

Oklahoma's Rand Elliott

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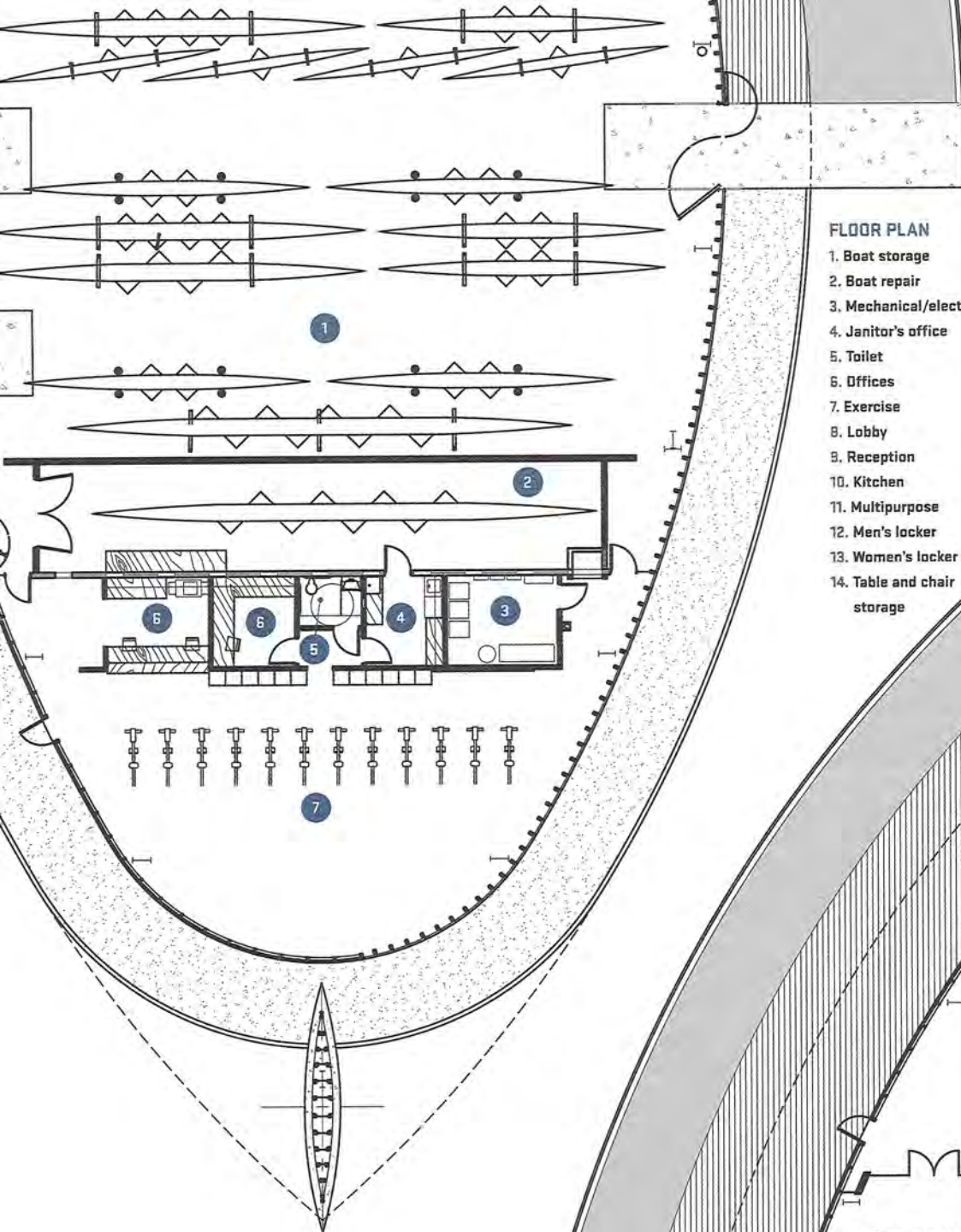


Architect Rand Elliott in front of one of his newest projects, the Chesapeake Boathouse, in Oklahoma City. The walkway is composed of Trex, a durable wood-and-polymer composite. Opposite: Floor plans for the building.

