

On the Wings of Modernism



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The United States Air Force Academy stands as one of the most extensive architectural projects of the cold war era. Key to a full understanding of American modernism, this project was also a volatile battleground involving competing ideas about aesthetics and politics. Arguing that the academy's production was squarely grounded in bureaucratic and political processes, Robert Allen Nauman demonstrates that selection of both the site and the design firm was the result of political maneuverings involving U.S. military leadership. In the academy's iconic design, myths and metaphors of flight and the American West were interwoven with those of modernism, both to justify the plan and to free it from any lingering socialist or European associations. Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill's first public exhibition of plans and models for the project was designed by the former Bauhaus master Herbert Bayer, and it incorporated photographs of the Colorado Springs site by Ansel Adams and William Garnett. Using previously unexplored resources of the U.S. Air Force Academy, SOM, and the Air Force Academy Construction Agency, Nauman uncovered materials such as negatives of Adams' original photographs of the sites. He also conducted extensive interviews with SOM's project director for the academy, Walter Netsch, in tracing the complete history of the academy's construction, from its earliest conception to eventual completion.

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