

# **Our International Friendship Bell – a unique Oak Ridge symbol, part 7**

## ***The Pavilion - part 1***

**(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on July 22, 2008)**

The research into the history of our bell continues to be personally rewarding. I am meeting people who were involved, unlike much of my normal historical research. Many of these folks are still very much alive. That's refreshing and adds much to the effort. Rather than relying on records, documents and such, I am able to talk to the actual people who were there when things happened.

I have found it intriguing that so many differing perspectives exist on the events surrounding the bell. Yet, a theme is surfacing that reinforces my initial thoughts regarding the bell and what it brings to Oak Ridge. It has quickly become an integral part of our city's historic heritage. That is good.

Among the people involved in the bell project that I have recently located is Jon Coddington. His unique contribution was the architectural design of the bell house or pavilion. That structure is an integral part of the bell mystique and adds immeasurably to the allure of the bell.

Standing on the south edge of Bissell Park, the unique design, the odd yet symmetrical arrangement of the various main elements of the visually stimulating wooden, copper and rock monument and the pleasing location near the conflux of two streams make for a singular visual experience even before getting close enough to see the bell hidden beneath the shadows. What a compelling arrangement!

With Jon's permission, I am going to share with you his thoughts regarding the bell project, his involvement in it and why he designed the pavilion as he did. Enjoy the following as written by Jon Coddington, architect, past University of Tennessee Professor, past University of Ball State University Administrator and now with the RiverCity Company in Chattanooga, TN.

In a document I located in Shigeko's materials she shared with me, Jon Coddington, while at the University of Tennessee, wrote, "When I first offered my services to design the bell house, I, along with the rest of the Committee, had no idea how controversial the project would become. For me it was a "no brainer" as my kids would say.

"That spring our family had participated in the first student exchange with our Japanese sister city Nacha Machi. We hosted a young Japanese student who loved baseball and is now enrolled here at the University of Tennessee. His father is a physicist/engineer involved in the design of nuclear reactors and has been to Oak Ridge on a number of occasions.

"I joined the effort to celebrate my city's fiftieth anniversary with the simple thought that I was just one of a number of citizens attempting to leave our city better than the way we found it. For me the project also represented a chance to learn something.

"After all, Frank Lloyd Wright, whom many consider to be America's greatest architect, borrowed many of his ideas from the Japanese as well as from other cultures. Indeed, Wright acknowledged that the open plan which he "invented" was developed after he visited a traditional Japanese house at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893.

"America's cultural strength is based on such creative borrowings. T. S. Eliot, in his *Notes Toward the Definition of Culture*, explains how cultures who shut themselves off from the influences of other cultures not only wither and die, but also become quite dangerous, as his example of Nazi Germany demonstrated.

"Thus I saw this project as yet another indication of the strength of America's culture in general and our community's strength in particular. With these cross cultural borrowings come transformations as we take that which is of value from other cultures and make it our own.

"Both the bell and the bell house are unique, as a result of these merging. I hope this explanation of the concepts behind the pavilion makes this process clear.

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“Architecture is how we place ourselves between the earth and the sky, between needs and aspirations and between the pragmatics of everyday life and the poetics of possibilities. This is in part what distinguishes architecture from building. Architecture also has the capacity to explain. The words edifice and edify are inextricably linked through history.

“As a building is constructed a story is also created about those who build it. Architecture and its surrounding landscape is the tangible legacy by which future generations will judge us. Thus when an architect designs a structure he or she not only has an obligation to meet the immediate needs of a client, but there is also an obligation to address a larger cultural narrative as well. The lines that are drawn and constructed must have both technical and ethical dimensions to them.

“Because the project deals with an ideal – international peace and friendship – the first lines drawn were those of the ideal proportioning system of Western culture, the golden rectangle. The overall dimensions of the project are prescribed by that rectangle and it is iterated a number of times throughout the plan.

