

MARINE AIR TERMINAL, LA GUARDIA AIRPORT, Borough of Queens,  
Built 1939 - 1940; Architect William Delano of Delano and Aldrich.

Landmark Site: Borough of Queens Tax Map Block 926, Lot 1 in part  
consisting of the land on which the described building is situated.

On December 11, 1979, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Marine Air Terminal and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 15). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Three witnesses spoke in favor of designation. There were no speakers in opposition to designation. Letters have been received in support of designation. The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey made note of its superior jurisdiction.

#### DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Hardly more than a decade after Charles Lindbergh's historic 1927 solo flight from New York to Paris, the world's first transatlantic passenger flights were regularly departing from La Guardia Airport's Marine Air Terminal. Designed in the Art Deco style, the Terminal is "modern", serving as an appropriate introduction to air travel, which prior to World War II struck the general public as both glamorous and adventurous. The Marine Air Terminal is the only surviving American airport terminal dating from "The Golden Age of the Flying Boat"<sup>1</sup>, when trans-oceanic passenger flights were made aboard giant Pan American clipper ships, which vied with ocean liners in providing luxury service. Although these great seaplanes have long since been retired, the Marine Terminal has remained in continuous and efficient use. Recent restoration efforts, most notably the uncovering of the interior mural "Flight" have further enhanced the architectural significance of the building, which is not only major example of a new building type in the 1930s, but also a superb example of the Art Deco style.

The history of the Marine Air Terminal coincides with that of commercial aviation in the United States. In the year 1927, two important events gave impetus to commercial airline development. First, the federal government decided to use private contractors for postal transport, and second, Lindbergh's transatlantic flight captured the imagination of Americans, inspiring faith among potential passengers. At that time, New York City did not possess a municipal airport, although in the same year, plans for the construction of Floyd Bennett Field in Brooklyn were made. Construction of this airport proceeded slowly, in part because of The Depression, and it was not completed until 1934. During the same years the City of Newark, New Jersey, constructed a large airport, in operation by 1928, which rapidly became the major airport on the eastern seaboard. Designated the official airmail terminus for the metropolitan area in 1929, Newark also became the main passenger airport, serving

nearly 100,000 customers per year by 1931. Until the late 1930s, Newark Airport's supremacy remained unchallenged.

In 1934, Fiorello H. La Guardia became Mayor of New York City. A reform liberal candidate taking office just after the very worst years of the Depression, La Guardia embarked upon a vast municipal transportation improvement campaign, which while bettering the city, also provided thousands of jobs. The scheme involved bridge, highway and tunnel construction, as well as the reorganization and consolidation of the Mass Transit system. Most significantly, La Guardia was staunchly in favor of a New York City airport which could effectively compete with Newark. The location of Floyd Bennett Field was inconvenient to Manhattan, and consequently La Guardia was convinced of the necessity of a new airport at a site at North Beach, Queens, where a private airport, Glenn Curtiss, had been constructed in 1929. The Depression had forced the closing of Glenn Curtiss Airport, and the site had been acquired by the city. It consisted of some 100 acres sufficiently close to Manhattan, and also, adjacent to Long Island Sound, so that a seaplane base could be included. Like La Guardia's other transportation projects, the airport was to be federally sponsored and funded through the Works Progress Administration. Consequently, plans for the "New York City Municipal Airport" were submitted to the New York City WPA Administrator, Brehon Somervell, and on September 3, 1937, were approved by President Roosevelt. Only six days later, Mayor La Guardia presided over ground breaking ceremonies at North Beach.

Fiorello La Guardia (1882-1947) had been an enthusiastic advocate of aviation from its very early years onward. While in private law practice, he had as a client Giuseppe Bellanco, a pioneering aviator and flying instructor from whom La Guardia took lessons in 1913 at Mineola, Long Island. Soon after the United States entered World War I, although La Guardia had recently been elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, he enlisted as a lieutenant in the Aviation Section of the Signal Corps. He served as a supervisor of the 8th Aviation Instruction Center at Foggia in Italy, and also flew as a pilot bombardier with the Fifth Squadron on the Italian-Austrian front, attaining the rank of major. La Guardia was an early proponent of the military significance of aviation, and also recognized the potential of commercial passenger airlines. The airport which became his namesake is a fitting tribute to this aspect of the career of one of New York's most colorful and inspirational political leaders.

