

MIT List Center

Theodore Roszak

In 1955, Polish-born sculptor Theodore Roszak was asked to imagine a spire for MIT's non-denominational chapel, designed by Eero Saarinen.

It was not appropriate to have a cathedral spire or a dome of a synagogue or a dome of a mosque.

A mighty professor of art history, Caroline Jones.

This had to be a completely abstract form. We can see in this form the visual culture of a kind of space age aspiration. These three spires reach towards the heavens, each one attempting to outreach the other in a kind of race for space.

Indeed, the atomic age weighed heavily on Roszak. The mass destruction wrought by technology during the war led him to begin making expressionistic welded steel sculptures.

Rozzak was working with a very new post-war material, aluminum, and he was both seduced by this high tech new technology, but he was disturbed by the techn-utopianism that might be imputed to that new material. So at the base of the bell tower, he literally added bits of metal to make it a rough and textured surface, which he felt would humanize this technological material, would add a kind of furry, humble, human base to this aspirational striving of these three spires.

The spire was not universally loved. It was criticized for resembling a dinosaur bone, a lobster claw, and a twisted set of hairpins. When one MIT student expressed dismay that the spire wasn't tall enough and no one could see it across the campus, Roszak responded, but God will.

Additional commentary about the chapel and the altar piece, as well as Kresge auditorium, is available on the List's website.