“In combinations but used as a subset, the ideal Japanese proportioning system called the Ken was also used. This is a 2:1 proportioning system. Both proportioning systems have as their base the square, and the square becomes evident in plane and elevation.

“The front elevation is intended to tell a story about how two cultures can exist side by side, maintain separate identities while offering the possibility of merging into something larger. The two small gables – one the open pragmatic American truss, the other a closed gable with the 2:1 proportioning system embedded in it – are cantilevered, neither touching the other.

“However, each merges into the larger roof. The circle on the elevation under the larger roof is the same diameter of the bell. There is some precedent for it in Japanese temple design, as well as western ecclesiastical design, the Rose Window at Notre Dame Cathedral being a famous example.

“The rear façade contains four dovecotes (birdhouses) arranged in a square. Two of these will be designed and built by each of the junior high schools in town, one by students from our sister city in Russia and the other from our sister city in Japan. (Interestingly, I am told that the Japanese do not have birdhouses as we know them and what we receive from Nacho Machi should be interesting.)

I must add a note here regarding the birdhouses. There are only three birdhouses there now. There are two from the Oak Ridge schools and one from Japan. There is not one from Russia. No one is working this anymore. Herman Postma desired to get that done, but it was not accomplished at the time of his death.

Now back to Jon's narrative. “The structure's cantilevered sides are an interpretation of Tennessee's cantilevered barns, which are the only indigenous building type we have here in East Tennessee. The metal roof is consistent with that building type, and accentuates the sound of the rain. Copper was chosen because it is one of the two constituent elements of the bronze bell.

“Tin is the other element, and while it also would have been a fine material to use, copper has the additional advantage in that it will age and acquire a distinctive patina, allowing the structure to settle into the landscape over time.

“Directly beneath the bell and corresponding to its five foot diameter, will be a cast disc of handprints of the various people who have worked on the bell. This casting is to be made by a team of artists from Oak Ridge, but not surprisingly, the handprints will come from all over the world. They are simultaneously particular and universal just as our bell, bell house, and community are.

Another note from your author – the cast disc and these intended hand prints evidently did not become a reality.

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“There are numerous other aspects that could be mentioned – the square connections that join pieces together literally and metaphorically or the landscaping plan that incorporates the same species of Japanese cherry trees that ring the tidal basin of our nation’s capital – but I suspect I am stretching the reader’s patience. Besides, one must leave things to discover, and open to interpretation if only to make them one’s own.

“It does seem to me that this project palpably represents some of the highest aspirations and some of the most deeply held beliefs of this community. The bell house attempts to embody them with a sense of grace and style. It is a project based on the world of ideas and their free exchange. It attempts to anticipate that the future of Oak Ridge lies in a broader international context and not in the exclusively parochial.

“The project maintains that peace, friendship and tolerance are better than pettiness, bickering and ethnocentrism. The pavilion is a tangible reminder that it is possible to remain modern and international in our outlook while still returning to the roots that distinguish us as a community.

“Finally it affirms the notion that an idea which is right will eventually triumph in an open democratic society, despite opposition and misrepresentation. The bell, the bell house, and the surrounding landscape will allow us to do what the poet Wadsworth instructs: ‘Others will love what we have loved and we will teach them how.’

That completes Jon Coddington’s insightful narrative. I was pleased to locate him in Chattanooga and to find him willing for me to share these details written as he was in the midst of what must have been an exciting, unusual and unique project. It is obviously one that he is very proud to have done.

Next we will examine the insights into the actual day to day decisions regarding the final construction will be shared by Hugh Bishop who managed the overall construction project. We will also look at the controversy regarding the bell, the bell policy committee and Bill Wilcox’s collaborative efforts to explain the broad interpretation of the symbolism of the bell. And lastly we will see how Elise Campbell freed the bell to be enjoyed by all.

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Model of Oak Ridge Friendship Bell Pavilion created based on Jon Coddington's design