

Two Houses: Case Studies in Hubris and Stewardship

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In 2015 and 2016, two very different houses were torn down: Ray Bradbury’s house in the Cheviot Hills neighborhood of Los Angeles, and the Bavinger House, designed by Bruce Goff, outside Norman, Oklahoma. At first examination, these two houses had little in common: Ray Bradbury’s house dated from 1937 and was conventional for L.A. houses of its time, notable only for its bright yellow color—and its resident, a 20th century literary master. Meanwhile, the Bavinger House, built between 1951 and 1955, was known for its singular quality, arguably the masterpiece of a master architect.

Despite the differences in the houses, the stories of their demolition have many overlapping qualities. Specifically, the destruction of these houses was the result of a lack of stewardship and an excess of hubris. In the case of the Bradbury House, the house was ultimately judged on its architectural merits alone, isolated from its notability as the residence of an important author and screenwriter. The final owners of the Bradbury House—who purchased the house with the explicit intent of demolishing it—showed utter contempt for the home’s cultural significance. In the case of the Bavinger House, the owner—who inherited the property—showed no regard for or understanding of the house’s architectural value. In both cases, significant heritage was lost because people acted as property owners, not cultural stewards. In neither case was the idea of an obligation to others paramount or, arguably, even present.

Notably, the stories of the demolitions played out in the media, but perhaps more dramatically on social media, where premature obituaries of the Bavinger House may have helped seal its fate. In both cases, concerned citizens used social media to voice their desire that the houses be preserved, but in both cases, those citizens were ignored.

More than just an interesting tale of two demolished houses, the stories of the Bradbury House and the Bavinger House provide case studies to explore aspects of collective memory, conservation, and stewardship.

COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND ARCHITECTURE

This paper is anchored in the belief that architecture plays a critical if not essential role in a civilization’s collective memory. To serve that role, architecture must survive, relatively intact, through the ages. Thus, this paper argues that a sense of

stewardship, among both individuals and groups, is necessary to protect works of architecture, and thus civilization’s collective memory and sense of common heritage.

The literature addressing these concepts is robust and extensive; what follows is an extremely brief introduction to some essential sources.

John Ruskin’s *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, specifically chapter six, “The Lamp of Memory,” is an early, essential text. In that text, Ruskin said about architecture, “We may live without her, and worship without her, but we cannot remember without her.”¹ Architecture, for Ruskin, provides both literal and metaphorical touchstones for a civilization. Referring specifically to monumental buildings, Ruskin outlined two tasks: “[T]he first, to render the architecture of the day, historical; and the second, to preserve, as the most precious of inheritances, that of past ages.”²

In his seminal work *The Collective Memory*, philosopher Maurice Halbwachs devoted chapter four to “Space and the Collective Memory.” He began that chapter by referencing the earlier philosopher August Comte, who argued that a connection between “thought and things” was necessary to maintain one’s mental health.³ The environment, including the built environment, provides a sense of stability and permanence. Furthermore, people just have to know that a place exists and remains—they do not have to visit it to benefit from the steadiness it provides. This point becomes apparent when something well known is destroyed, as evidenced by the loss felt when the Twin Towers fell during 9/11—a loss felt by many people who had never visited New York City.

About losing part of the built environment, Halbwachs wrote

Any inhabitant for whom these old walls, run-down homes, and obscure passageways create a little universe, who has many remembrances fastened to these images now obliterated forever, feels a whole part of himself dying with these things and regrets they could not last at least for his lifetime.⁴

When a piece of that “little universe” is destroyed, people suffer.

Finally, why does society need actual artifacts, such as the Bradbury House and the Bavinger House, when people can instead have memories of them, or images of them? Historian David Lowenthal offered this piece of caution:

The public at large, however, tend to view history through the same distorting lenses that filter their own memories. The collective past is apprehended as a personal and deeply felt extension of the present, and the events and viewpoints of bygone times are seen and judged in today's perspectives. Historical understanding among the general public, including most of the educated minority, embraces biases more closely akin to popular modes of memory than to procedures customary among historians.⁵

Arguing that the past is largely unknowable, Lowenthal suggested that artifacts may better help people understand the past by providing concrete, largely unchanging messengers from earlier periods of time.

