



Come Fly With



Me ————— ✈️

In May 1962, Trans World Airlines opened a new hub at New York's Idlewild Airport (now John F. Kennedy International). But the TWA Flight Center was no ordinary airplane boarding spot. A swirl of vaulted arcs and gleaming glass, resembling a bird in flight, the structure was a daring expression of form by architect Eero Saarinen, whose futuristic design captured TWA's bold optimism and spirit of adventure.

Saarinen died unexpectedly in 1961, but his fame as a modernist master was solidified with a series of memorable creations built later that decade, most notably, St. Louis' Gateway Arch.

None, however, was as audacious as his Flight Center—now a hotel—where the jet age soars in every swerve of its curvilinear concrete. Join us as we explore this marvel from a golden era when the sky was the limit and air travel the height of sophistication.

BY MARY-LIZ SHAW

TWA MUSEUM AT 10 RICHARDS ROAD, KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI



THE ROOF stands free of its complex scaffolding. A 1962 print ad, far left, shows the finished terminal in a dramatic light.



Terminal City

TWA approached Saarinen in 1955 after New York's port authority devised a plan for airlines to build independent terminals at Idlewild to handle their own flights. Airlines pushed for that concept, dubbed Terminal City, because they saw it as a way to showcase their brands. While always an option for the rich, air travel was just taking off among the burgeoning middle class, and airlines were in fierce competition to gain market share.

Indeed, an architectural one-upmanship ensued at Idlewild among American Airlines, whose terminal had the world's longest continuous cocktail lounge; PanAm, whose grand disklike Worldport was acclaimed upon completion in 1960; and, of course, TWA, whose curvaceous hub stole the show in 1962.

From the Ground Up

Theories abound as to what inspired the terminal's shape—some believe it was the rind of a sectioned grapefruit—but it certainly wasn't a bird, according to the architect. "That was the last thing we thought about," Saarinen said later.

What he did think about a great deal was how to construct a building that looked like no other in existence at the time. Today's architects use computer programs to calculate every angle, dimension and stress factor. But in 1959 all Saarinen had was his brain, structural engineers and an army of craftsmen who handmade a complicated scaffolding grid to support the 6,000-ton roof during construction. The architect and the general contractor produced hundreds of schematics to guide the work, and Saarinen built large-scale models to further help him think it through.

For the interior, Saarinen used TWA's colors—chile pepper red and white—to dramatic effect in a sunken waiting area studded with the architect's signature pedestal tables. Swirling staircases stirred passengers through the terminal, while carpeted tunnels funneled them to gates.

One of the most captivating features was the large Solari board clicking through arrivals and departures behind the central reception desk. Saarinen encased it in a tile-covered concrete sculpture that resembled a human eye. (Shown on cover.)



THE VIEW from the mezzanine, shot by architectural photographer Balthazar Korab in 1964.

MARY TYLER MOORE takes a call in the sunken lounge, TWA bag at her feet. Far right, the Beatles invade New York via TWA.



High Times

The Flight Center was an instant brand identifier for TWA and a powerful symbol of the thrill of flying.

"We tried to design a building in which the architecture itself would express the drama and excitement of travel," Saarinen said. "In a way, this is man's desire to conquer gravity."

Yet shortly after it opened, the Flight Center was already en route to being a throwback. It was meant to accommodate the smaller prop planes in vogue in the late 1950s, not the large jumbo jets that soon became the industry standard. TWA had

to make several modifications over the years to keep it a working terminal. More sculpture than building, its artistic shape made any practical addition feel ungainly. It finally closed in 2001, when TWA was sold to American Airlines.

But the Flight Center defied its apparent failings because it was always about the dream of flight, not its messy practicalities. A beacon of glamour, it was a stylish landing for celebrities stepping off TWA flights—Liz Taylor, Grace Kelly, Red Skelton, Rod Steiger.

Even after it closed, the terminal's star status lived on. In 2002 Steven Spielberg made the Flight Center the backdrop for his homage to 1960s jet-setting, *Catch Me If You Can*.



