

# architectural **FORUM**

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# Air Academy design brawl

**Backstage manipulations, strange alliances put Wright in camp with modern-design foes, commercial lobbyists; except for Legion, Wright might have been designer**

Congressional antiaircraft batteries manned by antimodern architecture crews temporarily shot down the new Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Col. last month.

Said a House appropriations committee report explaining its design-by-Congressional-committee action in withholding all new funds for the project: "The committee and individual Members of Congress have received a great deal of adverse comment on preliminary designs and feel strongly that it would be most unwise to provide funds for construction until the design is more firmly established. The designs should reflect the best traditions in American architecture; the designs should inspire the confidence and respect of the American people. It is suggested that the Secretary consult with the Commission of Fine Arts before accepting a proposed design for this national institution."

A week later, however, a Senate appropriations subcommittee was shown the most recently revised Skidmore, Owings & Merrill plans for the project by Air Force Secretary Harold E. Talbott. He said a whole year would be lost in opening the buildings for the nation's third great new service academy if the \$79 million cut from the House measure were not restored. A fortnight ago the Senate committee voted to put all the funds back in the bill, and the House foes, who also had then been shown the new plans, were expected to agree to rescind their knifing action.

Under the revised designs, the extensive glass areas originally proposed for academy buildings (AF, June '55) would be trimmed as much as 80% to 90%, Talbott told the Senate subcommittee. Instead there would be masonry walls—although it was not definite yet of what particular material: granite, limestone, or something else.

Superficially, the attack looked like a concentration of esthetic hostility among Congressmen devoted to vaguely traditional, early-American architecture. A number opposed the academy's brisk modern expression in preliminary presentations as "alien, European, un-American." To most onlookers, and to much of the press, denial of funds seemed like the breathholding of petulant lawmakers refusing to invest in the unfamiliar.

But as details of backstage manipulations became known, there took form a remarkable episode in which esthetics were most generally viewed through eye-glasses shaped like a dollar sign.

Leading character in the unfortunate ruckus, by happenstance or exploitation, if not entirely by his own design, was Frank Lloyd Wright, "Mr. Architect" to Congress, the nation and much of the world. As jigsaw parts of the picture were assembled, it seemed clear that Wright's role was the most influential, although a review of the

history of the academy's design shows Wright, just turned 86, to have been one of the controversy's principal victims.

The unprecedented harshness of Wright's comments, before the committee, on fellow architects\* came out of a three-fold background: 1—Wright as the fervent high prophet of "organic" modern architecture had lost the contract to the representatives of the "international" architecture, which is the exactly opposite school; 2—he had thereby lost his greatest and probably last chance to build a major monument for his own country by which his towering genius might be remembered for all time; 3—the way in which this chance had been lost must have seemed bitterly unfair to a great and valiant man of culture—in the light of facts hitherto unrevealed.

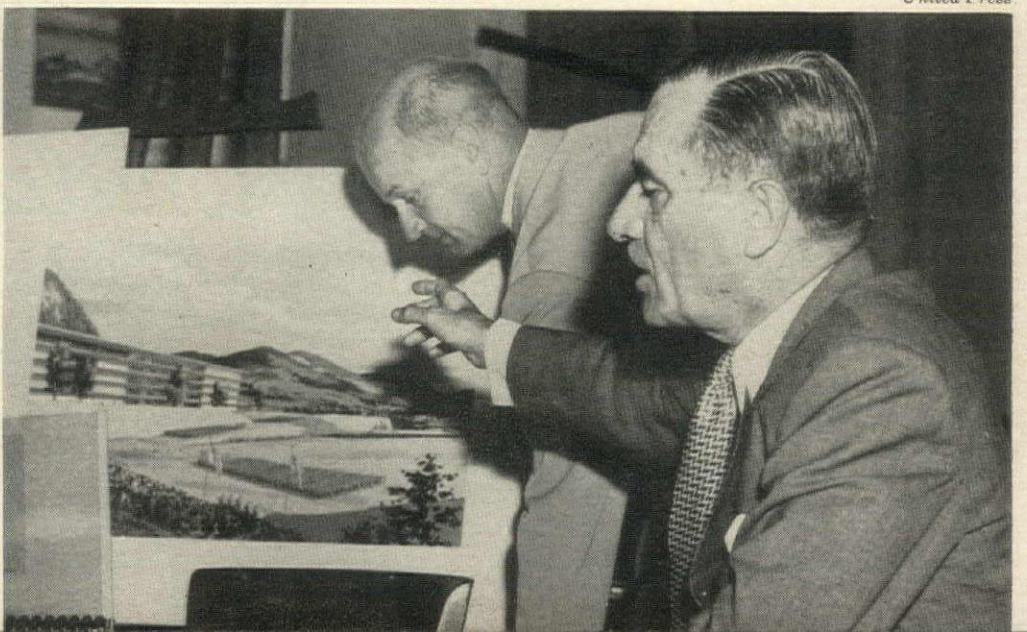
More than a year ago, when architects nationwide were scrambling for the job of designing the academy, Wright was induced by Richard Hawley Cutting, Cleveland architect, to head a group of architects and engineers who called themselves Kitty Hawk Associates. Other members: Burns & Roe, New York; Bush-Brown, Gailey & Hefferman, Atlanta; George B. Cunningham, Ft. Lauderdale; Graham, Anderson, Probst & White, Chicago; Mitchell & Ritchie, Pittsburgh; Kump Associates, San Francisco and Robert & Co., Atlanta.

