

“A strong story, not sweet.”

--Walter A. Netsch, Jr., cadet chapel architect

ANNE WELLS LADOW

Lines and Shadows

Photographs of the
United States Air Force Academy Cadet Chapel

Editor's Note: Of the visual arts in the first seven issues of *WLA*, only Roger Preston's striking computer-generated Holocaust Art (Fall 1990) has appeared. When the portfolio containing the photos that follow arrived, we knew we should publish a sampling of them, not only because the art was deft, but also because in viewing the Cadet Chapel photographs, we felt the compelling connections *and* separations between art and war, between church and state, the military and religion.

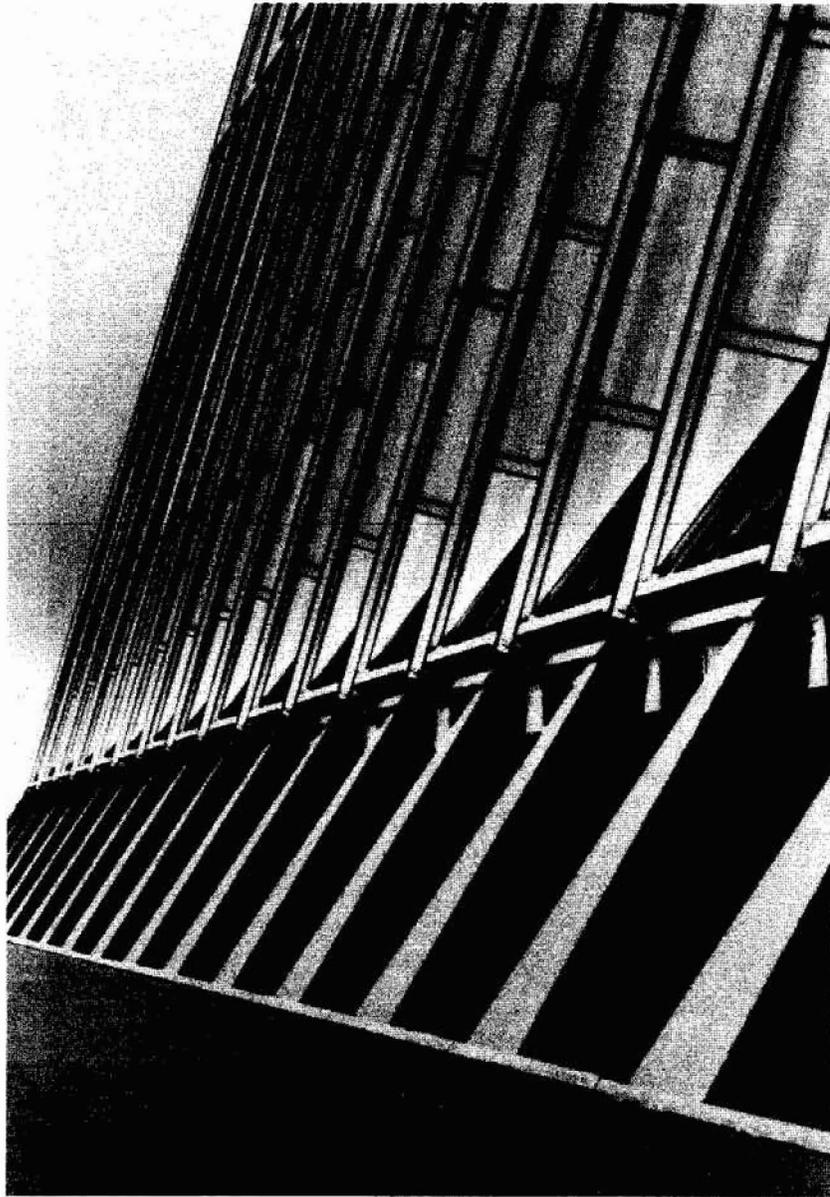
Although the Cadet Chapel has become Colorado's number-one man-made tourist attraction, it was nearly not built at all. Public officials, in particular, were loud in their objections to its design. In searching the public record, we discovered many reminders that *bold* art generally meets with what art critic Robert Hughes has called the "Shock of the New." H.W. Hanson instructs us in *History of Art* that when the layperson says "I don't know art, but I know what I like," what that person really means is, "I like what I know." To like what we know and to distrust what we do not, Hanson points out, is an age-old human trait, especially with regard to art. We thought it both lively and monitory to season Ms. Ladow's strong work with some early reactions to the Air Force Academy's most dominating architectural structure.

