

Practice

Saarinen's Beloved TWA Terminal and Air Travel for the Future: Can This Marriage Be Saved?

by Stephanie Stubbs, Assoc. AIA

Managing Editor



Even a cursory glance at the current condition of the TWA Terminal at New York City's JFK Airport tells you that it ain't what it used to be: the proud Modern monument to the Jet Age designed by master architect Eero Saarinen in 1962. "Terminal 5," as it is known in the parlance of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, which holds steward-

ship of the airport, has rushed to keep up with the increasing demands of air travel. Along the way, it has acquired concrete and sheet metal and all other kinds of accretions and add-ons just to handle burgeoning amounts of planes, cars, baggage—and people. All appear to have suffered, not least the building itself, which can no longer keep up with the demands of air travel and has fallen into disrepair. Its owner, Trans World Airlines, bought out in June by American Airlines, is uncertain of its own fate and, by extension, that of its future relationship with the Saarinen terminal.

Many elements of the existing building simply render it not a good terminal from a passenger's point of view, says Ted Kleiner, AIA, the Port Authority's assistant director for capital programs. There is no weather protection on the landside of the building, where arrivals and departures are mixed, as opposed to the now-standard bilevel departures and arrivals roadways for air terminals. TWA needed to add a baggage-handling wing to the building on the airside, blocking views arriving passengers would have had to the terminal. Inside, ticketing modules are underused, waiting areas are minuscule and



therefore overcrowded, and the lengthy jetways are not models of accessible design. The challenge becomes providing customer service in a functional terminal—while preserving a landmark.

Master plan offers the best chance for survival

Kennedy Airport, home of the beleaguered building, serves more than 30 million passengers each year, some 18 million of whom are international travelers—more than any other airport in the world. The airport is undergoing a \$10 billion master plan, which includes renovation or replacement of each of its 10 terminals and could have been the impetus for Terminal 5's demise midst the space-starved airport. Actually, though, the Port Authority's master plan offers the Saarinen design—at least the most important parts of it—a great chance for survival; likely the best chance it will get. It seems clear that the building can no longer function as a terminal. However, because the Port Authority has conceived the airport renovation as a whole, there is hope and room for finding a new use for the landmark building.

Part of the Port Authority's holistic approach includes a regionally connected train system, operational next year, that will connect the airport terminals with Jamaica station, hub of the Long Island Railroad. This vital connection provides easy access to midtown Manhattan's Penn Station, Brooklyn, and the length of Long Island. The air train will also make any terminal only minutes away from any other terminal, says Kleiner, allowing the 10 buildings—each designed independently now and in the original plan—to function as a whole.

continued on next page

Practice

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continued from previous page

The plan

The concept of uniting the terminals into a whole allowed conception of Terminal 5 and Terminal 6 as one project, which in turn allowed freer thinking of how to preserve the Saarinen building while developing the up-to-date terminal needed to handle today's air traffic. As is true with the entire Kennedy Airport redesign, says, Robert I. Davidson, FAIA, Port Authority's chief architect, the Terminals 5/6 project needs to balance three elements:

1. Landside/landscape approach to the terminal
2. The terminal itself
3. Airside/boarding and servicing of the aircraft itself.

The plan to restore Terminals 5 and 6 is a public-private partnership between the Port Authority and major airlines, United Airlines chief among them. United has hired William Nicholas Bodouva & Associates of New York City, designer of JFK Airport's much acclaimed Terminal 1, to design the new facility. New York City's award-winning Beyer Blinder Belle will work on restoration of the Saarinen terminal.

Pressure from preservationists to save the terminal led to extensive modifications in the

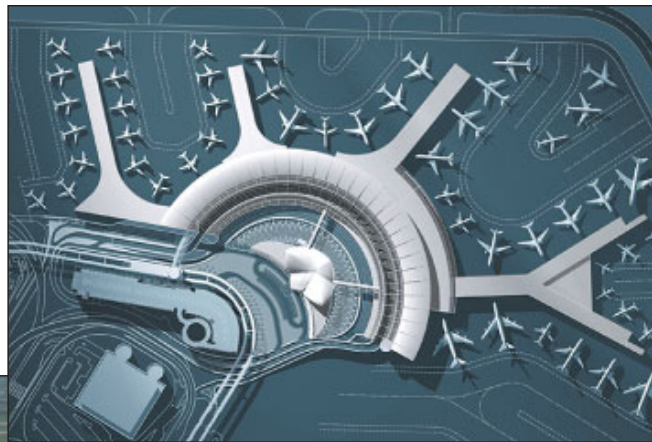


Port Authority's original plan. Most significantly, the agency reworked its roadways into a fairly complex pattern that includes a departure lane that takes cars under the TWA Terminal's umbilical jetways, allowing the umbilicals to be saved. Preservation of the jetways allows for preservation of Saarinen's original parti, which called for entry into the main building and a processional departure down long hallways to a destination—now to be the new terminal.

