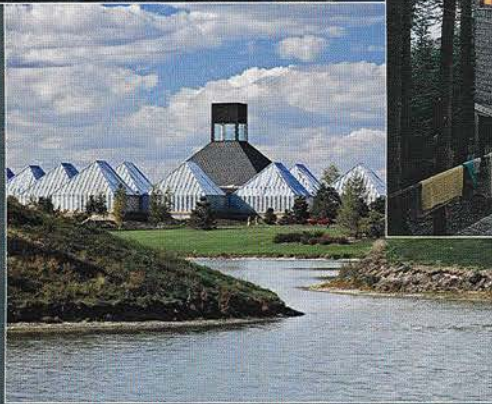
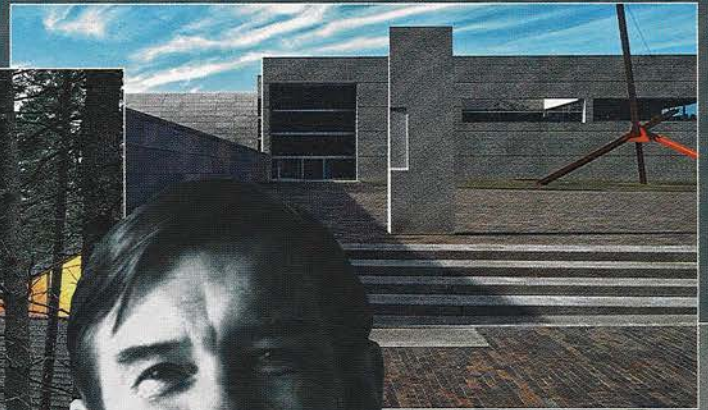
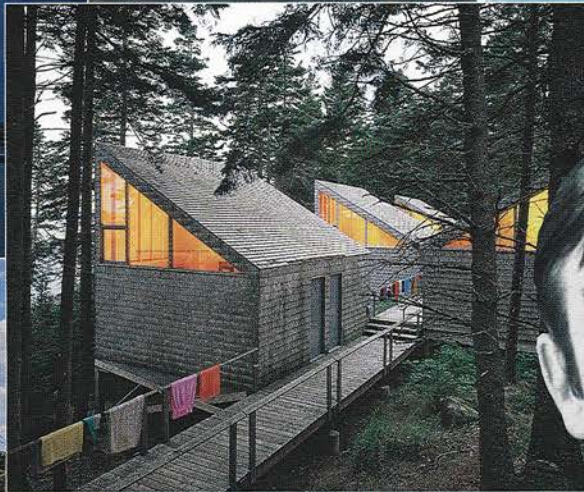
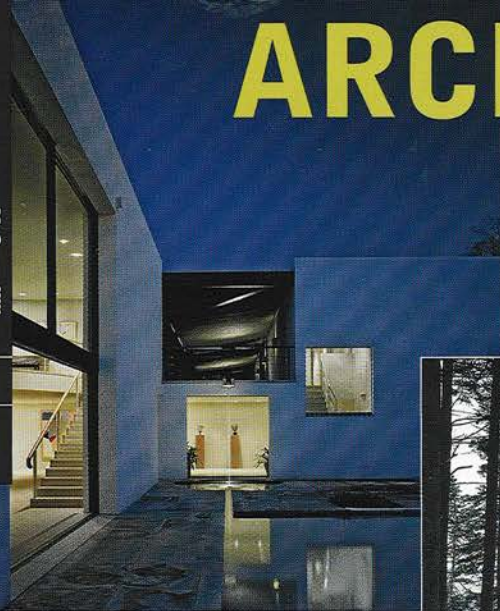
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The west end of the building ends at a deck surrounded by a shallow pool. To the eye, the glass storefront system appears to be semi-elliptical in plan, but it consists of slightly faceted panels.



