

# Sic. Building Syndrome

## Context

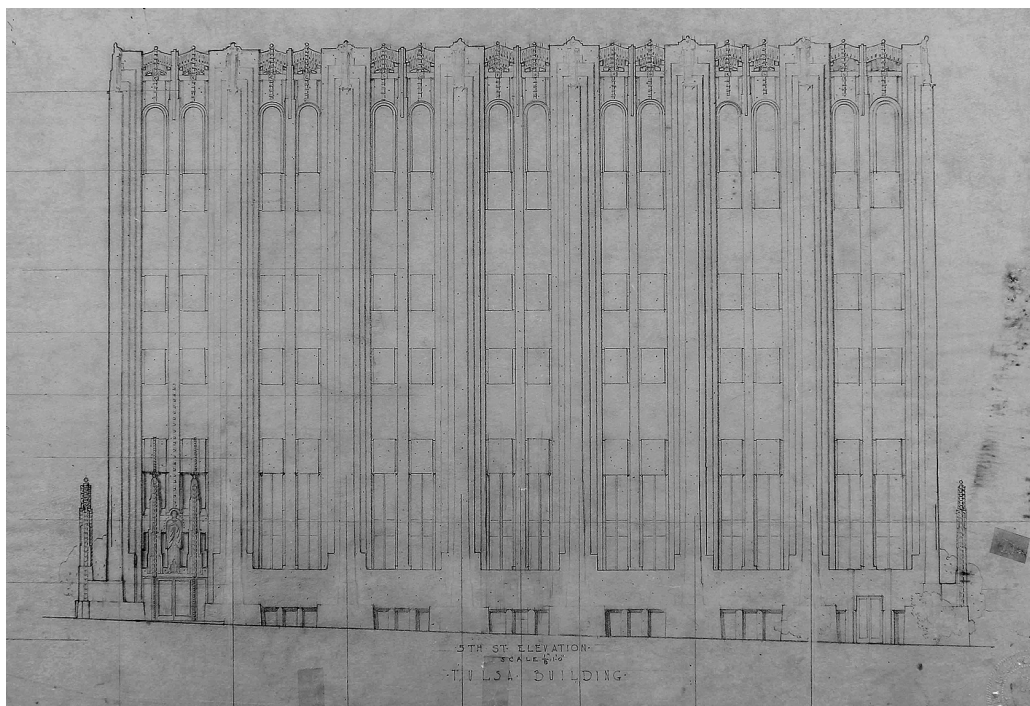
We begin by looking back at a very young architect in a flourishing city during a tumultuous time.<sup>1</sup> The year is 1916 and, at the age of 12, Bruce Goff begins an apprenticeship with the Tulsa, Oklahoma, firm of Rush, Endacott & Rush. Europe is at war, the Great Depression is more than a decade away, and the “Oil Capital of the World” is stirring amid an unprecedented economic boom. Fortunes are being pulled from the earth, oil barons are being anointed, Black entrepreneurs are thriving, and the pace of building is feverish. The young Goff is witness to new wealth and the illusion of social progress. In hindsight, the backdrop sure looked promising.

Despite the economic boom, the leading building traditions are lackluster and a bit dusty: colonial, neoclassical, religious Gothic. They fail to match the rapid pace of Tulsa’s economic growth. For the next two decades, Goff works to harden Tulsa’s viscous riches into built reality. He assimilates the languages of heroes such as Frank Lloyd Wright, Erich Mendelsohn, and Michel de Klerk into Rush, Endacott & Rush’s vocabulary. While his early buildings are largely derivative, many survive as reminders of Tulsa’s economic flash and the lost architectural model of apprenticeship. Remarkably, Goff’s Tulsa buildings bear very little resemblance to his later and more popular work. Even Goff historian David De Long advises against paying them too much attention when he writes that “collectively [Goff’s] work of this first phase indicates no clear or strongly innovative direction. Rather it astonishes by its diversity, and by the skill of assimilation it reflects.”<sup>2</sup> Look a little closer and you see the early stages of a timeless double bind in which universal order and local individualism nag at the aspiring architect.

In a void of critical accounting like Tulsa, it can be difficult to appreciate the achievements, and shortcomings, of buildings that are practically anonymous. Moreover, reviewing the noncanonical work of an outsider architect requires closer attention and more patience than its canonical counterpart. Goff’s Tulsa buildings were largely inspired by stylistic movements of his time and of other places (Amsterdam

1. See Jaffer Kolb, “Sic. Building Syndrome,” in Norman Kelley (Thomas Kelley and Carrie Norman), *Eyecon* (Chicago: Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts, 2015), 7–10. This essay shares the same title as Kolb’s foreword.

