

Landmark TWA Flight Center Now Stuns as Hotel

By: [Carrie Whitney, Ph.D.](#)



The iconic Sunken Lounge at the TWA Hotel boasts a split flap departures board by Solari di Udine and a view of the hotel's restored 1958 Lockheed Constellation "Connie." [TWA HOTEL/DAVID MITCHELL](#)

In the days before [TSA](#), full-body scanners and packed airplanes, flying the friendly skies was exciting and sophisticated. Take for example the Trans World Airlines (TWA's) terminal at New York International Airport. In 1956, Finnish-American architect Eero Saarinen was charged with designing this terminal at New York's International Airport — known then as Idlewild and now as John F. Kennedy International Airport.

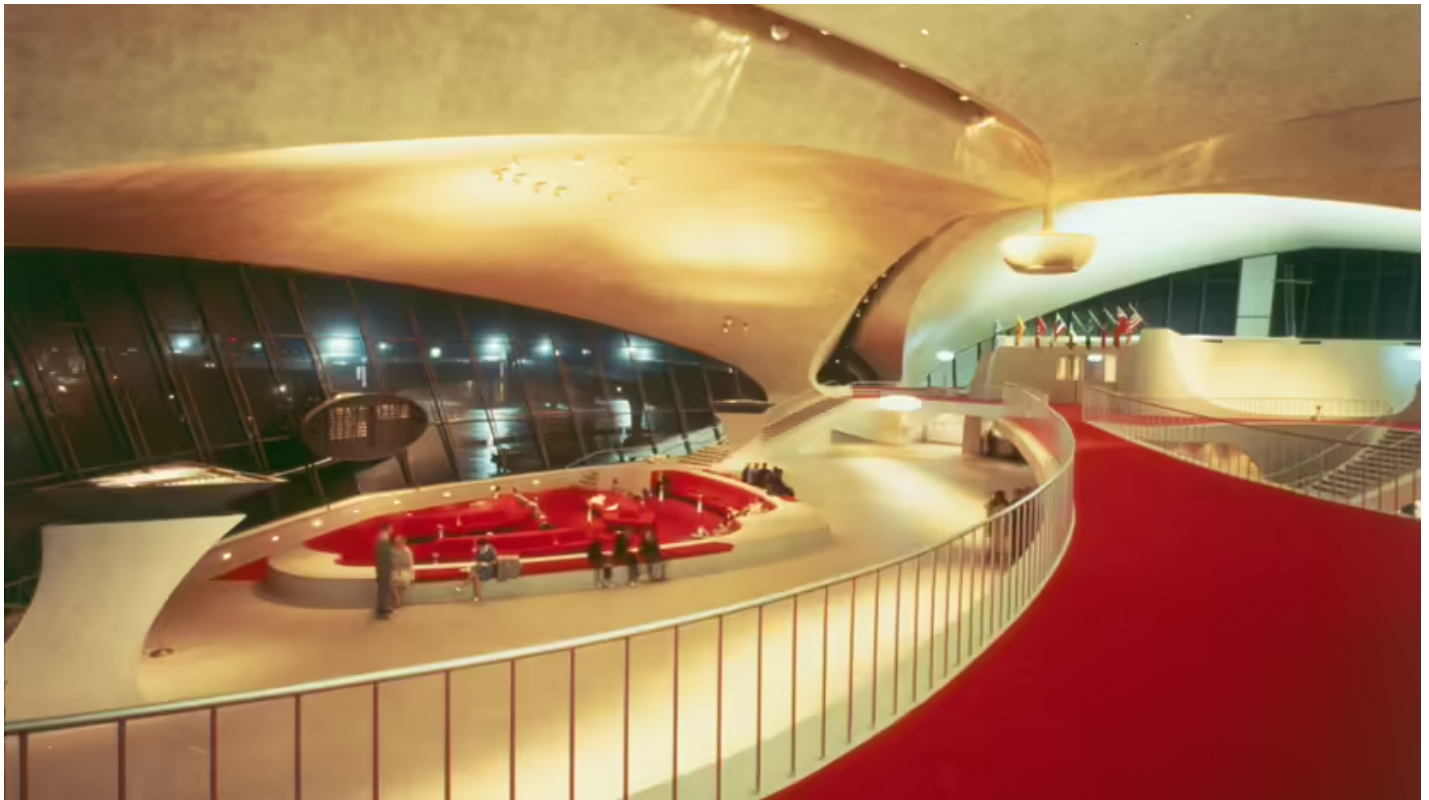
A jet-age masterpiece, the TWA Flight Center opened in 1962 and celebrated innovative architecture and the height of modern style. With its impossible-looking winged roof and

curved interior walls, it was as much a massive sculpture as it was a functional building.

