

Old airports, new beginnings

Many of yesteryear's decommissioned and derelict airport terminals are being resuscitated, their architectural features reinstated after years of neglect, and in many cases repurposed for a viable new future.

By PAUL SILLERS



Soon to be a hotel, the
former TWA terminal
at JFK, New York.





A midst the vibrant hubbub of New York’s JFK Airport, a concrete architectural icon of the 1960s stirs from its slumber. After lying vacant since 2001, the former “Flight Center” terminal of defunct airline TWA is prepping for its grand opening – and reincarnation – next year as the “TWA Hotel.”

Designed in 1955 by Finnish-born architect Eero Saarinen, the Flight Center encapsulated the spirit of flight with its organic bird-like contours, evocative of the optimism and excitement of the new jet age when the terminal became operational in 1962.

THE MONUMENTAL GATEWAY brimmed with futuristic innovations. “It was equipped with the first movable jetways where you could walk from the terminal to the door of the aircraft. Saarinen invented the carousels – it was the first terminal to have those. He spent lots of

time studying how long it would take passengers to get from the waiting room to the plane, and devised a lot of innovations in terms of announcement boards and baggage handling,” says Richard Southwick, Partner and Director of Historic Preservation at Beyer Blinder Belle (BBB), the New York-based architects, that, together with developer MCR, are transforming the terminal into a 505-room hotel with eight restaurants, six bars, fitness facilities and an observation deck. The hotel will retain many of the terminal’s jet age details, such as the original mechanical Solari split-flap message board.

BUT WHY DID the Flight Center cease operations and why is it getting a new lease of life now?

The Center was designed at the end of the propeller-driven airliner era and on the cusp of the jet age, when aircraft typically carried around 100 passengers. But despite Saarinen’s focus on the future, nobody in the



Photo: Max Touhey

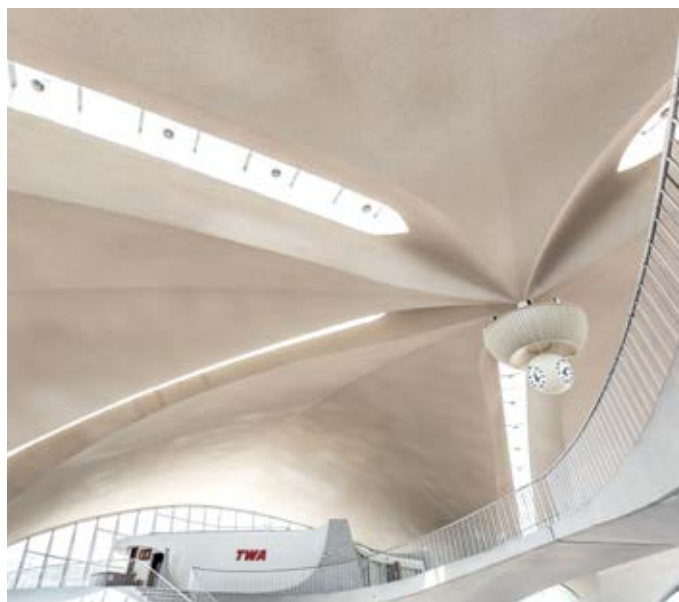


Photo: Max Touhey

The repurposed TWA Airport terminal has been redundant since 2001.

'You could say the terminal was designed for a different era'



The original TWA terminal building was designed by Finnish architect Eero Saarinen in 1955.

mid-50s could have anticipated the 350-seater wide-body jets of the late 60s.

"When TWA got its first Boeing 747, the terminal was basically obsolete at that point. It was too small. You had people sitting in the tubes (the corridors linking the terminal with the gates), because there was no place for them to wait. If you had two planes coming in or taking off, it just couldn't handle that capacity and the baggage areas were wall to wall. You could say the terminal was designed for a different era," Southwick says.

THE TWA HOTEL is just one of a number of former airport terminal revamps by BBB, which also include the restoration of the 1938 Marine Air Terminal at LaGuardia Airport, the former Art Deco-styled base of Pan Am's Clipper flying boats. The architects worked with the Port Authority to identify relevant new uses for the building, leading to the revamp of the entrance portal,

repair of the Tennessee pink marble floors and the restoration of the curved brick façades with their decorative "flying-fish" terracotta frieze. The building now houses the popular Yankee Clipper restaurant.

BBB also transformed the 1935 Newark Airport terminal, which had become too small for post-WWII operations. The architects led its adaptive reuse following restoration of the original Art Deco lobby, its ornate terrazzo floor, marble walls and sculpted plaster ceiling, and the terminal currently houses Newark's police and firefighting departments.

"A lot of these buildings are throwbacks to previous generations of aviation terminal development and they have become so iconic that the managers at the airports and the general public decided that they wanted to try to reuse these buildings for some other purpose," Southwick says.

Currently, in mainland Europe, another bygone →



What was formerly Tempelhof will be reborn as Berlin's new culture district.

Photo: Getty Images

airport is poised for resurrection. Once the world's busiest airport (in the 1920s), Tempelhof in Berlin was remodeled between 1936 and 1941 into a monumental showpiece of National Socialism. Paradoxically, despite its dubious origins, between 1948 and 1949 the terminal became a symbol of freedom during the Berlin Airlift crisis.

Dwindling usage following Germany's reunification, combined with competition from Tegel (West Berlin's main airport) and Schönefeld (formerly East Germany's main hub), precipitated Tempelhof's closure in 2008.

In 2015, consensus was reached between the city's political, administrative, cultural and heritage-protection stakeholders that Tempelhof should be reborn as Berlin's new urban district for culture, aka the "Berlin Creative District," managed by Tempelhof Projekt GmbH.

ONE OF THE architectural firms involved in the reimagining of Tempelhof is :MLZD which won first prize in a competition to design the new access and reception areas, roof terrace, cafe and exhibition areas. Architect Andreas Frank says, "Ours is the first part of the repurposing of the whole building over the coming years, maybe decades. As this is the largest monument in Europe, there are a lot of possible uses being discussed." Looking at the bigger plan, the idea is to roll out a raft of features including a 1.2km rooftop gallery, an Allied museum and a visitor center for exhibitions and events. Currently, Tempelhof Projekt is evaluating concepts to build and operate the "H2rund," a digital and innovation center. o



Photo: Pim Mentkeld



Photo: Tempelhof projekt



Photo: Tempelhof projekt

Tempelhof's new look includes a roof terrace, cafe and exhibition areas.