

# ARCHITECTURE VIEW: CONTROVERSY OVER DULLES AIRPORT

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## ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

# Controversy Over Dulles Airport

I am willing to bet that the futurists—those soothsayers who feed trends and truisms into the computer and come up with tomorrow's statistical platitudes—never envisioned the current dilemma of the Federal Aeronautics Administration. It is extremely unlikely that anywhere among the projected figures and patterns for jet air travel there is any forecast of the current hue and cry to declare Dulles International Airport a landmark. Surely no one predicted the present movement to have Dulles listed on the National Register of Historic Places, like Williamsburg, or Mount Vernon. Everything has been speeded up by the jet age, even immortality.

It is now 15 years since Eero Saarinen's dynamically handsome concrete structure was completed in the rolling Virginia countryside near Washington; the terminal's soaring catenary curve supported by temple-like pylons took its place almost immediately as one of the century's most memorable images of flight and architecture. Among the early airports designed specifically for future jet travel, Dulles stressed not only symbolism but innovation. The mobile lounges that it incorporated for loading the planes still work admirably for this national airport under Federal management; local, or city airports are apparently less able to override problems of labor and administration. Dulles was, and still is, a brilliant architectural and functional breakthrough.

In those 15 years since 1962, however, problems have arisen. Traffic at Dulles has grown from 66,559 passengers in 1963 to 2,841,495 in 1976, increasingly large jets have come into common use, and jet air travel has boomed. There are serious deficiencies now: not enough room for the growing number of people and mobile lounges for the larger planes and more numerous flights, and limited and inefficient facilities for the handling of baggage. By the end of Dulles's first decade, modifications were being planned.

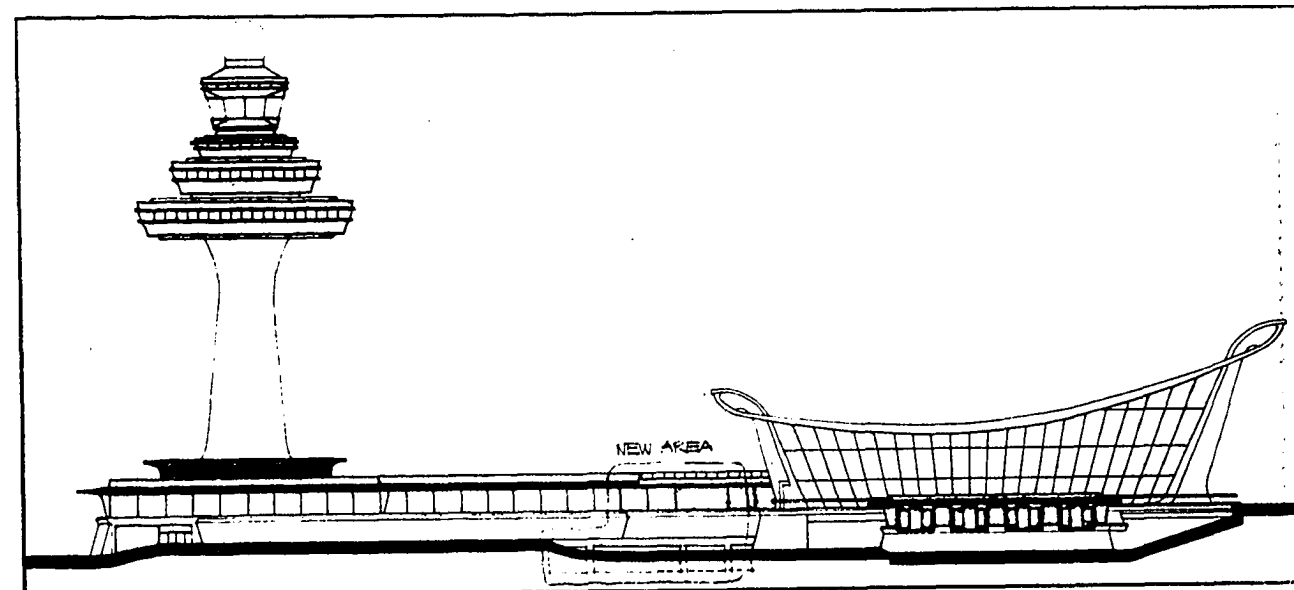
It is not surprising, then, that the idea of Dulles as a protected national landmark has been causing considerable discomfort and consternation at the F. A. A., which is far more interested in expanding the terminal's facilities than in im-

mobilizing it as a historic shrine. In 1972, after interviewing several architectural firms, including Roche, Dinkeloo, the successors of Eero Saarinen, the F. A. A. selected the St. Louis firm of Hellmuth, Obata and Kassabaum to work with planning consultants Peat, Marwick and Mitchell on immediate expansion plans. They were also to prepare a master plan for the future. These proposals were approved by the National Capital Planning Commission, which has advisory planning and design review rights for Federal projects in the larger Washington area.