# NATIVE SON

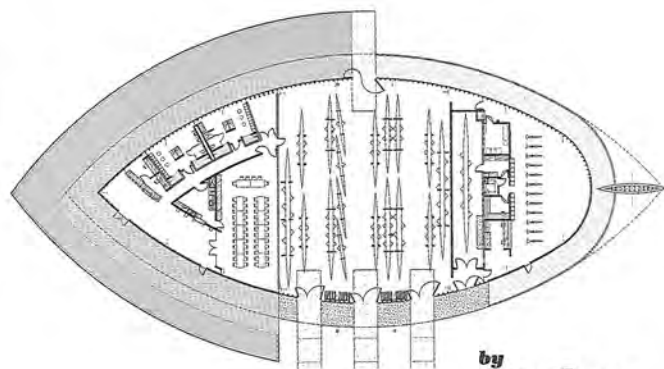
Portrait by  
**Joseph Mills**

Drawings, courtesy Elliott + Associates Architects

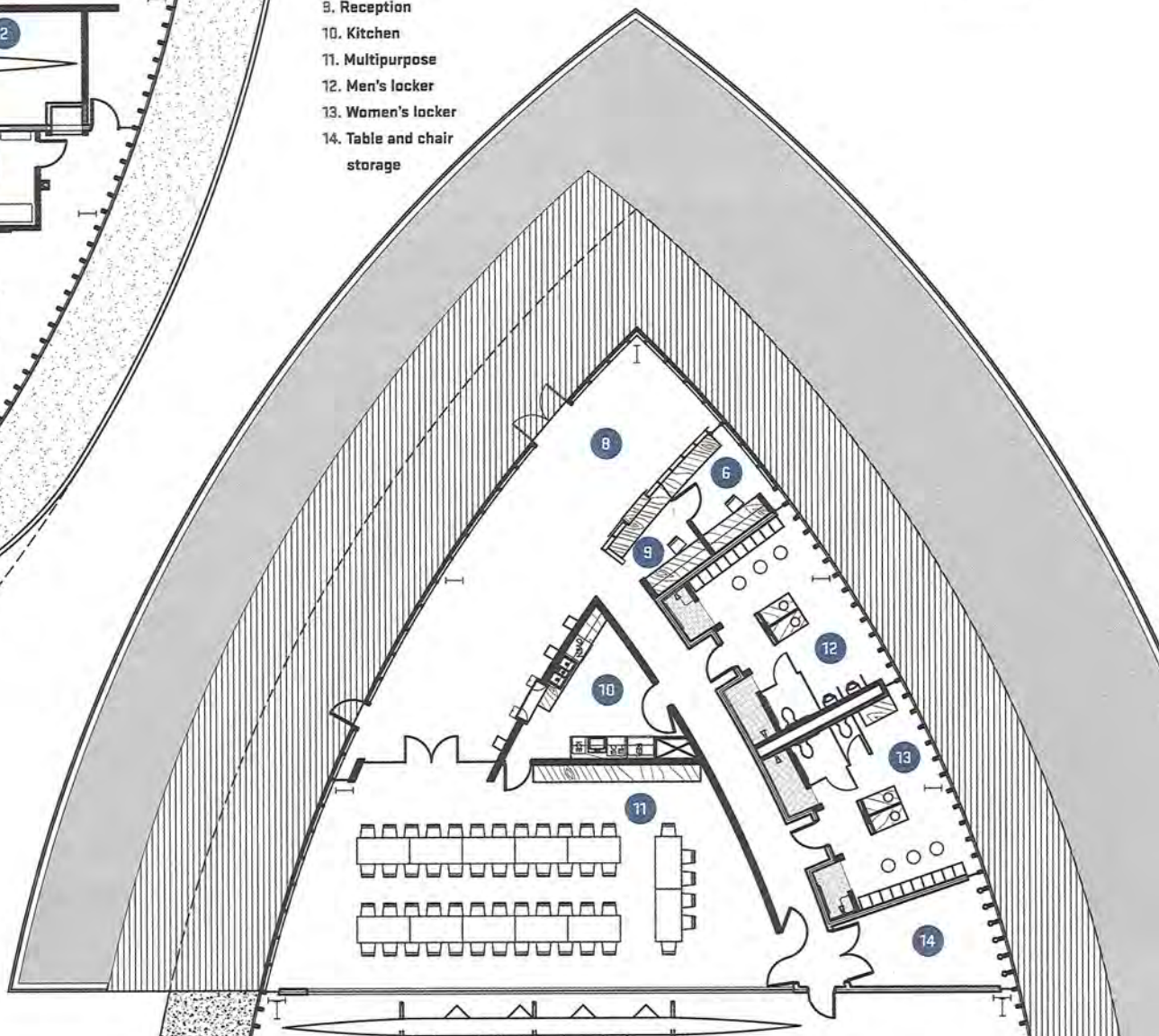


**FLOOR PLAN**

- 1. Boat storage
- 2. Boat repair
- 3. Mechanical/electric
- 4. Janitor's office
- 5. Toilet
- 6. Offices
- 7. Exercise
- 8. Lobby
- 9. Reception
- 10. Kitchen
- 11. Multipurpose
- 12. Men's locker
- 13. Women's locker
- 14. Table and chair storage

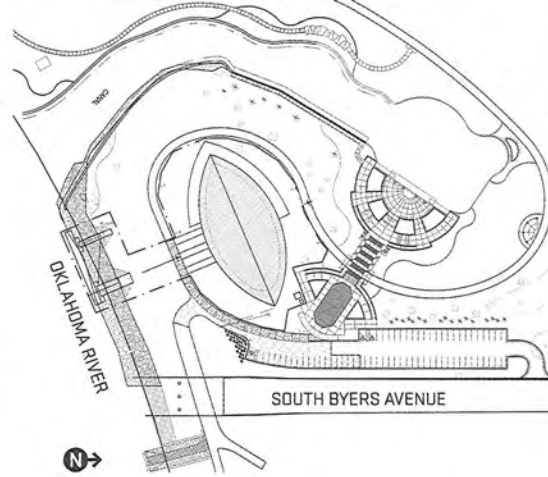


by  
**Stephen  
Zacks**



Oklahoma City's  
Rand Elliott  
carves out an  
impressive body  
of work that's  
deeply rooted  
in place and  
local culture.

