

Landmarks Preservation Commission
November 25, 1980, Designation List 138
LP-1110

MARINE AIR TERMINAL INTERIOR, main floor interior consisting of the entrance vestibule, the hallway connecting the entrance vestibule to the circular main space, the stairways leading from the main floor to the second floor, the circular main space to the depth of the opening reveals, and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall, ceiling, and floor surfaces, doors and transoms, aluminum letter signs, attached clock, skylight, and staircase railings; LaGuardia Airport, Queens.

Landmark Site: 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 Interior and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 16). 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 struck the general public in the 1930s 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",¹ 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. The main interior space, a two-story circular room is among the most noteworthy Art Deco interiors in New York City. Its pure geometry, marble paneling and fine proportions serve as a magnificent setting for the huge mural "Flight", only recently restored and once again, the focal point of an exceptionally fine design.

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 and airport development. First, the federal government decided to use private contractors for postal transport, and second Lindbergh's transatlantic flight not only captured the imagination of Americans, but inspired 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 which proceeded slowly, in part because of the Depression, 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 new location. Studies of the problem resulted in the selection of 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 sea plane 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."². The buildings of this original complex included the landplane hangar, and the Marine Air Terminal. The airport was officially opened on October 15, 1939, with crowds estimated to exceed 325,000 in attendance.³ 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, LaGuardia 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 the inauguration of a new era in commercial flying. The first practical seaplane 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 water⁴, 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 size⁵, and 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."⁶ 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, although 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 New 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 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."⁷

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 grille work above the doorways in the form of winged globes is a notable example. The interior of the Terminal has marble paneling and paving, but stainless steel, one of the new materials favored in Art Deco circles, also makes a restrained but gleamingly sleek appearance. The apparent simplicity of the Terminal interior design is deceptive. Its spaces contain subtle geometric relationships and are well-scaled, well-planned, and well balanced.

The functions of the Terminal are clearly demarcated. The three wings of the building are intended for easy access and exit while the circular core houses airport related facilities--waiting rooms, mail room, health and 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". It is this room and the vestibule leading to it which the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates a New York City Interior Landmark.

The main entrance doors give access to a small foyer with a group of four stainless steel doors surmounted by transoms containing winged globes, identical to those on the exterior of the building. Through these one passes into the vestibule which contains a stairway with a handsome simply detailed stainless steel banister. Five stainless steel doors lead into the great circular room at the center of the building. The room rises a full two stories, and is crowned by a skylight situated within the third tier of the building.

The power of the room derives from the geometric purity of its form, the richness of its materials, and the grand scale of its vibrantly colored mural. The walls of the room are paneled with dark green marble and contain counters for ticketing and related purposes within each of the 14 bays, which are divided into groups of four, five and four, by the doorways leading to the wings. These doorways are of stainless steel and repeat the design seen on the exterior and in the foyer, with winged globes set in the transoms. The floor is paved in light gray marble, with a geometrically patterned circle at the center. The original, very handsome wooden benches, with stainless steel propeller blades motifs

inlaid in the end panels, have recently been returned to the room. The ceiling of the room is interestingly treated, and is tiered in graduated steps--a motif which echoes the tiered configuration of the exterior of the Terminal--and contains a large circular skylight. The mural is located just beneath the lowest and broadest ceiling tier and is separated from the green marble wall paneling beneath by a narrow stainless steel band.

This mural, the creation of James Brooks, today an internationally recognized artist, was, like the entire airport, sponsored by the federal Works Progress Administration. Entitled "Flight", it chronologically depicts man's conquest of the skies, from his earliest primitive yearnings for flight, to his modern aviation achievements. During the early 1950s, a highly misguided refurbishing of the Terminal resulted in the covering over of the mural. Through the efforts of Geoffrey Arend, author, publisher and aviation-airport buff, a campaign to restore the mural to view was successfully undertaken. On September 18, 1980, "Flight" was officially rededicated.

