Seven Continents/Rotunda Building

Chicago O'Hare International Airport

Seven Continents Building / O'Hare Rotunda Building, exterior view. Courtesy Gertrude Lempp Kerbis Archive, Ryerson and Burnham Archives, The Art Institute of Chicago

OVERVIEW

In 1961, Gertrude Kerbis, with the architectural firm of Naess & Murphy, later known as C.F. Murphy, designed the Seven Continents/O'Hare Airport Rotunda Building as a multi-purpose structure housing several restaurants and airport functions. It served as a magnificent passenger link connecting two major airport terminals. The Rotunda Building is a Jet Age design that was once the centerpiece of Chicago's O'Hare International Airport and is an excellent example of Midcentury Modern airport architecture.

Gertrude Kerbis was a groundbreaking architect and one of the first women at the forefront of Chicago architecture working in the modern style in the 1960s. She studied with Walter Gropius at Harvard and with Ludwig Mies van der Rohe at IIT-Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago. Kerbis worked with at Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM) and later at Naess & Murphy/C.F. Murphy. She opened her own architectural firm, Lempp Kerbis Architects, in 1967. Kerbis was one of very few female architects working in a male-dominated profession. She worked on the origi-

Seven Continents / Rotunda Building

Address: **O'Hare Airport, originally between Terminals 1 and 2**

Architect: **Gertrude Lempp Kerbis with Naess & Murphy, and C.F. Murphy Architects**

Date: **1963 (drawings 1961)**

Style: **Jet Age**

Neighborhood: **O'Hare**

Seven Continents Building / O'Hare Rotunda Building, exterior view. Courtesy Gertrude Lempp Kerbis Archive, Ryerson and Burnham Archives, The Art Institute of Chicago

nal O'Hare Terminal structures and the Chicago Civic Center, now known as the Richard J. Daley Center, a designated Chicago Landmark.

Kerbis designed the Seven Continents/Rotunda Building using an elaborate structural system consisting of one mile of heavy bridge cables spanning a 190-foot ceiling and measuring approximately five inches in thickness, considered by some to be a structural feat. This system resembles a sunburst pattern sheathed in concrete visible from the floor of this unique circular, public, two-story space. The Rotunda Building remains largely intact today but has faded from public use due to the closing of the original restaurants, the expansion of O'Hare Airport and the difficulty of accessing the building beyond added security checkpoints.

Preservation Chicago advocates for a greater appreciation, recognition, restoration and Chicago Landmark status for this iconic building. As an extensive $8.5 billion O'Hare modernization effort is about to begin, the Seven Continents/Rotunda Building should be retained and restored.

HISTORY

Before O'Hare Airport was built, Chicago's Midway Airport (originally called Chicago Municipal Airport) on the Southwest Side of Chicago was the busiest airport in the country. Midway Airport was suffering from overcrowding and a lack of space for expansion. Orchard Field, a site northwest of the city, had 10 times the land that Midway occupied and was chosen in 1945 as a site for a new airport to be built. The airport opened to commercial air traffic in 1955. In the 1960s work began on two new terminals, infrastructure and support buildings for what is now known as O'Hare International Airport. The architectural firm of Naess & Murphy/C.F. Murphy Associates was commissioned to design most of this early work, and it was completed in 1963.

The Seven Continents/Rotunda Building, designed by Gertrude Kerbis during her time at Naess & Murphy/C.F. Murphy Associates, was centrally located between the first two terminals at O'Hare Airport. The circular form of

The grand concourse connecting Terminals 1 and 2 with entry to the Seven Continents Restaurant on mezzanine and the Tartan Tray Coffee Shop on ground level, circa 1963, with original oculus skylight and lighting before extensive modifications. Seven Continents Building / O'Hare Rotunda Building, interior view. Courtesy Gertrude Lempp Kerbis Archive, Ryerson and Burnham Archives, The Art Institute of Chicago