Rand Elliott is standing across from a field on the outskirts of Oklahoma City in front of Bruce Goff's Hopewell Baptist Church. A neglected modern landmark buttressed with rusted pipes from oil fields, it looks like a cross between a barn and a tepee, with hydraulic flaps for circulation and a Styrofoam ceiling. "Hey, Rand!" a woman yells, pulling up to a stop sign. "Are you gonna fix it up?" "I'll try," he yells back. Everyone here seems to know Elliott: the town's landscape is sprinkled with three decades of his buildings and sculptures, and his contemporary rockabilly style—imagine Roy Orbison as an architect—makes him instantly recognizable. "Early in my career I didn't get Bruce Goff," he says. "He was just a wild man, did these crazy damn things. As a pioneer he didn't come out here into a lap of luxury—it was about making do with what you had, creating something out of a very rough and difficult environment. I think there is some connection between that pioneer



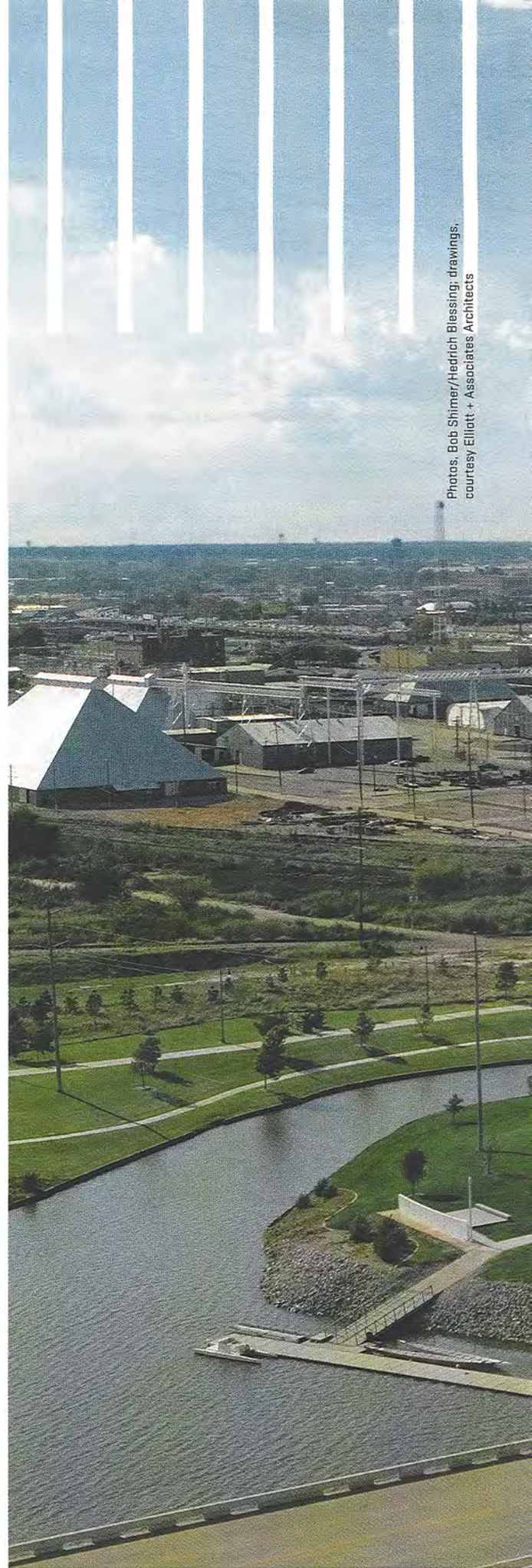
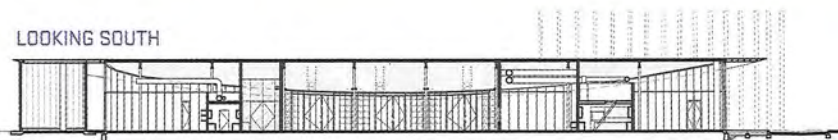
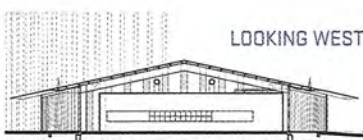
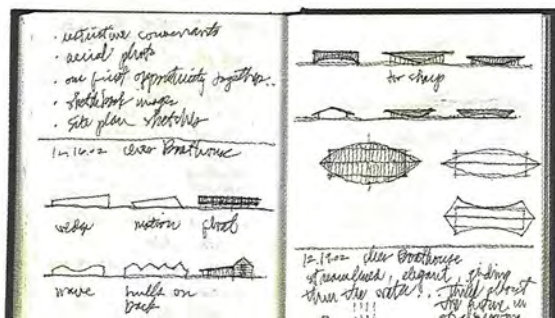
spirit and not being afraid to take a risk, try a new material, stick your neck out.”

We’re driving around Oklahoma City in Elliott’s white 1997 Porsche on a tour of the dozens of buildings the 56-year-old architect has produced since starting his practice in the late 1970s. He’s dressed in his trademark white shirt, black tie, and black pants, wearing thick black-rimmed glasses with his hair slicked back into a ducktail, and his steady salesman’s patter would have easily sold me on the originality of his achievement if the work hadn’t already.