2. David G. De Long, “Beginnings of a Free Architecture, 1904–1934,” in *Bruce Goff: Toward Absolute Architecture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), 51.



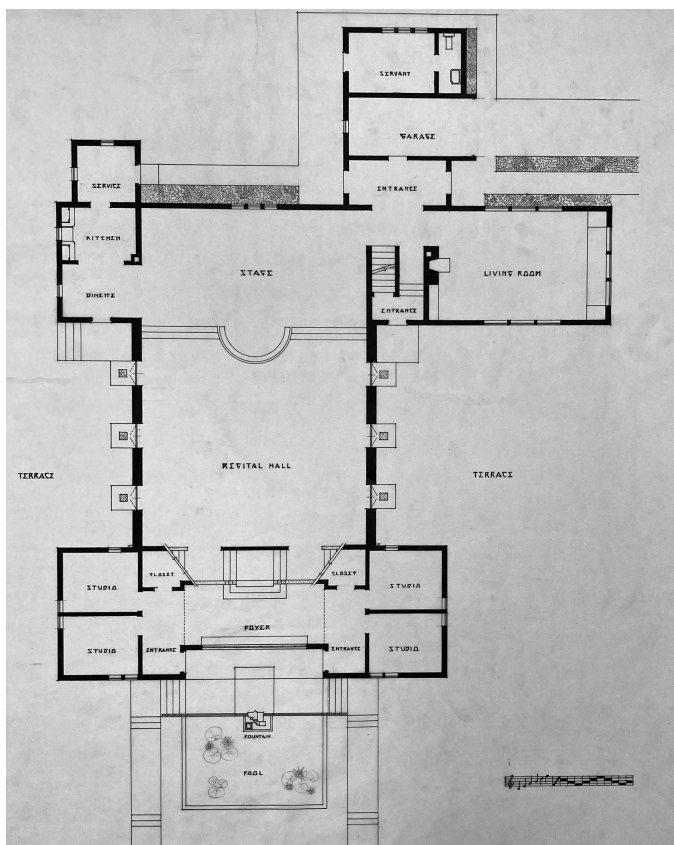
Rush, Endacott & Rush, Tulsa Building and Tulsa Club, Tulsa, 1927. Fifth Street elevation by Bruce Alonzo Goff, 1925. Drawing courtesy Art Institute of Chicago / Art Resource, New York.

School, Prairie Style, Zigzag Moderne) but exist today as detached relics. We wonder if Goff should have paid closer attention to his immediate surroundings.

Five years after his apprenticeship began, Tulsa's Greenwood neighborhood, known as Black Wall Street, suffered one of the nation's deadliest and most destructive outbreaks of racial violence. From May 31 to June 1, 1921, a White mob murdered as many as 300 Black people in the Tulsa Race Massacre. The mob razed nearly every property that dotted Greenwood's 35 city blocks. Prior to the massacre, the neighborhood was a thriving Black-owned business district. Following the massacre and hindered by racist politics, the community's economy never recovered. Rebuilding efforts sustained challenges ranging from denied insurance claims to rezoning obstacles.

Soon enough, economic wreckage reached most Tulsans. But before the Great Depression devastated Tulsa's oil economy, Goff completed almost 20 buildings. Though precise in their execution, these early works now seem lost in the discipline and forgotten by their community – ghosts in an architectural limbo. Some have been altered, some demolished. Others have been recognized with historical landmark status while still others lie vacant. As with many derivative early 20th-century buildings that line Main Streets, appraising

Rush, Endacott & Goff, Patti Adams School of Music, Studio, and Home (Riverside Studio), Tulsa, 1929. Ground-floor plan with musical notation by Bruce Alonzo Goff, 1928. Drawing courtesy Art Institute of Chicago / Art Resource, New York.

