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Planning a Nest of Concrete for a Landmark of Flight

By DAVID W. DUNLAP

The fight to save Eero Saarinen's T.W.A. Flight Center at Kennedy International Airport -- that sculptural, vaulted concrete gull of a building that seems poised to take wing itself -- will have a decided twist: No one is proposing to tear it down.

Rather, the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, working with the architects who restored Grand Central Terminal, will present a plan today to save most of Saarinen's curvilinear 1962 landmark, now known as Terminal 5, though it would be set amid two enormous new terminals arrayed in a seamless semicircle.

No longer to be used as a terminal, the main Saarinen hall might be turned into a conference center, restaurant or flight museum. "We're looking for a way to preserve the terminal that will breathe life into it for generations to come," said William R. DeCota, Port Authority aviation director.

Preservationists think it will have the opposite effect. "This does the thing that we try to avoid in landmarks: making them flies in amber," said Frank E. Sanchis III, executive director of the Municipal Art Society, which wants the Saarinen building preserved intact and as an aviation hub.

Under the Port Authority plan, the Saarinen building would be connected to the new terminals by its two sensuously shaped tubular walkways, a hallmark of the Saarinen design. However, the gate areas to which they now lead would be demolished.

The plan is to be presented this afternoon to the City Landmarks Preservation Commission, whose role in this case is only advisory because it does not have regulatory power over the Port Authority. This morning, the Municipal Art Society is to hold a news conference with three leading architects -- Philip Johnson and Peter Samton, who protested the plans to demolish Pennsylvania Station in 1962, and Robert A. M. Stern.

"Saarinen was able to express in a building what I had thought inexpressible, a feeling of flight," Mr. Johnson wrote in his prepared remarks. "This building represents a new idea in 20th-century architecture, and yet we are willing to strangle it by enclosing it within

another building. Imagine, tying a bird's wings up. This will make the building invisible. If you're going to strangle a building to death, you might as well tear it down."

"It deserves our attention and protection," he wrote, "just as the great Pennsylvania Station did when it faced destruction."

This will be a different fight, though. Because there is general agreement that passengers could be much better served than they are by Terminal 5 -- and that the building itself is too important to be razed -- its fate presents more nuanced questions:

*If Terminal 5 is no longer in aviation use and loses its connection to runways and the open sky, has it truly been preserved?

*Should the reconstruction project have been awarded to an innovative, cutting-edge architect -- a latter-day Saarinen, in other words -- instead of firms known more as aviation and preservation specialists?

*Has Saarinen's aesthetic intent already been lost to an accumulation of unsympathetic signs, kiosks and security devices? And would a plan that stripped the building of these intrusions actually restore the fidelity of the architect's vision?

"In a very ironic way," said Robert I. Davidson, the chief architect of the Port Authority, "the best chance for the building to remain viable and be restored and have all the accretions removed is for it not to be an airline terminal."

Although the public thinks of airport design in terms of passenger terminals, planners begin by trying to open as much space as possible for aircraft. Terminal 5 and the neighboring Terminal 6 now have 37 aircraft positions between them. The sickle-shaped layout of the proposed new terminals would increase the capacity of the same site to 51 positions.

(It is also likely to require demolition of Terminal 6, another vestige of Kennedy's Terminal City era, which was built in 1969 as the National Airlines Sundrome and designed by I. M. Pei & Partners.)

The first of the two new terminals, with a Y-shaped concourse, would be built by United Airlines and completed in 2006. Adjoining it would be a terminal whose principal tenant is expected to be JetBlue Airways. Both are being designed by William Nicholas Bodouva & Associates.

Several changes have already been made in the plans for the terminals to accommodate the T.W.A. building. The roofline will be kept low so as not to overwhelm the landmark. The lower-level roadway will be depressed and the upper-level roadway set back so that Saarinen's connector tubes can still be used.

"We felt it was absolutely essential to connect the new with the old," said Richard Southwick, a partner in the architectural firm Beyer Blinder Belle, which restored Grand Central Terminal and is working on Terminal 5.

Between the Saarinen building and the new terminals would be a crescent-shaped public plaza that would set off the landmark as if it were monumental sculpture.

"In my mind there's a signature view of the T.W.A. building," Mr. Southwick said. "By doing this project we can restore this view."

That is not the view in preservationists' eyes.

"This building was designed so that when you walked into it, you saw through it and saw airplanes," Mr. Sanchis said. "In this scheme, you go into it and see another building."

Docomomo, an organization concerned with the documentation and conservation of the modern movement in architecture, has encouraged its members to express their opposition, yielding letters and e-mail messages from Argentina, Britain, Canada, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Macedonia, Panama, Portugal and Spain, and from across the United States.

Kennedy Airport holds extra meaning for Theodore H. M. Prudon, president of Docomomo U.S., who came here from the Netherlands in 1969. "For many people like myself," he said, "it can be called the Ellis Island of the 20th century."