Elliott has never been shy about publicity; he regards it as essential to his success in carving out a diverse portfolio of homes, offices, banks, schools, and public buildings—most recently his iconic Chesapeake Boathouse on the banks of the Oklahoma River—in a region not known for architectural experimentation. But for Elliott publicity is just an extension of a continuous process of communication—with clients, with the public, with the landscape—that gives his work an underlying spiritual dimension and makes it feel like a contemporary native American architecture, not because of its ethnic identity but because of its rootedness in the place and its culture.

Early in his career Elliott had a pivotal experience that brought him face-to-face with local Native American culture and influenced him to think differently about architecture. His friend Philip Bread invited him and his wife to an Apache fire dance way out in the Oklahoma countryside. “We go down this road, and the road starts to curve, and all I can see on the horizon is the color of blood,” he recalls in his office before we set off on the tour. “I start to hear drums, and I’m thinking, ‘What the hell are we doing?’ And Stephen, we go around this corner—it gives me chills to talk about it—and there is a bonfire the size of this building, and there are elders standing around a drum about ten feet in diameter, and children and adults with their bodies painted black are dancing counter-clockwise around this giant fire. It was the most powerful experience I’ve ever had, and I realized

The lobby of the boathouse (top). Elliott and project architect Brian Fitzsimmons stained the structural concrete slab to serve as an all-purpose floor, and the reception desk is encased in blue Plexiglas and translucent polycarbonate. The faceted steel pylons at the entrance (above) withstand the strong winds that sweep across the prairie.



*The boathouse is Elliott's first truly signature building, and the relatively simple program liberated him to pursue a more purely form-driven design.*



LOOKING EAST



The Chesapeake Boathouse (above) is sited on the Oklahoma River adjacent to the Bricktown Canal. "The landscape, big skies, and moods of thunderstorms are more of an influence on me than architectural elements," Elliott says.

An aerial site plan (opposite, top) and conceptual sketches from Rand Elliott's notebook (opposite, left), which he describes as breakthrough drawings for the project.

*"It wasn't just Rand creating a beautiful piece of art but making sure that we were happy with the building," says Mike Knopp, the boathouse's executive director.*



A fiberglass boat sits on a sling in the boat storage room (above). Glowing polycarbonate doors on the south side allow boats to be taken straight down to the river.

In August the U.S. Olympic Committee selected the boathouse to host next year's international rowing competition as a part of its 2008 Olympics preparations.



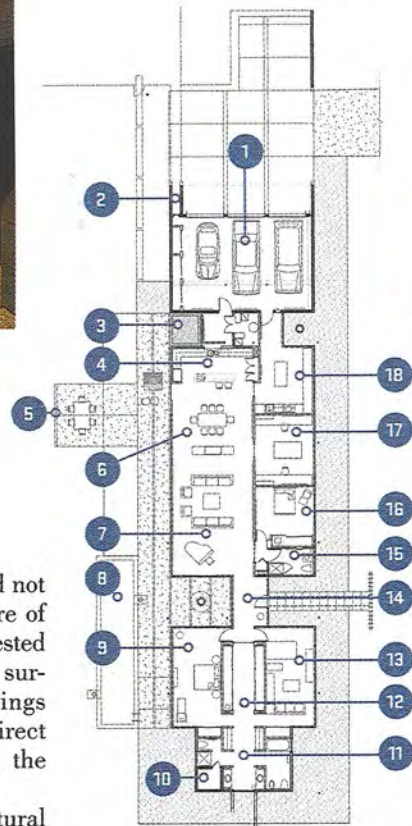
**222 RESIDENCE**  
Oklahoma City  
2004

how naive I was living here and not really understanding the culture of this place. I got very, very interested in what's going on below the surface, and some of the buildings I'm going to show you are direct results of that connection to the land and culture."

Goff—an untrained architectural prodigy who became chair of architecture at the University of Oklahoma—was also a natural source of inspiration for Elliott, whose American Bank building and K. J. McNitt offices take cues from Goff's playfulness with materials and unusual compositions. But despite Elliott's deep local roots—his grandmother came to the area during the late-nineteenth-century land runs, and he studied architecture at Oklahoma State—the lack of an active design tradition made it extremely unlikely that he would succeed in making a career as an architect here. During an oil bust in the early 1980s he almost gave up. "I began to have second thoughts," he says. "Wow, is this really your destiny? Are you just going to be out here destitute in a place where most people would say architecture can't exist? We didn't have architecture in Oklahoma City and Albuquerque at that time; architecture was something that happened in New York, L.A., or Chicago."

Elliott even took a trip to New York at the time to interview with a few firms. At the Gensler office he ran into David Pipkin, an old friend from Oklahoma State. "What are you doing here?" Pipkin asked. "You're not right to work in this office. You would be bored to tears. You need to go back to Oklahoma City." But Elliott went through with the interviews, including a surreal meeting with Philip Johnson in the Seagram Building. After a long wait in a prisonlike reception area, followed by another wait in an interior reception area, he sat face-to-face with Johnson, behind a spare desk loaded with razor-sharp pencils. Johnson proceeded to charm him and offer him a job, and then walked him through the office, which was stacked high with the bodies of architects. Afterward Elliott sat on a bench in front of the monumental glass tower and contemplated his future.

