

MIT List Center

Eero Saarinen Kresge Auditorium

Acknowledge that one of the best examples of mid-century modern architecture in the US, Eero Saarinen's Kresge Auditorium, was built in 1955 as part of MIT's effort to broaden its mission beyond its scientific focus. Rather than design a building that would blend in with the campus' largely neoclassical structures, Saarinen created a visually stunning and innovative design. The elegant thin-shell structure of reinforced concrete rises to a height of 50 feet.

A nod to MIT's iconic dome by William Welles Bosworth, Kresge's roof is stretched out and pulled down like a canopy at only three points. Associate Dean of MIT School of Architecture and Planning, Mark Jarzombek.

It's a very bold design. Today, the roof's copper sheeting from our recent restoration about 10 years ago gives the building a heavy look, but originally, the roof was exposed concrete, and the feeling would have been of a large sail billowing skyward.

Inside, the space soars. There are no columns and no intervening architecture of any type.

The building consist of two parts. One is a bowl, which holds the seats and the auditorium, and the other is the lid, the dome, which sort of rests over it, forming, as people say, a type of clam.

Just across the way is the MIT Chapel Saarinen designed as a companion to Kresge. At first glance, the buildings seem to have nothing in common, but a closer look reveals a subtle connection.

There's something about the simplicity of these buildings, the directness of the design, their functional characteristic, as well as their capacity to carry the message of MIT as being more than just a place of engineering but as a place where cultural issues, and thoughtfulness, and philosophy, and religion, and humanities, do matter as well.

Additional commentary about the chapel, its exterior, interior, altarpiece inspire, is available on the List's website.