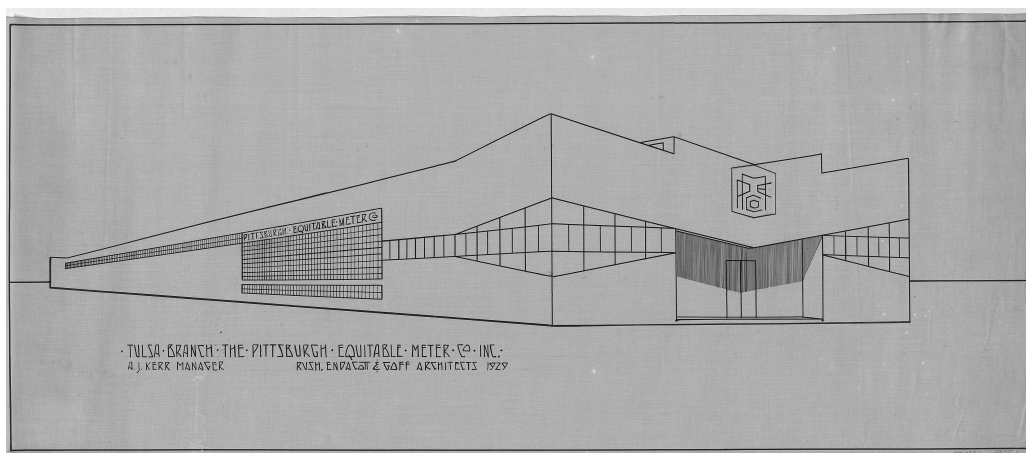


their value is tedious work and makes it more difficult for architects to propose meaningful interventions. Unlike preservation, alteration has few guidebooks.

In *Sic. Building Syndrome*, a studio we taught at the Harvard University Graduate School of Design during the spring of 2020, our research with 14 students reflects on these buildings, asks what was and is ethical or imprudent, and considers whether to preserve or adapt them. By understanding the terms of their construction to include not only their tectonics but also their social and economic histories, our proposals aim to review, and possibly revise, their public value.

We focused on four buildings Goff completed between 1927 and 1929. These include the Tulsa Club, Guaranty Laundry, Riverside Studio, and the Midwest Equitable Meter Company. The four buildings – a men’s social club, a laundry warehouse, an oil meter factory, and a piano recital studio and home – show varied capacities for revisionist meddling.

The research began with a set of as-built drawings. The prompt was deceptively simple: draw what you see. How you see, when you see, and what you see will become the



Rush, Endacott & Goff, Midwest Equitable Meter Company, Tulsa, 1929. Perspective study by Bruce Alonzo Goff, 1929. Drawing courtesy Art Institute of Chicago / Art Resource, New York.

foundation for a future revision to the building. We underscored several modes of perception (physical, technological, illusory, and public), or scopic regimes, to guide ways of looking at our adopted buildings. Site visits were conducted in collaboration with the Tulsa Foundation for Architecture, original drawings were sourced from the Bruce Goff Archives at the Art Institute of Chicago, and interviews were conducted with local Tulsans, including Mechelle Brown of the Greenwood Cultural Center.

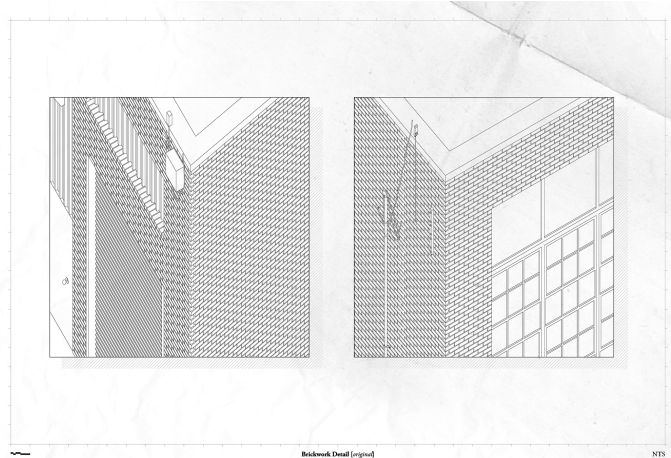
Of the four buildings, one has been restored and three are in decay. In the studio, we observed how programs have changed and how programs have not changed enough: the men's club is a boutique hotel, the laundry warehouse is a leaky storage warehouse, the oil meter company is empty, and the studio (now a theater, no longer a home) hosts the same theatrical performance every Saturday night, provided a minimum of five tickets are sold. We documented intricate brickwork, peculiar structural decisions, ad hoc additions, eroding interior finishes, failing weatherproofing, and questionable space planning. We zoomed out and observed that Tulsa is not, and was not, the kind of city that matched Goff's buildings. What look to be flaws brought on by age seem to recall old rifts between the buildings and the communities they were designed to serve a century ago.

### Format

The Latin term *sic*, meaning “thus,” used in a direct quotation, signifies that a mistake was wrong in the original, and it is usually italicized and bracketed to make clear that it was not part of the original statement. For example: “They made



Zipper-joint brick detail of the Midwest Equitable Meter Company by Alex Yueyan Li, 2020. Drawing courtesy the authors.