“A chapel for worship does not have to be a classical structure. It does not have to be Romanesque. It does not have to be Gothic. It does not have to be Renaissance. It does not have to be Baroque. It does not have to be Georgian. It can be as plain and simple as a Quaker meeting house. It can be as modern as in the rest of the design of the Academy. Any of these things it can be. But it cannot be the antithesis of reverence and worship. The proposed structure is a deliberate insult to God Almighty. I hope you will take a look at it yourself and pass judgment on it. Please stop it.”

--U.S. Senator, Vermont

“I do not know, I am no architect or anything of that sort, but I guess we all agree that it does not take any building in which to worship your God. If it takes a building, I am sure it does not have to be a particular kind of building. But I do think there should be some degree of conformity to general views of what is appropriate. It appears the Air Force wants everything different and new and unusual.”

--U.S. Congressman, Mississippi





“I confess to being old-fashioned in my views on modern art. When I look at a painting I want to see something I can identify, instead of merely a splash of colors. I am also old-fashioned in my religious views, and would not donate my personal funds for a house of worship which might just as well be a museum of modern art or a skating rink.”

--*U.S. Senator, Virginia*

“We just were not going to build an Air Force chapel out of stone. It was not appropriate to anchor these airman to the ground . . . what I tried to do was build a great church with a Gothic feeling in a contemporary medium.”

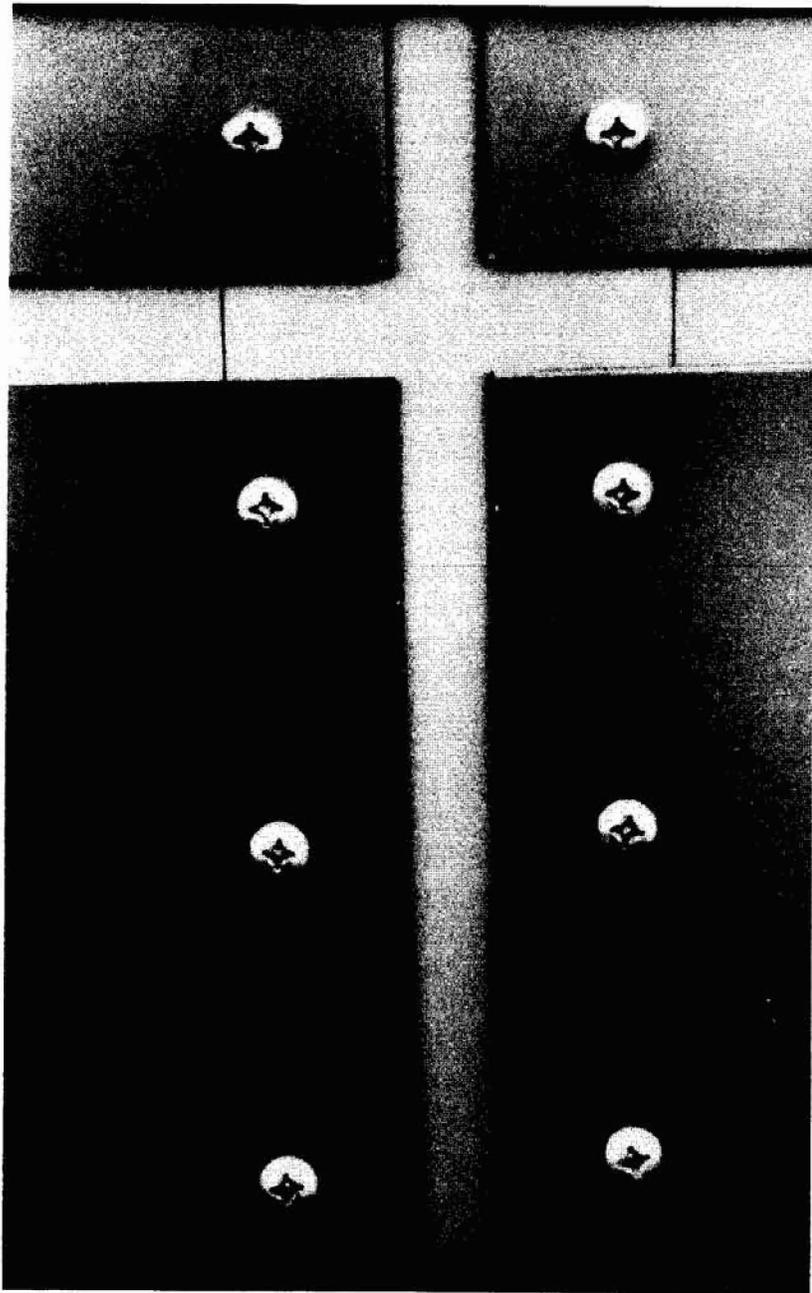
--*Walter A. Netsch, Jr., cadet chapel architect*

