

Robert Bruegmann, editor

**MODERNISM AT MID-CENTURY: THE
ARCHITECTURE OF THE UNITED
STATES AIR FORCE ACADEMY**

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Among the great ensembles of Modernist buildings, surely none has been better preserved or carries a greater ideological burden than the United States Air Force Academy. *Modernism at Mid-Century* documents the history of its design and construction, focusing on the period from 1954, when the architects were chosen, to 1962, when the completion of the chapel signaled the realization of the original master plan for the Cadet Area. Discussion is largely confined to that famous complex of academic buildings, the most publicized component of the 19,000-acre complex.

As the title suggests, the selection of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill (SOM) to design the academy seemed to represent the triumph of Modernism (or the International Style, as it was more usually termed at the time) over other, more conservative approaches. Those familiar with the firm will know that such a choice also reflected the government's predictable endorsement of corporate-level competency over the uncertainties of individual genius.

In his generous acknowledgments, Bruegmann describes the book as "unorthodox" and assembled "with too little time and too many participants" (9). What, I wondered, made so clear an account unorthodox, and why the hurry? A visit to the academy, where I was given an extensive tour by the resident architect, Duane Boyle,

supplied answers. The idea for the book, as Bruegmann states, came from people at the academy—most notably Lt. Gen. Bradley Hosmer, who had been among the first class of cadets to occupy the new complex and who, from 1991 to 1994, was its superintendent. Others shared his concerns about its ongoing preservation and agreed on the importance of documenting its architectural significance. Together they not only cooperated in providing needed access to archival materials, but also secured full funding from the Air Force, a remarkable signal of official support. From the architects' side, Walter A. Netsch, Jr., project designer for the commission in SOM's Chicago office, was equally cooperative in providing access to archives under his control. He also selected Bruegmann as editor, and Bruegmann, in turn, chose his collaborators—five younger writers, including two architects and one landscape architect, all positioned to bring fresh views to the enterprise. Understandably Bruegmann and his collaborators were under pressure from their sponsors to complete the study in a timely manner.

For me, this history did much to explain the richly informative, yet largely uncritical, account. Also more understandable under these circumstances is the selection of illustrations—primarily officially sanctioned images of the period that present the academy in a largely pristine state. Remarkably, it remains surprisingly close to that state today, although significant additions to the Cadet Area have modified it in ways that are briefly explained in the book.

The book's complicated organization may also be what Bruegmann meant by "unorthodox." As summarized below, a series of short articles, somewhat like extended and illustrated footnotes, are interspersed within longer essays. This approach works remarkably well in maintaining a lively story of complexly overlapping constituencies—Congress, the military, the designers, and the American public.

The first section of the book, dealing with the design and construction of the academy, begins with an essay by Kristen Schaffer on its early history, from the creation of the Air Force as a separate branch of the military in 1947 to the occupation of the original (yet still incomplete) Cadet Area in 1958. It is a workmanlike piece that

includes discussion of alternate sites as well as of other architectural firms that were originally considered. Four short, interleaved pieces by Sheri Olson deal with related issues: first, the early history of SOM (relying, oddly, on secondary sources published in the 1950s and early 1960s); second, the advisory board of architects who complicated the process (led by Pietro Belluschi, Welton Becket, and Eero Saarinen); third, the organization of SOM's Chicago office during the time the academy was designed; and fourth, the sad yet fascinating attempt by Frank Lloyd Wright to secure the commission for himself. Four illustrated portfolios follow: the first, with comments by Bruegmann, on the original architectural renderings; the second, with comments by Robert Nauman, on construction photographs; the third, again with comments by Bruegmann, on carefully staged images of the completed buildings; and the fourth, with comments by Olson, on the technical prowess of the two-acre roof over the dining facility.

