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THE air age, if we are to judge it by the average airport terminal, is an age of standardized mediocrity. Take, for example, New York's International Airport. Design-wise, to use an appallingly appropriate term for its strange mixture of World's Fair flash and pedestrian bad taste, this entrance to New York and the nation is a curious exercise in architectural anarchy .

Two events emphasized this disappointing state of affairs this week:(1) The opening of the new terminal for Braniff, Northeast and Northwest Airlines, and (2) The announcement that 1962 marks the airport's 20th anniversary.) Twenty years is long enough for air-age architecture to begin to grow up.)

The new terminal, a comparatively modest $10,000,000 job by White & Mariani, lacks the usual airport gimmicks except for a triple row of concrete parasols serving as a protective entrance canopy. It is a simple, clean, direct, unpretentious structure of basically sound intentions, with an interior refreshingly free of overbearing materials or details.

The result verges on distinction, but falls sharply short of it.

Even to call it a near-miss, however, is probably compliment enough to an architect dealing with a triple client, an airport authority, and all of the obvious and debilitating changes and compromises that are an inevitable part of such a situation. (Surveying what had survived of his original concept under similar circumstances, one designer is known to have remarked, "I'd like to blow the whole thing up.") Outside, there is less to commend. A fairly undistinguished economy package in a standard blue-gray color commonly used for basement floors, the new building adds little but further confusion to the general airport picture.

The picture as it exists today is a far cry from the original idea, which is recognizable only in the site plan and the earliest buildings. The 655-acre Terminal City was laid out in a huge, roughly circular Beaux Arts design of formal, sweeping grandeur, punctuated by separate terminals, of which six are now built of a scheduled seven. The focus was to be the International Arrivals Building and the 11-story control tower, conservative, well-bred structures executed by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill in the mid-fifties, facing on a large central park with fountains and pools.

Actually, nothing focuses; everything fights. The terminal buildings wage incessant war on one another through their aggressively individualistic and unrelated design, and the focus, if anywhere, is on Edward Durell Stone's centrally placed Gulf Gas station, an unpardonable *reductio ad absurdum* of his design for the United States Embassy in New Delhi, its screen walls one more discordant personal mannerism in the general turmoil.

Paradox

The best architectural idea and one of the worst buildings to come out of the chaos is Pan American's cantilevered steel umbrella, a fine engineering concept that has been mangled, mutilated and sabotaged in every aspect of its inept and tasteless execution. The most dubious idea, which, paradoxically, has produced by far the best building, is Eero Saarinen's magnificently detailed and executed *tour de force* for Trans World Airlines.

The two structures could not be more diametrically opposed in philosophy and result. Pan Am started with a concept that was a legitimate functional advance—a circular, cable-hung cantilevered roof providing plane protection and permitting passenger loading directly from the open terminal beneath.

Saarinen's "bird," on the other hand, unlike his later Dulles terminal for Washington, represents no revolutionary breakthrough in airport design. It is a subjective demonstration of sculptural form; a questionable approach superbly carried through to an exhilarating conclusion.

What is new and impressive here, particularly in the notably successful interior, is the stunning manipulation of reinforced concrete into unconventional forms of arbitrary but dazzling grace. Every line and finish is carried out with a fine consistency and consummate elegance. (Surprisingly, it is the outside that is heavy; the inside takes flight.) But these spaces, as Lou Kahn would say, did not "have to be." The carefully engineered forms have nothing of the inexorable structural logic of a Nervi solution. In this case, personal expression pursued dangerously close to the point of architectural transgression has produced a gem, and if this is sin, it provides the traditional extra measure of pleasure of all sinful pursuits.

The American Airlines Building is a rude jolt back to banality. Singularly inappropriate and grossly scaled rusticated stone wing walls masking plain brick behind, with a bright Sowers glass mural to dress up the facade, create no more than a false front in dashingly conventional style. United-Delta, next to American, is an inoffensive, routine version of airport architecture everywhere.

Eastern Airlines has produced the most expensive building and the most ambitious failure in the group. (This high-priced excursion into the ordinary cost $21,000,000 in comparison to $15,000,000 for T.W.A. and approximately $12,000,000 for Pan Am, American and United.) Never have so many exotic marbles been used for so bleak an effect. An arched ceiling, cut ruthlessly by partitions, curves to nowhere, its indecision revealed awkwardly on the exterior. Enormous, confused, heavy handed and dull, it is a vast monument to pretentious mediocrity.

It is disheartening indeed that so many major airlines, with all of America's architectural talent at their disposal, have racked up such a dismal score. It is even more disheartening that there has been no effective coordination for this monumental enterprise. Buildings can be well related for calculated contrast, without the imposition of uniformity.

But whatever the differences between the buildings — and they are now irreconcilable — one leveling factor equalizes them all: the indiscriminate overlay of uncontrolled, defacing commercialism. Souvenir counters, cheap gifts, soft-drink dispensers, stuffed-animal displays, vending machines, larger and brighter than life illuminated advertisements and revolving, gleaming status symbols from Detroit, all soliciting the traveler to unctious recorded tunes, are the universal low common design denominator imposed without regulation or control on the architects' best efforts. The promise of the air age, which was bold and brilliant, has petered out into a world of petty vulgarity and perpetual Muzak.