The huge mural, approximately 12 feet high and 237 feet long, encircles the room, functioning as the dramatic culmination of the entire design. Painted on Belgian linen, with shades of intense red and green predominating, it includes figures of varying scale placed against a flat abstract ground. Three abstract panels, located above the three entrances to the room, divided the mural into segments which might be entitled "man's release from earth", "the flight of Daedalus" and "the modern age of flight". Mythical and historical figures--Icarus, Daedalus, Leonardo da Vinci, the Wright brothers, are depicted, as well as typological ones--early man and woman, modern man and woman, pilots, navigators, engineers etc. The figures are boldly foreshortened, and objects rendered in emphatic perspective. A powerful composition, in style it shares much with the Socialist Realism popular in the 1930s, but also includes abstract elements which prefigure the artist's later shift to Abstract Expressionism.

Of special interest in the context of the Marine Air Terminal is the final scene of the mural, in which a clipper ship is seen landing and docking.

James Brooks was born in St. Louis in 1906, and presently resides in Springs, New York. After his work with the W.P.A., Brooks turned to Abstract Expressionism and was a member of the circle of artists often termed the New York School. Brooks studied at Southern Methodist University, the Dallas Institute of Art, and New York's Art Students League. Aside from the Terminal murals, he also executed murals for the Little Falls, New Jersey, Post Office, and the Woodside, Queens, Library. He has taught at a number of schools and universities, among them Pratt Institute, Columbia and Yale. In the early 1960s, Brooks was artist in residence at the American Academy in Rome, and in 1967, was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship. In 1963, the Whitney Museum held a retrospective exhibition of his work, which has also been exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of New York, the Guggenheim Museum, and the Art Institute of Chicago, among others.

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. With changing uses, the interiors of the Terminal have survived, even if at times they have suffered certain esthetic indignities. The restoration of the mural has returned to the Marine Air Terminal interior all the essential components that make it a truly distinguished, exceptional example of the Art Deco style.

Report prepared by Nancy Goeschel
Research Department

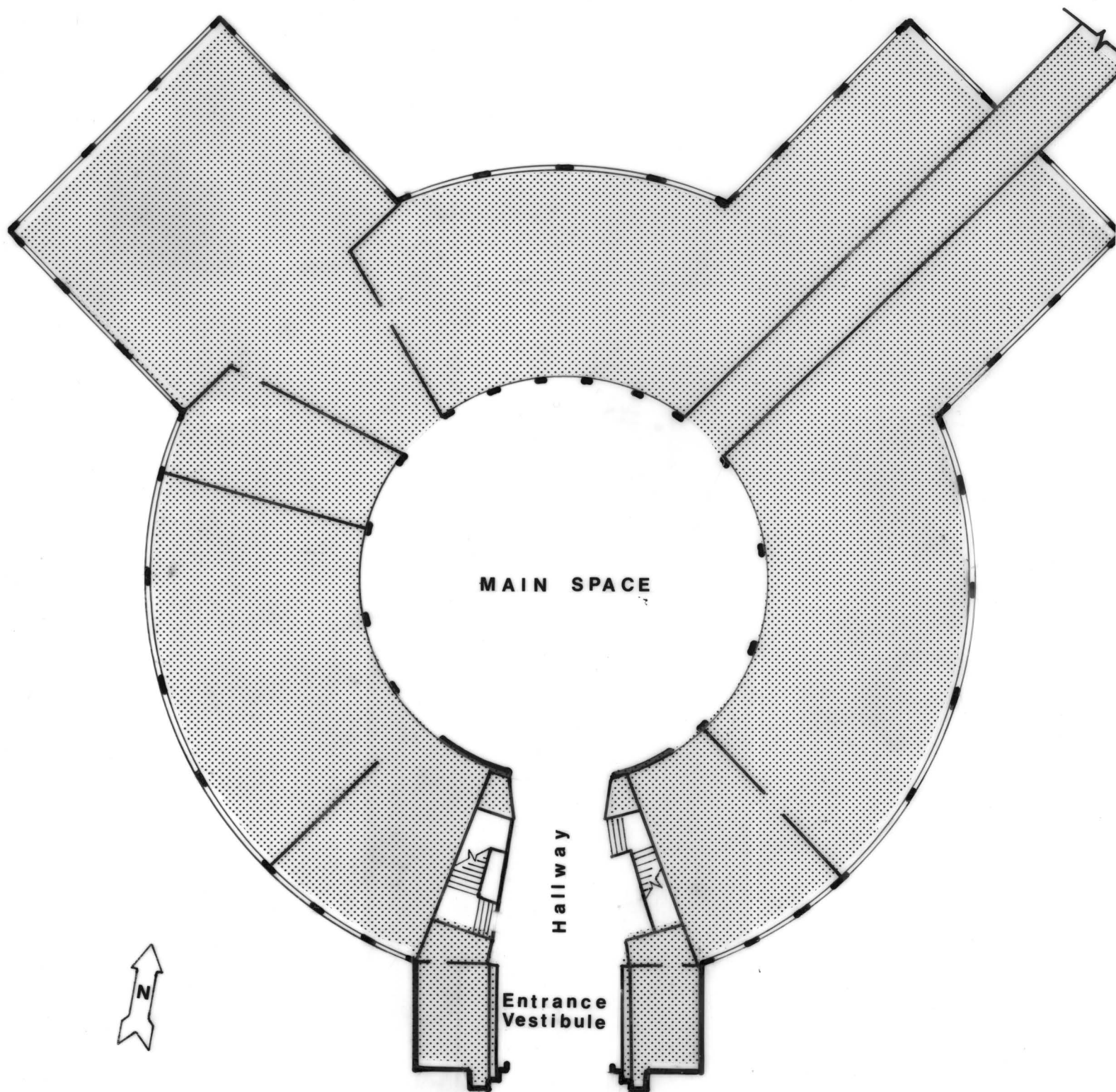
This project was funded in part with the assistance of a preservation survey and planning grant authorized by the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, administered by the U.S. Department of the Interior, Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service; through the New York State Office of Parks and Recreation.

