

MILITARY CONSTRUCTION APPROPRIATIONS FOR 1956

HEARINGS BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE OF THE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES EIGHTY-FOURTH CONGRESS FIRST SESSION

SUBCOMMITTEE ON DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE APPROPRIATIONS

GEORGE H. MAHON, Texas, *Chairman*

JAMIE L. WHITTEN, Mississippi

ERRETT P. SCRIVNER, Kansas

CHARLES B. DEANE, North Carolina

GLENN R. DAVIS, Wisconsin

SAMUEL W. CROSBY, *Staff Assistant to the Subcommittee*

Department of the Air Force

Printed for the use of the Committee on Appropriations



UNITED STATES
GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE
WASHINGTON : 1955

THURSDAY, JULY 7, 1955.

AIR FORCE ACADEMY

WITNESS

FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT, ARCHITECT

Mr. MAHON. The committee will come to order.

We are pleased to have with us this afternoon, Mr. Frank Lloyd Wright, who desires to testify with reference to the requested appropriation for the Air Force Academy.

Mr. WRIGHT. Thank you, sir.

Mr. MAHON. Mr. Wright, we have been requested to appropriate \$76 million as a further expenditure for the Air Force Academy.

Mr. WRIGHT. To find out why you should spend \$576 million; is that it?

Mr. MAHON. There is considerable dissatisfaction which has arisen over the proposed design of the Academy. Of course, the design is not as yet fixed.

Mr. WRIGHT. Accepted.

Mr. MAHON. Accepted is right.

Mr. WRIGHT. It has been presented.

Mr. MAHON. A preliminary proposal, at least, has been presented. Are you familiar with the preliminary or with the proposal?

Mr. WRIGHT. Yes; the young editor outside there sent me the number of his paper in which it appeared, and it was very well presented. That is why I spoke up, being an old stager here in this thing of modern architecture, and I thought if that was to represent the Nation for the next 300 years or more, as modern architecture, it was time for somebody to do something. So, I spoke out, and here I am.

I do not feel very comfortable here.

Mr. MAHON. Well, be perfectly at ease. We want you to be comfortable, and we want you to give us any of your ideas which will be helpful.

We are not architects, or engineers, or specialists. We are members who are charged with the responsibility of screening requests for funds.

Mr. WRIGHT. That is an admission that I admire. It was not present when this matter was first decided. I thought Mr. Talbott was a very brave and rash man to have proceeded as he did.

It seems to me that when a thing of this importance to the people and to the Nation is under consideration, there is only one way of proceeding, and that is by inviting men of undoubted capacity by way of experience and having proved it, to submit plans, and pay them for their services. You know, I have never joined the architectural profession, because they have never lived up to their so-called ethics. They will work for nothing. I think there were 700 of them reaching for this in the first place, were there not?

Anyway, it simmered down to two represented by commercial, or do you call them advertising agencies, in New York City, and myself, with no representation. When I saw how the thing was going, and that I had really signed into a competition which I had never believed in, I resigned and I did not go down to sell myself to Mr. Talbott. They said all you have to do is go down—just go down and tell him,

and I said, "Tell him what?" I have done enough so the whole world knows what I have got, and why do I have to go and sell myself to Mr. Talbott? I did not go, and—well, that was the end of that.

Well, then, the next thing I saw was this thing, and when I saw it, I was shocked, because this is an abuse of the thing which we call modern architecture. I have seen it referred to in your papers as experimental architecture. Well, that is a very nice, kind name for it, because there is no soul in it; there is no feeling for humanity in it. It is, shall I say, unhuman, or inhumane. You can take your choice.

Now, the thing which I think they should have done is to have picked out, well, we will say, an oldtimer like myself, and another, perhaps modernistic, and then one of the old school—3, at least, and probably 5—and pay them \$100,000 to take the overhead off them, and then I think the only fair judgment now that we had would be to take and make a brochure out of it, and, say, three designs would be enough. I would be willing to put my thoughts on paper, for one, and then there would be the other oldtimer, and the boys who did all this dignified old stuff around the country, and get them in and give a fair contrast.

