

Rebirth of a Jewel:

Eero Saarinen's Landmark TWA Terminal Has Been Restored as the Centerpiece of a New Hotel at JFK

By Eric Uhfelder

It's not easy finding your way in.

The AirTrain appears to let you off close. But it's a long walk before you can figure your way into the Terminal's iconic access tubes. Parking doesn't get you any closer, unless you're willing to walk down an inbound car ramp and cross access roads.

But however you make your way into the reborn TWA Terminal (formerly known as the TWA Flight Center), it's well worth the effort because this extraordinary structure—for me the most exciting example of modern architecture—succeeds not just because of what you will see, but in what it recalls.

For coach travelers, flight is a punishing experience—a cattle call from the moment you step into most terminals, queuing to check in, passing through security, then the splendor of gate waiting, until you're funneled into your 21-inch wide seat.

Entering into the spacious TWA Terminal is like walking into a museum. No. It's like walking into a painting; wherever you look is extraordinary composition of form, light, and color.

When TWA commissioned Eero Saarinen, the Finnish sculptor and architect, to create its flagship international terminal at JFK, he redefined the experience of air

travel. Saarinen offered travelers a place as spectacular as any destination to which they may have been heading.

"The terminal was laid out not only to provide passengers with a smooth flow of travel between arriving at the building and boarding their planes," wrote the venerable architect and author Robert A.M. Stern, "but to dramatically elevate that journey to a rite of passage; travelers would become part of the drama of flight itself." And when it designated the Terminal landmark status in 1994, the Landmark Preservation Commission, recalled 1962 "as the year New York City lost Pennsylvania Station and gained the TWA Terminal . . . two buildings, with their different ways of enclosing space for waiting and departing, (which) were both exceptional achievements in architecture."

Since TWA failed in 2001, the Terminal has laid largely dormant, until it was transformed into the centerpiece of Kennedy's first onsite, 512-room hotel and conference center. Developed by MCR/Morse Development with restoration and design led by the esteemed architecture firm Beyer Blinder Belle, the hotel will enjoy its formal opening this September. Partner and Director of Historic Preservation at BBB, Richard Southwick, says leading the architectural effort to preserve and restore the terminal "has

been a highlight of my career."

The new hotel and conference space are broken into two distinct curved wings to reduce mass, that emphasizes the symmetry of the Terminal, and provides a benign backdrop to the landmark without competing with Saarinen's design.

Success of this \$265 million project will depend on a unique business plan. There will be guests who stay to make morning flights easier and to deal with long connection waits and flight delays. Some will stay because of the unique destination, offering remarkable vistas of flight, not just from rooms facing the runways (silenced by 4 1/2-inch plate-glass windows), but from a cool rooftop pool and bar, and access to a refurbished classic Lockheed Constellation propeller plane turned very cool lounge.

The extraordinary space will also cash in from hosting special events—from fashion week catwalks, weddings, to feature film sets. (Remember Leonardo de Caprio in *Catch Me If You Can*.)

But the developer is betting the house it can redefine the New York conference event, allowing attendees flying in from all over the country and world to avoid schlepping into Manhattan and instead enjoying this unique setting, embellished throughout with pieces of nostalgia.

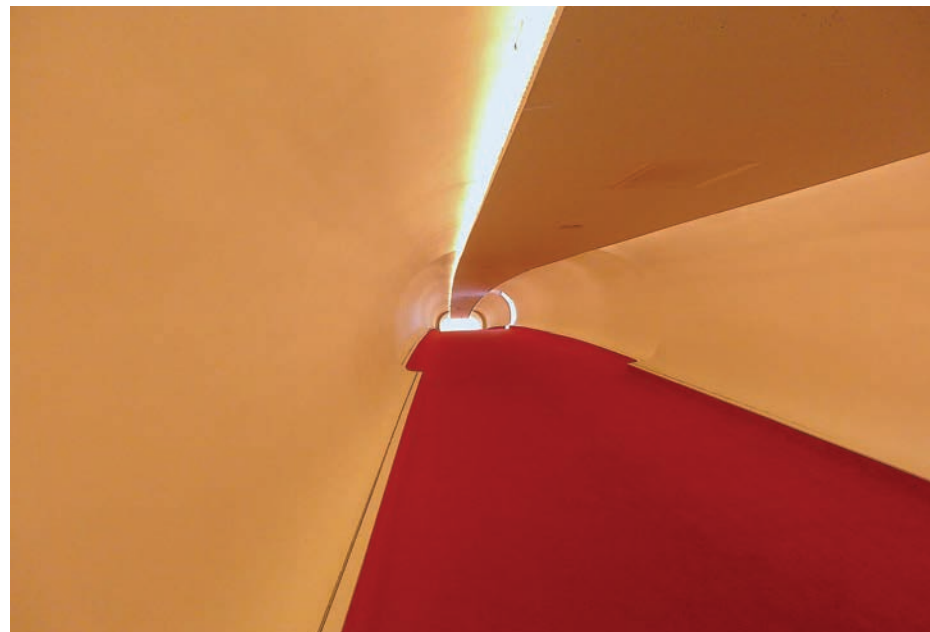
My First Flight from the TWA Terminal

"Form follows function" was coined by architect Louis H. Sullivan in 1896 and remains the most followed architectural design dictum going, suggesting that nearly all architecture, even today, should be created as some type of box.

That is until 1962 when architect Eero Saarinen designed the TWA terminal at Kennedy as giant wings taking flight and I asked myself as I approached it, "is this functional or just design indulgence?" until I stepped inside and found the outstretched arms of the ticket booths that momentarily engaged me only to release me into a giant sweeping bridge to my plane—nice.

—George Caplis

And as for finding an easier way into TWA, by next year visitors will be treated to a new formal pedestrian entranceway from the AirTrain and the parking garage, offering a majestic view of Saarinen's soaring masterpiece.



Clockwise From Left To Right:

THE MAIN ENTRANCE IN TWA.

THE RETRO WELCOMING CREW.

SAARINEN'S SIGNATURE "CHILI PEPPER RED" CARPET, a motif throughout the Terminal, is recreated in the two tubes that used to link the terminal to the gates; now connecting the hotel to the adjacent JetBlue terminal.

THE REMARKABLE SCULPTURAL QUALITY OF SAARINEN'S DESIGN.

Photos by Eric Uhfelder.