



SPACEBOUND

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Restoring Faded Splendor

Academy grads join forces to restore the historic Air Garden

By Gary Martyn

In 2004, Congress designated the Cadet Area of the Air Force Academy as a National Historic Landmark. The landmark's most iconic feature, the Cadet Chapel, with its 17 stained glass and aluminum spires that resemble a squadron of Air Force fighter jets, had become a symbol of the Modernist design that defines the campus architecture and grounds.

Construction of the campus began in 1955. As the buildings began to reach skyward, landscape architect Daniel Kiley went to work on the ground level of the Cadet Area, giving special attention to the Terrazzo, the expansive central square between the campus structures. The jewel in the design was the Air Garden.

A WALK IN THE WOODS

When designing a landscape, Kiley said, "A garden should feel like a walk in the woods."

Drawing inspiration from the Academy's location on the eastern slope of the Rocky Mountains, Kiley created the Air Garden as a broad impression of a mountain stream, flowing for 700 feet through a series of reflective pools, flanked by sunken planters, and intertwined with a labyrinth of aggregate granite walkways, winding through a collection of woodland trees and plants.

Kiley also tapped into his visionary spirit to design the garden to provide a unique experience when viewed from the air as well as from the ground. The aerial view was an appropriate consideration for the Air Force Academy, and an inspiration for the Air Garden name.

Reflecting on his design of the Academy grounds, Kiley said, "I was at that point establishing a reputation as a landscape architect who rejected traditional compositional methods, instead seeking organic order and balance in concert with architectural elements. We pushed to reveal a sense of movement on the land, as well as to connect outwards to the essence and spirit of the site."

FADED GLORY

Unfortunately, the Air Garden today bears little resemblance to Kiley's original masterpiece. More than 50 years of exposure to the extremes of harsh Colorado winters and blistering summer sun hastened the deterioration of the garden's stonework paths and structures. The original vegetation and landscaping also lost their former splendor. In response to various grounds maintenance and repair

issues, most of the reflective pools and sunken planting areas were filled with dirt and covered with sod over the years. Trees and shrubs that died were rarely replaced and the garden faded.

ON A RESCUE MISSION

Academy graduates from the classes of 1975 and 1976 have joined forces to champion a \$5 million project to



Modernist landscape architect Dan Kiley poses in the Air Garden in 1968.



Digital artist Joel Gray's rendering of what the Air Garden will look like after renovation.

restore the Air Garden to its original grandeur. The project was selected from a short list of current priorities provided by the Academy.

"In the end, the overwhelming sense was supportive of this effort to preserve the heritage of the Academy and make the Air Garden an attractive element of the cadet grounds," says Col. (Ret.) Joseph Wysocki, chairman of the Class of '76 Class Gift Committee.

When Fariss and his classmates were freshmen, the Air Garden was off limits until they completed their rigorous first year of training and were officially "recognized" as upperclassmen, allowing them to wear the Prop and Wings insignia on their flight caps.

"Because of that, the Air Garden was a venerated place that had a special feel to it," Fariss explains. "The first time you got to walk in the Air Garden, that was pretty cool. So it's in our

"The restoration of the Air Garden is another example of how private funds add significantly to the margin of excellence of Academy-initiated projects"

As part of the restoration, the 9/11 World Trade Center Memorial, the 35th reunion gift to the Academy from the Class of '76, will be relocated from the northwest edge of the Terrazzo to the Air Garden.

"The movement of various statues and monuments that currently exist in places around the Air Garden will further add to the heritage symbology of the garden," Wysocki explains.

Graduates from the Class of '75 share the same vision for the project. Col. (Ret.) Larry Fariss, a member of the 45th Reunion Class Gift Committee, remembers the Air Garden as a unique place that came to symbolize a rite of passage for freshmen cadets.

mystique and in our minds as being hallowed ground, if you will, an iconic place out there on the Terrazzo, the most important part of the Terrazzo."

Fariss is also pleased to join forces with the Class of '76 to support the restoration project.

"We're excited to be in it with a sister class," he says. "We were there together for three of the four years at the Academy. I know tons of people in the Class of '76 and vice versa, so it's exciting to be in it with them."

RESURRECTING THE PAST

The landscape architects who are coordinating the restoration may feel like archeologists as they begin to unearth and

restore the buried fountains, pools and planters that were part of the original design. They want to honor the legacy that Dan Kiley entrusted to Air Force Academy, making the Air Garden worthy of inclusion as part of a National Historic Landmark.

“This project has been a lot of fun,” says Jim Houk, president of Thomas and Thomas Planning, Urban Design & Landscape Architecture, Inc., the team tasked by Merrick & Company to drive the restoration project.

“We’re really trying to stay as true to Kiley’s design as possible, while incorporating the latest environmental objectives, especially water conservation,” Houk explains. “There were a lot of problems with the early pumping system, and maintenance really got expensive, which contributed to the eventual filling in of the majority of the pools. In the renovation, we’re reducing the amount of water needed to maintain the pools and fountain areas. We also took steps to improve the soil conditions and drainage. The proposed plan removes the remaining existing locust trees (30 percent of the original planting) and brings in 400 new trees to recreate the original design.”

Houk and his team are awaiting final approval from the Academy, but hope to begin working on the garden before summer.

PULLING IT ALL TOGETHER

Approximately \$2.5 million in government funds have been allocated for the project, with the USAFA Endowment, the Associate of Graduates, and friends of the Academy providing the remaining \$2.5 needed to fully fund a complete restoration.

“The restoration of the Air Garden is another example of how private funds add significantly to the margin of excellence of Academy-initiated projects,” says Maj. Gen. (Ret.) Mark Volcheff, president and CEO of the USAFA Endowment. “Without private support, the Air Garden could have only been minimally restored. But now, it will reflect the unique heritage of the Air Force Academy and the original splendor of the Cadet Area.”

The USAFA Endowment maintains a list of priority projects and programs that help the Air Force Academy increase the margin of excellence that sets it apart from other military academies. Explore current funding opportunities on the Endowment website www.usafa.org/endowment or call 719 472-0300. 