



HOTEL

July 23, 2019



Preserving an icon

Rarely does a hotel launch drum up so much fanfare, but then again, the TWA Hotel isn't any old project

Models and dancers dressed in vintage TWA flight attendant uniforms glide around the terminal like ballerinas. A trio of former Ambassador's Club servers take selfies in a cocktail den; "we used to work here!" they squeal, puckering their lips and admiring the Knoll candy-stripe fabric that has been custom-designed to match the one from their youth. Decidedly 21st-century laptops pop open in the Sunken Lounge, the Instagram darling of the space. A Solari split-flap board clatters, displaying faux departure times for airlines (like the now-defunct Pan Am) as the Temptations' "My Girl" plays in the background. There are TV crews everywhere. Even the Beatles make an appearance in the form of a tribute band that has materialized, as if by magic, on the cantilevered bridge suspended (also as if by magic) across the soaring lobby of the just-opened [TWA Hotel](#).

Rarely does a hotel launch drum up so much fanfare, but then again, the TWA Hotel isn't any old project. Aviation and design geeks and preservation advocacy groups—not to mention New York City, the Port Authority, and [John F. Kennedy International Airport](#)—have been waiting for decades to see Saarinen's winged creature, once the Trans World Airlines terminal, take flight again.

Nostalgia for the 1960s is no new thing; from the prevalence of midcentury furniture to tableside Caesars, contemporary culture loves a throwback. But when Saarinen's Flight Center was finished, it would still be another two years before the the Civil Rights Act of 1964 came into being. In taking inspiration from the culture of the era—as well as the design—are we willfully glossing over the more sordid details of a decade that began with Jim Crow laws still in place and ended, in 1969, with the National Organization for Women protesting the White House for "Rights, Not Roses"?

Commissioned by the Port Authority, Southwick and BBB spent nearly a decade developing a preservation plan and guiding the first phase of construction. They used Saarinen's original working drawings and specifications to rebuild **the Sunken Lounge**. They repaired and restored the tubes famously featured in the 2002 Leonardo DiCaprio flick *Catch Me If You Can*. Originally those groovy passageways ushered passengers into the TWA departure halls; now, each leads to one of the two hotel additions and, beyond that, the jetBlue terminal. (An elevator near baggage claim offers only two buttons: "1960s TWA HOTEL" or "PRESENT DAY JETBLUE.")

Enter Tyler Morse of MCR/Morse Development, which was awarded the redevelopment project in 2014. In addition to a fully restored Flight Center, there was to be retail and restaurants, 50,000 square feet of meetings and events space, and at least 500 hotel rooms (which can be sold as standard nightly bookings, plus four-, six-, or 12-hour chunks when a guest needs only a nap and a shower).

No matter where you stand in the 392,000-square-foot TWA Hotel today, Saarinen is right there with you. For starters, Chili Pepper Red—the fiery hue he developed for the Flight Center—is everywhere, from the upholstery in **the Sunken Lounge** to the hallway carpeting in the hotel buildings.

In the rooms themselves—426 doubles and kings and 86 suites divided among the two new buildings—the NYC-based interior design firm Stonehill Taylor swept in Saarinen Womb chairs and Tulip tables. Beds are comfortable; bathrooms are capacious. A martini station, a mini-bar with retro touches like a mini Etch A Sketch (born in 1960), and vintage rotary phones are additional midcentury touchpoints.



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Saarinen's love of hardwoods, terrazzo flooring, and brass details, as well as his more orthogonal works, inspired much of the underground Conference Center, overseen by INC Architecture & Design. The lighting in the main ballroom, for instance, took cues from the General Motors Technical Center in Detroit and the Irwin Conference Center in Columbus, IN. Just outside massive double-height hangar doors—studded with a total of 12,304 hand-screwed rivets—a 207-foot-long pre-function space has interpretive exhibits showcasing info and artifacts from the architect's life, vintage TWA ads designed by David Klein, retro flight attendant uniforms, and other archival materials curated with assistance from the New York Historical Society. The Paris Café, the Jean-Georges restaurant on the mezzanine, is a sea of custom Saarinen furniture from Knoll.

MCR has also leaned hard into TWA-as-a-selling point, all while dutifully avoiding sandtraps like the “Foreign Accent Flights” that the airline launched in 1968—which, per an ad, included “four styles of hostesses to match: Italian (see toga), French (see gold mini), Olde English (see wench). And Manhattan Penthouse (see hostess pajamas—after all, hostesses should look like hostesses, right?).”

Instead, the hotel offers an excerpted version of history—fresh-and-cool this, fresh-and-cool that. The hotel's logo—an adaptation of the airline's, designed by Pentagram—adorns everything from the side of **Connie**, a restored Lockheed Constellation that's been retrofitted as a cocktail bar, to the pencils and notepads in the guest rooms. A lobby shop stocks all manner of TWA-branded red-and-white merch, including cashmere sweaters (\$249) and Gola sneakers (\$65).

On a recent Thursday evening, a stylish woman clad in a white-and-black maillot poses in the TWA-branded **rooftop pool** as her husband dutifully contorts himself to take her photo. Uniformed pilots stroll around the lobby. European tourists perch on the edge of the Sunken Lounge, sipping drinks from one of the mobile Intelligentsia carts that were custom designed for the hotel by Stonehill Taylor. A few shoppers roam around the glass-fronted Shinola boutique. That Solari split-flap board is still doing its thing: a reflection, perhaps, of the constant, ceaseless motion of any hotel—and any airline terminal—on earth.

“As a practicing architect, if I had a building that was unoccupied and unused for decades, I would be thrilled that it came back,” says Southwick. “It's alive again.”