Now, who is going to judge? The tribunal is always the question, and a tribunal in architecture is very hard to find, because it is their blind spot. Well, culture knows nothing of architecture yet, and inasmuch as it is the base of a culture, I could come in here wearing gold medals and citations behind me which would cover the wall. Why? Because America at last is seen by our neighbors to have something to say for itself in the way of a culture of its own; something to exploit besides dollars. That did not get into your competition here. I mean it did not get into your Air Force Academy.

Mr. MAHON. In specific terminology, what are some of the things which in your opinion are wrong with the proposed design? You said it had no soul, and I am inclined to agree with you.

Mr. WRIGHT. The proposed design, in the first place, ignores entirely the nature of the site. Now, in good architecture, in organic architecture, the first element is to put something there that looks as though it had always been there, and always ought to be there, and if you took it away it would spoil the landscape.

Mr. SCRIVNER. In other words, something that fits, just naturally fits in its surroundings.

Mr. WRIGHT. Yes, sir; something becoming and something suitable and appropriate, is the word. It is not appropriate to the character of the American people, except a certain gang getting too big in the country altogether who are commercializing everything and who now believe that architecture also is a business. This is a big factory which did this thing. It is one of the biggest planning factories in the country. I think they have five or six hundred draftsmen, and the two men at the head of it, what do they know about architecture? There is a boy in the backroom making designs for the magazine. That is more or less a deduction, but call it a deduction, and that is the worst name for it.

Mr. MAHON. You are talking about Skidmore, Owings & Merrill?

Mr. WRIGHT. I am; and they are friends of mine, too, besides.

Mr. MAHON. Are they architects of considerable stature?

Mr. WRIGHT. Are they? I would not use that word stature in regard to them.

Mr. MAHON. I am asking you a serious question.

Mr. WRIGHT. They are commercial artists, and they are very successful, and they know how to sell themselves, by way of their advertising agency, to the big American businessman, who knows no more about architecture than his little girl, or his son who has not yet gone to school.

Mr. MAHON. These people do commercial work, and you mean they build buildings for different concerns?

Mr. WRIGHT. They do, and they do it well, and that is why they have got so much of it to do, but it is commercial.

If you want something that represents feeling, spirit, and the future, they have not got it.

Mr. MAHON. We want some dignity in the design, and something that represents feeling.

Mr. WRIGHT. Somebody said "appropriate," a little while ago, and that says the whole thing.

Mr. MAHON. But, we want it to be utilitarian also. Some of the present buildings, of course, are magnificent, but they, like the United States Capitol, are wholly unsuited to the job which you are supposed to do in them.

Mr. WRIGHT. Absolutely and certainly. My thesis in architecture is that those things are not incompatible. In the usefulness of the thing, and in its complete satisfaction of all the physical requirements, you will find the basis for the beauty that you are going to endow the thing with, as a rule.

Mr. MAHON. Do you have a vision as to what the Academy should look like, and, if so, about how would it look?

Mr. WRIGHT. I have, and that is what hurts. I had a perfect vision of that building. I went out to the site, and I saw it, and it impressed me so much that I did not sleep at night for a long time. I have the design in the back of my head.

Mr. MAHON. Does such design involve taller buildings than these, or some flat-topped buildings?

Mr. WRIGHT. My dear Mr. Mahon, I could not describe it to you; it is woven right in with that site. The chapel is the apex of the thing, and the whole thing is wound down the side of that slope, until you get in the great field below.

Mr. WHITTEN. Even as a layman, it strikes one as being odd to see, and I have been in that country years ago, the mountains and beautiful lines have some flat something such as this.

Mr. WRIGHT. Yes.

Mr. WHITTEN. In an area where the mountains stand out, and a place where you would look for at least spires, or something that would blend in with the surroundings. This thing made like a pancake looks out of place even to a layman.