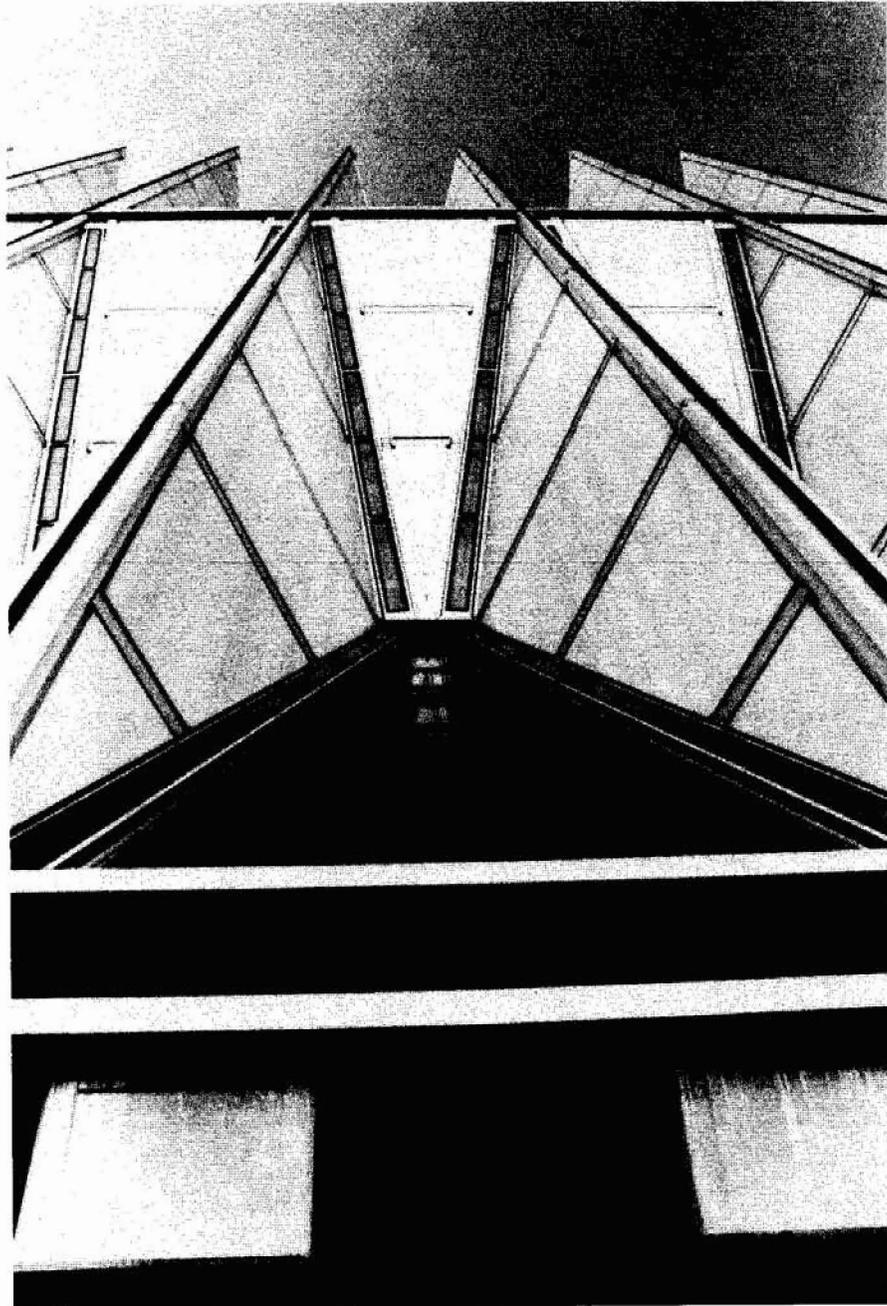
“Yes, I believe in prayer, but I think that the chapel sought to be provided for the Air Force Academy is un-Christian.”