Sadly, Saarinen, who also designed the St. Louis Gateway Arch, among many other notable structures, passed away in 1961 at the young age of 51, so he never saw the completed space.

The TWA Flight Center

Despite its cutting-edge design, the TWA Flight Center had some problems moving into the 21st century. Designed in the 1950s when propeller planes were common and supersonic transports (SSTs) were expected to be the next big thing in air travel, the building was "really locked in time," and wasn't configured to handle planes like the [747](#), explains Richard Southwick, partner and director of historic preservation at New York's [Beyer Blinder Belle Architects & Planners](#). The waiting areas also were fit for roughly 100 people — about one planeload of passengers.



The TWA Flight Center, circa 1956.
BALTHAZAR KORAB

Beyer Blinder Belle became involved in the project in 1995, just a year after the building was [designated a historic landmark](#), and as the Port Authority of New York & New Jersey was trying to decide how to preserve it. By then, TWA had gutted the building, and it was wholly different from Saarinen's original design.

By 2001, TWA had sold the building to American Airlines, which was followed by 9/11, so the building was "mothballed," Southwick says. It sat vacant and obsolete, the glamour of the '60s packed away with demolition possibly on the horizon. "As a preservationist, the worst thing for any building is to have it vacant," Southwick says. "A building is dead unless it's active."

How They Revived a Landmark

Instead of demolition, the building was nominated to the National Register of Historic Places, and Southwick's firm assisted the Port Authority to put together a request for proposal in hopes of giving the TWA Flight Center new life.

But there were issues. Developers didn't want to touch it because it was too expensive. They wanted it fixed up first, so the Port Authority invested about \$20 million, while Beyer Blinder Belle handled restoration of the major spaces.

The project still required demolition — only additions made to the structure after the final stages of Saarinen's original design were completed were torn down. That set the stage for the hotel development and made the business plans financially sound.

"It took 22 government agencies and over 180 firms working tirelessly over five years to get the project up and running," says Kaunteya Chitnis, senior vice president of acquisitions and development of [MCR](#), the developer of the hotel project. "It's a massive public-private partnership."



Visitors to the Sunken Lounge and the Paris Café by Jean-Georges can watch planes take off as they sip cocktails.

TWA HOTEL/DAVID MITCHELL

The TWA Hotel Today

Today, the original terminal is now the lobby for the [TWA Hotel](#). It includes 521 guestrooms accessible through a tube from JFK Terminal 5, and entering is like walking right into the 1960s, except there's wifi. The hotel has two wings: Saarinen and Hughes, the second named for aviation great [Howard Hughes](#), who at the time the Flight Center opened was the majority shareholder in the airline.

The original baggage claim is now a ballroom, but "everything else is where it had been," says Southwick, and spaces like the London Bar, Lisbon Lounge and Paris Café retained their original names.

"[We] did a pretty faithful restoration of the space," Southwick says. It's a who's who of mid-century modern design: The 1960s TWA Flight Center featured furniture by Eames, fabric from Knoll and a fountain by Noguchi. By the time of Beyer Blinder Belle's renovation, the famed sunken seating area had been taken out, so the architects had to

consult drawings to re-create it. For the lounge, hotel rooms and event spaces, they procured furniture from Knoll, which still produces Saarinen-designed pieces like the famous [Womb](#) and [Tulip](#) chairs.



The Paris Café by Jean-Georges serves breakfast, lunch and dinner, as well as amazing views.
TWA HOTEL/DAVID MITCHELL

Most of the signature red carpet was gone, and what was left had faded considerably. The team went to Yale University where some of Saarinen's drawings are held and found a drawer of samples including carpet that had never seen daylight.