Construction at North Beach proceeded rapidly. Plans prepared by the Department of Docks, the Works Progress Administration, and the firm of Delano & Aldrich, called first for the filling in of a portion of Bowery Bay, Rikers Island Channel, and Flushing Bay, thereby more than doubling the acreage of the original site. Initially, some 5000 men were employed, but when building construction began the work force was gradually increased, peaking at 23,000 workers in early 1939. A 558 acre airport with three and two-thirds miles of runways and taxi strips emerged. At a cost of \$40,000,000, La Guardia was not only the largest airport in the world, it was also the most costly--"the greatest single undertaking of the W.P.A."<sup>2</sup>. The buildings of this original complex included the landplane Administration

Building, six hangars, office buildings, a seaplane hangar, and the Marine Air Terminal. The airport was officially opened on October 15, 1939, with crowds estimated to exceed 325,000 in attendance.<sup>3</sup> Among the 150 airplanes which took part in the festivities were three which circled overhead as the Mayor made his address, skywriting "Name It La Guardia". This inaugurated a campaign to rechristen the airport, and on November 2, the Board of Estimate and City Council officially agreed upon "New York City Municipal Airport-La Guardia Field."

Service was instituted in December of 1939, and by 1940, La Guardia had completely eclipsed Newark Airport. It was not until March, 1940, that the Marine Air Terminal was dedicated. At this ceremony two of the new Pan American Clipper ships were on display. These were the great sea planes which the Marine Air Terminal and its accompanying hangar had been designed to accommodate. The Clipper Ships represented both the culmination of the development of seaplanes, and also the inauguration of a new era in commercial flying. The first practical seaplanes was invented in 1911 by Glenn Hammond Curtiss (1878-1930) (in whose honor the original North Beach Airport was named). This was a float plane, with the fuselage supported on struts. A year later he created the first flying boat, with a boat-hull fuselage, the prototype for the clipper ships used at the Marine Air Terminal. Another seaplane designed by Curtiss, the Navy-Curtiss, made the first Atlantic crossing in 1919. Although the majority of early trans-oceanic flights were made aboard land planes, the relative danger of travelling long distances over water, led aeronautic designers to think of seaplanes as safer, and thus better suited to passenger service. Water was also considered convenient and economical as an air base. By the 1930s, Americans led the field in seaplane design. Boeing Aircraft in conjunction with Pan American Airways, developed the Martin 130, the first monoplane flying boat intended for commercial purposes. Soon thereafter, the Boeing 314 with a wing span of 152 feet, a cruising speed of 200 m.p.h., capable of carrying 74 passengers was produced, and with it, Pan American inaugurated the world's first scheduled transatlantic service. The first flight from the Marine Air Terminal by a Boeing 314-- the Yankee Clipper-- departed on March 31, 1940, carrying a crew of ten, nine passengers, and over 5000 pounds of mail. It landed in Lisbon 18 hours and 35 minutes later. The scheduled Clipper ship routes were New York-Lisbon-Marseilles, and New York-Newfoundland-Southampton.

The clippers caused a genuine sensation; they were described in the New York Herald Tribune as "breathtaking" in size 5, and in in a Life magazine article by Claire Booth Luce, with the following prediction "Fifty years from now, people will look back on a Clipper flight of today as the most romantic voyage of history."<sup>6</sup> The accommodations aboard these planes were indeed luxurious by today's standards. The two-deck interior featured dining rooms, private compartments and sleeping sections. But this glamorous era was brought to an abrupt halt by World War II. The Clippers were pressed into war service, and functioned as passenger planes on government missions and as freight carriers. By the end of the war, technological advances in land plane design had made the clippers obsolete. The age of international passenger flight which

they had helped to establish continued to flourish, the Marine Air Terminal was successfully converted to a land plane terminal and at the present time is occupied by Butler Aviation and Air England.

The site of the Terminal today serves as a reminder of its original use. Located close to the water's edge, the building was planned for the convenience of both passengers and crew. The Clippers taxied in from Long Island Sound, pulled by small motorboats, and docked just outside the Terminal. For maintenance purposes they were hauled out of the water and moved along special railroad tracks into the nearby hangar.

The siting of the Terminal was determined by engineering and aeronautical considerations. Its exceptionally fine design is to be credited to the architectural firm of Delano & Aldrich.