# Rand Elliott adds a delicate shell to the banks of a reinvented river for the new **CHESAPEAKE BOATHOUSE** in a renewed downtown Oklahoma City

By Russell Fortmeyer

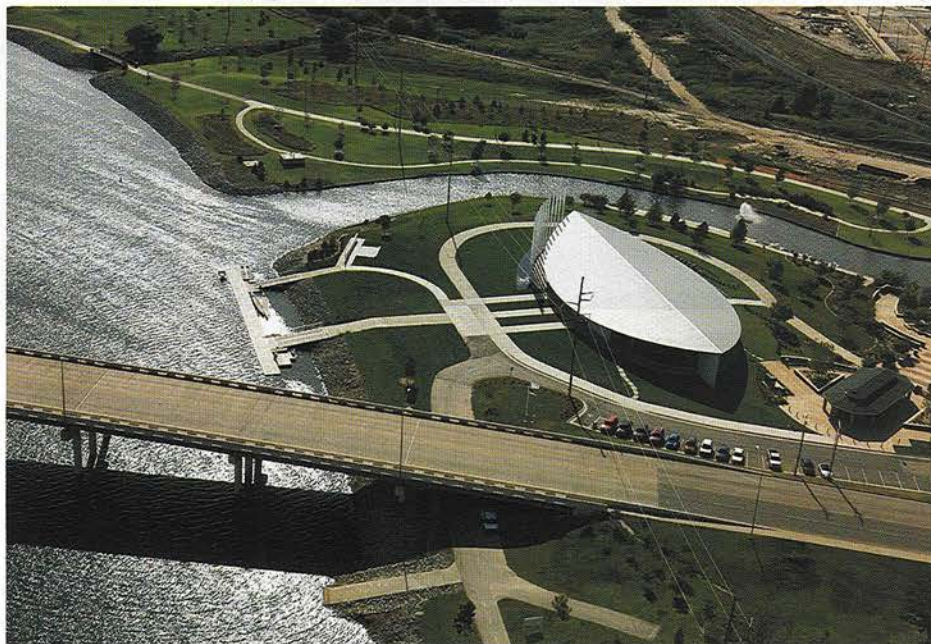
**R**and Elliott, FAIA, drives his white Porsche 911 around Oklahoma City, showing you his major projects, shifting gears, and sweeping through the sprawling landscape so quickly, authoritatively, you begin to understand how important the new Chesapeake Boathouse is to the career of this consummate Oklahoma architect.

But you first have to ask yourself: What is a boathouse doing in O-K City and, for that matter, who builds boathouses in this day and age? It sounds like some kind of country club folly, a euphemism for a garden shed, or an aluminum-sided marina on the banks of a red dirt reservoir, but rather it turns out to be exactly what you wouldn't expect in Oklahoma: one of the best facilities for competitive sculling in the country. The nonprofit Oklahoma City Boathouse Foundation asked Elliott to design the building on the banks of the Oklahoma River to accommodate an expanding program—the Oklahoma Association for Rowing counts 325 members and growing, while three local universities have implemented programs. The 14,578-square-foot boathouse provides these athletes and hobbyists with meeting space, offices, fitness facilities, and storage for nearly 100 racing shells—sleek, carbon-fiber-reinforced plastic boats in a variety of colors and lengths.

Like most athletes in America, rowers are obsessed with speed. Custom manufacturers optimize the shells like those stored at the Chesapeake Boathouse to within fractions of an inch. An elite single-person racing shell may measure 30 feet long, less than 24 inches wide, and weigh only 30 pounds. They slice through the water so easily, you forget the rower must maintain precise balance to keep the silvery thread of a vehicle from