"The color was very true," says Southwick of the Chili Pepper Red that once again lines [the Sunken Lounge](#) — now a Gerber Group bar — the hotel hallways and other areas. Hotel check-in takes place at the former departures desks, although it's now managed on a tablet. Restored penny tile and a split-flap departures board handcrafted by [Solari di Udine](#) complete the mid-century airport terminal vibe.

Through the expansive windows, visitors get a view of the [Connie](#), the 1958 Constellation airplane that's now home to a cocktail lounge. The entire space feels authentically "Mad Men."

In addition to 512 rooms, the TWA Hotel includes several dining and drinking spaces: the Paris Café by Jean-Georges, The Sunken Lounge, The Pool Bar, the Connie Cocktail Lounge, a Food Hall and Intelligentsia Coffee. There is a library and bookstore called The Reading Room that is a partnership between Phaidon and Herman Miller, along with a handful of additional shopping options. A 10,000-square-foot [fitness center](#) is open 24 hours a day and is the world's largest [airport gym](#).

In addition to teaching about the past through its architecture and design, the hotel features multiple exhibitions. There is a [TWA Museum](#), a display of TWA uniforms throughout the decades, an exhibit about Hughes and, of course, information about Saarinen.



Hotel rooms at the TWA Hotel have the second-thickest glass in the world.

TWA HOTEL/DAVID MITCHELL

Stay an Hour, Stay Overnight

Due to its position as a hotel located at a 24-hour, international airport — the [fifth busiest in the U.S.](#) — TWA offers travelers short-term respite with its [Day Stay](#) option. Available in increments of four hours or more, time slots like 7 to 11 a.m., 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. or noon to 6 p.m. give fliers the chance to freshen up, go to the pool, hit the gym and nap between flights.

Fliers from the area can also use the hotel as a place to stay overnight before taking an early morning flight, eliminating the need to drive to the airport super early or worrying about getting caught in traffic. In fact, MCR's Chitnis says the average length of stay at the TWA Hotel is just 1.1 nights.

Of course, the hotel itself is an attraction. "The Connie has been a huge draw; it's one of four remaining in the world," Chitnis says. "But the Flight Center itself has been the celebrity of the project. There are no amount of photographs or pictures that are going to describe the feeling of standing in that building."

During 2015 [Open House New York Weekend](#), three days when the New York City unlocks the doors of important buildings for special tours and events, more than 10,000 people visited the building in four hours. The interest in the building has not waned, and architecture aficionados, Saarinen fans and aerophiles now have the opportunity to make a pilgrimage any day of the year.

"I hope that when a guest goes to the TWA Hotel, they have a really positive experience of flight," says Southwick. "When flying was not only comfortable and convenient, but it was also fun."



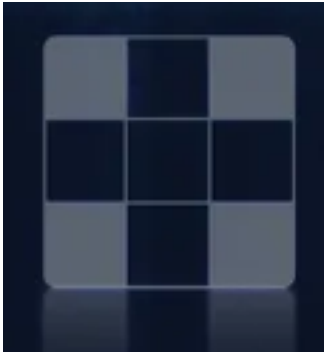
Restoring the new TWA Flight Center at JFK Airport was the combined effort of 22 government agencies and more than 180 firms.

TWA HOTEL/DAVID MITCHELL

Now That's Amazing

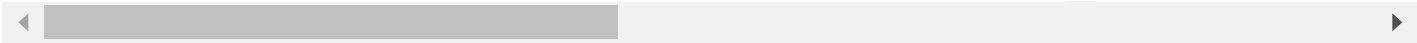
The interior of the TWA Flight Center is a spectacular homage to the mid-century modern penchant for rethinking standard shapes and materials. But the building itself is a "structural tour de force," Southwick says. The entire Flight Center is supported on only four columns. Each column holds up two corners of each of the lobes. Southwick compares the building's structure to a bird with big wings and just two little legs, or a dinosaur with significant weight supported by two central legs.

Featured



Special Offer on Antivirus Software From HowStuffWorks and TotalAV Security

Try Our Crossword



 Loading...