THE BRADBURY HOUSE

Built in 1937 and bought by Ray Bradbury in 1958, the Bradbury House was a traditional Los Angeles house and rather unremarkable, save for its dandelion yellow color. Ray Bradbury lived in the house until his death on June 5, 2012, at 91 years old.

From the street, the most prominent feature of the house was the two-car garage, an appropriate image for car-crazed L.A. (but an odd choice for Ray Bradbury, who never learned to drive). Above the garage, which had a flat roof, was a patio, which was the location of musical bands during Bradbury's famous Halloween parties. On the right-hand side of the patio was a bay window, which opened into a breakfast alcove. To the right of the garage was a stone stairway that led to the front door, which was obscured by vegetation. To the right of the front door was second, shallow, arcing bay window, which was the final element of note on the front façade.

The Bradbury House had multiple levels, but three main levels: the main floor, an unused attic above, and an extensive basement below.



Figure 1. The Bradbury House in the early 1960s. Image courtesy of the Center for Ray Bradbury Studies.

The interior of the house had a comfortable, lived-in feeling, jam-packed with books and other items important to Bradbury. To the right of the entry was the living room, which was arguably the nicest space in the house, with light-colored walls, a wood floor, a vaulted ceiling, and abundant natural light.

The basement was arguably the most important space in the house, as it was the place where Bradbury wrote, producing important works such as *Something Wicked This Way Comes*.⁶ The basement was lined with books and mementos of Bradbury's career, including a globe of Mars from NASA and a model of the Nautilus from the motion picture *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*.⁷

Because his wife, Maggie, preceded him in death, the house was empty after Bradbury died in 2012. The house went on the market May 16, 2014, being described as "a charmer" on the *Curbed Los Angeles* website.⁸

Bradbury fans were optimistic that his house would survive tear-down happy L.A. Describing the house on the *Curbed Los Angeles* website, Adrian Glick Kudler wrote, "The listing is heart-warmingly Bradbury-happy, so hopefully they'll find somebody who wants the place for what it is."⁹

That did not happen. Instead, the property was bought by a husband and wife who quickly tore down the house to clear the site for their dream home.

Making that news especially newsworthy, the husband and wife were Thom Mayne and Blythe Alison-Mayne.

The news of the tear down spread rapidly, with *Curbed Los Angeles* running a story titled "Starchitect Thom Mayne is Tearing Down Ray Bradbury's Cheviot Hills House Right Now" on January 13, 2015. A second article on *Curbed Los Angeles* appeared on January 20, and the L.A. Times summarized events on January 22 with an article titled "Ray Bradbury's house: The postmortem."

Caught off guard by criticism of the tear-down, the Maynes spoke on a KCRW program, defending their actions. During that program, Alison-Mayne said

When they said that it had been Ray Bradbury's house and that he had died there, I thought that was an interesting little factoid, but it didn't really mean a whole lot to me except for the fact that he lived there. But it was such a bad house, really one of the worst in the neighborhood.¹⁰

To that point, Mayne added

I could make no connection between the extraordinary nature of the writer and the incredible un-extraordinariness

of the house. It was not just unextraordinary, but unusually banal.¹¹

The language used in these two statements is important, and it deserves to be parsed. In both cases, the statements are very self-centered: “I thought that was an interesting little factoid, but it didn’t really mean a whole lot to me....” and “I could make no connection....” [emphasis added]. Furthermore, Alison-Mayne’s use of the phrase “little factoid” is telling. The phrase reduces the cultural value of the house to nothing more than trivia because, of course, the architectural value is the only thing that matters.