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 Interior, main floor interior consisting of the entrance vestibule, the hallway connecting the entrance vestibule to the circular main space, the stairways leading from the main floor to the second floor, the circular main space to the depth of the opening reveals, and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall, ceiling, and floor surfaces, doors and transoms, aluminum letter signs, attached clock, skylight, and staircase railings; LaGuardia Airport, Queens; has a special character, special historical and esthetic 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 Interior is an excellent example of the Art Deco style, that it was designed by William Delano, senior partner in the noted architectural firm of Delano & Aldrich, and is a fine example of his rare use of the Art Deco style, that it includes a circular main room of great beauty created through the use of pure geometric spaces and forms, rich materials, and a mural "Flight", that this mural, the creation of James Brooks, an internationally recognized artist, is an excellent representative of the artistic achievements sponsored by the Works Progress Administration, and is a powerful and dramatic composition combining elements of both Socialist Realism and Abstract Expressionism, that the interior of the Terminal is evocative of the "Golden Age of the Flying Boat", and serves as an important reminder of the first generation of commercial, international, air travel.

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 an Interior Landmark the Marine Air Terminal Interior, main floor interior consisting of the entrance vestibule, the hallway connecting the entrance vestibule to the circular main space, the stairways leading from the main floor to the second floor, the circular main space to the depth of the opening reveals, and the fixtures and interior components of these spaces, including but not limited to, wall, ceiling, and floor surfaces, doors and transoms, aluminum letter signs, attached clock, skylight, and staircase railings; 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.



**Marine Air Terminal
Main Floor Interior
LaGuardia Airport**

Not Drawn to Scale
Areas Deleted



Photo Credit:
Carl Foster

Interior
Marine Air Terminal
La Guardia Airport
Built 1939-1940

Architects:
Delano & Aldrich



Marine Air Terminal Interior
La Guardia Airport
Built 1939-1940

Photo:
Courtesy, G. Arend

Architects:
Delano & Aldrich