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Your Gate has Changed

Adaptive Reuse at the Heart of the Modern Airport

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Abstract

New York's JFK and Los Angeles' LAX have been in a constant cycle of demolition and reconstruction at the service of airport operations, yet two of the most iconic monuments of American Jet Age Futurism—Eero Saarinen's TWA Flight Center at JFK and Pereira & Luckman's Theme Building at LAX—now sit as beloved relics at the center of their respective airports. Built within a year of each other, both structures channel technological ambition and civic identity. And both were rendered obsolete almost immediately by changes in aviation. This paper examines the afterlives of these structures as case studies in adaptive reuse at the intersection of preservation, commerce, and technology. The TWA Flight Center's reinvention as a hotel is often cited as a seamless success story, but its reuse required deeply invasive interventions, exorbitant infrastructure, and a series of previously unthinkable compromises. By contrast, the LAX Theme Building, originally conceived as the central domed hub of futuristically-arrayed radiating terminals, was downgraded to an observation deck and restaurant and preserved by means of isolation as the airport developed around it. Together, these case studies show that the success or failure of adaptive reuse often rides on land use decisions made in the surroundings. They also challenge the more facile narratives surrounding the cultural and sustainability benefits of adaptive reuse. Such narratives may overlook the hidden demands of new programs, new infrastructure, code compliance, structural retrofitting, and commercial viability.

Keywords: Airport, TWA, Theme Building

Introduction

For a brief period in the mid-twentieth century, American architects experimented with a theatrical, futuristic style—structurally expressive, geometrically exuberant, and inspired by both industrial design and science fiction. Two of the most beloved examples stand at the poles of American aviation: the TWA Flight Center at New York's John F. Kennedy Airport (JFK) and the Theme Building at Los Angeles International Airport (LAX). (fig. 1 and 2)
The two buildings were conceived in the 1950s and opened within a year of each other in 1961 and 1962. They were futuristic but emphatically not future-proofed. Cursed with almost immediate obsolescence, both were situated within constant cycles of construction and demolition at the service of the aviation industry. These cycles have outpaced the designation and preservation process that sustains adaptive reuse.
During this period, the airports around these buildings grew vastly to accommodate the jet age's increased passenger load, with aircraft flying more frequently and holding eight times

the seating capacity of their piston engine predecessors. These structures once claimed a commanding presence on the tarmac plateau but are now dwarfed by stacked arrival and departure roadways, parking garages, and monorail structures. These landmarks of the early jet-age now serve as witness structures to the more genteel, romantic, and smaller-scaled era of piston-engine aviation.

How did these two buildings survive? In his 1962 essay *The Obsolete Airport*, Reyner Banham documented the frenetic evolution of airport facilities. He observed that advances in airport architecture inevitably lag advances in commercial aviation, which themselves lag advances in military aviation. Yet he noted that airports continued to build works of architecture like the TWA Flight Center: «The perennial drag of airport design behind airport operation may here have found its most massive and ultimately irreducible ball and chain – the unreformed human desire to create places for things to happen in».(Banham 1962, 253)

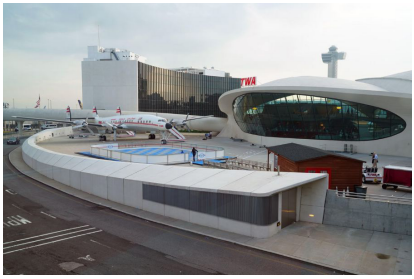

Fig. 1. TWA Hotel. Beyer Blinder Belle / Lubrano Ciavarra (Roy, 2021); Fig. 2. Theme Building. Pereira & Luckman (Grimm, 2007)