Judging what stands out more is difficult: the arrogance, or the complete lack of imagination? How could such a boring, banal building possibly be important? How could a building that was not stuffed full of architecture goodness be worth saving?

Others were not as blind to the Bradbury House’s cultural significance. The Los Angeles Conservancy was quoted in the L.A. Times saying that “the Conservancy was very dismayed at the demolition of such a culturally significant place.”¹²

For all the projected confidence in his and his wife’s decision to demolish the Bradbury House, Mayne appeared to have been stung by the criticism. Referring to the controversy in a Curbed Los Angeles article, he said, “Maybe I’m naive. But it’s really been a bummer.”¹³

A bummer, indeed. Regardless of the criticism and possible hurt feelings, the Bradbury House was destroyed. With Los Angeles’s weak preservation laws, Mayne and Alison-Mayne were able to demolish the Bradbury House before hardly a voice could be raised in protest.

However, the story does not stop there, a point which is addressed near the end of this paper.

THE BAVINGER HOUSE

Architecture must be experienced to be understood. Although books, glossy magazine articles, and ArchDaily spreads have their place, works of architecture are singular, uniquely sited if nothing else. Moreover, works of architecture engage all of the senses, not just the visual.

That said, some works of architecture less knowable from afar than others. Bruce Goff’s Bavinger House is one of those works, defying description by text or photographs.

The Bavinger House was built while Bruce Goff was the director of the University of Oklahoma School of Architecture, a position he held from 1947 to 1955. Goff designed the house for Eugene and Nancy Bavinger, who were artists. In addition to being a working artist, Eugene Bavinger also taught art at OU.



Figure 2. The Bavinger House in 2010. Photo by author.

Of all of the works of architecture this author has visited, the Bavinger House was perhaps the one with the most distinct aura. Although it predated the 1960s by five years, the Bavinger House felt like the prototypical swinging 60s pad, a hippie house that combined a sense of individualistic freedom with optimism about the future. When this author visited the house in 2010—his first and only visit—the house was suffering from age and neglect. However, the scent of decay only added to the atmosphere of decadence and artistic exploration.

One entered the Bavinger House at the lower, cave-like level, or via a suspended bridge. When this author visited the Bavinger House, the bridge had deteriorated to the point of being unsafe, so guests were required to enter at ground level.

The lower level was probably the stronger of the two entries. The ceiling was relatively low at the entrance, concealing the spiraling space above, a virtuosic example of Frank Lloyd Wright’s “compression and release.” Once one left the entry, the sequence of “rooms” or pods became visible, if not fully comprehensible. Connected by suspended stairs, each pod



Figure 3. Daylight floods one of the pods on the interior of the Bavinger House. Photo by author.

served a particular function, whether living room, bedroom, or other space.

At first, it might seem ironic that such an iconoclastic house was built in such a conservative region of the country. However, it is worth remembering that the frontier—even the receding frontier—tended to attract a certain kind of person. As author and architecture critic Michael Webb observed, “The American heartland was settled by rugged individualists who struggled to make a living and, for better and worse, did what they pleased.”¹⁴ Defying convention and—seemingly—gravity, Bruce Goff and the Bavingers did just as they pleased as they designed and built the Bavinger House.

The Bavinger House is considered by many to be one of the most important works in the Goff canon. Educator Jeffrey Cook wrote

It is probably the best known of Goff’s houses, but although published frequently in both the popular and professional press, it may be the least understood because of the difficulty in documenting a spatial continuity. The interior defies photographic capture....¹⁵

Likewise arguing that the Bavinger House is a significant work of architecture, OU faculty member Arn Henderson wrote in the National Register application form that, as of 2001, “[t]he Bavinger House is one of the best and most original Goff designs, and retains a very high degree of integrity.”¹⁶ Henderson further argued that

