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SUCCESS STORY

Modern Masterpiece Poised to Take Flight: Historic TWA Terminal Queens, New York

“The TWA terminal is one of the world’s great 20th century architectural landmarks and its rebirth is a testament to the exceptional oversight of the Port Authority and the encouragement and support of its preservation and community partners.”

— NEW YORK STATE OFFICE
OF PARKS, RECREATION, AND
HISTORIC PRESERVATION



THE STORY

The Trans World Airlines Flight Center (also known as the TWA Terminal) at New York’s John F. Kennedy International Airport frequently is compared to a bird in flight. With its wing-like vaulted roof and curvilinear interior elements, the building is an icon of modern expressionistic architecture that embodies the romance of flight as well as the jet age aesthetic of the 1960s. Designed by noted architect Eero Saarinen, the building opened as a hub terminal for TWA in 1962. Its architectural significance led to the building’s designation as a New York City Landmark when it was only 32 years old and its subsequent listing in the National Register of Historic Places. However, the terminal’s unique design could not stave off its growing functional obsolescence, however. By the time TWA went out of business in 2001, the terminal had significant operational and capacity deficiencies that led the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey (operator of the airport) to propose replacing the historic terminal.

THE PROJECT

The Port Authority planned construction of a large, new terminal behind the TWA Terminal. While the main portion of the historic terminal would not be touched, two satellite gate structures linked to the main building by oval connector tubes would be demolished. Their proposed demolition helped fuel the controversy that erupted when the plan was made public. Much concern focused on the fact that the TWA Terminal would be isolated from its original airfield context and “wrapped” by a large, potentially overpowering new building. Also troubling was that no use for the historic building was identified as part of the plan, and there was no funding commitment for rehabilitation of the structure. These and other issues led the National Trust for Historic Preservation to place the TWA Terminal on its 2003 list of America’s 11 Most Endangered Places.

THE 106 PROCESS

To move forward with its proposal, the Port Authority needed the Federal Aviation

Photos: Above, cover of TWA 1961 annual report; Right, connector tubes (courtesy Timothy Vogel), windows (courtesy Karen Johnson)

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Photos: Restored main lounge with new terminal visible through windows (courtesy Timothy Vogel); Right: 1960s view (from the ACHP archives); exterior today (courtesy Karen Johnson)



Administration (FAA) to approve a change to the airport's Airport Layout Plan. Thus, the FAA was responsible for conducting the Section 106 process under the National Historic Preservation Act. Section 106 requires that federal agencies identify historic properties and assess the effects of the projects they carry out, fund, or permit on those properties. Federal agencies also are required to consult with parties that have an interest in the fate of the property when adverse effects are likely to ensue. Ultimately, 13 consulting parties—including the Consulate General of Finland, Eero Saarinen's homeland—worked together to explore alternatives to the Port Authority's plan. Through the Section 106 review process, the project design was revised to reduce encroachment on the historic building and permit the two historic connector tubes to be retained and tied into the new building. The Port Authority agreed to seek an adaptive reuse developer for the historic terminal and, pending reuse, to fund interim maintenance. The final Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) for the project set forth these and other measures, including establishment of a Redevelopment Advisory Committee that would review and consult on future plans and designs as they were developed.

THE SUCCESS

The new terminal building was completed and opened in 2008. Ultimately, the Port Authority decided to go beyond its pledge to stabilize and maintain the historic terminal and funded a \$19 million restoration of the building. Inappropriate additions to the building were removed, roofs and windows were repaired, and historic finishes in the main public areas were restored or replicated. This commitment of public funds improved significantly the likelihood of finding a private developer for the historic building. Currently, promising talks are underway regarding the possibility of creating a hotel in the historic terminal. The Section 106 MOA and the Redevelopment Advisory Committee it created provided the framework for these achievements and will continue to shape how the multiple parties committed to preserving the TWA Terminal work to assure the future of this modern architectural masterpiece.

Consulting Parties:

Federal Aviation Administration
 ACHP
 New York State Historic Preservation Office
 Port Authority of New York and New Jersey
 JetBlue Airlines
 New York Landmarks Conservancy
 National Trust for Historic Preservation
 Municipal Art Society of New York
 The New York City Partnership
 Documentation and Conservation of Buildings, Sites and Neighborhoods of the Modern Movement US (DOCOMOMO)
 New York Buildings Congress
 Consulate General of Finland
 John Cullinane & Associates

For more about Section 106 and the ACHP go to www.achp.gov

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