The Vestigial Organ

In 1953 the Los Angeles Department of Airports commissioned a joint venture of architects, led by William Pereira, that produced both the master plan for LAX and the design of the Theme Building. An early version of the master plan, adapted from the work of one of Pereira's USC students, featured a single central terminal as a colossal Buckminster Fuller-inspired glass dome emerging from a subterranean spoke-and-hub concourse, with a restaurant hovering at the dome's apex. (Cusack, Whitney 2005) Yet the airlines insisted on decentralized terminals where their branding could begin at the curb. The master plan instead developed into the now-familiar rectangular perimeter of terminal buildings around a vast area of surface parking lots. In the center was a grand arch-supported structure, a vestige of the colossal dome in the original concept. The seeming placeholder name for this structure, the Theme Building, telegraphed both its nostalgia for the unrealized dome and its utter irrelevance to airport operations. Its only stated program: «income production» and «symbol». (Cusack, Whitney 2005, 52)

The Theme Building's main feature is a saucer that is seemingly both supported by a cylindrical core and suspended by intersecting parabolic arches overhead. On top of the saucer was that once-ubiquitous airport attraction, an open-air observation deck, and tucked underneath was a restaurant. Sitting below was a single-story plinth veiled by a screen wall. The designers had an early ambition to construct the parabolic arch structure entirely of reinforced concrete, but this was abandoned to avoid costly formwork. The final structural

design relied on massive built-up steel members, intended to be clad in aircraft-inspired aluminum, though the expense of curving the metal in two directions led to the application of stucco instead. With neither structural rationalism nor the craft of metal cladding, the Theme Building took on an otherworldly quality, as if ripped from the pages of a comic book.

Variations on a Theme Restaurant

The architect Charles Moore once quipped of the Theme Building's restaurant, «The flying saucer doesn't even turn». (Betsky 1991) It's a poignant dig, as this torus-shaped belvedere was built amid the post-war fascination with revolving restaurants, likely its closest typological classification. Each of the seven LAX terminal buildings featured fine-dining restaurants plus grills and cocktail lounges, all operated by Interstate Hosts Inc, and supported by a central prep kitchen inside the plinth of the Theme Building. It's a curious choice of program at the base of such an ambitious and omni-directional structure, as the operation required a large truck dock, mechanical exhaust, and other irregularities that likely generated the need for the screen wall. Hovering above in the saucer was Interstate Hosts' signature venue, "Host International" where waitresses, dressed in the traditional garb of various countries, served conspicuously international cuisine. A critic noted «It was a place, not a restaurant». (Ohanian 1984) In the 1980s it was reconceived first as a French restaurant called "The Theme Room" and then an American restaurant called "California Place". (Gold 1993) By the mid-1990s, there was a new Request for Proposals for a restaurant, and an enterprising group of "Imagineers" took interest. Walt Disney Imagineering (WDI) is the in-house atelier that designs and tests attractions for its dozen theme parks worldwide and it wanted to experiment with applying its talents to non-Disney properties. WDI entered and won the bid, deeming the «California Cold War» interior outdated and choosing to match the futuristic exterior with "The Encounter", an immersive «intergalactic space lounge» with space-themed food and drinks. (Borrelli 2001) WDI found the Theme Building difficult to work with, due to its odd shape, low ceilings, significant noise leaking into the interior, and isolation from the terminals by a visual, auditory and olfactory cacophony. WDI's solution was to bus visitors from the terminals and to set the mood with period Theremin music. The Encounter operated from 1997 to 2013, and the restaurant space has sat vacant since. In 2014 Gina Marie Lindsey, then-LAX executive director, succinctly described the dissolution of the Theme Building's customer base over the years, noting that it was «built when bringing your family out to have dinner and watch the airplanes was a cool thing to do. Passengers now won't leave the terminals to have dinner because it is unpredictable how long it'll take to get through security again». (Forgione 2014)

Jet Age Drama

Across the country, at New York's Idlewild Airport – now JFK – The Trans World Airlines (TWA) Flight Center followed a parallel path to design and construction. Having earned a reputation as a serious caretaker of his corporate client's needs, Eero Saarinen won the commission. His team made numerous visits to other airports with stopwatches in hand, determined to design a space that accommodated a smooth and dignified experience.
The resulting vaults were a stunning composition of board-formed concrete, left natural with an as-cast finish, and complemented by equally sculptural interior elements

that enveloped the TWA passenger in "total design". Every detail was at the service of, in Saarinen's words, an «architecture that would express the drama and specialness and excitement of travel». (Knoll 2015) Widely considered a cathedral for air travel, the Flight Center was also a theater for air travel.