Davidson explains that the major elements of the current plan include:

- Preserving the Saarinen terminal for a new use (restaurant, conference center, and museum are among the alternatives suggested) and connecting it to the new facility via the intact jetways. This is the driver that keeps intact Saarinen's original parti.
- Removing the airside accretions—including the makeshift baggage handling wing—and opening this outdoor space as a public plaza
- Keeping the profile of the new terminal as low as functional, so it does not overwhelm the landmark building. Depression of the aforementioned roadway on the landside of the TWA Terminal allows for them to be staggered. Although not directly stacked, the arrangement still achieving bilevel arrival and departure roads as well as this lower profile for the new terminal.

Davidson says these major elements, plus connection to the new rail and road systems will allow the Saarinen Terminal to *continued on next page*



Practice

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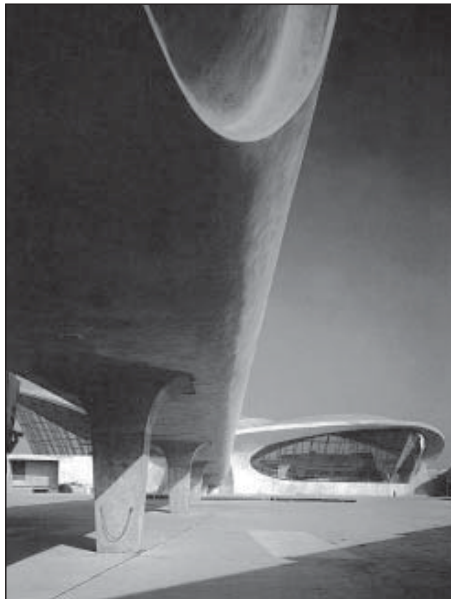
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serve as the centerpiece for JFK Airport.

Concessions must be made

Bringing the terminal up to modern functionality requires concessions in its original design. Most significantly, its two outlying boarding pods (one of which is covered by the city's landmark status; the other was added later) need to be demolished to make room for the new terminal. In their present form, they cannot service today's larger aircraft. In April of this year, the State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation approved the Port Authority's plans to remove the pods, despite objections from the New York City Landmarks Commission, which in this case can suggest changes but not mandate them. Under federal law, the state's historic preservation agency is responsible for approving changes to landmarks when federal money is involved. The Federal Aviation Administration also will review plans for the building.

On the other hand, the plan offers the building a new lease on life and returns to it its all-important context that has gotten crowded by makeshift additions. In a way, although the landmark building will share its space with the new terminal,

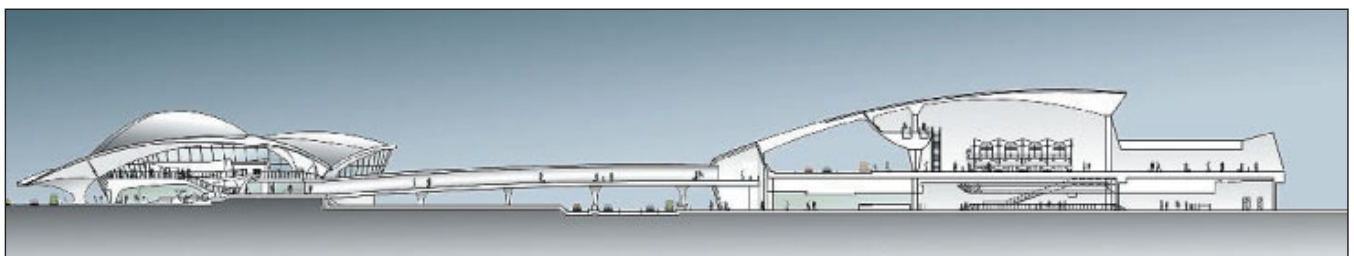
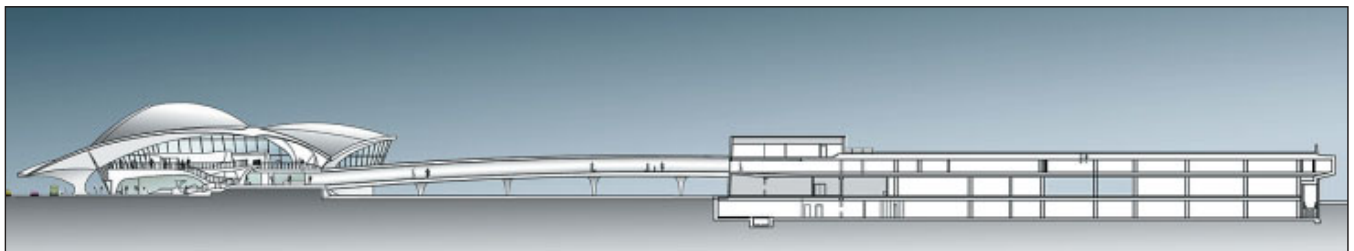