--U.S. Senator, New Mexico

“All in all, the architects have come up with a magnificent and soul inspiring concept. Nevertheless there is one ugly duckling in their plans. The paganistic distortion conceived by them as a place of worship is an insult to religion and Colorado.”

--Governor, Colorado





“They have missed the nature of creative devotion, the majesty of the scene, and the great dignity that is required. As for the church . . . it is uninspired and brash—a tinlike shell of a rake that scrapes and threatens the sky. This is not the way to refresh the soul.”

--*Alfonso Iannelli, Designer*

“I would rather people have some reaction to it than have the cadets merely shrug and say, ‘And that’s the chapel.’”

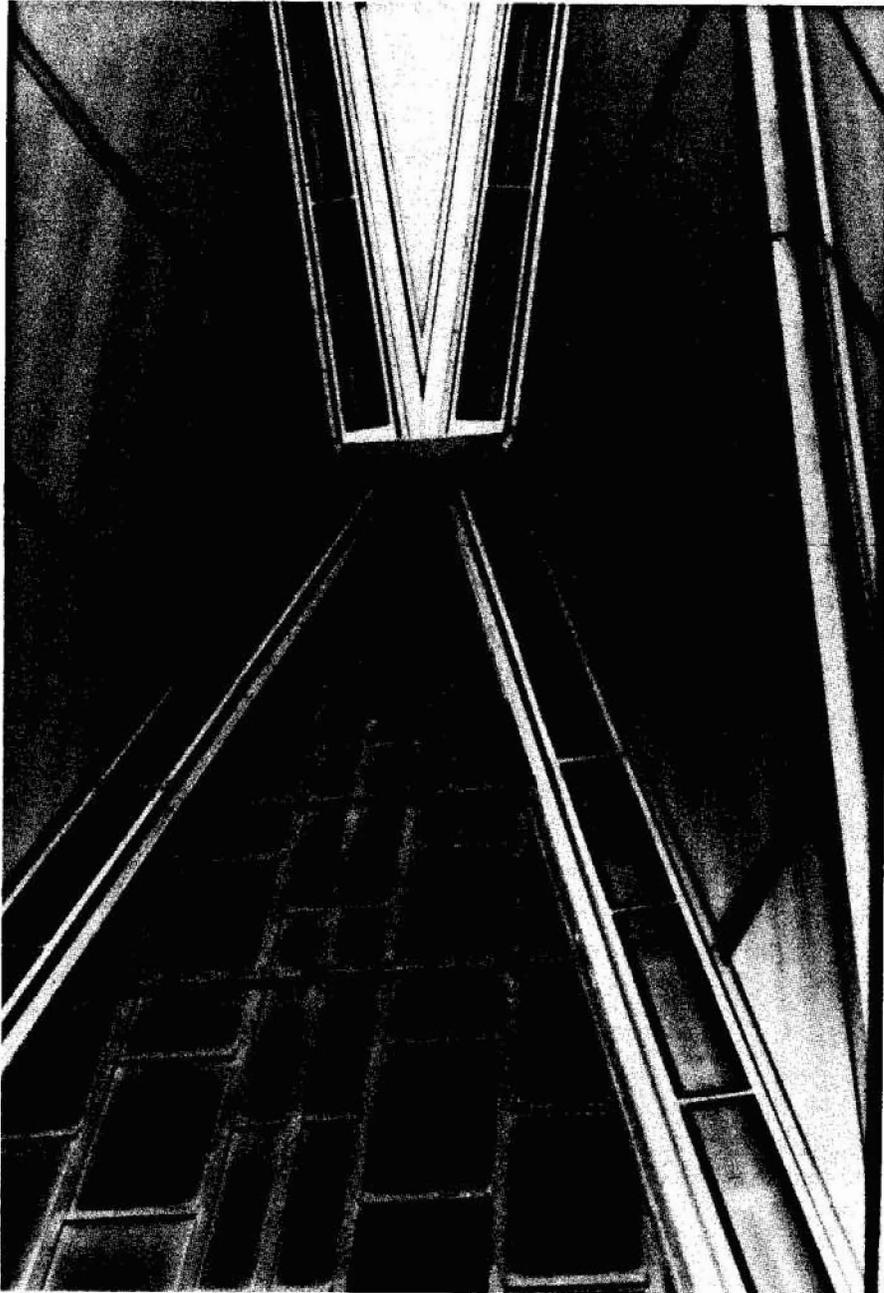
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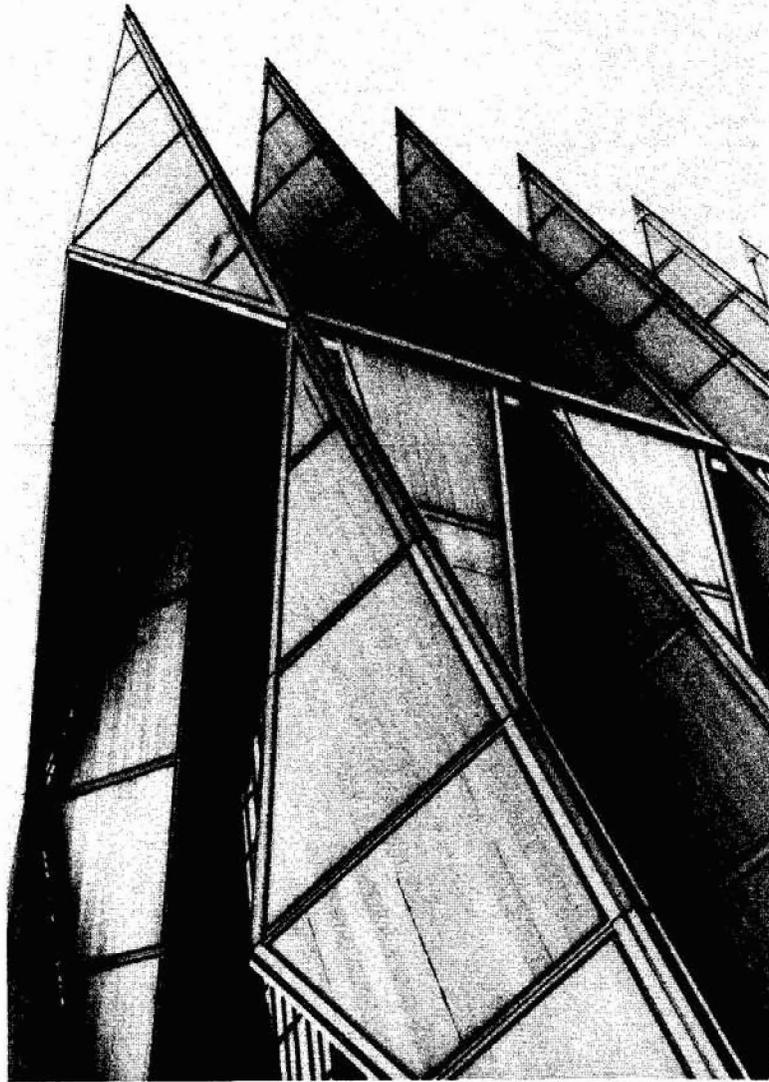
“I am shocked to learn that Congressional approval has been granted for the construction of the proposed non-denominational chapel for the Air Force Academy. This radiator-like edifice of spikes . . . would be more suitable as a Temple of Mars, or any other pagan god of war, than as a Christian-Judaic House of Worship. The naked brutality of this design is appalling to anyone with aesthetic sensibilities. I can only say that if this structure represents the epitome of modern architectural design we can afford service personnel then our entire standard of moral and spiritual values truly needs reappraisal.”

--Letter to the Editor, The New York Times

“To me, it looks like a rectangular accordion that is stretched out on the floor. And I am not exaggerating in the least. They are using aluminum, which doubtless will add little to the general tone. . . . As one member of our subcommittee said, it almost comes to the point of looking like it might be sacrilegious. It is not different, it is peculiar. It does not fit any plan I have ever seen, and I have been around the world, and in almost all the sections of the world. It does not fit anything you have ever seen.”