Nothing further was done until last year, when the architects were instructed to carry out the designs for construction. But then a curious thing happened. Concern and protest began to snowball. Like many government agencies, the F. A. A. had been holding the whole process pretty close to its chest, and when inquiries began to come in from watchdogs of the public domain—from professional groups to other government agencies—they were met with an uncommunicative facade. You might even call it stonewalling. The F. A. A.'s administrators were probably surprised to find that there were people out there who felt immensely protective of an important architectural monument that the Administration happened to own and operate as a functioning airport. Moreover, it was a sophisticated public, well-connected to power centers, and well aware of the Federal reputation as architectural spoilers.

At any rate, the pressure was on for public exposure of the plans, and for landmark designation. Prodded periodically by such bodies as the National Advisory Council on Historic Preservation and the preservation offices of the Department of the Interior, the F. A. A. has refused to make the nomination to the National Register. F. A. A. officials clearly have not wanted their hands tied by landmark status, which would mean design review for changes. And in a game of bureaucratic Alphonism, the two other officials who could have started the designation process, the Preservation Officer of the State of Virginia or the Secretary of the Interior, have preferred to wait for the F. A. A. to make the first move. There have been editorials and cartoons in the Washington Post and in Preservation News; the latter, published by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, showed Dulles sporting a giant Tinkertoy extension.

What exactly is planned at Dulles and how ominous is it? The latest word, as this is written, is that everyone will know on Jan. 11, when the F. A. A. has scheduled a briefing at Dulles, at 10:30 A. M., to finally reveal the details of the expansion design and the new master plan. A spokesman for the Administration says that policy and philosophy will be discussed, as well as the question of landmark designation. Representatives have been invited from the National Trust, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, the Department of the Interior, which maintains the National Register, the



## Dulles International Airport—listed on the National Register of Historic Places

American Institute of Architects, the National Endowment for the Arts and other interested groups.

For those who would like to have the details sooner, the following information is taken from the architects drawings and model. The immediate terminal expansion scheme, for which bids are expected in January, will add 67,000 square feet of passenger handling facilities to the building. It appears that this is to be done in a rational and sensitive way.

The present passenger arrival and departure area is a space at the rear, or field, side of the building that runs along its entire 600 feet and projects about 10 feet beyond the glass facade, for slightly less than half of its height. The proposal is to push this area out another 45 feet, for a total of 55 feet, following all of its original configurations and details. This will also make it possible to substantially enlarge and update the baggage-handling facilities below ground, which will be extended under and slightly beyond the new ground-level passenger area.

Moving this element out will change the site lines of the field facade, but they were interrupted by the passenger area before; this was always the business side of the building. The front of the building, where the graceful curved shape reaches its full 65-foot height and visibility across the countryside, will be unaffected. Nor will the general form or mass lose impact or definition.

As for the long-range master plan, the basic proposal follows the original expansion suggestion by the Saarinen office—that the building structure be extended to the east and west. At that time, the passenger arrival and departure area would probably be pushed out a good deal more. This proposal raises some legitimate design questions. These should be studied by the National Capital Planning Commission, which,

in its advisory capacity here, can deal with everything from land use to design harmony. But National Register listing is essential to provide another necessary kind of esthetic review. What must be considered for the long term is the balance between the projection of future needs and the building's expanded proportions and relationships in terms of its design integrity.

The present plan suggests a logical and acceptable way to keep Dulles functioning with a minimum adverse esthetic effect, provided that the solution is carried out with scrupulous attention to detail. This is, in fact, a little like the building of the second deck of the Brooklyn Bridge some years ago; to the alert eye the thickening of the roadway was a loss of refinement and elegance, but the overall design still carried, and the bridge has continued to be a beautiful and useful object, even with the necessary compromise for another capacity and time.

Dulles's operating managers are well aware of the terminal's exceptional architectural quality; they speak of "soul-searching" for every change, from the relocation of the car rental area to the color of fresh paint. The airport's landmark qualifications are clear. Still, no one wants it to be a malfunctioning shrine or an aeronautical cripple.

The F. A. A.'s lack of full exposure of the plans and its failure to respond satisfactorily to appropriately expressed concern has led to suspicion and mistrust, which is at the root of the controversy. The scheduled briefing session is encouraging, as is an apparent softening of attitude toward landmark designation. In matters of art and environment, eternal vigilance is its own reward.

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