

Meigs Field Terminal



Photo: Debbie Dodge

Overview:

The 1961 Terminal on Northerly Island is one of two reminders of the Merrill C. Meigs Field Airport that was abruptly closed in 2003. The delightfully modern airport terminal was completed in 1961 by Consoer & Morgan. The firm also designed Ravenswood Hospital in Chicago and the 1971 Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth in

Des Plaines. The new terminal building contained waiting areas, offices and counter space and was operated by the Chicago Department of Aviation. The two-story glass, steel and precast masonry building features a taller three-story central structure with an atrium that offered spectacular lake vistas for waiting passengers. The terminal's brightly colored 1961 interior is mostly intact, including seats for passengers in the gate waiting areas, despite having also been home to a Chicago Police station at one time. The airport was closed on March 30, 2003, when bulldozers working at night gouged large X's into the runway at the request of Mayor Richard M. Daley.

Threat:

In the summer, the building currently functions as the Field House for the Chicago Park District's Northerly Island park. It also houses the Flint Creek Wildlife Rehabilitation Center for injured birds. The Chicago Park District is working with architects on plans for the redevelopment of Northerly Island that include alterations to the historic Terminal building. Northerly Island is also figuring into plans for the 2016 Olympics should Chicago win its bid in October 2009; it is unclear what the impact of the Olympics would be on the Terminal. To date, the City has not been overly

Meigs Field Terminal
Northerly Island
Architect: Consoer & Morgan
Date: 1961

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sympathetic to the park, since it leased a portion of the former airstrip to concert promoters to build a “temporary” 7,500-seat Charter One Pavilion that many park enthusiasts consider an eyesore.

History:

Northerly Island is a 91-acre peninsula made from landfill that was part of the City’s efforts in the 1920s to fulfill Daniel H. Burnham’s lakefront parkland vision from the 1909 Plan of Chicago. Construction of Northerly Island began in 1922 — and so did proposals to turn it into an airfield. Instead, the parkland became the site of Chicago’s second World’s Fair, the 1933-34 Century of Progress. In 1945 after failing to convince the United Nations to locate on Northerly Island, Chicago leaders revisited the air strip idea. The Northerly Island Air Strip opened on December 10, 1948. A year later it was renamed for Merrill C. Meigs, publisher of the Chicago Herald and Examiner and aviation booster. Meigs had never been in an airplane before he was inspired to buy one after hearing about Charles Lindbergh’s solo flight to Paris in 1927. Meigs also deter-

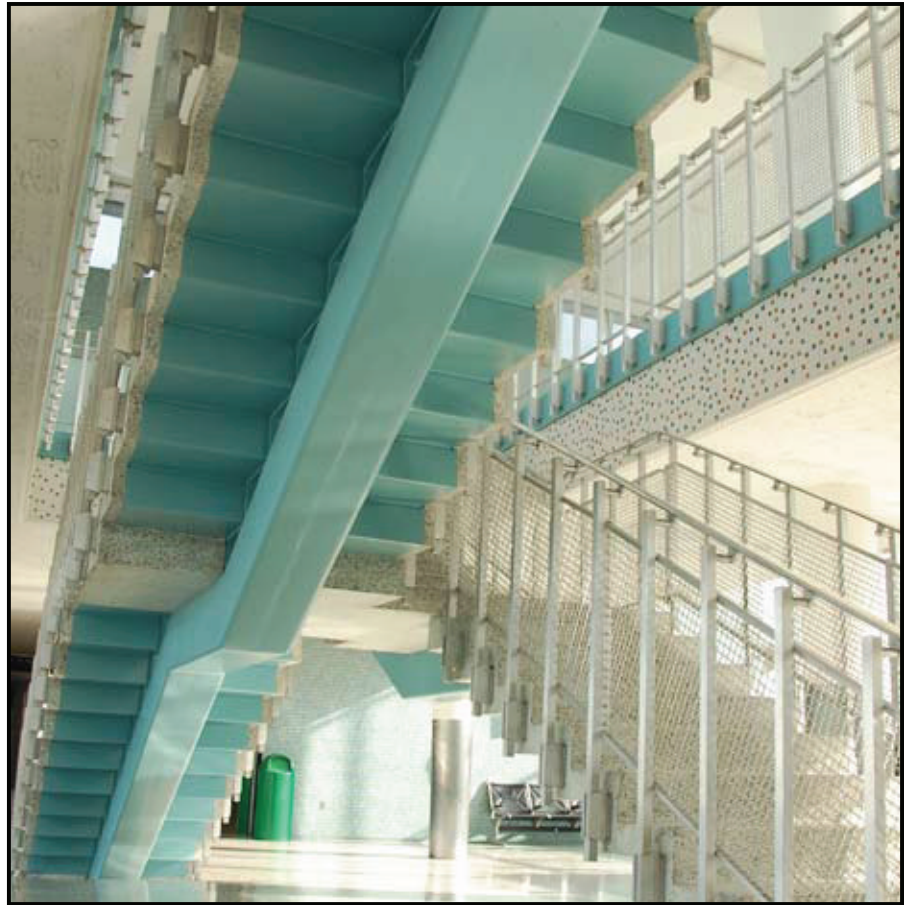


Photo: Justin Bradley

mined at that time to start promoting Chicago as an aviation center and enlisted the support of other Chicago luminaries who also started taking flying lessons, including Chicago Tribune editor and publisher Robert R. McCormick. Meigs is noted for having given President Harry Truman his first flying lessons. Meigs was head of the Chicago Aero Commission in 1935 and a member of the federal committee to select a city site for a central airport. The existing Air Traffic Control Tower designed by Consoer & Townsend was added in 1952. The original wooden terminal was replaced in 1961 with the modern structure designed by Consoer & Morgan. The new terminal was dedicated by Mayor Richard J. Daley, who subsequently tried to close the field in 1972 but stopped when threatened with the loss of FAA funding. The 50-year lease granted by the Chicago Park District for Meigs Field expired on September 30, 1996 and the City’s campaign to close the airport began in earnest.

Recommendation:

Preservation Chicago believes the City should landmark both the Meigs Field Terminal building and its interior before any plans for alterations are acted upon. As has already been happening, the building can be easily reused to support Park District activities as well as other nature-based programs. Reusing the building with as little demolition as possible is one of the greenest things the Park District can do as it moves forward in its plans to further develop Northerly Island as a park.