FRENCH INDUSTRIAL designer Raymond Loewy styled the Lisbon Lounge II. This is how it looked in August 1962.



Eero Saarinen
Architect & Industrial Designer

Aug. 20, 1910 - Sept. 1, 1961

BORN IN FINLAND to an architect father and a textile designer mother, Eero Saarinen (*Eh-row Sahhr-inin*) moved with his family to the United States at age 13. In Michigan, the elder Saarinens taught at the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills; Eero's father, Eliel, designed most of the campus, now a National Historic Landmark.

Eero studied at Cranbrook, where he befriended artists who were later at the apex of midcentury modern design, especially Charles Eames and Florence Knoll. While working in his father's architectural firm, Eero's career took off in a spectacular way when he won the 1948 design competition for the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial in St. Louis (now Gateway Arch National Park).

High-profile commissions from disparate clients through the 1950s resulted in an equally disparate body of work, from the cavellike chapel at MIT in Massachusetts to the

Brutalist war memorial in Wisconsin to the whale-shaped Ingalls rink at Yale in Connecticut. Some criticized Saarinen for absorbing the whims of clients so deeply that he developed no distinct style of his own. Yet each of his structures was highly expressive and inspired strong reactions. In the last project Saarinen oversaw before his death—TWA's Flight Center—emotion was the guiding principle.

Perhaps because he had to please no one but himself, Saarinen did find a unique voice in furniture design. At the invitation of

his old friend Florence at Knoll Associates, Saarinen created some of the most recognizable pieces of American modernism, including the iconic Womb chair (48), named for how it cradles the sitter, and the Pedestal Collection (58), better known as Tulip chairs and tables.



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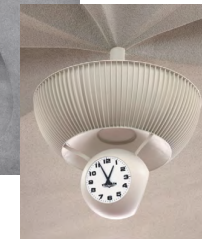
1. Tulip chair, designed for Knoll, 1958.
2. War Memorial Center, Milwaukee, WI, 1957.
3. Dulles International Airport, Dulles, VA, 1962.
4. North Christian Church, Columbus, IN, 1964.
5. Saarinen with model of St. Louis arch, late '50s.
6. Womb chair, designed for Knoll, 1948.

SAARINEN TULIP CHAIR: COURTESY OF KNOLL INC. (2); LOC. WAR MEMORIAL: LC-DIG-RRB-00284; DULLES: LC-DIG-RRB-00713; CHURCH: LC-DIG-RRB-00812; MODEL: RYNDOLF FERGUSON; ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH/POLARS; WOMB CHAIR: MICHAEL CULLEN/COURTESY OF KNOLL INC.

SAARINEN'S RESTORED sunken pit, with Tulip stools and tables and new split-flap board, looks out on a 1958 Lockheed Constellation, or "Connie," repurposed as a cocktail lounge.



TRAVELERS SWARM the Flight Center in 1969 under a three-sided Vulcain clock. Below, the clock ticks on today.



Back to the Future

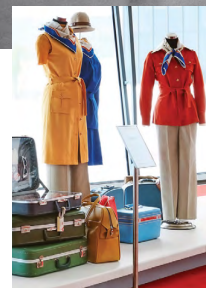
In May 2019, almost exactly 57 years after its debut and 18 years after it closed as an air terminal, Saarinen's Flight Center reopened as part of a hotel complex.

The terminal serves as the reception and public gathering areas, with the original mezzanine bars and eating spaces revived using Saarinen-designed furniture. Guests stay in the mirrored black monolith-like outbuildings that shield the TWA structure from the noisy bustle of real airport terminals beyond. Rooms are retro-chic, complete with Womb chairs and stick

lamps, with views of the restored terminal or the runways. Thick reinforced glass ensures that planes are seen but not heard (except for a low hum).

Stepping back into Saarinen's exuberant vision of flight can be strange, given how mundane air travel later became. As one critic put it, the terminal is selling what flying was supposed to be. At the same time, the urge to relive that sense of promise is irresistible. ●

THE TWA HOTEL displays vintage flight attendant uniforms, courtesy of the New York Historical Society.



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