"I realized at that time, Stephen, that I had a choice," Elliott says, using his trademark salesman's technique—he took a Dale Carnegie course back then to improve his marketing skills. "I could either take the job and it would

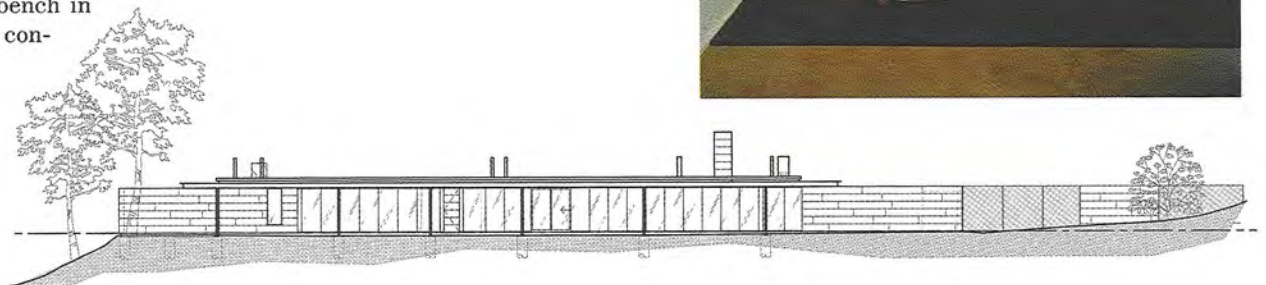
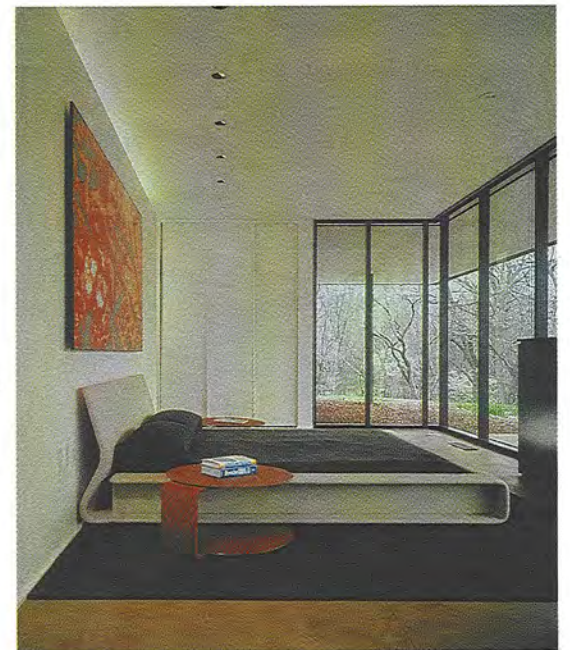


**FLOOR PLAN**

1. Garage
2. Dog entrance
3. Glass garden
4. Kitchen
5. Patio/outdoor fireplace
6. Dining room
7. Living room
8. Lap pool
9. Master bedroom
10. Sauna/safe room
11. Master bath
12. Master dressing
13. Exercise room
14. Main entry
15. Guest bath
16. Guest bedroom
17. Office
18. Utility room



Clockwise from top left: The gravel walkways, with earth-red concrete insets, complement the rusted steel elements on the exterior. In the dining area yellow-painted steel tubes frame red cedar trees and the surrounding landscape through the glass wall; the glass dining table is outfitted with Arne Jacobsen's Seven chairs. Elliott specified Patricia Urquiola's Clip bed and nightstands, for Molteni, in the bedroom; the black lacquer pedestal contains a TV; and low-volt MR16 lights are recessed in the wall behind the bed. Longtime Elliott associate Miho Koliopoulos served as project architect.





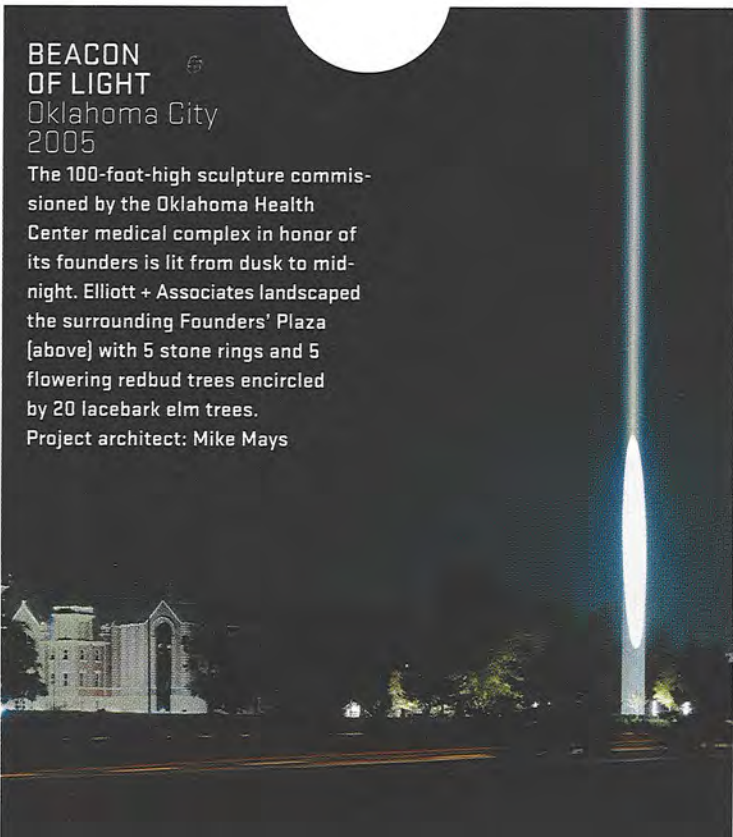
**HERITAGE HALL  
ATHLETIC FACILITY**  
Oklahoma City  
2004

Elliott and project architect Michael Hoffner used blue and white fluorescent lights in the long passageway lined with trophy cases to add a sense of excitement on game days. It functions as the main entrance to the football field and a lobby for the basketball court and locker rooms. The blue lights are primarily for game days, and the white ones are for everyday use.