the proposed design offers it more contextual breathing room than it has now by returning its surround in the form of an airside plaza and connections to the landside road and railways.

"These is a lot of fluidity here," says Kleiner, based on the notion that there are still "wild cards" that will affect the timing and construction of the project. The status of TWA and how and if it will continue to function is a wild card, as is finding a new owner who will respect the landmark and treat it right. "We plan to write a very tight preservation scope," Kleiner says. However, it is this unknown that worries preservationists most. They fear that if the building is vacated, it will deteriorate to the point that the Port Authority will need to tear it down ([click here](#)).

Walker S. Johnson, FAIA, chair of the AIA Historic Resources Committee, says, "While we applaud the attempts of the Port Authority to preserve the main building, we cannot forget that its fate is not cast in stone. There still is no tenant for the terminal." To offer protection for other icons of the Modern Movement, Johnson also points to the need for the National Register to reduce the age requirement for buildings to become National Historic Landmarks from the current 50 years to 25 years,

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Practice

Saarinen's Beloved TWA Terminal and Air Travel for the Future: Can This Marriage Be Saved?

continued from previous page

as England and Canada already have done.

Moving Ahead

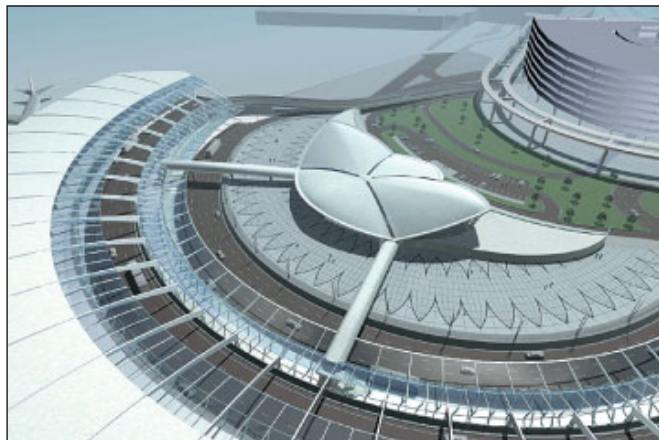
If TWA and a new owner are the wild cards, the ace-in-the-hole is the solidity of the design concept balancing customer service and transportation. The Port Authority met with the federal-level Advisory Council for Historic Preservation on July 23. The Council has 30 days to approve the state-approved plan or ask for more public hearings on the terminal design. In the meantime, overall plans for the overall airport are moving ahead. United Airlines will build the new terminal with an eye toward opening in 2005. Jet Blue, an up-and-comer airline that has made JFK Airport its hub, plans also to occupy the building and has retained Bodouvas as its architect.

There are many precedents of successful adaptive use in which the original structure could no longer support its intended use and has been cradled by a respectful modern suc-



cessor, points out preservation architect John J. Cullinane, AIA, Annapolis, Md. The AIA's own original headquarters, the 1801 Octagon House, now preserved as the Octagon Museum and foiled by the 1973 headquarters, albeit of much smaller scale, demonstrates clearly how the concept employed for the Saarinen's terminal could work.