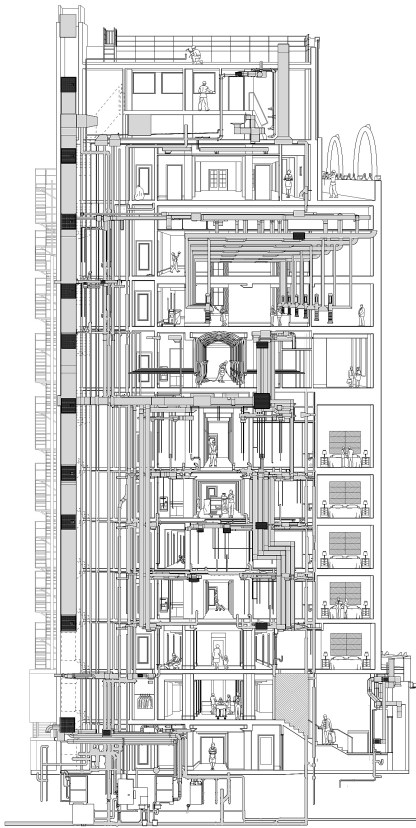
3. “Using [*sic*] Properly,” GrammarBook.com, <https://www.grammarbook.com/blog/definitions/sic/>.

4. See Kolb, 8. The studio name is borrowed from Kolb’s essay, in which he uses this Voltaire mistranscription to elaborate on Norman Kelley’s approach to architectural representation.

there [*sic*] beds,” which should have been, “They made their beds.”<sup>3</sup> In this example, *sic* is a judgmental index finger, referring attention to a misused word that replaces the possessive of the statement’s original intent. Not a big deal. Despite the minor grammatical error, the basic intention remains clear: beds were made.

But consider another example, in which something is inaccurately transcribed: “I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it,” is a remark attributed to the French Enlightenment writer Voltaire. Translation permitting, what he actually said was, “Think for yourselves and let others enjoy the privilege to do so.”<sup>4</sup> In this instance, the inaccurate transcription, or false retelling by biographer Evelyn Beatrice Hall, has altered our perception of the writer and his original statement. The former, and more famous, statement reads with felicitous action; the latter statement suffers from passivity. And though *sic* is not legibly present, its implications are felt.

In this linguistic digression, our deceptively simple architectural prompt becomes a Trojan horse. Like Goff, who strayed from the socialist virtues of the International Style in search of a more individualistic approach, our students were encouraged to look for themselves when surveying the buildings. Their initial observations focused on building qualities, both physical and contextual, that are and were deviant. In one instance, a student not only documented a ceiling and its corresponding structural members – noting all of the intermediate tin panels where the ceiling is failing – but also recorded in obsessive detail the ad hoc water collectors at ground level designed by the current tenant to mitigate leaks around his fledgling storage business.



Section perspective of the Tulsa Club with mechanical, electrical, and plumbing routes by Ge Zhou, 2020. Drawing courtesy the authors.

In another case, a student drew attention to stark divisions between labor and leisure by documenting service spaces, and their respective MEP runs, with more intricate detail than the ornate served space. Another observation revealed how an isolated corner detail – where brick had been laid in a vertical zipper bond – signals where the building's rear facade was sheared to allow for a regional railroad to pass by. And yet another study cross-examined the abstract symbolism that a musical staff, found in an original ground-floor plan, plays in organizing the apertures of the corresponding elevations.

