



FREEDOM FLIGHT

USAFA GRADS HELP LEAD MASSIVE AFGHANISTAN EVACUATION



Air Garden Sprouts Anew

Donors step up to make
restoration project happen

By Lt. Col. (Ret.) Steven A. Simon '77

The \$7.1 million restoration of the USAFA Air Garden was officially dedicated on Oct. 23, 2021.

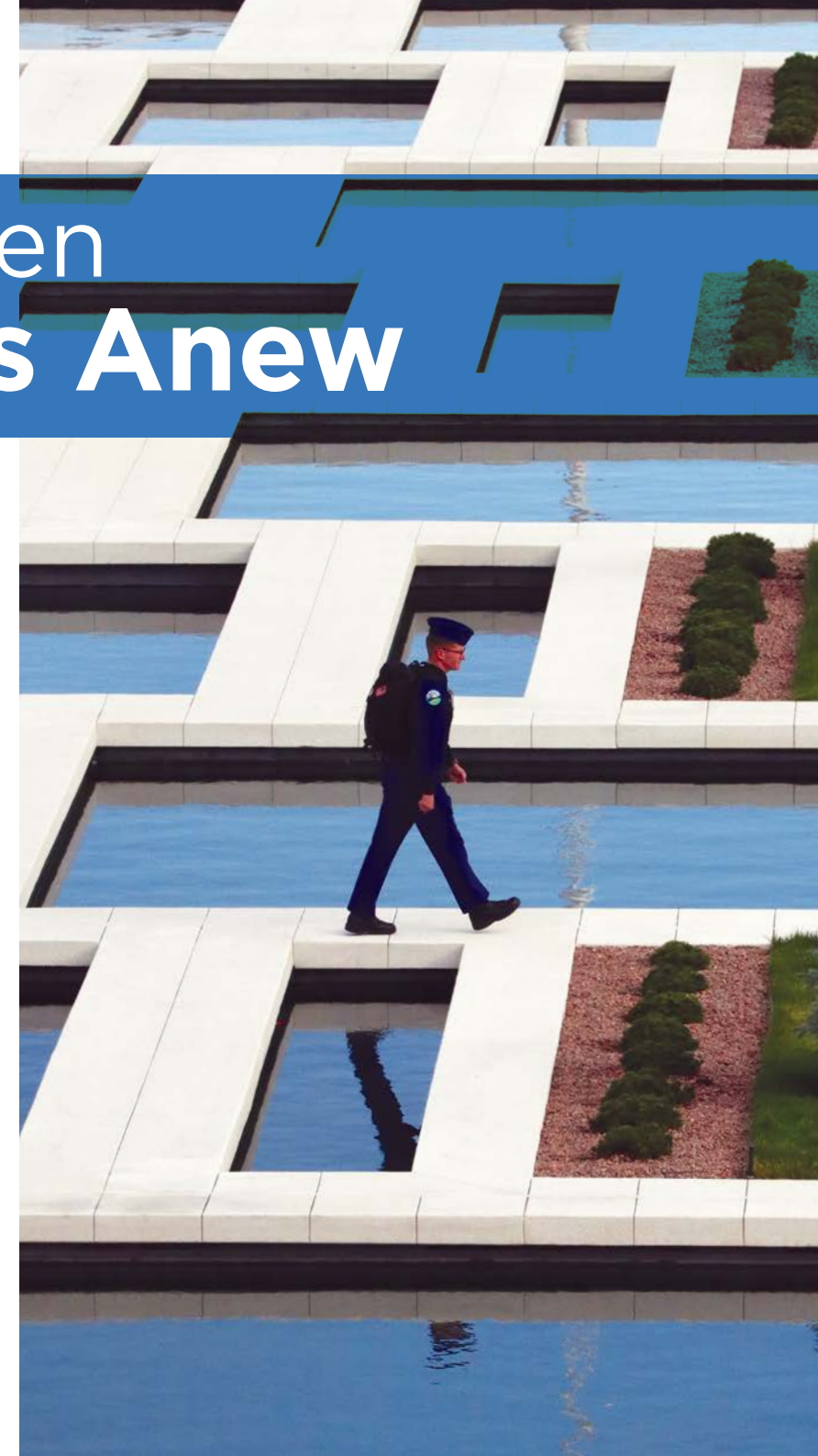
On a brisk Saturday morning, the Academy, graduates and donors celebrated the project's completion, along with a high-profile crowd in attendance — including Chief of Staff of the Air Force Gen. Charles Q. Brown, Chief of Space Operations Gen. John Raymond and Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. John Hyten.