Saarinen dismissed stylistic comparisons of his design to science fiction illustrations, also dismissing claims that the vaults were an abstraction of a bird. He was committed to working with his structural engineers, including Aba Tor of Amman & Whitney, to develop a roof that conjured flight through both structural invention and the architect's representations of structure. For example, the skylights, which sliced the roof vaults cleanly into four separate vaults, produce an ever-changing play of daylight in the interior. Yet they were actually put in at the behest of Tor to address thermal expansion. Conversely, Saarinen insisted on adding creases to the surface of the vaults that merely represented stiffening and required adding four inches of additional concrete to compensate.

By the time the TWA Flight Center opened, the airline had already ordered fleets of passenger jets and done extensive studies of how the new aircraft class would affect flight scheduling. However, TWA, and the aviation industry in general, did not anticipate how jets would tax ground facilities. As a result, Saarinen's design captured the aesthetic promise of the coming jet age spot-on, but it really missed the mark on the sheer scale of the jet age. He seemed to recognize this when he praised the more prescient program of his concurrent design for Dulles Airport. (Ringli 2015)

When the Flight Center opened, TWA heavily publicized the modern efficiency of its design, yet a key feature of what we now assign to modern airports was missing: arrivals and departure circulation was entangled through the entirety of the headhouse. Saarinen believed the design could later accommodate a second circulation tier, though how remains unknown. (Ringli 2015) This entanglement seems to have hastened the terminal's obsolescence, yet other Idlewild terminals were designed with such foresight. The PanAm and Eastern Airlines terminals both opened in 1960, two years ahead of the Flight Center. Both featured fully separated arrivals and departures on different levels and with stacked roadways under sheltered drop-off and pickup. By comparison, without distinct arrival and departure levels, the Flight Center could not accommodate the scale of its growing passenger loads, nor the coming era of airport security.

TWA filed for bankruptcy in 1992, 1995, and 2001, and it was during the final stages of acquisition by American Airlines when the attacks of September 11, 2001 occurred. The "post-9/11" security requirements were deemed infeasible to implement at the Flight Center because the only circulation throats in the design were the flight tubes, and all the amenities were landside of that point, precisely the opposite of where amenities commonly occur today.

The Flight Center's inability to accommodate the required changes in aviation may speak less to genuine structural impediments to alterations and more to the affections for Saarinen's work. Airport buildings all over the world were being altered to meet the demands of the time, but it is possible that the Flight Center was considered too magnificent to alter. Its ambition might have conferred an aura of inalterability.

Idle at Idlewild

Saarinen's death during the construction phase of the Flight Center may have eased the

process of determining which posthumous alterations were historically significant. By 2004, per Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, stakeholders signed a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) establishing the protected portions of the Flight Center. It was this process, more than any other in the life of the Flight Center, that ensured the viability of an adaptive reuse for the site. The MOA stated that the air wings would be demolished, as would the so-called "batwings" that grew out of the rear of the north and south wings, and it established a Redevelopment Advisory Committee (RAC) to evaluate the design development.

In 2001, when the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey (PA) took over stewardship of the Flight Center from the bankrupt airline, it set in motion three initiatives to support the building's adaptive reuse. It initiated a restoration campaign under Richard Southwick of Beyer Blinder Belle Architects (BBB) to return many deteriorated features of the historic headhouse to their original 1962 state. The PA then carved out a parcel around the headhouse to protect it from encroaching construction, attempting to make the parcel large enough to accommodate an adaptive reuse. That parcel included the headhouse and most of the flight tubes, with the flight wings demolished to make way for Gensler's new Terminal 5 for Jet Blue Airways.