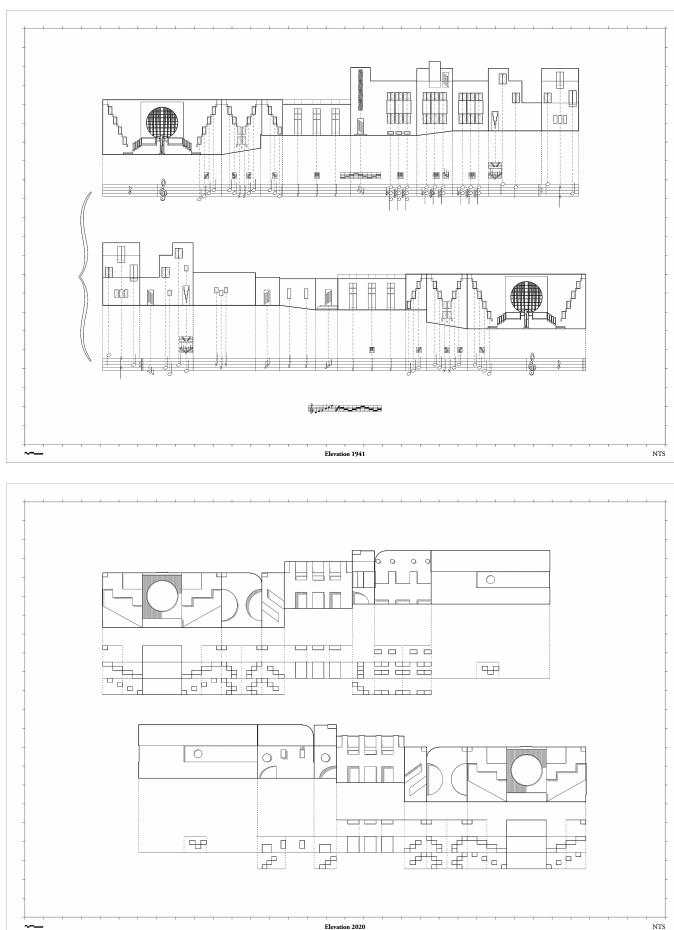
The format is intentionally slow, and the survey tools are analog. The as-built drawings were not created using a laser scanner but with an attuned eye. When you measure by pacing, for example, parts of the building get left out but obscure and idiosyncratic qualities are captured more fully. Hopefully, the analog survey yields a more discriminating, or anexact, way of seeing the building. Imagine a descriptive geometric analysis drawn with a crayon. The act is precise, but the result depicts a building unlike what the architect likely drew or even built. This format, which we refer to as *sic*, empowers the observer, now a transcriber, to exercise agency in their depiction of an experienced circumstance – be it an act, a statement, or a building feature.

Some students felt unchallenged, as if the task were too nominal. Like Goff, they struggled with personal biases or stylistic prejudgments, or were perhaps paralyzed by their own social upbringings. After all, looking closely means inadvertently exposing one's inhibitions. Some students embraced the simplicity and allowed their individual proclivities to drive the survey. Their observations revealed new forms of use and incited pragmatic concerns, like how, when, and why to add something new to something old.

## Proposal

To effect meaningful change to an existing building begins with a confusing wealth of possibilities. We have no definite word yet for this epistemology, so *alteration* makes for a provisional point of entry, since it captures quite precisely the potential for architecture to intervene, decisively, into uncertain historical and tectonic conditions. And while the general goal of any building alteration is to satisfy the immediate occupancy needs while anticipating future needs, the term is often qualified by its proximity to *preservation*, *restoration*, and other well-intentioned terms. Our proposals ventured to unravel what

Unrolled elevations of Riverside Studio with musical notation by Sean Kim, 2020. Drawing courtesy the authors.



constitutes a meaningful alteration to Goff's Tulsa buildings, but first we considered the term and its popular etymology.

The United States Access Board, a federal agency that promotes accessibility and establishes design standards, defines *alteration* as “a change to a building or facility that affects or could affect the usability of the building or facility or portion thereof.”<sup>5</sup> Many types of projects are covered as alterations, including “remodeling, renovation, rehabilitation, reconstruction, historic restoration, resurfacing of circulation paths or vehicular ways, changes or rearrangement of the structural parts or elements, and changes or rearrangement in the plan configuration of walls and full-height partitions. Normal maintenance, reroofing, painting or wallpapering, or changes to mechanical and electrical systems are not alterations unless they affect the usability of the building or facility.”

In his book *On Altering Architecture*, Fred Scott refers to an alteration by its degree of intervention. According to Scott, there are two different categories of alteration: surface and

5. Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, 2010 ADA Standards for Accessible Design, §106.5, United States Access Board, [https://www.access-board.gov/ada/#ada-106\\_5](https://www.access-board.gov/ada/#ada-106_5).

6. See Fred Scott, *On Altering Architecture* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

7. Leon Battista Alberti, "The Tenth and Final Book of Leon Battista Alberti on the Art of Building, in Which the Restoration of Buildings is Described," in *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, trans. Joseph Rykwert, Neil Leach, and Robert Tavernor (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), 320.