The second section of the book, "Interpreting the Academy," broadens the argument. Bruegmann's lead essay, "Military Culture, Architectural Culture, Popular Culture," shows clearly how the design reflects aspirations of the 1950s. Jory Johnson's "Man as Nature," which follows, was of particular interest to me. While it does not resolve the debate over the terms "native" and "landscape," it does offer convincing thoughts on meanings underlying the academy's design and provides welcome information on changes since its completion. For example, landscape architect Dan Kiley's Air Garden—a relieving element within the otherwise rigid layout—was obliterated in 1975; plans are now underway for a complete restoration. Kiley had been added to the design team at the urging of Eero Saarinen and clearly helped relate the complex to its spectacular setting at the base of the Rocky Mountains. Robert Nauman's essay, "Presenting the Academy," also speculates on underlying meanings—for example, the academy as a metaphor for the frontier city (125)—while concentrating on the ambitious exhibition of the design that was organized by Herbert Bayer and held at the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center in May 1955. This carefully orchestrated display, which succeeded in generating needed Congressional support, is per-

suasively evoked through plan diagrams and photographs.

This section continues with an account by Olson of other components designed for the academy as part of its total image. Prime among these were the interiors and their furnishings, by Walter Dorwin Teague Associates. It was comforting to learn that replacements for Teague's furniture, necessitated by wear, are less popular than the originals. Also subject to replacement but apparently more faithful to the original concept are the academy's official uniforms. It was ironic to me that these were conceived in Hollywood under the direction of Cecil B. De Mille, who, according to the text, pulled his best designers from work on *The Ten Commandments*. Does this mean, from the government's perspective in the 1950s, that architecture and costume, SOM and De Mille, were approximate equals? The androgynous renderings epitomize the clichés of the period. Are the architectural renderings similarly bound? I am too supportive of the buildings to judge.

An essay on building technologies by James S. Russell is disappointingly brief and fragmented, justifying Bruegmann's introductory comment (12) that more research is needed. Of greater interest is Olson's outline of major controversies surrounding the design of the chapel; quotations from Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Louis I. Kahn provide critical background. Bruegmann concludes the second section by summarizing major changes and additions to the academy since 1962, relating these changes to fluctuating fashions that have recently led to renewed appreciation of the original design.

The third and final section of the book contains useful recollections by Walter Netsch, Gordon Bunshaft, and Lt. Gen. Hosmer. Netsch had been interviewed about the design of the academy by John Burchard in 1958, but apparently this interview has not been published until now. Bunshaft's undated and more general comments are part of an oral history project organized by SOM. Lt. Gen. Hosmer, interviewed by Duane Boyle in May 1993, recalls his early impressions as one of the first students to occupy the complex.

Some minor problems mar the solid accomplishments of the writers. For example, Eliel Saarinen is identified as the founder of the Cranbrook Academy of Art

(32). This academy, together with other components of Cranbrook, was founded by George G. Booth and his wife, Ellen Scripps Booth; the elder Saarinen was Booth's architect and first president of the academy. Also, Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* was not published in 1964, as stated (101, n. 69), but rather in 1966 (selections had appeared in *Perspecta* 9/10 [1965]). Further, the Modern Architecture International Exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York was held in 1932, not 1931 as claimed (128); and Robert Slutzky should be listed as the coauthor, with Colin Rowe, of "Transparency: Literal and Phenomenal" (137, n. 45). More problematic for me than these easily correctable details is an undifferentiated use of the terms "Modern," "Modernist," and "Modernism" throughout; these are sometimes further modified without clarification, for example, "American Modernist architects" and "International Style Modernism" (91).

Ultimately clear definitions will derive from further studies for which this book will serve as a worthy source. When, for example, we read Nathaniel A. Owings's statement that the functional diagrams of the academy became the "design for the academy buildings themselves" (64, n. 97), we seem to be at a threshold of understanding why Modernism of the 1950s ran its course (or evolved into something different, depending on one's perspective). Future histories of the period will no doubt lean on such books as *Modernism at Mid-Century* for pertinent documentation. But most important, perhaps, the book should succeed in awakening the present generation to the need for thoughtful preservation of one of the nation's most important architectural masterpieces.

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