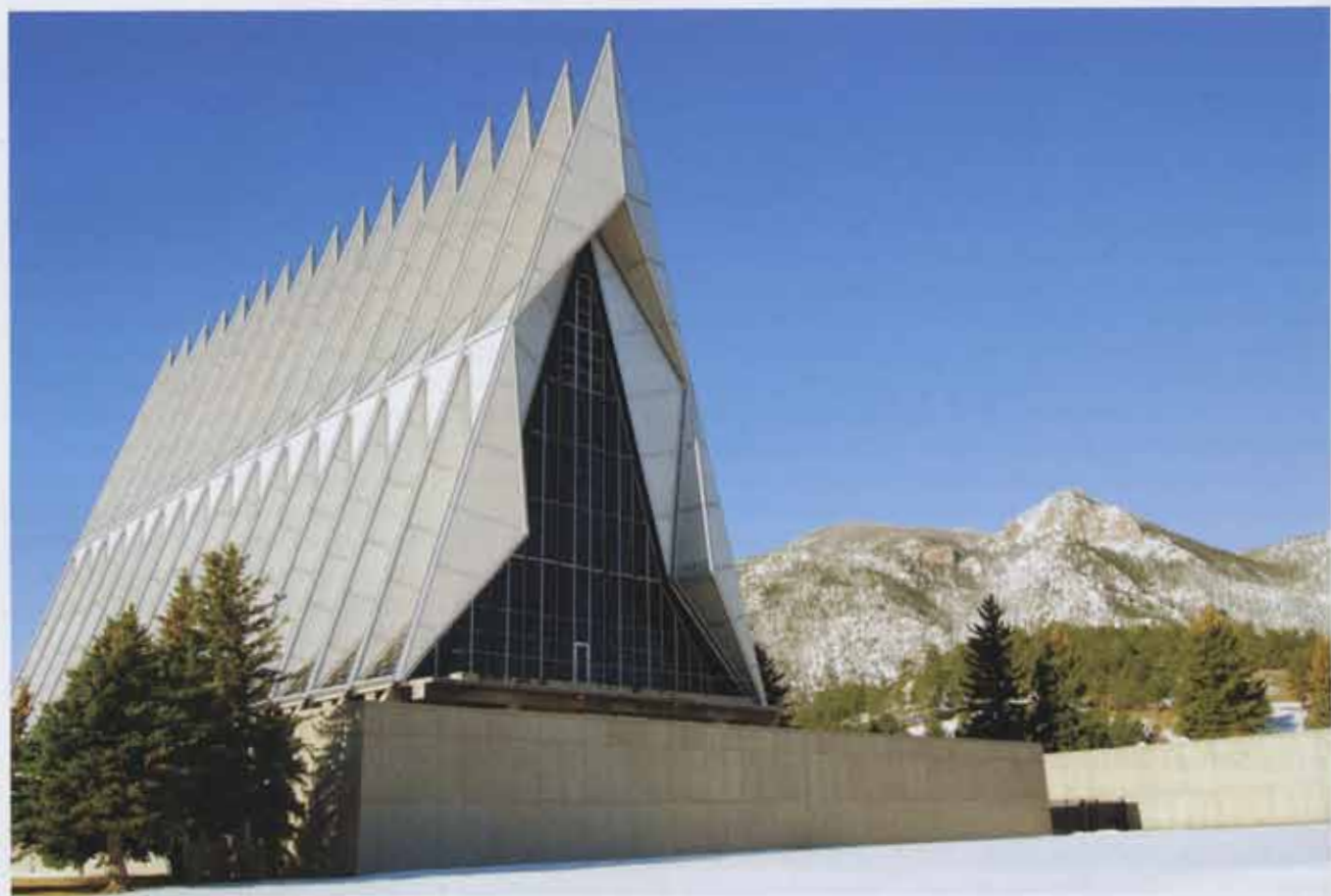

ARCHITECTURE



A Chapel Takes Flight

by Robert Bruegmann

Perched on a dramatic site along the Rampart Range of the Rocky Mountains, the United States Air Force Academy is one of the most conspicuous ensembles of mid-century modern architecture found anywhere in the world. The chapel, with its glittering aluminum tetrahedrons looming like Gothic spires against the mountains, has become familiar

to millions of visitors to the academy and has even figured on a postage stamp. The chapel has become such an icon that it is hard to imagine how controversial it was when it was first proposed, and how remarkable that it was built at all.

The first obstacle was architectural. As one of the largest and most important ensembles built by the federal government during the Cold War, the academy automatically carried an enormous representational burden. Skidmore, Owings, & Merrill, the architects, realized that it

had to symbolize an open American society in opposition to the recently defeated totalitarian regimes of Europe and those still in power in the Soviet Union and China. Although this context provided a strong argument against the grandiose classicism often seen in official architecture in totalitarian states, there were still many, especially in Congress, who would have preferred a more traditional look, something akin to the Gothic Revival buildings of West Point or the classical façades of Annapolis. Not all of the problems were ideological. The local stone industry was incensed that the academy wasn't made of local stone. Even Frank

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Lloyd Wright got into the act, trying to gain the commission for himself. Despite these controversies, the new academy opened in 1958.