**BEACON  
OF LIGHT**  
Oklahoma City  
2005

The 100-foot-high sculpture commissioned by the Oklahoma Health Center medical complex in honor of its founders is lit from dusk to midnight. Elliott + Associates landscaped the surrounding Founders' Plaza [above] with 5 stone rings and 5 flowering redbud trees encircled by 20 lacebark elm trees.  
Project architect: Mike Mays



take me off in a certain direction, or I could choose to go back to Oklahoma City but this time with a different attitude. It would be, 'You just *absolutely* care. You go in with both feet, get reenergized, and really get after them.' That's what I chose to do."

On a lonesome stretch of the North Canadian River between downtown Oklahoma City and a cloverleaf linking two interstates, the white metal rooftop of the Chesapeake Boathouse floats above the glass-and-translucent-polycarbonate walls of the pavilion like a supermodern sail, echoing the tin-roofed cotton gin in the distance. A row of vertical steel pylons curves around a reflecting pool facing the Oklahoma River, where rowers set off in long sleek fiberglass boats that were stored on racks in a bright airy room inside the boathouse. Completed last January, it is Elliott's first truly signature building, and the relatively simple program liberated him from the service-heavy demands of offices, commercial buildings, and homes to pursue a more purely form-driven design. But it has all the hallmarks of an Elliott + Associates project: a passion for the way architecture responds to the landscape, a gift for materials, and a disciplined attention to quality and functionality.

"Rand puts a lot of thought into details and small components, as well as taking ideas that people come up with to improve the building and making them better," says Mike Knopp, the boathouse's

**K. J. McNitt Construction**  
Oklahoma City  
1996

The structure is built of precast tilt-up concrete panels (below). Elliott used oil-field pipes instead of screw jacks to hold the panels while they were being put in place, and incorporated the pipes into the final design as a living illustration of the construction process (above).

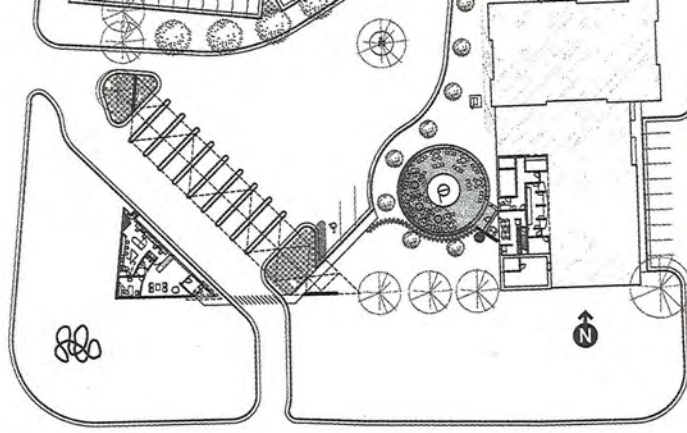






**POPS**  
Arcadia, Oklahoma  
2007

A 66-foot-high soda bottle covered with LEDs (shown here in an elevation) will stand in front of POPS, a gas station and recreation area under construction on Route 66 in Arcadia, just north of Oklahoma City. Project manager David Poerio is overseeing the project, which is scheduled to be completed this summer.



*"The key to successful relationships with your clients is their having a sense of who you are and what they want to accomplish," Elliott says.*



**American Bank**  
Edmond, Oklahoma  
1997

In an homage to Bruce Goff, the office and mini lobby for the American Bank (now Kirkpatrick Bank) is constructed of Endicott manganese iron-spot brick with green glass cullets adhered to the facade. Site plan (above left); view with the tip of the drive-in canopy in the foreground (above). Project architect: Michael Hoffner



**ImageNet**  
Oklahoma City  
2002

An antique typewriter is displayed on a glass-topped pedestal of paper in the headquarters of ImageNet, an information-technology company founded by a former typewriter repairman. The wall is composed of 390,000 sheets of recycled copy paper. Project architect: Brian Fitzsimmons

executive director. "It wasn't just him creating a beautiful piece of art but making sure that we're happy with the building. It's been real interesting to see how Rand put it all together, how immersed he gets in a project, and how passionate he is about getting it right and making sure that he captured the pure essence of the sport of rowing."

The project—which came to Elliott as a result of a two-decade-long relationship with Aubrey McClendon, CEO of the Oklahoma City-based Chesapeake Energy Corporation, the third-biggest independent natural-gas producer in the country—emerged as an outgrowth of one of the city's Metropolitan Area Projects to reclaim a seven-mile section of the North Canadian River (renamed the Oklahoma River) that had essentially become a drainage ditch before a series of low-water dams were installed in 2004 to hold in the water. "The joke around town was that it was the only river that they mowed three times a year," Knopp says. "In my early conversations with Aubrey, we realized that we could either do something that was very modest and get people on the water, or we could try to set a standard for the river and build an international icon for the city."