After a few months, competition was narrowed to Kitty Hawk Associates and S-O-M; Pereira & Luckman, who had outlasted Belluschi and Eero Saarinen, were ruled out because they were designing the Spanish air bases.

In July 1954 Wright withdrew abruptly

\* Wright's comments about also-rans in last year's scramble for the design job, later named—with non-contender Welton Becket—as advisors to the Air Force: Becket—"I wish that something would happen to him soon. I would hate to see his things going as they are now." Eero Saarinen—"His father wanted me to train him architecturally." Pietro Belluschi—"He is a teacher. He has done some very nice little houses, but he has had no experience as a builder."

**REVISED PLANS** for Air Force Academy buildings were displayed before Senate appropriations subcommittee by Air Force Secretary Talbott (r). Behind Talbott is Architect William Hartmann of Chicago office of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill.



REP. MAHON  
(D, TEX)



REP. FOGARTY  
(D, RI)

from the competition. Behind this:

The American Legion had readied a public blast at Wright, dredging up past antimilitaristic activities and associations of the architect which, frontpaged for America in its 1954 mood, would have made it awkward for the Air Force to consider Wright and his group. The Legion's price for silence: elimination of Wright. Knowing this, his associates did not intervene when Wright refused to make the required personal appearance, and the award went to S-O-M.

Wright's reason for non-appearance was professional: "I woke up and found they (the associates and the Air Force) wanted me to go down and sell myself to Talbott."

His explanation, in a wire to Cutting a year ago: "I assume that an architect . . . shouldn't be asked to plead his own case or tell who he is. The world knows what I can do in architecture. If officials of the air force have missed this, I can do no more than feel sorry for what both have lost."

But the legion had not put down its shooting irons. It was standing by last month, ready to shoot if Wright or anyone else thought the Taliesin genius might still be able to get the commission for the project.

Meanwhile, S-O-M, quietly continued its assignment during the melodrama, made no public comment on the hail of stone cast at its glass building. Dutifully, it revised plans and specifications for its client to satisfy the desires of commercial interests seeking Congressional directives in favor of one material or against another.

Strongly supporting S-O-M, Air Force Secretary Harold E. Talbott wrote to AIA Executive Director Edmund R. Purves: "We believe that we have probably as able a group of architects and engineers as has

*continued on p. 13*



ever been assembled in a building enterprise. I have confidence that these men will present for approval the most appropriate buildings possible for our academy."

Talbott also thanked Purves for a "most unbiased statement" on behalf of the AIA board of directors outlining the board's views on the "matters of principle and policy." In no way judging the specific designs, this statement declared:

"In arriving at a selection of architects and architect consultants . . . the Secretary followed ethical and objective procedures that were in the public interest. [Those] selected are among the most distinguished of American practitioners. Their experience is extensive, their reputations are worldwide and the buildings and projects to their credit among the most significant productions of the American professionals. . . . Any structure or work of art will find itself the target of criticism, sometimes voiced without knowledge of the problems involved. . . . The AIA is firmly convinced that the commissioned architects should continue [developing] their plans and the Air Force should proceed with confidence knowing that the final result will be in the best interest of the American people."

After the May 14 unveiling of S-O-M's initial plans at Colorado Springs, Congressmen who criticized them as too modern or futuristic far outnumbered those singing their praises. There also turned out to be a concentration of opponents on the key Air Force subcommittee of the House appropriations committee.

Explaining this committee's elimination of the academy's construction funds from the appropriations act, Chairman George H. Mahon (D-Tex.) cited public controversy over the first S-O-M drawings and "grave doubts of committee members over the suitability of these designs." Mahon denied, however, that he had any preconceived ideas on what type of design should be adopted, and insisted the subcommittee action was intended only to avoid "buying a pig in a poke" before a final design was adopted.

But the leading Congressional actor in the drama was Rep. John E. Fogarty (D-R.I.), a member of the full appropriations committee. Fogarty, who before his election to Congress had been president of Rhode Island bricklayers union Local 1 (covering the entire state), said it was he who suggested that Wright be called to testify before the House subcommittee. Fogarty said his interest in the academy began after receiving a "form letter" Wright sent Congressmen. After he sent Wright a reply, said Fogarty, Wright called him from Wisconsin and Fogarty went to work arranging a hearing on the design. To FORUM Wright denied sending a letter to any Congressman. "Why should I be sending letters to Congressmen?" he asked.