--U.S. Congressman, Mississippi





“This is the model I hold in my hand. Now imagine—here you have a row of 19 aluminum tepees pointing up toward the sky. With the grandeur of the mountains and Pikes Peak in the background this would appear entirely insignificant; and when you look at the beauty of the red granite of the Colorado mountains and then put into this scene a garish, incompatible monstrosity like this of polished aluminum, it will be incongruous. Furthermore, aluminum, they tell me, is a strategic material, and they could certainly build quite a few bombers, if I am not mistaken, out of the material that would go into this building.”

--*U.S. Congressman, Kansas*

U.S. Congressman, New York: Is it not a fact that the chapel is supposed to represent flight in architecture?

U.S. Congressman, Kansas: It could be that and it was suggested that perhaps as an emergency measure we might mount some jet engines on each of these spires, then if trouble comes just take off.

U.S. Congressman, New York: The flying buttresses of a cathedral are replaced by the ailerons of the plane wings and the bow of the plane pointing skyward are the spires. I like it.

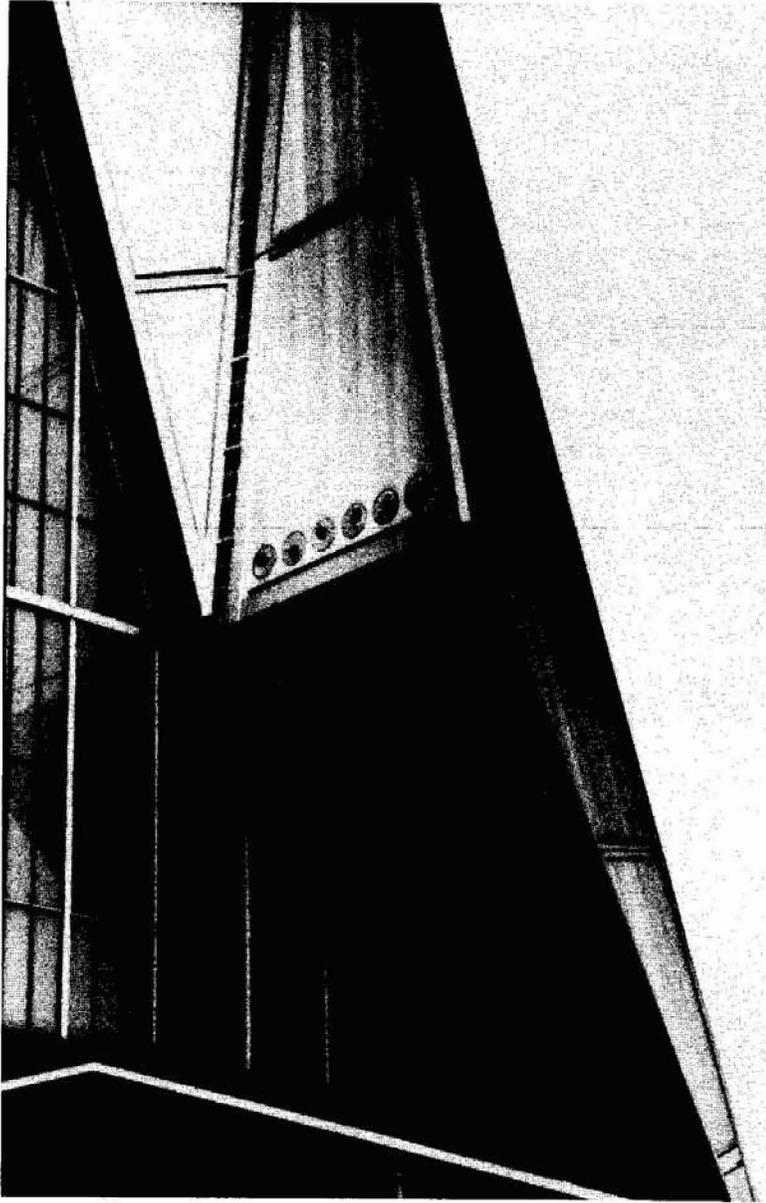
U.S. Congressman, Kansas: You are entitled to your views just as I am to mine. The spires are a symbol of religion, that is true. They indicate the aspiration of man for his God in Heaven. One spire is good, but with 19 I feel there are at least 18 too many.