Elliott had done numerous projects for McClendon, including Chesapeake Energy's first offices in 1988 and an entire 20-acre modified Georgian corporate campus—updated here and there by Modernist additions— **continued on page 141**

continued from page 107 as well as an athletic center for a private school, Heritage Hall, that McClendon financed. "He wears all black and he's got a kind of funny haircut, but he's the most talented architect I've ever worked with," McClendon says. "We just have a real nice relationship; he'll bring me an idea—we've worked on probably twenty-five different projects—and sometimes it doesn't click initially, and we work together to get it to where I can handle it. Sometimes it's a little too far out there and I have to rein it in a little bit, but for the most part we get on the same page pretty quickly."

**"He wears all black and he's got a kind of funny haircut, but he's the most talented architect I've ever worked with," McClendon says.**

Once McClendon had signed on to fund three-quarters of the boathouse, there was no doubt that Elliott + Associates would be brought in to design it. "The Oklahoma City rowing community came to me and said, 'We need a boathouse,'" he says. "I looked at the architectural plan and said, 'Well, I can't support that, and I can't support where you're going to put it. I want to put it in downtown Oklahoma City—not out on some city water-supply lake. And if I'm gonna be involved, it's gonna be my architect.' They said, 'If you're gonna write the check, you can pretty much do what you want.' So I turned it over to Rand and said, 'Build something world-class that the boathouse world has never seen before.'"

It was the perfect chance for Elliott to prove that not only had architecture arrived in the region but its forms didn't have to be imported from elsewhere. "We chose not to do a traditional boathouse but something that feels like the future of Oklahoma," Elliott says. "It's really about the pioneering spirit that remains fertile here and continues to be an underlying factor for everything we as a firm do."

Great architecture could emerge from "listening to the land"—the title of his 2001 monograph—but maybe even more from listening to his clients. "I'm keen on being a good listener," Elliott says as we survey the site of another upcoming project for McClendon, a gas station and tourist attraction on Route 66 called POPS. "We have conversations, and there will be things that prompt me to think certain things or to react in certain ways. The key to successful relationships with your clients is their having a sense of who you are and what they want to accomplish, and if I'm listening well and hearing what they say—not only to the words but to the things between the words—then I should be able to do my job really well."

Often Elliott's pitch comes in the form of a poetic description of the project, what he calls a "word painting," that evokes the feeling of the space he intends to create. McClendon owns a commercial tree farm and a recreational site in Arcadia, just northeast of Oklahoma City, and with development increasing in the area, he asked the architect to design a gas station/convenience store to serve the community that wouldn't look like every other one in America. Elliott imagined an homage to the soda fountain that would play on the nostalgic appeal of Route 66, with a glass facade displaying 12,000 pop bottles, an outdoor patio that looks into a redbud orchard, and a 66-foot pop bottle in front. His word painting for POPS went, in part: "Freedom...to travel the open road / to explore the countryside. ...There is always a 'gimmick' on Route 66. Some true, some tall tales. There is always a 'hook' to get you to stop and look and buy something. ...It's a building of our time. continued on page 143



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Circle 62

continued from page 141 ...Imagine...a building emerging from the soil...growing out of the earth...connected to the place."

As we continue past Goff's church in Edmond and past the site for POPS on our way to a recent residential project for a longtime friend of Elliott, colonies of tacky French country houses are clumped together in three-story masses of turrets and oversize mansard roofs on the horizon. "What is it with turrets?" I ask Elliott. "I don't know," he says. "Are they reading 'Hansel and Gretel' at night? It's just horrific." Elliott was actually offered the commission for a similar development a few years back. "They said, 'Well, it's all gonna be French country and French provincial, and it'll all be a gated community.' And I said, 'You know, there are lots of architects who do that a whole lot better than I would do it—it's not my cup of tea.' They said, 'Are you kidding? You're telling us no?' I said, 'Yeah, I really am. I'm a Modernist, I don't do French country houses.'"

**In most Elliott + Associates projects, the real payoff is in the small details: "I'm less interested in the form than I am in the experience."**