Mr. WRIGHT. It is a factor moved into the wrong place. That was my first reaction. I think it should be something for the American people.

I want to see it appropriate. Your chapel would be the crowning feature of it on top of the mountain, and the whole thing would go up this way [indicating], and out from a central avenue running up

the side of the mountain with escalators taking you up as you please. The center line would run up to the chapel on top of the hill. I am not going to give the scheme away.

Mr. DEANE. This thought occurs to me: How could you take a glass structure which has been created and then try to put more bricks in it, or more stone in it to take the glass effect out? It would be a worse monstrosity, would it not?

Mr. WRIGHT. Absolutely.

Mr. DEANE. How can that be done satisfactorily. I mean unless you start from the bottom and create from the beginning?

Mr. WRIGHT. That is what you must do.

Mr. DEANE. That seems to me to be reasonable. It has been represented to us that we could take this and recast it.

Mr. WRIGHT. What is lacking is the proper feeling for the concept of the structure. It is initially wrong.

Mr. DEANE. I agree with you completely. It seems to me the chapel which they say they have not created—they just put it in there—

Mr. WRIGHT. Chapel?

Mr. DEANE. That chapel should be as you indicated, the focal point in the whole plan.

Mr. WRIGHT. It should be the apex, the sense of the whole thing coming into some spiritual idea of life and character. The Academy should be a character builder for the young people who will be in it. It should not put them on a level with the butcher, the baker, and the candlestick maker, should it?

Mr. DEANE. From your experience, what percentage of the architects of the country subscribe to that type of thinking?

Mr. WRIGHT. A very small percentage. It is novel; it is new. It is a diversion from my own thought and feeling, as you see it spread over the country today. It is not architecture. I do not think you could call it architecture. It is a commercialization and an expedient use an exaggeration of the use of glass. That is what started this, the Lever Building in New York City.

Mr. SCRIVNER. In your vision, did you not see more use made of the natural stone that you have right there that would blend right in?

Mr. WRIGHT. Of course, the redstone. I would have the whole thing redstone, with a great use of the modern materials of glass and steel. But it would be harmonious. It would not be a sacrifice to a commercial idea. It would still maintain the dignity and beauty of architecture.

Mr. SCRIVER. The name of Wright in architectural circles and elsewhere has been an outstanding name. My recollection is you used to be known as the father of modernistic architecture.

Mr. WRIGHT. It is modern.

Mr. DEANE. We understood you had a little hesitancy in coming here.

Mr. WRIGHT. I did.

Mr. DEANE. As one member of the committee, I would like to say that I am extremely grateful to you for coming, and I think that I speak for the other members.

Mr. WRIGHT. There is not an architect in the United States who would do what I am doing here now.

Mr. DEANE. It would probably be looked upon——

Mr. WRIGHT. As unprofessional and betraying a profession.

Mr. DEANE. I think that you are rendering a distinct service. Do you know Mr. Becket of Los Angeles?

Mr. WRIGHT. I do not know him, but I know of him. I wish that something would happen to him soon. I would hate to see his things going as they are going now.

Mr. DEANE. What do you have reference to?

Mr. WRIGHT. That new hotel he has built out there. Why should not a hotel have something human and attractive in it?

Mr. DEANE. Who is Mr. Saarrinen?

Mr. WRIGHT. His father wanted me to train him architecturally. That is the young boy.

Mr. DEANE. How old is he?

Mr. WRIGHT. Thirty-five or thirty-six.

Mr. DEANE. Do you know Mr. Belluschi, the dean of the architectural school of MIT?

Mr. WRIGHT. He is a teacher. He has done some very nice little houses, but he has had no experience as a builder.

Mr. DEANE. It is generally known that the names I have mentioned have been asked to advise with Mr. Merrill of the firm of Skidmore, Owenings & Merrill. These gentlemen that I have just mentioned have been asked to sit as consultants to reassess Skidmore, Owenings & Merrill's plan.