The Bavinger House is of exceptional architectural importance at the national level as a premier example of organic architecture. It is regarded by architectural historians and architects as Goff’s finest work.¹⁷

and

The Bavinger House represents the finest extant example of the mature work of Bruce Goff.¹⁸

Also examining the place of the Bavinger House among Goff’s works, Russell Cobb, an Oklahoma native who grew up in a house by one of Bruce Goff’s former students, wrote that the Bavinger House was the “most singular, unique, and non-conformist Goff house of them all.”¹⁹

Many Bruce Goff projects, built in the 1950s and 1960s, were in poor shape by the 21st century. Writing in 2005, Michael Webb observed that Goff’s legacy “has been eroded by vandalism and neglect, and much of what’s left is at risk.”²⁰ Looking toward the future, Webb asked

Who will save these houses and other unique creations, when their original owners are no longer there to care for them? They are too remote to excite the passion that a prosaic brownstone elicits in New York. Most preservationists are focused on traditional buildings, and popular sentiment favors familiar monuments and main streets, rarely the modern.²¹

In the case of the Bavinger House, the man charged with saving the house was the original owners’ son, Bob Bavinger, who inherited the property when his mother died in the early 2000s (his father died in 1997).

Bavinger is mentioned numerous times over the years in *The Norman Transcript*, the local newspaper, usually in conjunction with a planned open house or preservation fund raiser. Asked in 2008 about making the house accessible to the public, Bavinger said, “This is something I promised my mother before she passed away. It may take several years, but we’ll get it done.”²²

Unfortunately, Bavinger did not “get it done,” if by “get it done” he meant saving the house. As a blogger wrote, “[T]his is where the story gets a bit murky and a lot sad.”²³

In June 2011, a windstorm hit the Norman area, and Bavinger claimed that the storm damaged the house. That same month, rumors began circulating online that the Bavinger House had been demolished.²⁴ In an attempt to confirm the report, an Oklahoma City television reporter attempted to access the site, but he left after hearing a gunshot.²⁵

Then, Bavinger apparently changed his story:

Bavinger, in a Monday interview, blamed an ongoing dispute with the University of Oklahoma over restoration and ownership of the historic house, which was completed in 1955. He claimed that OU had undermined his efforts to gain funding to restore the family home, and he felt compelled to destroy the home and “remove the target.”²⁶

When asked about the situation, Bavinger said, “It was the only solution we had. We got backed into a corner.”²⁷

With no one but family allowed on the property, the truth proved elusive. A blogger asked

So, did Bob destroy [his] own home? Did he really obliterate his parents' beautiful legacy and Goff's most identifiable work, or did last week's terrible storm that ripped through Norman topple the spire, as Bob now seems to claim? I don't know, and, truthfully, I really don't care. I just want to know if this greatest of Oklahoma's treasures can be saved and, if so, what needs to be done to do so. Unfortunately, without Bob's cooperation, even learning that little bit of information may prove difficult.²⁸

A few days later, *The Norman Transcript* was still holding out hope that the Bavinger House could be saved. In an editorial, the paper asked, "What if the city of Norman got involved in the preservation of this architectural treasure? It would be an embarrassment for the city and an architectural tragedy if the home were destroyed, as the family has discussed."²⁹

Despite being pronounced dead by the Internet in 2011, the Bavinger House remained mostly intact. About a year after the house's rumored demolition, a reporter from *The Oklahoman* photographed the damaged but partially standing structure.³⁰

After several years in limbo, the house was indeed destroyed. On April 29, 2016, the world learned that the damaged house was completely gone: published photographs revealed a cleared site. Bob Bavinger had bulldozed his parents' house to the ground.

In the aftermath, Bob Bowlby, who worked for Bruce Goff, said, "It's like when any beautiful thing in your life is gone. It's impossible to talk about how much one misses a place like that. At least it was there, and a lot of people experienced it."³¹

The Bavinger House is gone, and the memory of it is fading. One of the most recent references to the house is also one of the most poignant: a report from the National Register of Historic Places requesting the removal of the house from the register.

