

Los Angeles Airport International Terminal: A Collaboration Between Montalba Architects, Fentress Architects, et al.

The vision for an architecturally significant, cosmopolitan international terminal that captures the zeitgeist for the Los Angeles International Airport is being realized after sixty plus years since its inception. A combination of forward thinking and retrospective insight accounts for this dramatic turn of events propelled by the team of Montalba Architects of Santa Monica (Design Architects), Fentress Architects of Denver (Base Building Architects) and owners Westfield Concession Management.

In a 1953 master-plan completed by Pereira & Luckman for the then primitive facility, initial concept presentation boards depicted in watercolor a space-age terminal of science-fiction epic proportions. Towering above the main concourse acreage was a mega-sized, shallow, open-ribbed, transparent glass dome supported by a giant center column (with air traffic control on top) complete with a circular restaurant level/ observation platform. The plan called for shops and additional eateries at the base of the column, with seating clustered among palm trees that were dwarfed by the structure. High in the air, an elevated circulation ring wrapped around the circumference of the space, helping to whisk passengers to their departure gates.

Despite being potentially the greatest architectural project of that era, the entire concept was scrapped for a more practical solution consisting of separate terminals around a horseshoe-shaped traffic artery. The dome's demise was primarily due to the tremendous cooling load required for the colossal heat gain that would have been produced.

This 50s Buckminster Fuller-meets-Disneyland solution pointed the L.A. design compass toward a bigger and bolder 21st-century airport that was largely a futuristic fantasy for more than a generation. Now, in 2015, the core objectives of over half a century have finally been achieved with an addition to the Tom Bradley International Terminal (by Dworsky Associates, 1984) that has decidedly fast-forwarded LAX "back to the future." In this most recent rendition, a 732 meter (800 yard) long, multi-level, north-to-south arrival-and-departure appendage was designed (by Fentress) to the west of the handsome but outdated Dworsky piece. A Great Hall was created at the intersection point of the north and south wings, affording ample space (12,542 square meters/ 135,000 square feet) for the Villaraigosa Pavilion food and shopping court (by Montalba). This oeuvre checks the boxes of a majority of qualities first conceived in the mid-century master plan, albeit in a smaller size.

As with the dome, scale is manipulated via high ceilings that reveal structural tectonics and provide for plentiful glazing, influxing copious natural light into the composition. Multi levels of decking overlooking the main concourse also take their cue from the past concept boards with large open areas and smaller more secluded nooks for drinks,

dining and everything in between. Shopping experiences in the pavilion replicate a “main street” lined with a variety of high-end and duty-free stores. (The “main street” is actually the principal axis alley that connects the northern and the southern “arms” of the nearly .7 kilometer/.5 mile structure). Similar to the original 50’s image sketches, clusters of furniture (designed by Montalba) punctuate the pavilion, offering travelers a brief respite prior to their likely 10-hour international flight.

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