Mr. WRIGHT. I could not imagine anything that would make a bad matter worse. There is not anything to assess. The start is wrong. The whole trend is wrong. There is nothing there to take hold of except something reprehensible to our Nation.

Mr. WHITTEN. Did I understand you to say that the firm that got the contract are big commercial planners and they were represented by two publicity firms and public relations firms, or something like that, in New York City?

Mr. WRIGHT. That is true. That is when I resigned. I gave up. I said, "What is the use of getting into a fracas of this sort?"

Mr. WHITTEN. You had no idea of what fees they paid such publicity firms?

Mr. WRIGHT. No.

Mr. WHITTEN. The record shows the amount they have already received for the plans.

Mr. WRIGHT. I think that you ought to leave them where they are with what they have. They have shot their bolt. Now I think that you should take a fresh start and pay some of us enough money to take the overhead off of us so that we would not have to spend any of our money. I am willing to throw my time in for nothing. There would be other men who would do the same.

Mr. WHITTEN. How much money has been spent on architectural fees to date?

Mr. WRIGHT. I wonder!

Mr. WHITTEN. Your idea is that about \$100,000 ought to take care of the overhead?

Mr. WRIGHT. Yes, and if a model were requested after you have seen the sketches, that should cost about \$20,000. I just completed a model and that is what it cost me. My boys made it. We spent 3,500 man-hours on that model.

Here is the point that I have come here to labor and defend. Architecture, after all, is the blind spot of our country. We do not know what constitutes a good building. Now we are going into it blind. We are having one of these planning factories do it. That is what we call them. There is a boy in the back room reading magazines who has a little flare for design, and then in the middle is the big boy who has club relations and he is a good guy and he gets the thing over, and then there is the big fellow in the front office who gets the deal. The country is full of them I have always deplored it. That is one reason why I have never joined the profession. They have given me their gold medal. I have never joined the profession because I believe that its dignity, its greatness, and what should lie in it for the American people now is not there. I think it is not there because everything is commercialized to such an extent. There is no poetry in it anymore. The poetic principle has left. They do not see the beauty. They do not understand what could come out of that to inspire the American people and the boys who go there. It could be like going to church. It could be like going into a great cathedral only it would not be in those terms. It would be associated with nature and the whole structure would be felt.

Mr. DEANE. Are you in a position to comment upon the cost of a proposed scheme such as has been presented as compared to a more substantial one such as you are thinking of?

Mr. WRIGHT. I think of something of a more substantial nature because it would cost less than all this artificiality. The other has no true appropriateness.

Mr. DEANE. You can take that one step further. The maintenance likewise would be much more expensive?

Mr. WRIGHT. It is elemental. One does not plan programs without all that as a synthesis in the mind of the architect.

Mr. WHITTEN. You might be interested in this. I thought it odd, but when questioning the witnesses here about the flat roof, I asked if it was not unusual in that area. The Assistant Secretary said it was like a telephone building in Colorado Springs.

Mr. WRIGHT. If the scheme was right, you would not think about the roof being flat. You would feel the whole thing was like a tree in the landscape; that it was natural to it and that it belonged there.

Mr. WHITTEN. If it was good enough for the local telephone company building in Colorado Springs, it was good enough.

Mr. WRIGHT. That is about the way the building looks. That is about the way it impressed me when I first saw it. It would make a good market out there somewhere on the plains near a big city, or on the outskirts of a city.

Mr. WHITTEN. This will mean a lot to the young men who go there. Actually, for each American who perhaps will have a chance to go to see the interior, there will be 1,000 who will know it only by pictures. The point I make is the outside appearance of it as a public building will be the thing that will be known to millions of American people. If you leave that out, you are depriving the American people of everything.

Mr. WRIGHT. That is why I am sitting here now talking to you gentlemen. I know that it is going to have a great effect upon the course of architecture in America, and I do not want it to go that way.

I have fought it consistently now for a great many years. I do not want to see it go clumpety-clump all the way down the backstairs which is the commercial stairs. That is the backstairs, no matter what you say when it comes to art.