The Air Force Academy Foundation oversaw the funding for the restoration, with the USAFA classes of 1972, 1975 and 1976 contributing to the project. In addition, major funding was provided by the Association of Graduates-managed Dorothy D. and Joseph A. Moller Trust. Representatives from the three donor classes attended the ceremony.

Speaking at the ceremony were Lt. Gen. Richard Clark '86, USAFA superintendent; Lt. Gen. (Ret.) Mike Gould '76, the CEO of the Association of Graduates and the Air Force Academy Foundation; and Col. (Ret.) Larry Fariss '75, the Class of '75's Gift Committee chair and the project's liaison with representatives from '72 and '76.

The celebration was a long time coming. Gen. Gould recounted that when he became USAFA's 18th superintendent in 2009, his predecessor — Lt. Gen. John Regni '73 — implored him to restore the Air Garden.

"We just couldn't make it happen," he said. "I know we tried for many years, but it was one of those needs that never quite made the cut for appropriated dollars. Thanks to some tremendous friends of the Academy, this is a reality today."



Gen. Clark personally thanked all of the graduates and donors who made the project possible.

"None of this would have been possible without the support we enjoy from some incredible individuals and the generosity of our graduate community," he said. "You're making a direct impact on the cadet experience and on the experience for leaders for generations to come."

Speaking on behalf of the three contributing classes, Fariss said the finished Air Garden was impressive.

"Our classes are proud to have brought the Air Garden back, and it's just going to get better and better," he said. "These are going to be big trees — so come back in 10 or 20 years."

After their remarks, Gen. Clark, Gen. Gould and Col. Fariss cut the ceremonial ribbon.

“The Air Garden has needed this restoration for many, many years. This came about because of teamwork ... from the Academy, the donor community and our partners in Colorado Springs who came out to help do the construction.”

—Lt. Gen. (Ret.) Mike Gould, '76

“To have the Air Garden finished and restored is really important for our Academy,” Gen. Clark said following the ceremony. “Literally and figuratively, this is the centerpiece for our Academy.”

Gen. Clark said he’s grateful for the partnership with the three classes, the AOG and the Foundation in making the project possible.

“The Air Garden has needed this restoration for many, many years,” Gould added. “This came about because of teamwork ... from the Academy, the donor community and our partners in Colorado Springs who came out to help do the construction.”

Fariss reported the three classes raised more than \$3 million to help accomplish the Air Garden restoration. The graduates are thrilled with how it turned out.

“Our classes were looking for a gift that would have long-lasting significance and impact,” he said. “It’s totally been worth it, and we’re just so excited for this day. It totally exceeds our expectations, but not our hopes.”

Planning for the restoration project began in 2015, and construction has been underway since June 2020. In remaking the garden, workers moved some 277 cubic yards of dirt and planted 344 trees.


The Air Garden was restored to its original design, with reflective pools, sunken planters and walkways amid trees and plants. Each pool is individually plumbed, eliminating the previous issue of draining the entire system if maintenance or repair were required.

New technologies were incorporated in the restored Air Garden, including a modern electrical system for the lighting.

In one variation from the original layout, the restored Air Garden includes granite seating for two outdoor classrooms.

During the restoration, the Air Garden also was enhanced with the addition of

the 9/11 Memorial, which pays tribute to the United States and the three places where airplanes crashed during the terrorist attacks of Sep. 11, 2001.

The Air Force Academy Foundation directed the overall project, with Matrix Design Group as the engineering firm and G. E. Johnson as the contractor. 



TOP: Members from the Class of 1975 pose for a photo behind the new monument on the edge of the Air Garden.