William A. Delano (1874-1960) and Chester H. Aldrich (1871-1940) formed their architectural partnership in 1903, after meeting when both were employed in the offices of Carrere & Hastings. The two men had previously studied at the Paris Ecole des Beaux Arts and upon their return to this country espoused Ecole teaching methods. Delano taught at Columbia University's School of Architecture from 1903 to 1911, and Aldrich assisted Thomas Hastings in running an atelier based on the Parisian system. Not surprisingly, Delano & Aldrich's work reveals, for the most part, a traditional, conservative approach to design. The architects favored the neo-Renaissance and neo-Federal styles, and were best known for residential work for wealthy clients. What most distinguishes their work is its fineness of execution, care to detail, and over-all refinement. Among their many important commissions are the estate of John D. Rockefeller, Pocantico Hills, the Otto Kahn house at Cold Spring Harbor, Long Island, the Vincent Astor house at Port Washington, Long Island, and the Charles A. Lindbergh house at Hopewell, New Jersey. In New York City, they designed numerous fashionable town houses on the Upper East Side, among them the Willard Straight house, the Marshall J. Dodge house and the Harold Pratt house, as well as clubhouses, including the Knickerbocker, and Colony Club buildings. In 1935, Charles Aldrich took a leave of absence from the firm to serve as head of the American Academy in Rome, a post he held until his death in 1940. Apparently, he was not involved with the designs of the airport buildings, which ought to be credited to Delano alone. The use of the Art Deco style represents a dramatic departure from the architect's usual approach, no doubt the result of Delano's recognition that a modern building type required a modern style. At the same time, the Terminal building was under construction, Delano also served as a member of the Board of Design for the New York World's Fair. He retired from practice in 1950. Soon before his death in 1960, Delano was quoted as saying "You know, in this town, very few of the things you build are left in your lifetime."<sup>7</sup>

Delano employed the Art Deco style for all the buildings of the original airport complex. Although these structures possessed the essential components of the style, they should not be categorized among the more flamboyant architectural manifestations of Art Deco in New York City. The Marine Air Terminal relies for its impact primarily upon

the crisp geometry of its massing and the symmetry and precision of its design - hallmarks of Delano & Aldrich's work generally - rather than upon vivid polychromy or emphatic "streamlining". Delano, even when he employed a 20th century, non-revivalistic style, did not stray from the principles of Beaux-Arts design as formulated in the 19th century. Thus, the Terminal is symmetrically and axially disposed both in plan and elevation, places strong emphasis on the entrance and on ease of circulation, and displays a very clear relationship between the exterior and interior. Yet, within these self-imposed boundaries Delano interpreted the Art Deco style masterfully. Ornament, although used sparingly, is highly expressive of the Terminal's function; the agreeably light-hearted frieze of flying fish encircling the building comes first to mind. The Terminal is faced in brick, originally buff-colored with black brick detailing, but stainless steel, one of the new materials favored in Art Deco circles, makes a restrained but gleamingly sleek appearance on the exterior and interior of the building. Faceted surfaces, again an index of the Art Deco style, have been created by setting the black brick in vertical, angled courses between the banks of windows, thus enlivening the smooth circular form of the building. The apparent simplicity of the Marine Air Terminal design is deceptive. It is a building of subtle interlocking geometric relationships - well-scaled, well-balanced, and well-planned.

The Terminal is comprised of a central circular core, of two stories with an attic, from which a rectangular entrance pavilion and two symmetrically disposed one-story wings project. The walls are now painted a light, warm beige, with chocolate brown detailing, creating a contrast similar to that of the original buff and black brick.

The circular main portion of the building is tiered in a "wedding cake" configuration. The first and second stories have tripartite windows enframed by dark brick and separated by the faceted brick panels mentioned above. Originally, these windows were louvered (like those remaining in place on the rear one-story wings). The windows with their enframements form a continuous register encircling the building. Above a simple projecting stainless steel cornice at the first story is a smooth parapet wall behind which is the roof-top observation deck and promenade. At the second story, or tier, is the terra cotta frieze of flying fish which adds a polychromatic note to the otherwise subdued color scheme of the building. Golden yellow fish fly through the air against a background of wave-patterned sea, executed in two shades of blue. The third tier of the building is the attic story, sheathed in stainless steel panels, as is the original control tower at the rear of this story.