Our profession could find a lot to be proud of in this process—not the least of which is the collaboration among the public and private architects. The preservationists have led public opinion, perhaps evoking concessions that led to more of the TWA building—and the parti that Saarinen intended—being preserved and incorporated into the design. The Port Authority architects have demonstrated vision and balance in finding a way to preserve the TWA Terminal and make it part of the new master plan. They are working with William Nicholas Bodouva & Associates, and Beyer Blinder Belle, whose track records give every indication of how the old terminal will be preserved—skillfully and beautifully—and the new terminal will be designed—skillfully and beautifully. ■■■



DOCOMOMO Helps Safeguard Saarinen's TWA Terminal

In the midst of a \$10.3 billion redevelopment, the internationally known and universally loved TWA Terminal, designed by Eero Saarinen for John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York City and opened in 1962, most likely cannot survive totally intact. Theo Prudhon, president, DOCOMOMO US

((International Working Party for Documentation and Conservation of Buildings, Sites, and Neighborhoods of the Modern Movement) explains:

“The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, the agency in New York City responsible for the operation of the international airports, has announced, as

part of its plans for the renovation of John F. Kennedy Airport (JFK), the construction of new terminals. One of these new terminals is directly adjacent to the world famous TWA Terminal designed by Eero Saarinen between 1956 and 1962. The airline TWA has been

continued on next page

Practice

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taken over and no longer exists. As a result the TWA Terminal will become vacant and has as yet no appropriate use identified. In addition, as part of the construction of an adjacent new terminal, a portion of the original TWA Terminal and its gate structures are scheduled for demolition.

"DOCOMOMO US and DOCOMOMO TristateNY have three concerns:

- Sections of the original building will be demolished
- A new adjacent building will dwarf the existing structure with little or no proper architectural solution
- The original terminal will be derelict without any viable use which will ultimately lead to its continued deterioration and will in the future lead to arguments for further destruction."

Christopher Northrup, also of DOCOMOMO, sent the following message last month to members to the AIA's Historic Resources Committee:

"Some of you may know already the dire situation Eero Saarinen's TWA Terminal here in New York City now faces. It is a complex issue, which I hope each of you will help support by sending a letter to the Governor of New York and heads of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey.

If you could follow these directions when writing a letter:

1. Please send a letter to the following people regarding your concern and dismay at the plans for the preservation and adaptive reuse of the TWA Terminal.

The Honorable George Pataki

The Governor of New York
The Executive Chamber
The State Capitol
Albany, New York 12224

Neil Levin

Executive Director
The New York and New Jersey Port Authority
1 World Trade Center, 65th Floor
New York, NY 10048

John Fowler

Executive Director
The Advisory Council for Historic Preservation
The Old Post Office Suite 809
1100 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20004

2. Please cc: your letter to the below address, to be committed to official public record:

Edward C. Knoesel

Manager, Environmental Program
Aeronautical and Technical Services Division
Aviation Department
The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey
1 World Trade Center, 65 East
New York, NY 10048

3. Please send a hard copy of your letter to Docomomo c/o Caroline Zileski, 300 Central Park West, 29d New York, NY 10024.

Thank you for your help and keep checking your email for further developments. Your action and making your voice heard is crucial to changing this outcome!!!

*Christopher Northrup
DocomomoNY/Tri State
Steering Committee"*

Northrup provided the following sample letter:

Dear Governor Pataki:

I am writing to communicate my concern and dismay for the impending plans by the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey for one of New York's most internationally recognized icons of 20th Century architecture. I am speaking of Eero Saarinen's TWA Terminal in New York City.

My concern for this building is not only its great architectural value, but its value as a symbol from a time in American history of hope, prosperity, and technological innovation. This building is of a time when we were beginning our space programs, before the Kennedy assassinations; it was a time caught in between the idealism of the 1950's and social turmoil of the 1960's. The terminal was a symbol then of America, so too should the new terminal be a symbol of our future in harmony with the past.

As I understand the preliminary plans for the terminal, these plans in no way come close to a satisfactory over-all design solution for the new terminal, nor does it provide for the adequate preservation of the TWA Terminal. It is sad to me that New York, and a nation which commissioned and produced the masterpiece TWA Terminal, cannot, or is not willing to take an innovative approach to the preservation and re-use of a designated Landmark of the City of New York.

The people of New York, and the people of the world, deserve to see a visionary work indicative of the dynamic New York City I have chosen to live in, and the country in which I was born. I beseech you to support an innovative preservation and adaptive re-use for this great work of international stature.

*Sincerely,
Christopher Northrup*