Mr. DEANE. As I understand it, the contract has been entered into with this firm. They have people on the ground. How can you change the creative thinking of a man, or of a firm, or people that may be brought in to advise? How could you get away from the course that it appears to be following?

Mr. WRIGHT. You cannot. It is natural that the constructive interpretation as an idea at the beginning should enlist all these forces and activate them and direct them and see that they are going in the right direction to a coherent, comprehensive scheme.

Mr. DEANE. What can this committee do? What can the public do about this? As I see it, we are helpless.

Mr. WRIGHT. Say that it did not have sufficient benefit of the clergy and a reconsideration has been ordered and give it a reconsideration. That is all you can do. It is an honorable state of mind.

Mr. DEANE. If you had placed your name on a contract and then for reasons comparable to what we are discussing here, the plans were pulled away, and someone else came into the picture, how would you feel?

Mr. WRIGHT. I would feel that if I had done anything of this kind and I had been a party to it, if the hand of God was not sufficient, the hand of man should rise and execute justice.

Mr. DEANE. Being a lawyer, I appreciate the validity of a contract.

Mr. WRIGHT. But do not get the contract bigger than the man.

Mr. DEANE. We wrote the law saying that there should be an Air Force Academy. We did not spell out the plans and the specifications.

Mr. WRIGHT. There was not enough depth of consideration given.

Mr. DEANE. It seems that the Congress will have to yield to the wishes of the Defense Establishment in arriving at the final plans, as much as we might regret it. We could refuse them money. I do not know whether that would be right or not. We need an academy. The first class has already been recruited.

Mr. WRIGHT. It is the age-old dilemma, man versus the net which he weaves for himself and finally becomes entangled in and has to be rescued from. I do not know what the method of procedure could be. My thought is, leave this as it is for the time being. Postpone it. Do not abrogate it. Let it lie. Let me show you what is in my mind and what I have been talking about. Get somebody else in and do the same thing with him you do with me. Get up a little brochure and get it to every high school in the Nation, not to the architects, not to the prejudices of the people as they exist. This is a democratic process, and I would let them vote to see what the consensus of opinion of the Nation is regarding this thing. It is not going to be ours. We will hardly see it. They are the ones who are going to live with it. Why not make a definite appeal to their sensibilities? They are fresh. They can be manipulated, too, and will be, and the idea is not perfect, but it is as near to it as you can get.

Now, you are in the realm of spirit when you are in art, and when you are talking about a work of art that is where you are.

The great difficulty is to get a conception worthy of execution and get the thing right. None of those men that you have mentioned to

me could ever conceive a thing, so what is the use of monkeying along with it?

Mr. WHITTEN. Back in the days when the Capitol was built all of these modern things were not available, but in the new buildings you can adapt those things.

Mr. WRIGHT. We do it every day. There is no trouble about that, even for the old-timer. We can do it.

Mr. WHITTEN. That is the point that I made.

Mr. WRIGHT. Who would be the outstanding concern now, the Richard Hunt of today? Do they exist? I do not know.

Mr. WHITTEN. On behalf of the committee I wish to thank you. We have the mechanical problem of what we can do. But this type of expression and opinion is of value to the committee. It will be printed and it will be of value to those who read it.

Mr. WRIGHT. Do not say it is mechanical; it is moral.

Mr. WHITTEN. How we can do it is a matter of mechanics. How we can get our hands again on it is another matter.

Mr. WRIGHT. You have a lawyer at the head of the table. The lawyers have succeeded in doing this, that, and the other with the law. Now, the law knows neither justice nor mercy, so he can do anything with the law he wants to.

Mr. DEANE. The implication is we should ride herd on this and see if we can bring up something?

Mr. WRIGHT. Postpone; wait and start this other thing in motion as a codicil. Wait to see what happens. If you see something that you should have had in the first place, then you will manage to get it.

Mr. WHITTEN. If they do not have the money, it will hold them back. This is not a question of money.

We appreciate your appearance, Mr. Wright.