ABOVE: Col. (Ret.) Larry Fariss '75, USAFA Superintendent Lt. Gen. Richard Clark '86 and Lt. Gen. (Ret.) Mike Gould '76, CEO of the Association of Graduates and the Air Force Academy Foundation, cut the ribbon during an Oct. 23 ceremony at the newly restored Air Garden. (Photos by Jeff Holmquist)

What's New Is Old Again

USAFA Air Garden history comes full circle

By Lt. Col. (Ret.) Steven A. Simon '77

Upon first glance at the Air Force Academy's Cadet Area, two things stand out — the modern architecture with structures made of aluminum and glass and the imposing mountains and plains that surround it.

That those two seemingly incompatible elements mesh so beautifully is due to the genius of the Skidmore, Owings and Merrill (SOM) architects and designers.

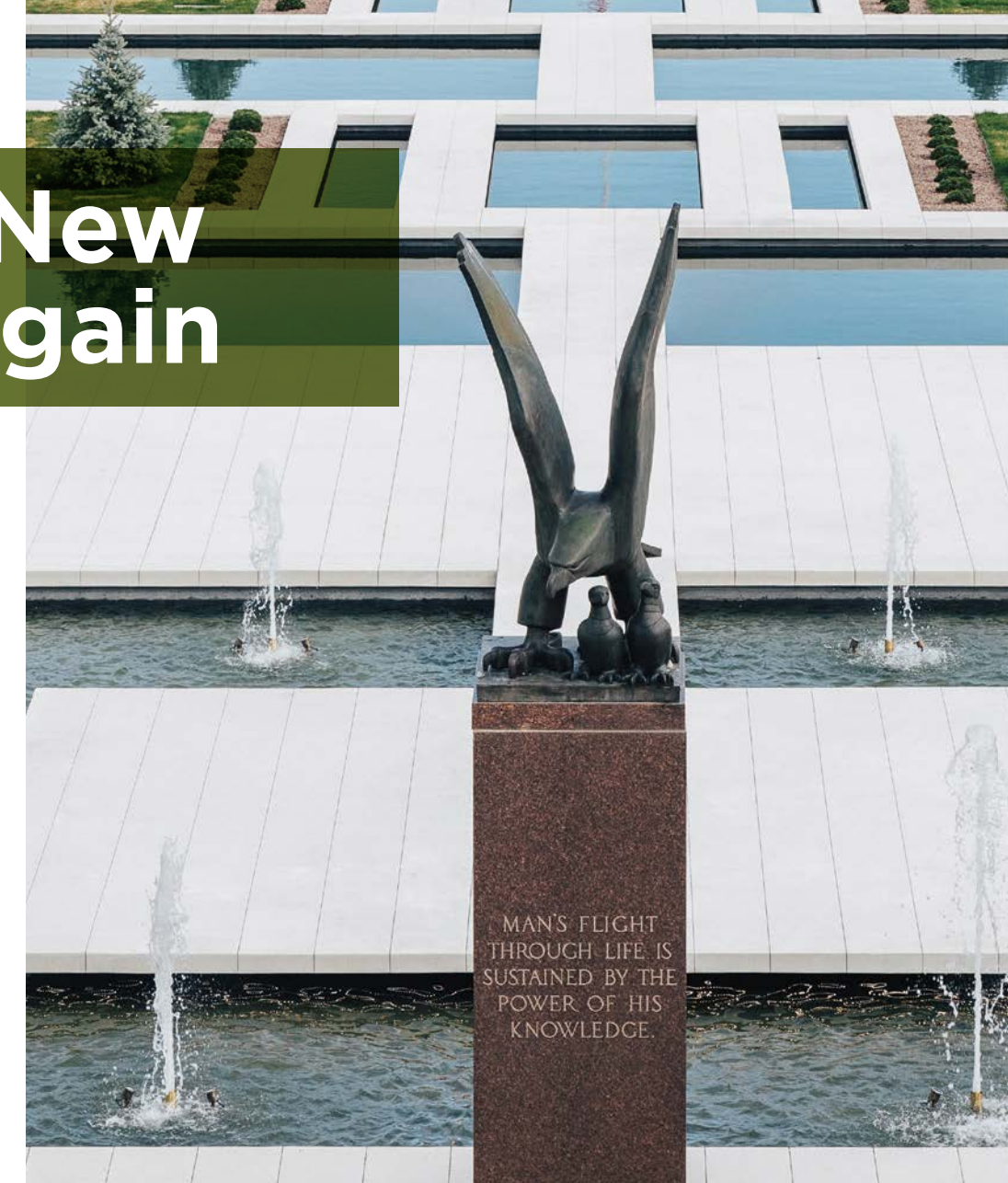
When he first visited the site, lead architect Walter Netsch considered the natural surroundings and is quoted as saying “How do we compete with infinity?” He knew it was vital that the facility not dominate the setting, nor could it be swallowed up by the vastness of the terrain.