The entrance pavilion is composed of a three-story rectangular center section, with lower flanking wings, creating the effect of one tall rectangular mass interlocking with a lower broader one. At the center of the pavilion is a bank of four stainless steel doors with grilles in the form of two stylized winged globes set in the transoms. The entrance is sheltered by a broad semi-circular canopy, rimmed and paneled in stainless steel, which echoes the curve of the building as a whole. Above the canopy is a large two-story window of the same breadth as the doorway directly beneath. Both are enframed by a single broad dark brick band which visually links the two elements. The window contains five rows of



four panes each, separated by a simple steel grille work. Through the windows one sees the second story stairway landing and the flight of stairs leading to the attic story level. The side wings of the entrance have small single windows at the first floor, and above, sections of the flying fish frieze.

The projecting rear wings of the building continue the design of the first tier. These were originally the entrance (west) and exit (east) for debarking and embarking passengers as their proximity to the water suggests. A long copper roofed walkway--in airport jargon, a "sheeprun"--originally sheltered passengers at the east wing. Part of this walkway is still intact at the doorway. Among the alterations to the Terminal, a small glass and metal extension on the east side of the main building is the only notable, although not desirable, one.

The functions of the Terminal are clearly demarcated by the exterior massing. The three projecting portions are intended for access and exit from the building while the circular core houses airport related facilities waiting rooms, mail room, health, customs inspection and detention offices originally--in a series of rooms which ring the perimeter of the building. At the center is the great circular room, the equivalent to a railroad station concourse, labeled on the original plans quite simply "Public Space." This handsome circular room which contains the recently restored mural "Flight" by James Brooks is also a designated New York City Landmark, and is of an architectural value equal to that of the exterior.

The Marine Air Terminal is today the only active airport terminal in the United States dating from the first generation of passenger air travel. That it has continued in effective operation, despite the great changes in commercial aviation during the past forty years testifies to the quality of its design. While the uses for the building have changed, very few alterations have been made to the exterior of the building.

It remains today an exceptional example of the Art Deco Style, and of a building type unique to the 20th century.

Report prepared by Nancy Goeschel,  
Research Department

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#### Footnotes

1. E. Angelucci, Airplanes From the Dawn of Flight to the present Day (New York: McGraw Hill Book Co., 1973) p.71
2. Fortune, "Fiorello's Windflower" August, 1940. p. 41.
3. New York Times Oct. 16, 1939, p.1:1.
4. According to Angelucci (Airplanes, p. 71) within a year after Lindbergh's flight, 31 other pilots attempted similar transatlantic journeys. Twenty lost their lives.
5. As quoted in E. Lowe, "The Story of the Clipper Flying Boats", Air World (Jan. 1978) p. 12.
6. As quoted in G. Arend, Air World' Great Airports: La Guardia, 1939-1979 (New York: Air Cargo New Inc., 1979) p.56.
7. New York Times Jan. 13, 1960, p.48.

## FINDINGS AND DESIGNATIONS

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Marine Air Terminal has a special character, special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that among its important qualities, the Marine Air Terminal at La Guardia Airport is the only surviving terminal building in the United States dating from the "Golden Age of the Flying Boat", that it is the last active airport terminal built during the first generation of air travel; that it is a fine and early example of a building type unique to the 20th century; that it is the building from which the world's first regularly schedule transatlantic passenger flights departed; that it was an important element in the original La Guardia Airport complex; that it was a valuable part of Mayor LaGuardia's municipal transportation improvement campaign; that it is the design of William Delano, senior partner in one of New York City's most prestigious early 20th century architectural firms, that the exterior of the building, an excellent and refined example of the Art Deco style, is a composition of subtle interlocking geometric relationships; that the massing clearly reveals the functions of the building; that the ornament though restrained, is highly expressive; that the Marine Air Terminal continues to be in efficient use.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21 (formerly Chapter 63) of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 8-A of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Marine Air Terminal LaGuardia Airport, Borough of Queens and designates Tax Map Block 926, Lot 1, in part consisting of the land on which the described building is situated, Borough of Queens, as its Landmark Site.



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New York Times Dec. 27, 1940 (Aldrich); Oct. 16, 1:1, 1939 (Airport Dedication) Jul. 24, 1:6, 1930 (Curtiss); Jan. 13, 48:1, 1960 (Delano); Sept. 21, 1:1, 1947 (La Guardia).

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Photo:  
Courtesy, G. Arend

Marine Air Terminal  
La Guardia Airport  
Built 1939-1940

Architects:  
Delano & Aldrich