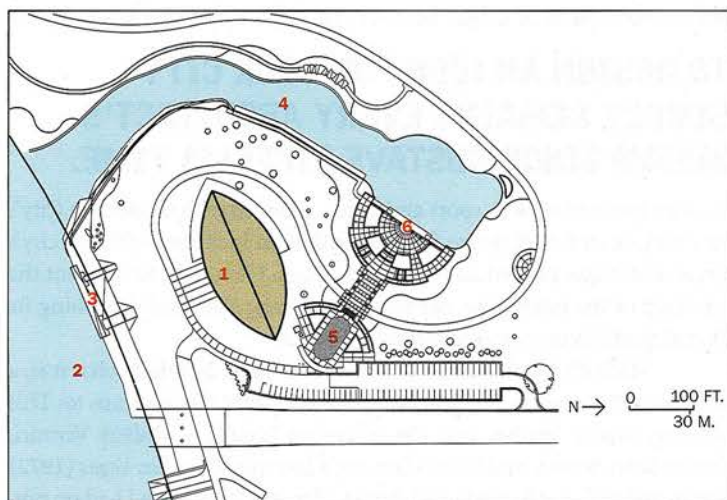
**Project:** Chesapeake Boathouse, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma  
**Architect:** Elliott + Associates Architects—Rand Elliott, FAIA, Brian Fitzsimmons, AIA, Miho Koliopoulos, AIA, Joseph Williams, Assoc. AIA  
**Engineers:** Grossman & Keith

*Engineering (civil); KFC Engineering (structural); PSA Consulting Engineers (m/e/p)*  
**Consultants:** Elliott + Associates Architects (landscape, lighting); Smith Lighting  
**Contractors:** Smith & Pickel Construction (general)



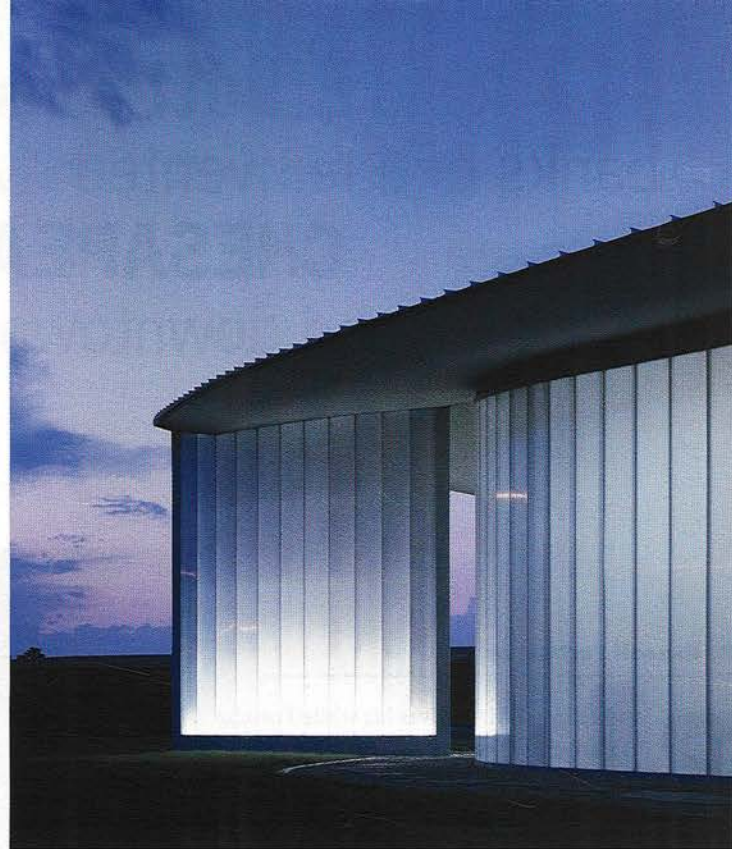
The boathouse's site (above) lies in Regatta Park on the banks of the Oklahoma River, just west of the Lincoln Avenue Bridge.

1. Boathouse
2. Oklahoma River
3. Dock
4. Canal
5. Water taxi pavilion
6. Water taxi dock



PHOTOGRAPHY: © ROBERT SHIMER FOR HEDRICH BLESSING

PROJECTS



Although the boathouse was built using a prefabricated metal system, the building's starkly symmetrical form and its restrained material use suggest

capsizing. Elliott paid close attention to these sorts of details when he began design. Throughout his more than 30 years of practice in the “City,” as everyone in Oklahoma calls it, he has consistently said he begins a project by looking at the culture prevailing at its inception, while also attempting a reading of the intangible qualities conveyed by the site’s physical context. Many architects say this, but not many architects are Rand Elliott.