Thirdly, the PA launched RFPs for private developers to build hotels on the parcel, and in 2016 the lease went to Tyler Morse of MCR Hotels. Morse hired Anne Marie Lubrano of Lubrano Ciavarra Architects (LCA) and Richard Southwick of BBB to design the hotel.

The World's Greatest Hotel Lobby

The transformation of the Flight Center from terminal to hotel follows a simple diagram: the headhouse would house the lobby-like functions, and the guest would take the flight tubes not to their gate but to their rooms. The elegance of the design relies on efforts to both reinforce this simplicity and conceal the infrastructure that makes it all function.

The work to transform the headhouse into what Morse promoted as the greatest hotel lobby in the world was minor surgery. Its newly restored vaulted center saw little change. The mechanical system was replaced using the same ingenious air distribution of the original Saarinen design. The lighting concept was maintained, and fixtures upgraded. The shell's acoustic treatment remained. In aggregate, this processional space that was designed for the "drama of travel" performed perfectly for the drama of hospitality.

Other than the intact original ticketing hall, the north and south wings of the headhouse were reconstructed to recreate the original baggage claim, to accommodate new accessible ramps, to carve out new retail and event spaces, and most importantly to retract to the 1962 footprint, clearing space on the parcel for two new guest room buildings to satisfy the six hundred room *pro forma*. The RAC required that new buildings be out of view of the central Sunken Lounge and that the hotel's conference center be entirely underground, with its roof serving as the ersatz aircraft apron.

The resulting front-of-house guest experience is a near-effortless redirection of the Saarinen design, from an airport procession to a hotel procession, but the seamlessness was made possible by the contortions of back-of-house infrastructure. The subterranean structures, for example, had to dodge the hundreds of steel piles that support the headhouse and flight tubes, withstand immense groundwater pressures, and preserve the geological barrier that separates the polluted airport soil from Long Island's aquifer of drinking water. The

subterranea and other infrastructure constituted half the cost of the adaptive reuse project. And these cost premiums hint at what is likely a significantly larger carbon footprint than more modestly constructed hotels of the typical airport periphery. All of this is out of sight of the hotel guests, who perceive only the seamless parts of the effort. The TWA Hotel is adaptive reuse as sleight-of-hand.

Conclusion: Two Ducks Among the Sheds

Why has the vibrant reuse of the TWA Flight Center escaped the LAX Theme Building? Stacking the deck is the simple fact that the Flight Center features an interior space of immense beauty; there will always be people willing to sit within and enjoy the play of light across its sculpted surfaces. The Theme Building, by contrast, is a building that, while heroic in form, has an interior designed solely for the purpose of looking outward. LAX has done an earnest job of managing, through voluntary setbacks and height limits, the surrounding airport construction to maintain views of the Theme Building, but views from the Theme Building are another matter. It was designed to view aircraft, but its view has been commandeered by the multi-tiered vehicular and parking structures that encircle it. We are well beyond the era when one would visit the Theme Building to admire its surroundings.

In 1972 Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour introduced the dialectic between a building that conveys its program and its meaning through its shape and a building where its meaning is, in some way, applied: the *Duck* and the *Decorated Shed*. Modernist architects, they believed, had been overtaken with the need to express the program of a building in its form, resulting in impractical and inflexible buildings that fit too tightly over their program, like a glove to a hand. Venturi et. al. could easily have offered our two buildings as archetypes of the Duck, and the buildings now sit amongst the many Sheds of their respective airports. It is why the Flight Center's headhouse, sculpted for procession and drama, could not have been adapted to anything other than a hotel lobby. It is why our best hope for the Theme Building's interior vitality may be that it simply has a better restaurant. From the outside, though, the Theme Building's stated program was symbolism, and as a symbol of the city of Los Angeles, it is second to none.

These magnificent landmarks embody our collective disillusion with the optimism of the 1960s, spanning the shift from Utopian to Dystopian fantasies, validating our fears that the future as sold was never going to arrive. As the siting of these two structures inside massive airports reminds us, the future we presently live in was ushered in more by machinery than by architecture, yet these works of architecture persist, along with our «unreformed desire» to adapt them. (1962)

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