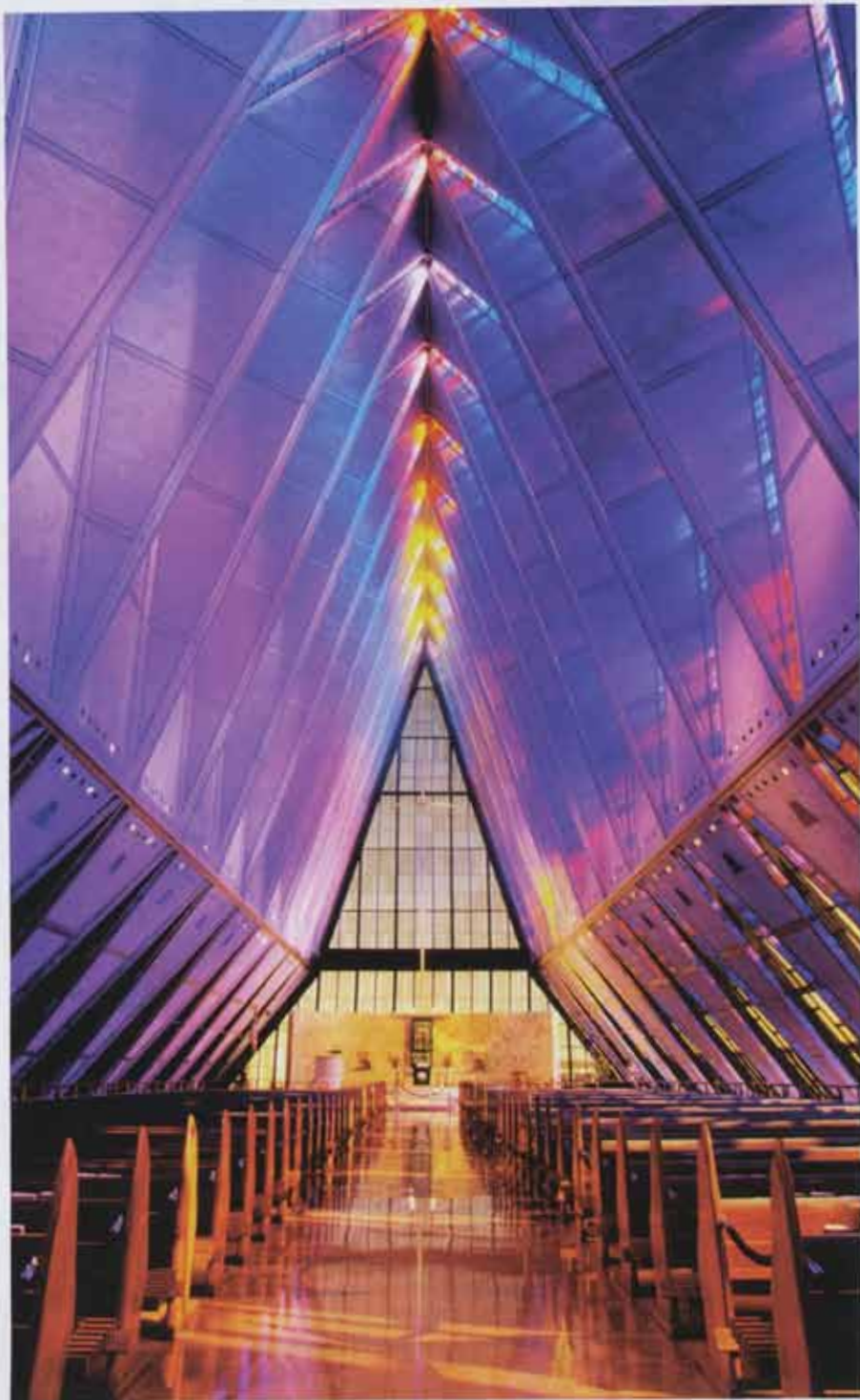
In the case of the chapel, debate was even more rancorous. Modernist architects, steeped in a tradition of functionalism and structural rationalism, had long wrestled with the problem of creating transcendent religious spaces. The small piece of origami-like folded paper that represented the chapel on the model of the academy drew howls of complaint. "I don't hear the rustle of angels' wings," complained one senator, during a series of congressional hearings that led to significant delays in appropriations for the building. The project's chief architect, Walter Netsch, was sent to Europe to study the great cathedrals and create a new design. In the end, his design—only slightly altered from the original but including great aluminum tetrahedrons and panels of stained glass in place of the folded concrete plates of the first model—was built. On its completion in 1962, the structure received a mixed reaction, with some critics seeing it as a brilliant modern interpretation of Gothic and others viewing it as a shallow pastiche.

Given the intensifying debate about the separation of church and state during the postwar years, one might have expected more controversy over the conspicuous placement of the building on the campus or even its very presence on academy grounds, but in the 1960s this did not seem to bother many people. What is more surprising is that there was so little comment about the fact that the soaring upper space was given over to the Protestants and the much less impressive lower level to the Catholics and Jews. Perhaps this lack of controversy was due, in part, to an adroit quip by Skidmore partner Nathaniel Owings, who suggested that the Protestants needed the extra seventeen-and-one-half feet for a head start to heaven. Even more surprising, from

the perspective of 2010, is that in the original plan there was so little provision for any other religious group.

Fifty years later, all of these actual and potential controversies have receded. The chapel won the American

Institute of Architects' coveted Twenty-Five Year Award in 1996, and it appears that for most of the millions of visitors to the academy, the chapel is as much a classic of religious architecture as the great cathedrals of Europe. **F**



The Cadet Chapel (left) at the U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colorado (above) hosts a half-million visitors a year.