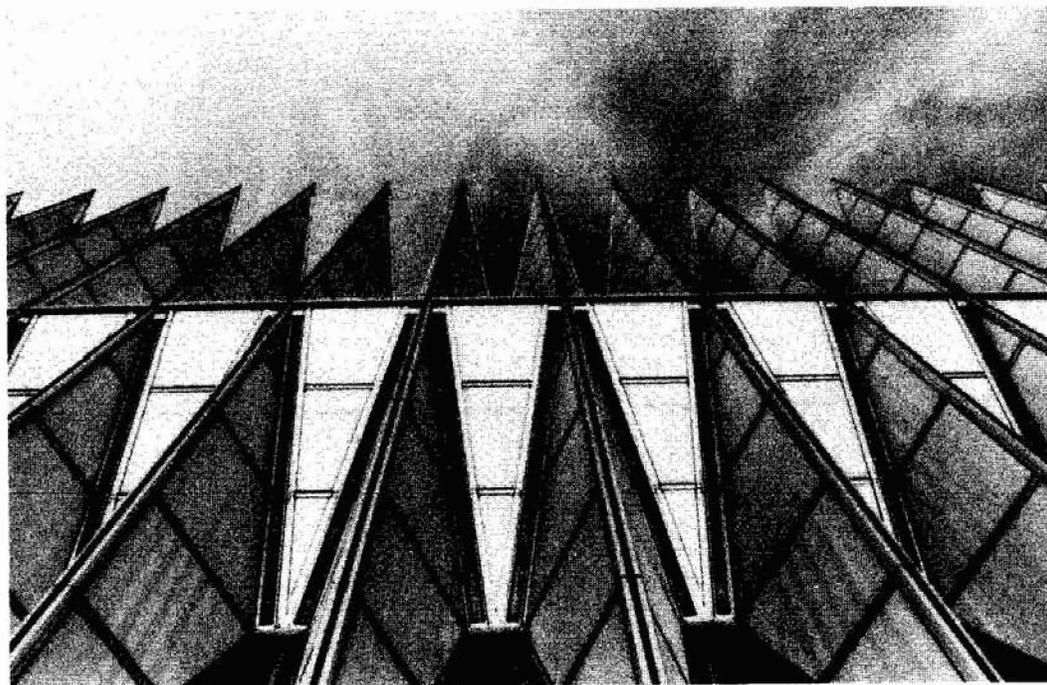
“As for aluminum, the boys fight and die in aluminum planes. They live in quonset quarters of aluminum. They can worship in aluminum if they can die in it, can they not?”

--*U.S. Congressman, New Jersey*

“[T]he buildings of the Air Force Academy generally will not be spectacular in design and the unconventional configuration of the chapel might very well brighten up the place and add a needed tone. It will stand out. I think when our friends go to see it, some will like it and some will not like it, but they will always remember it. It is something that is most striking to the eye.”

--*U.S. Congressman, Texas*





“A long chapel with a peak that looks as if it had been cut by a giant’s pinking shears . . .”

--Time, May 23, 1955

“You know an architect always wants to do something that is unusual, so his name will go down in history. But I am satisfied the architects would not be able to make any money out of this kind of plan for the common run of American people.”

--U.S. Congressman, Mississippi

“I do not know what concept of worship the architects of the structure may have. I do know that this chapel design resembles nothing that has ever been dreamed of in the minds of sane men.”

--*U.S. Senator, Colorado*

“Congress has no special qualifications to sit in judgment on questions of architectural design, but a lot of Members doubtless felt they were expressing a good solid grass-roots opinion about the Air Force chapel. In this we feel they were right. People generally aren't going to like this strange-looking place of worship. Even some professional critics will probably find that it lacks the calm and reposeful lines that make prayer easy or even possible. Let's remember, however, that it is difficult to judge a building from an artist's sketch, and that perhaps this structure, set in the foothills of the Rockies, may achieve remarkable beauty in its mountainous surroundings. Besides, don't we expect the Air Force to be daring?

--*America, Aug 24, 1957*