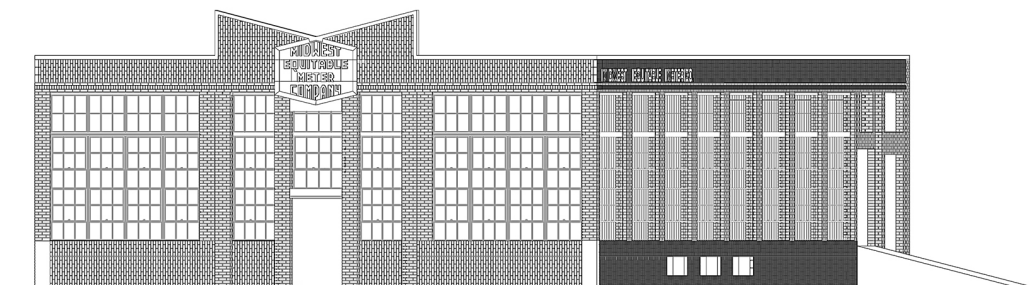
8. Beatriz Colomina, "Double Exposure: *Alteration to a Suburban House* (1978)," in Birgit Pelzer et al., *Dan Graham* (London: Phaidon, 2001), 82.

spatial (and the latter may include the former).<sup>6</sup> A surface alteration relates to color and finish, while a spatial alteration involves a change in plan and section. At its most basic, a spatial alteration involves enlarging or subdividing existing spaces and sometimes combining two or more spaces together. An alteration can be a tattoo – or it can be a heart transplant. In the final book of *On the Art of Building*, Leon Battista Alberti describes alterations as corrections to faults. Faults of the mind are "displaced, dispersed, or confused selection, comparison, distribution, and outline," whereas faults of the hand are "negligent or sloppy preparation, storage, stacking, bonding, and so on – errors that the unwise and careless may easily commit."<sup>7</sup> So for Alberti, an alteration is born from mistakes.

Our proposals, however, hew closer to Beatriz Colomina's definition in "Double Exposure: *Alteration to a Suburban House* (1978)," in which she examines a work by the artist Dan Graham. She writes, "Alterations, whether to a building or a dress, always involve, at a certain point in the process, the exposure of how a piece is constructed. When something is removed (a wall, a sleeve), elements are revealed that were previously hidden from view. Removing the facade of a suburban house reveals its structure – not just the physical but the social structure: how the suburban family is held together; and the optical structure, the lines of sight that sustain relationships."<sup>8</sup> Here, an alteration is not something performed on an existing building, to affect its use or character, but rather a process (in this case, a subtraction) folded into the building, through which connections between the original form and its constituents are exposed. By allowing the building material itself to expand and contract amid preexisting social and optical structures, an alteration might expose productive discord between the authenticity of the architect's original building and evolving contextual forces, both then and now.

As in Colomina's reading of Graham's subversive work (the facade of the house is replaced with glass and a mirror is added as an interior partition), our alterations guide attention toward something already present. At first glance, the focal point is usually tangible. A single column, for example, is conspicuously off axis and recalls something erased. Originally, the column was absorbed by a partition wall separating the factory and office labor. A subsequent alteration to the building elects to proliferate this column, and invert its temperament, into an addition with an arhythmic structural pattern in which spatial hierarchies are slackened. The alteration begets





Elevation of the Midwest Equitable Meter Company (or Stradford Institute) by Jeremy Benson, 2020. Drawing courtesy the authors.

multiple scales of occupation and new uses are entertained: a factory is converted into a learning center.

However, not all the alterations exact a geometric transformation to embellish, correct, and transfigure a seemingly deviant element back into the native building. The *sic*, or observed deviance, sometimes extends beyond the immediate site to be folded back. The same building, observed by another student, warrants a name change. Stradford, the name of a Black entrepreneur from Tulsa's Greenwood District, replaces the name of the oil parts company that was once mounted to an ornate brick parapet. Move inward and the alteration, more an elision of material to compress a plan to reflect the proportions of a Roman temple, symbolizes a new type of community monument. But using the same building, a different student altered the ground in a way that provides a circuitous entry. The building itself is not altered, only its immediate context.

Most of the proposals struggle to transcend the simple categories of preservation or renovation and expand the lexicon of alterations beyond the purely superficial or spatial. At a minimum, the alterations expose the tricky space in which how we see as individuals turns public and becomes social facts we can share. Goff's early buildings remain unexceptional; the intent was never to elevate them, simply to restore focus to what others may have missed.

Founded by Carrie Norman and Thomas Kelley in 2012, Norman Kelley is an architecture and design collaborative based in Chicago and New Orleans. Norman is a registered architect and assistant professor at Tulane University. Kelley is assistant professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago and a fellow of the American Academy in Rome.