The Chesapeake Boathouse has little in common with the traditions called to mind by Philadelphia’s Schuylkill River rowers forever in midstroke in a Thomas Eakins canvas. Rather, Elliott addresses the tricky architectural issue of origin head-on: through a deft evocation of our

## TO DESIGN AN ICON FOR YOUR CITY SURELY REMAINS EVERY ARCHITECT’S DREAM SINCE GUSTAVE EIFFEL’S TIME.

modern fascination with sport and speed, mingled with Oklahoma City’s very real, shared civic desire for reinvention, in lock-step with the city’s larger ambitions to shed its Dust Bowl image. He sought to reinvent the typology of the boathouse, capsizing the racing shell and morphing its formal qualities onto an architectural project.

Elliott’s boathouse couldn’t be anything other than what it is, a statement that sounds like quackery because it very much means to: This building boldly testifies that the infamous “duck” in Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour’s *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972) is alive and well and living in Oklahoma. “I’m not a rower, so I had no pre-

conceptions,” Elliott says. “I looked for a basis—the history and motivation for the project.” The architect, a native Oklahoman, says he wanted to embrace an architecture that would startle the locals in its departure from the city’s status quo. And while Oklahoma City may never quite qualify as a great river town like Philadelphia, Elliott’s boathouse makes a spirited case. Its sinuous form—elliptical in plan, topped with a sleek standing-seam metal roof—achieves the not-unimportant task of providing an icon for the river. It functions on two levels of iconicity: embodying what it purports to be (a house for boats that looks like a boat) and representing the city’s pride in its restored river (the icon as symbol). To design an icon for your city surely remains every architect’s dream since the time of Gustave Eiffel.

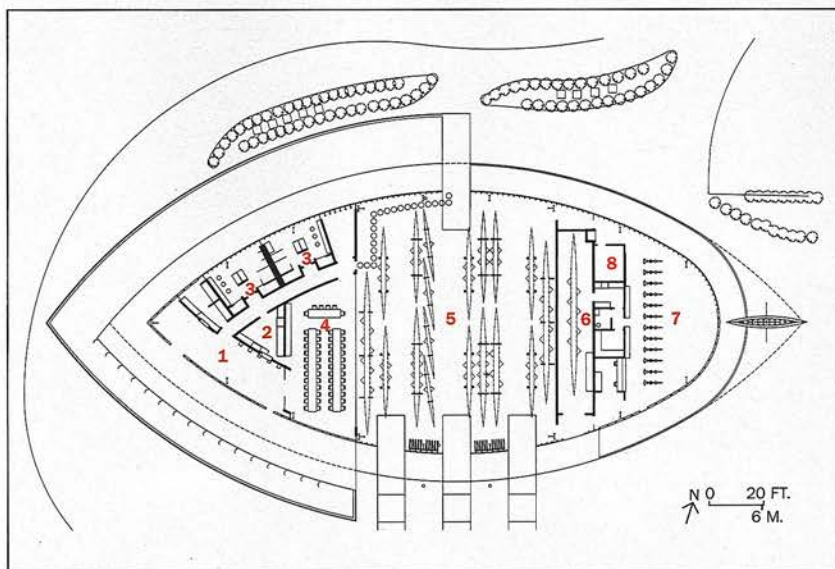
Although on paper the specifications for the boathouse indicate a conventionally steel-framed building with stained concrete floors, Elliott has a knack for putting his budget constraints—a mere \$3.5 million—to work. He’s a pragmatist with a Pop sensibility, calling to mind Venturi’s urge in his seminal 1966 book, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, to give “uncommon meaning to common elements by changing their context or increasing their scale.”

