

underCONSTRUCTION

Where's the Energy?

A perspective on the creativity and plight of Tulsa's architectural future

Tulsa, a city built by energy, is now in a serious energy drought. In its youth, Tulsa exploded with exponential growth once it established itself as the epicenter of the petroleum industry, then the latest energy technology of the time. The builders of this city were pure energy as well — bold, brash, and most of all, fearlessly creative. Even the buildings they constructed and helped fund were buildings "of the moment," structures that utilized the very latest in building and construction technology, and that artfully reflected the current advancements and sensibilities of our local and national cultures. The creative energy that pulsed through this young Midwestern city in the 1920s through the 1960s fueled Tulsa's position as a truly progressive city — every bit as much as the crude oil that flowed under the nearby hills and flatlands.

Back then, Tulsa was pure energy.

Through a series of cataclysmic economic events on the national and international fronts in the 1970s and 1980s, our local economy was devastated, and Tulsa was essentially dethroned as a destination city for the oil business. What we also lost around that time, and to date have not fully reclaimed, was our energy of boldness and creative thinking. We had come to the realization that we had no vision of our community and cultural identity beyond oil. The huge creative energy that drove our communal self-confidence and vision of ourselves was lost.

How did we lose that collective creative energy?

Where is Tulsa's boldness? This loss is certainly not due to a lack of creative thinkers. Tulsa is blessed with an abundance of creative people in all disciplines. Unfortunately, those in creative fields, including architects, are not exempt from the affliction of creative timidity in response to a community lacking self-confidence and collective vision of its "reason for being."

As well trained as architects are supposed to be in the skill of thinking and responding from our own creative gut, we too can fall victim to allowing our client's hand to guide our own response to the criteria set before us. It is equally easy to allow ourselves

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Photo by Don Wheeler



Brian L. Freese, AIA

Editor



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to fall into the trap of mimicking a locally ubiquitous and safe architectural style, rather than to creatively stretch with the client to design a truly individual solution.

I am reminded of a disappointing and related anecdote: an interior designer friend of mine told me of a Tulsa businessman who desires to build a very contemporary personal residence in Tulsa. He is interviewing an architect in Oklahoma City well known for his contemporary architecture. He told my friend he made this decision not because of a perceived lack of talent among Tulsa architects, but because he saw nothing in Tulsa that indicated to him there were any local architects willing to stretch beyond the narrow boundaries of Tulsa's own deathless trend of pervasive and mass-approved neohistorical residential archetypes.

Architects (among others) have such a huge amount of value to give to humanity at all levels, but only so long as we deliver our professional services and ideas with utmost honesty, integrity, and from our own bold and fearless creative core. As architects, our greatest value lies in our very different way of thinking and processing information to arrive at unique solutions. This is the essence of true creative thinking, and creative thinking is the only energy source of infinite value and incomparable power.

If more architects were to engage those ingrained skills, and with the talent I know exists among us, I can envision ways in which local architects could help to rediscover our huge communal creative energy and boldness:

- A new form of architecture unique to this city should once again emerge: a form of architecture that utilizes the most advanced building and engineering technologies. It should express the essence of the urban Midwest in simple, bold and contemporary forms combined with local natural materials. It should artfully define the accumulated knowledge and present day attitudes and sensibilities of our local culture. Art Deco architecture accomplished those things in Tulsa many decades ago. This new form of architecture should not be Art Deco revisited, but instead should be as bold, fearless, and current today as Art Deco was then.
- We should be pivotal and prominent in assisting Mayor LaFortune with the revitalization and redevelopment of the City of Tulsa and Tulsa County. I am speaking particularly about this AIA chapter and its members at all levels. Our unique combination of talents and specific training are such that we as a collective force, along with our Associate members and Affiliate members, are particularly well suited to play a major role in organizing and implementing Tulsa Vision 2025.
- We can take our recent successes in community and civic volunteerism to a completely new level. Our collective expertise and knowledge are invaluable in designing affordable housing types, assisting in neighborhood and community planning efforts, and in supporting our local and county appointed authorities, boards and commissions.

Tulsa's current struggle to redefine itself cannot be done mechanically. If we simply regurgitate what other cities have done in their own process of rebuilding themselves, we will fall short. We must dig deep within ourselves as a community and find those essential elements that truly define this place called Tulsa. Of most importance, this is our great opportunity to rediscover and engage the indomitable creative energy that took Tulsa to a position of greatness many years ago, and an effort in which Tulsa's architectural community must be an essential component. Architects have a huge untapped deposit of fresh creative energy to invest. And right now, Tulsa could benefit from some fresh creative energy – some bold, fearless, untamed creative energy. ■ BRIAN L. FREESE, AIA