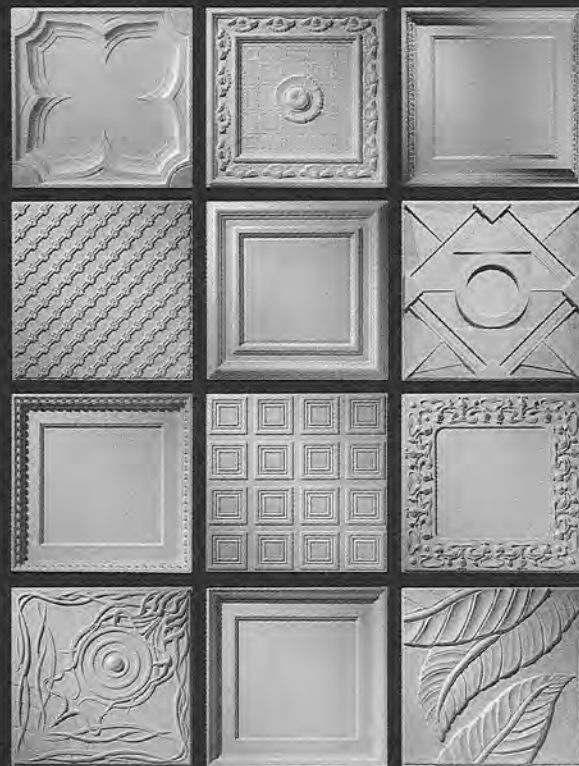
The 222 Residence is tucked back in the middle of one of these gaudy subdivisions, hidden away behind a shroud of red cedar trees and a Mondrian-inspired steel gate. It's a secluded glass house snugly embedded in the landscape with a flat roof, a rusted steel exterior, and ample overhangs for sun-shading, and it couldn't be further from the latest suburban tendency to occupy every square inch of lots with seven-car garages and dozens of rooms with no function except to take up space. The client, who prefers to remain anonymous, had lived for 25 years in a typical suburban development and decided he wanted something different. "I don't think I could live again in a neighborhood where I would see the house next door and they could see me," he says. "What's amazing is that people spend a million dollars on an architect and their house looks like everybody else's house. And I wonder, 'If you have that kind of money, why would you want your house to look like everybody else's?'"

The client raves about the way the building sits on the landscape. Elliott left the surrounding wilderness largely untouched for greater privacy and to shield the structure from neighbors—they had to persuade the developer to allow a modern home to be built there despite restrictive covenants. As a result the house is protected from views of the ridiculous McMansions cropping up everywhere around it, and the local deer population and various other critters have adopted the yard as a refuge.

As in most Elliott + Associates projects, however, the real payoff is in the small details of the interior. In the private spaces it's the glass-walled shower, a TV that emerges from a plinth in the bedroom, a steam room that can also serve as a storm shelter, and a bench in the center of the roomy closet-lined corridor. In the open living area it's the specially designed fish tank dividing the dining room and kitchen from lounging areas, and the trompe l'oeil-framed perspective through the dining area's glass windows, producing a James Turrell-like amplification of the natural environment. "The thing about a house like this is that often, Stephen, I'm less interested in the form than I am in the experience," Elliott says. "This house was about how to do formalist architecture where it's a shelter but has a dimension of warmth and hospitality, and fits into the site so that it just hugs the earth's surface."

Back in downtown Oklahoma City, we sit in the **continued on page 145**

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continued from page 143 ground-floor meeting room of the triangular 1911 Heierding Building, which Elliott bought in 1991 and restored with a modern interior filled with modulated light. The room is lined with immaculate photographs of his award-winning projects. Photography is one of his other passions, and a project isn't complete until he's brought in someone from Chicago's Hedrich Blessing to shoot it, put together a package to have it evaluated by his peers, and taken an annual trip to New York to show it off to the editors of national design magazines. It's one way Elliott stays connected to what's going on in the rest of the country and makes sure his work stacks up against competition, but he's running out of room on the walls—he's won roughly 185 awards and 9 AIA national honor awards—and his second-floor design studios are starting to reach overcapacity as well.

## Like Renzo Piano, Elliott isn't interested in style for the sake of style; it's all about the specifics of the project.

He takes me through some of his upcoming projects: a house in the big-sky country of northwest Oklahoma; a wine warehouse in Oklahoma City; a Houston office for ImageNet, an information technology company; a park pavilion in south Dallas; and a redesign of the Underground, a tunnel system connecting the buildings of downtown Oklahoma City. It's an incredibly broad portfolio, and Elliott's openness to such a wide range of projects—French country houses excepted—may be the most important element of his success. "Sometimes when I lecture I say, 'If somebody came to you and said, 'I'm interested in you building me a pink house,' how would you react to that?' Some of them said, 'I wouldn't do a pink house, that's a bunch of crap.' And I said, 'You know, I would feel completely the opposite.' I would think, 'That's kind of interesting. That's kind of out there. And furthermore, tell me why you want to build a pink house? Is it because it's your mother's favorite color? Is it because it's the color of your favorite candy?' Pink means lots of different things. It's the color of peonies that are coming out right now in the garden. The point is, try to find out what a person's motivation is, why they want to do that. As an architect, as a creative person, our responsibility, and our job, is to act as a vehicle to accomplish a client's goals."

Like Renzo Piano, Elliott isn't interested in style for the sake of style; it's all about the specifics of the project—the materials, details, and capturing the spirit of the place. "The whole psychology of doing something that is out of your purview and causes you to really stretch is probably why I'm so hooked on each project being completely different than the last one," he says. "There is a sensibility about details and materials perhaps, and coloration and the light: how you deal with it in a building is what gives it its spirit."

These days an emerging tradition of contemporary architecture in the region—Antoine Predock in Albuquerque, New Mexico; Lake/Flato in San Antonio, Texas; Randy Brown in Omaha, Nebraska; Marlon Blackwell in Fayetteville, Arkansas; Herbert Lewis Kruse Blunck in Des Moines, Iowa—has only reaffirmed Elliott's decision to stay in Oklahoma. "I think it's picked up some momentum over the last ten or fifteen years," he says. "In retrospect I can say without any remorse whatsoever that staying here was the best thing I ever did. It allowed me to grow at my own pace, work in a part of the country that I love, and really dig in and understand the historical and cultural nature of this place." [www.metropolismag.com](http://www.metropolismag.com)



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