With that in mind, he and his associates gave great credence to honoring and highlighting nature. It was for this reason that the Air Garden was created. While its form has evolved over time, recent steps were made to return it to its original watery and tree-lined splendor.



In the 1950s, Daniel Urban Kiley was one of the nation's foremost landscape architects. Among his successes was the landscaping in St. Louis's Gateway Arch complex. Although SOM had landscape architects on staff, they respected the Academy project and Kiley's talents so much that they went outside the organization to hire him, on the recommendation of noted architect Eero Saarinen.

Kiley oversaw all natural aspects of the Academy project, including the overall feel of the two main gates and the roadways.

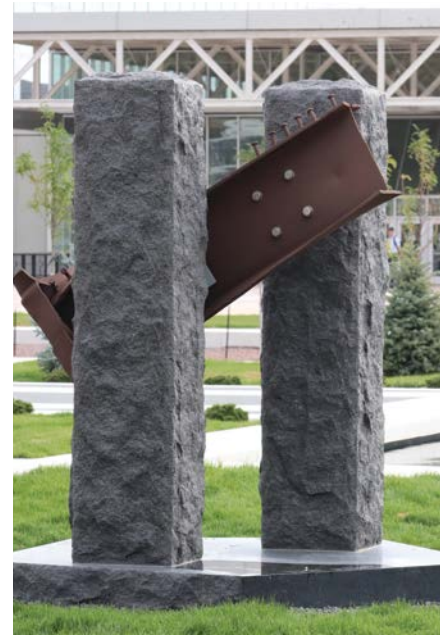


He created designs for the cadet dormitory courtyards (which were supposed to have plants and pools, too) and the Honor Court. But his best-known contribution to the Academy is the Air Garden. (The Air Garden is one continuous and integrated area, thus the use of the singular form.)

Kiley intended for the 700-foot-long space to be an iconic counterpoint to the Cadet Chapel. It would break the straight lines of the rest of the Terrazzo level, with water, grass, hedges and trees, and nonlinear sidewalks.

Those sidewalks formed a raised pavement grid, so that the paths were above the pools, fountains and landscaped areas.

The reflecting pools extended the length of the garden, with underwater swimming pool lights making the pools glow at night.





LEFT: The USAFA Air Garden has been restored to its former glory, thanks to the generosity of the classes of 1972, 1975 and 1976, along with funding from the Dorothy D. and Joseph A. Moller Trust.

BELOW: The 9/11 Memorial has been moved to the western edge of the Air Garden.

RIGHT: The statue honoring Brig. Gen. James Robinson "Robbie" Risner, fighter pilot and prisoner of war, was moved to its new location within the Air Garden. (Photos by Ryan Hall)

Duane Boyle, the Academy architect, spoke to Kiley about the design.

"He [Kiley] wanted the effect of one leaving the Terrazzo and walking or coming upon a forest and a lake," Boyle recalls. "He wanted it to be the nicest feature on the Terrazzo."

Kiley's creation was intended to evoke, in his own words, "A walk in nature. ... Movement is ever-continuous and evasive, like a maze. Every time you walk in nature it is a fresh experience. You might squeeze through some small maple trees, pick your way across a rushing stream and climb up a hill into an open meadow. It's always moving and changing spatially. What I did with the Air Garden was create a man-made scene having these spatial qualities."