(SOCIAL) MEDIA STORMS

One of the interesting parallels between the Bradbury House and the Bavinger House is the role of social media in their stories.

The Bradbury House demolition was first reported in *Curbed Los Angeles*, but it would be a severe overstatement to say that a firestorm ensued. In fact, the article announcing the demolition received only 59 comments.

What is interesting, however, is the perception in some of the comments. In the brief exchange below, three commentators are working out the issue of significance in way that would pose problems for the Mayne's only-architecture-matters approach:

OldNo7

Honest question as I haven't followed the story of this house. Was it significant/remarkable beyond the fact that a treasured author lived there?

Posted on Jan 19, 2015 | 4:00 PM

surfnspsy

Nope. It was not significant in an architectural sense, just a cultural sense.

Posted on Jan 19, 2015 | 4:00 PM

effron

@surfnspsy: So long as one considers architecture and culture as distinct concepts, sure.

Posted on Jan 20, 2015 | 4:00 PM³²

The Bradbury House was demolished quickly, which probably worked to mute the social media conversation. In contrast, the Bavinger House was demolished over an agonizing five-year period.

In December 2011, the Bavinger family offered pieces of the house for sale, which led to this withering response from a blogger:

[T]he now-ironically-named Bavinger House Conservancy has, for the first time since the home was damaged, updated the Bavinger House website offering "an opportunity for everyone to own a piece of history." A piece of the Bavinger House, that it. Yes, just in time for the holidays, you can "cherish actual pieces from the historic house" and buy an aqua glass cullet or maybe a rock or piece of pipe that once held up the AIA 25-Year-Award winner and pass it on to that loved one in your life who has everything.³³

One has to wonder if such social media posts had an unintended effect, both hardening Bob Bavinger's resolve while anticipating—and lending a sense of inevitability to—the house's ultimate doom.

STEWARDSHIP: AN OBLIGATION TO OTHERS

The online Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines "stewardship" as "the conducting, supervising, or managing of something; especially the careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one's care."³⁴ The architectural and other cultural treasures society enjoys today were protected by a generation or multiple generations of stewards.

In the case of both the Bavinger House and the Bradbury House, the stewards of the houses failed to protect them.

In the case of the Bavinger House, the world lost an architectural treasure when the house was demolished. In the case of the Bradbury House, the loss is narrower, because it was never likely that the Bradbury House would have been converted to a museum or “shrine” dedicated to Bradbury. Rather, a series of future home owners were denied the opportunity of occupying a space shared with an important literary figure. This is a loss as well.

If, however, stewardship is considered in a broader sense, the postscript of the Bradbury House complicates the picture. The new house that Thom Mayne and Blythe Alison-Mayne built on the Bradbury House site is environmentally friendly—it has a relatively small footprint, and it is designed to be cooled passively.³⁵ Furthermore, Mayne and Alison-Mayne explicitly conveyed their environmental intentions. Alison-Mayne argued that their new house was an argument against accountants telling their Cheviot Hills clients to build ever bigger footprints to create additional monetary value. In contrast, Alison-Mayne called her and her husband’s house a “super-anti-McMansion.”³⁶

Given that global climate change is, without a doubt, the most pressing issue facing 21st century architects, one could argue that Mayne’s and Alison-Mayne’s replacing an outmoded 20th century house with an appropriate 21st century house does represent a form of stewardship, albeit one that favors the environmental over the cultural.

CONCLUSION

The Bavinger House was a great work of architecture, and its loss is easily understood. The Bradbury House was a plain, run-of-mill house, that also happened to be the residence of one of the 20th century’s great writers. While standing, these houses provided important markers of cultural memory. Now that they are gone, those markers are gone as well, and the world is a less interesting place.

The pairing of these very different houses, which suffered similar fates, provides a fascinating entry point for discussions of collective memory, conservation, and stewardship.

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