



TWA Terminal

Eero Saarinen · New York, NY · 1962

Eero Saarinen's winglike, thin-shell concrete terminal for Howard Hughes would become a soaring symbol of the Jet Age.

As the Jet Age ascended during the 1950s, New York City was determined to become a world leader in air travel. Overtaxed LaGuardia Airport and scattered regional facilities would, therefore, no longer be enough. Around this time, city leaders began zeroing in instead on Idlewild Airport, a small complex on the site of former marshlands between Brooklyn and Long Island. Here, they dreamed of building a new "Terminal City" that would feature independently designed terminals known as the "Seven Wonders." In the end, they got their wish, with Idlewild later being renamed John F. Kennedy International Airport shortly after the president's assassination in 1963.

The centerpiece terminal was Eero Saarinen's Flight Center for Trans World Airlines (TWA), a company owned by visionary eccentric Howard Hughes. The sexy, curving design, which Saarinen first scrawled on the back of a restaurant napkin, was intended to capture movement, transition, and the soaring spirit of flight; a Baroque concept rejecting the cube-dominated skeletons of the International Style. "I feel strongly that modern architecture is in danger of falling into a mold too quickly—too rigid a mold," Saarinen said.

Inside, there were no columns or straight lines. Concrete-clad spaces flowed into each other

and then out to jetports via long concrete tubes. "As the passenger walked through the sequence of the building, we wanted him to be in a total environment where each part was the consequence of another and all belonged to the same form-world," said Saarinen, who would open his towering Gateway Arch in St. Louis the following year. TWA's roof, resembling—although as Saarinen claimed, unintentionally—a large bird spreading its wings, consisted of four thin concrete shells supported at their corners by Y-shaped piers and connected by slender skylights.

According to an August 1960 article in *Architectural Forum*, Saarinen supplied upwards of 130 architectural and structural drawings to build what was, in the pre-digital era, an absurdly complex assemblage. Completed in 1962, the building—along with Saarinen's ambitious Dulles Airport outside Washington, D.C.—quickly became an icon of the golden age of flight. But Boeing's release of the wide-body 747 jet just eight years later (which necessitated much larger berths and concourses) made the terminal all but obsolete. In 1990, it was spared demolition by being designated a landmark. Since then, it remained largely ignored until a 2019 renovation by Beyer Blinder Belle, which transformed it into the majestic lobby of the TWA Hotel.

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