Kiley's three-dimensional work of art was completed in time for the Academy's move to its permanent site from the temporary location at Lowry Air Force Base in Denver, Colorado.

Unfortunately, his vision did not last long.

From the beginning, there were problems. For one thing, the pool design was a management headache. Simple maintenance was difficult because the pools were all connected. To fix one pool, the entire 600,000-gallon-capacity pool system had to be drained.

Contrary to Academy lore, it was not true that the fountains leaked into the buildings below because, simply, there are no buildings below. Another popular myth held that the water was removed because cadets were injured on the fountain nozzles upon jumping or being thrown into the fountains. Boyle dispels that rumor, saying that he knows of no such incidents.

Another problem was that the landscaped areas next to the reflecting pools were a little over a foot lower than the ground level. This made mowing difficult, as maintainers had to drag lawn mowers down into these areas to cut the grass.

In addition, plant selection was a problem, as some non-native species used in the garden did not survive. Improper watering and wind added to the difficulties.

For these reasons, in 1975, Kiley's masterpiece was altered when the pools, fountains and recessed areas were filled with dirt and the shrubbery was removed. To complicate the problem, rather than raise the trees to the higher level, the dirt was added around them. That left the roots too deep in the soil, and the trees could not survive.

For the next two decades, the Air Garden would have no water features.



Which is not to say that nothing happened there, before and after the first major alteration. Installations beautified each end of the greenway and added to the Academy's heritage.

On Dec. 13, 1958, the Eagle and Fledglings statue was dedicated on the south end of the Air Garden, near Mitchell Hall. The two-ton sculpture by Curt Mose was given to the Academy by person-



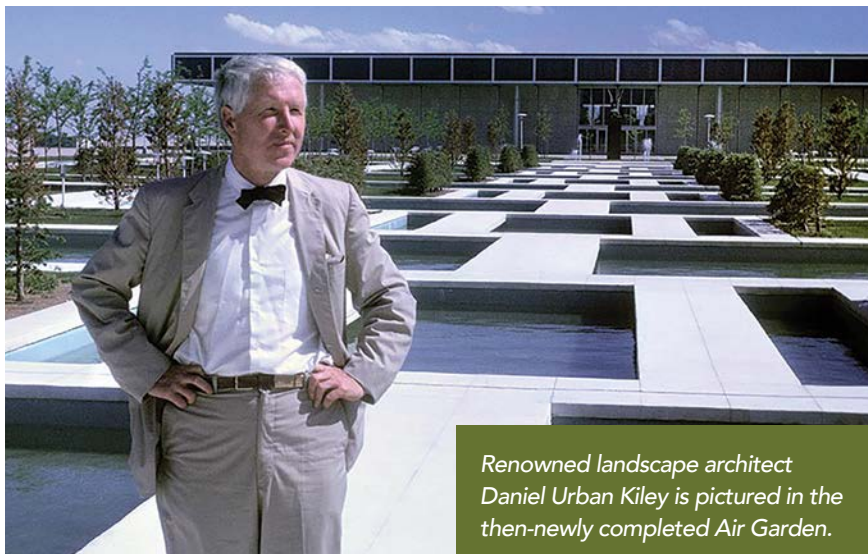
nel of Air Training Command. Mounted on a 10-foot-tall granite pedestal, the large eagle represents the speed, power and readiness of the Air Force, while the eaglets symbolize the cadets, being nurtured and trained by the Air Force. The inscription, "Man's Flight Through Life Is Sustained by the Power of His Knowledge" was written by Austin Dusty Miller.

On Oct. 10, 1970, the Graduate War Memorial was dedicated at the north end, facing (and almost embracing) the flagpole. Capt. Richard Mathews '60, the Association of Graduates' first alumni secretary, came up with the idea — sadly, he died before seeing the memorial completed. The curved monolith, constructed of three slabs of black starlite granite was manufactured by the Monument Services Company of Vermont. The inscription carved at the top reads, "In memory of our fellow graduates who have fallen in battle. ... " Below that are the names of graduates killed in combat or combat-related operations. Gifted to the Academy by the Association of Graduates, the memorial cost \$24,000, 90% of which was donated by graduates. ►

At the dedication ceremony, the then-Commandant of Cadets Brig. Gen. Robin Olds challenged the cadets in attendance, urging them to: “Remember these names. Honor them. They are a part of you, the wing. They represent your past, as you today represent our future. Reflect in their example of selfless devotion to duty, and gain courage so that, when you face your test, you may add honor and glory to the annals of the wing — and of the Air Force — and of our country.”

