

MIT List Center

Eero Saarinen MIT Chapel

Built In the 1950s, the MIT Chapel and Kresge Auditorium just across the way were part of MIT's response to the aftermath of World War II. Associate Dean of MIT School of Architecture and Planning, Mark Jarzombek.

MIT was concerned that its scientists were too limited and that the future required scientists who knew something about the world and who could, in fact, see the technological as a cultural product just as much as a question of innovation. MIT created a humanities program, but they also commissioned Eero Saarinen to design this nondenominational chapel and an auditorium as a place where one could go to reflect on life and communicate to each other about the realities of the age.

The Finnish-born Saarinen was a prolific architect whose commissions encompassed the high symbolic, such as the St. Louis Arch to the modernist aesthetic, such as the TWA terminal at New York's John F. Kennedy Airport. The chapel synthesizes both approaches. Its cylindrical form echoes ancient pantheons, but is distinctly modern as well.

From the outside, the chapel is a simple, windowless brick cylinder set up on arches and placed inside a moat. It's a mysterious building. How do you enter it? What do you do inside it? If you didn't know that it was a chapel, you might think of it, perhaps, as some sort of industrial experiment.

The textured brick endows the modern building with a historic feel and contrast with the thin-shelled concrete structure of Kresge Auditorium.

He wanted his building not to be just seen as a functional element, but as something elevated. And indeed, the two buildings are elevated literally about 3 or 4 feet over the surroundings. He wanted to sort of make sure that people understood that this area was special and set off from the general academic world of MIT.

To hear more about the chapel's interior, altarpiece and spire as well as Kresge Auditorium, please refer to nearby signage.