Jaunty Fogarty, 42, leading contender to be the next governor of Rhode Island, makes no bones about his reasons for opposing the first S-O-M designs: 1) In his opinion they are a monstrosity; 2) they lack brickwork. In an extension of his remarks on June 20 in the Congressional Record he gave a long account of the advantages of brick walls over other types,



**SERVICE ORGANIZATION FOES** who attacked academy designs as "an insult to our American heritage and traditions," were Veterans of Foreign Wars Legislative Director Omar B. Ketchum (I), former linotype operator and 1931-34 mayor of Topeka, Kan. and VFW President Merton B. Tice, Mitchell, S.D., lawyer. Tice said that "in every instance where the matter was brought to the attention of delegates at state VFW conventions, they unanimously opposed the proposed plans." But he refused to name a single state where this had occurred or give any figure on number of conventions that considered it.

and at one point declared: "Glass and metal, of course, are alien to American monumental design—even European. This is so obvious it needs no further comment."

Far more obvious were the parallel interests of Fogarty and the Allied Masonry Council, a component of which is his parent union, the 125,000-member Bricklayers, Masons & Plasterers International Union. The council, a trade group made up of nearly every one with a stake in masonry construction, was understandably unhappy over the academy's glass-and-steel design. The academy was a prize not only in its bigness, but also as a construction pacesetter.

House subcommittee witness for the promotion of masonry: Harry C. Plummer, head of the masonry council's engineering committee, who challenged reports of Air Force statements that use of stone in the academy was too expensive; Chicago Mason Contractor John Taheny, president of the Mason Contractors Assn. of America, and John J. Murphy, bricklayers union secretary, who denied validity of reports that masonry was ignored by S-O-M because not enough craftsmen were available for the job.

The council had a powerful friend in the Senate. Homer Capehart (R-Ind.), threw his weight behind a Hoosier product: "I come from Indiana, and we have a lot of limestone out there. Indiana Limestone Co. produces it."

Rare was the subcommittee witness without some motivation beyond architectural design. Even apparently guileless Henry H. Reed Jr., who appeared to plead for traditional design—and materials—for the academy, told FORUM he was equally interested in plugging a new book *American Skyline* of which he was co-author.

How did Reed happen to appear before the committee? Reed is an old enemy of glass-and-metal construction. Recently he

was the lone dissenting member when the awards committee of the Municipal Arts Society of New York honored S-O-M for its now-famous glass bank in New York City. Voted down, he mailed a letter setting forth his objections to "a friend in Washington who knew a Congressman."

Reed's friend: Robert Denny, a public relations man working for Henry J. Kaufman & Associates, a Washington advertising agency that handles, among other clients, the Allied Masonry Council. The Congressman: Rep. Fogarty.

Denny, 34-year-old ex-newspaperman who said he was a World War II bomber pilot with 35 raids to his credit, starred unapplauded backstage in last month's melodrama. Some of his manipulations compel an appreciation of the technical skill with which the masonry council's case was put across. In addition to getting Reed before the committee, Denny called Wright, eliciting the architect's assurance that he would testify if properly invited, and later met Wright at the Washington airport. He wrote some letters too. Two of them can be scored as errors, for reasons that Denny could hardly have foreseen. One, to the American Legion, failed to get that group into the style fray. In that letter Denny mentioned the telephone dealings he had been having with Wright. The Legion said it informed Denny it had favored an air academy for years, was more interested in getting it built, than in judging its design. Another group, the National Sculpture Society, sidestepped Denny's invitation. Reason given: sculptors depend heavily on architects for their business.

A third letter, to Wright, made clear the link between Denny and Fogarty.

And, interestingly, there was a marked similarity in typographical style and production characteristics among releases from these participants: the Allied Masonry Council, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and nearly all of the witnesses who criticized the S-O-M design (big exception: Wright).

### Newspaper editorial views on Air Force Academy ruckus

"This is not to argue that the Academy should look like a restoration of the Acropolis or like a multiplication of the new auditorium and chapel at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. . . . The design of the Parthenon was once an innovation. Yet when it was accepted in its day the work of Sir Christopher Wren might have been greeted as grotesque and radical."

*The Christian Science Monitor*

"We regret that the Air Force and its architects have seen fit to listen to the loud criticism evoked by preliminary plans and building models for the new Academy—criticism that had little validity outside the curious doctrine which holds that election to Congress automatically transforms the electee into an infallible authority on every art, technology and method of doing business. . . . We wish Talbott and his architects had stood by their guns. We lament the circumstances that make them susceptible to Congressmen who are architects by suffrage."

*San Francisco Chronicle*

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