

15 Mott Lane



JEANNIE MCCAIN
GREENWOOD KING PROPERTIES • 713.524.0888

11942 Longleaf



BROOKE ROBERTS MONK
GREENWOOD KING PROPERTIES • 713.524.0888

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Art deco for airplanes: The Municipal Air Terminal.

Flying High

A rare 1940s air terminal finds new life

BY BARRY MOORE

One of the best art-deco buildings in Houston has been saved. The Municipal Air Terminal, designed by City Hall architect Joseph Finger in 1940, is located at 8401 Travelair, on the west side of Hobby Airport. On March 25, City Council approved a lease between the City of Houston and the Houston Aeronautical Heritage Society (HAHS) and its immediate site.

When first built, the terminal was a glorious example of Moderne architecture, appropriately expressing the romance and glamour of flight. It has equal north and south wings symmetrically arranged around a central lobby ziggurat, which is topped with a glass control room (the only exterior portion that has been changed from the original). Bas-relief cast stone panels on the two wings depict a Wright Brothers "pusher" biplane, an experimental Sikorsky helicopter, and a sleek DC-3. The east and west portals of the lobby are marked by a stylized Icarus reaching for the sky, with an airplane substituting for a fig leaf. The concrete, stucco, and clay-tile structure was originally painted the palest off-white variations; painted aluminum window sashes provided a bright contrast.

When it first opened, the terminal seemed huge, and was more than adequate to serve the four or five airplanes and 200-some passengers per day. But with the exponential growth of air traffic after World War II, it wasn't long before there was literally no place to put the planes; baggage handling was a nightmare. By 1954 the now too small terminal

was replaced by Hobby Airport. Air travel and its accommodating architecture has always changed with stunning rapidity; Hobby itself was supplanted 14 years later by the then brand-new Houston Intercontinental Airport. It is fortunate but strange that this 63-year-old building was neither demolished nor much altered.

Working with master planner Howard Hill at Brand & Allen Architects, Inc., and general contractors Tribble & Stevens, HAHS projects a \$10 million to \$11 million multi-phased restoration effort. HAHS President Drew Coats, whose vision and determination has made the dream a reality, describes a civil-aviation museum with restaurant and gift shop that showcases the history of Gulf Coast flight from 1903 to the present.

The first phase, now under way, will open the north wing, with space for HAHS's growing collections and a few offices for the organization. As a first sign of progress, a security fence has been moved by the city, and for the first time in years, the terminal is again open to the street.

Hardly any major airports remain from the pre-World War II era. Most of them have been swept away for much larger facilities, or remodeled beyond recognition. An exception is New York City's LaGuardia Maritime Terminal, designed as a harbor for the Pan American Clipper fleet of flying boats and now serving small commuter aircraft. Houston's deco jewel is an architectural treasure and an aviation landmark, now lovingly tended and, soon again, open to the public.

HAYNESWHALEY
ASSOCIATES

Structural Engineering

2000 West Sam Houston Parkway South
Suite 1800
Houston Texas 77042
713-868-1591
fax 713-868-0046

www.hayneswhaley.com