In addition to these two anchor structures, various statues have come and gone over the years. Some temporary Air Garden residents were the Wright Brothers (now on the sixth-floor landing of the McDermott Library’s spiral staircase), Gen. Jack Ryan (now near Arnold Hall) and Gen. Jerome O’Malley (also outside Arnold Hall). Incidentally, Naval Academy graduate and two-time presidential candidate Ross Perot donated the O’Malley statue, as well as the only statue of an individual that remains in the Air Garden — that of Gen. Robinson Risner.

One other temporary resident of the Air Garden was the Northrop X-4 Bantam tailless transonic research plane that had been flown by Chuck Yeager. The prototype was tested by the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics in 1949-51. When first brought to USAFA, it was placed in the courtyard on the south side of the Arnold Hall Theater, space now occupied by Polaris Hall. The small aircraft was a cadet “spirit mission” favorite, so for its own good it was moved to the Air Garden and placed on the peninsula behind the Eagle and Fledglings statue. Members of the Class of ’72 claim it was they who moved it to that location, the result of a two-night effort, considerable engineering prowess and manpower, and some “borrowed” construction equipment. However it got there, the aircraft was anchored to the site and its wings were filled with concrete. In 2001, the X-4 permanently left its post in the Air Garden, bound for the Air Force Flight Test Center at Edwards Air Force Base, California.



Renowned landscape architect Daniel Urban Kiley is pictured in the then-newly completed Air Garden.



Despite all of the years and all of the changes, Kiley’s original design never lost its appeal. Eventually, the Air Garden as he envisioned it germinated and reemerged from the dirt, like a carefully sown and nurtured plant. The restoration happened in two phases over nearly 30 years.

In 1993, work began on restoring the fountains at either end. Lt. Gen. Brad Hosmer ’59, the superintendent at the time, was instrumental in that project.

He recalled the Air Garden of his cadet days and advocated for a partial return to its original condition. Fortunately, technological advances in the years since the original construction made it feasible to return water to the garden. The dirt was carefully removed from the fountains, and some of the original materials — to include nozzles, lights and tanks — were found to be usable.

SOM created the design for the fountain restoration, and Kiley was brought back to consult on the project. Among his contributions was an improved design of the underwater lighting that allowed the pools to glow at night. Originally, changing burned-out bulbs required draining the pool. He suggested lights on pedestals that could be lifted out of the water for replacement.


Another change Kiley suggested was the color of the fountain walls. As Boyle relates, “The tanks were originally blue. Even after restoring the north and south fountains in the ’90s, we still went with blue. However, in talking to Kiley, he thought that the tanks should be a very dark gray. Reason: It allows the water to reflect the

sky and surroundings better. The water becomes reflective.”

The fountains were brought back into service just in time for the Ring Dance in 1994.

The second phase to restore the Air Garden to its former glory began in June 2020. It was completed this fall.

Coincidentally, the Air Garden and the structure Kiley built it to counter — the Cadet Chapel — were under major construction at the same time during the past year-plus. While one goal of the Chapel restoration is to leave it exactly as it looked at the beginning of the project, the objective of the Air Garden was to drastically change its recent appearance. In both cases, however, the end result will be a return to the design elements and the appearance that the original planners intended.

Now, with the Air Garden restored to its original glory, Doolies can attempt to become aces by sneaking through the park five times without getting caught, and Firsties can leap into the fountain after their final (carefully avoiding the nozzles), in an Air Garden that looks as it did in the 1950s. 

Primary sources of information for this article are:

- *Modernism at Mid-Century – The Architecture of the United States Air Force Academy*, edited by Robert Bruegmann, 1994.
- 2nd Lt. Michael Lebovitz’s two-part historical perspective on the Air Garden published in *Checkpoints* magazine, June and September 2007.