Attempting the strategy of architectural icon-making qualifies as precarious business; in lesser hands, it could have been kitsch or Disneyesque frivolity. Sixteen 40-foot-high steel tubes mounted vertically along the southwestern edge of the boathouse’s composite-wood-and-plastic exterior deck stand in as sculls, or oars. A shallow pool surrounds the deck along the building’s western half. Other rowing details emerge: An exterior column on the east appears as a rudder; the ridge of the roof



a more refined level of construction. The roof's appearance (above and below), suggesting a capsized shell, attracts attention to the city's developing riverfront.





- |                      |                                   |
|----------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1. Lobby             | 5. Boat storage                   |
| 2. Kitchen           | 6. Boat repair shop               |
| 3. Locker room       | 7. Fitness club                   |
| 4. Multipurpose room | 8. Electrical and mechanical room |



The lobby (above) includes a wall of glass shelves for regatta trophies. The steel structure was left in its base factory color of gray—a cost-cutting step, says the architect.

recalls the skeg, or short fin, along the bottom of a shell; and from the interior, the 1-inch insulated-glass storefront system falls across the distance like oars dipping into water.

The boathouse's overall symmetrical composition recognizes the need for precise balance in the sport, but this is less apparent than the effect of lightness Elliott achieved with the thin roof surface that seems barely tethered to the walls of glass and polycarbonate underneath. An

## THE BOATHOUSE'S OVERALL SYMMETRICAL COMPOSITION RECOGNIZES THE NEED FOR PRECISE BALANCE IN THE SPORT.

interior detail, where the walls and ceiling planes stop just short of the structural elements, heightens the effect. An architect can draw balance and symmetry on paper, but creating the appearance of lightness in built form, whether in a racing shell or a boathouse, takes practice.

The form may begin with a boat, but the abstracted Minimalism of its design—its reduction to an unadorned state of materials and the subjection of the icon to the program of a boathouse—places the building in the category of significant architecture.

The stakes for architecture could not be higher. Local leaders have looked to architecture to provide evidence of the city's transformation, with much of that lately focused on the river. Oklahoma City's recent past is that oft-told American story of sprawl, downtown abandonment, and ill-conceived revitalization projects that go nowhere, all resulting in a

bad civic self-image. The reappearance of the river could not have come soon enough. In the 1950s, the Army Corps of Engineers, seeking to control flooding in the rapidly developing oil-rich town, undertook a channeling project that partially moved and totally transformed the North Canadian River into a mostly dry, glorified ditch. Although plans for redeveloping the river began in the 1970s, nothing happened until 1993, when the city's residents approved the Metropolitan Area Projects (MAPS), a sales-tax initiative for urban improvement that included multiple projects. The resulting \$56 million restoration of the rechristened Oklahoma River—really just a 7-mile stretch within the North Canadian—involved the construction of three dams and two locks, opening a huge tract of land to expansion south of the city's downtown.

The boathouse is architecture's first response to this new context. And it certainly doesn't lack for visitors; the last rowing event attracted 35,000 spectators. The Oklahoma Association for Rowing has played host to three regattas for the U.S. Rowing Association already, as well as innovated the concept of night rowing; there is even talk of Olympic team training, since the high-banked, wind-protected river's straight, 7,500-foot length of racing expanse provides ideal conditions for the sport. Oklahoma City understandably concerns itself with reinvention, while Elliott's architecture mines the field of architectural manifestoes and experiments hitherto dismissed. This has proved not only productive, but popular—even, as Venturi would say, almost all right. ■

Sources, see page 208. To rate this project, go to [architecturalrecord.com/projects/](http://architecturalrecord.com/projects/).



The central boat-storage room holds nearly 100 racing sculls of lengths ranging from 30 to 60 feet.

The fitness center (right) has become popular with members, especially given its ample light and view to the river. The multipurpose room (far right), used for meetings and social functions, includes a 62-foot window looking into the boat-storage room.