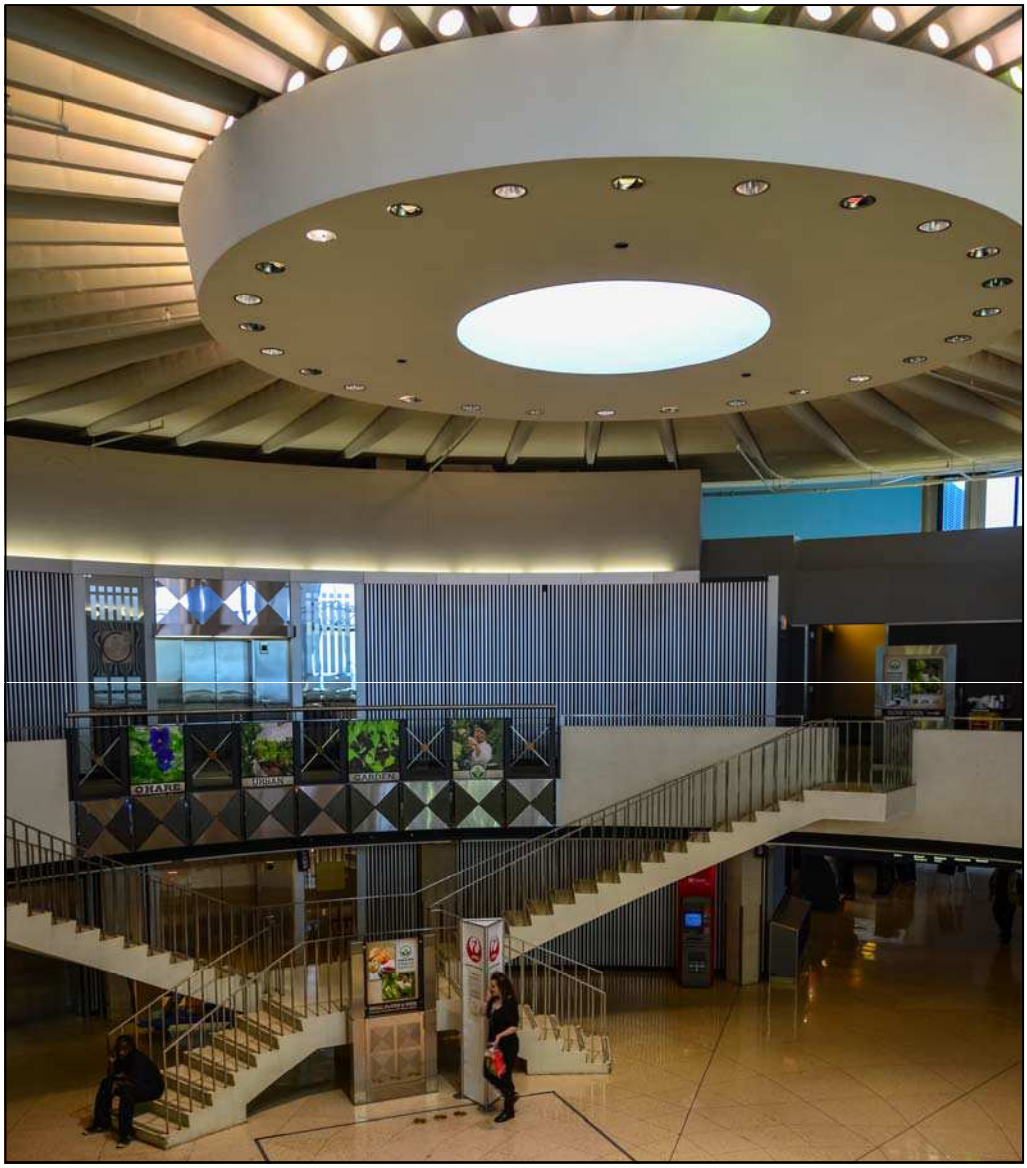
the Rotunda Building is covered by a shallow roof dome consisting of a concrete shell hung by metal cables from a steel support structure overhead. The circular two-story atrium, located at the building's central core, was also a terminal passageway in addition to being a grand space. It contains two floating sculptural staircases leading to a balcony on the mezzanine level above, which also wraps around the perimeter of the open atrium.

The building's interior perimeter also included restaurants and a bar. People were able to gather and watch airplanes depart and arrive on the adjacent tarmacs visible through the expansive two-story windows. The first level of the building contained an informal dining room, coffee shop, lunch counter, pancake shop and cocktail lounge, all which conformed to the curved perimeter of the building's exterior. A soaring, two-story space with a cantilevered mezzanine on the second level, the mezzanine level appears to float within the larger space. This was a brilliant use and program, which formed a universal space for two distinct dining establishments stacked upon one another, with one being a casual dining room and the other an elegant dining facility.

The casual dining room and coffee shop was called The Tartan Tray, which was a reference to the Scotsmen that had founded the Chicago-based, Carson Pirie Scott & Company department store. It was part of Carson's immense restaurant and food service division. The Carson's operation provided food service to all of its regional stores, their cafes within the airport and in-flight meals to airline passengers. Many of these meals were prepared on the ground

floor/lower level of the building within the vast kitchens at the tarmac level. The ground floor also included a bakery, offices, storage, mechanical and electrical, and an employee cafeteria.

The mezzanine level, accessed in the two-story circular atrium core by the two floating staircases previously mentioned, was the location of the famed Seven Continents Restaurant and a second kitchen. It also included five private dining rooms that could be combined into one larger space. The Seven Continents Restaurant provided a fine dining experience where travelers from around the world could enjoy a meal in a very sophisticated setting overlooking the airfield and surrounded by works of art. They could also watch airplanes take off and land through expansive windows. The Seven Continents Restaurant became a destination for even elegant dining, even those not leaving the city on an airplane. It was dining at its best and was said to once rival restaurants elsewhere in the region. The building was known simply as "The Seven Continents," even though it really contained a vastly complex program of services and wide passages connecting two massive terminals for airline customers.



Seven Continents / Rotunda Building, with view of skylight and lighting after extensive and insensitive modifications © Eric Allix Rogers

During the 1960s, airports throughout the country were expanding and building modern, futuristic structures to reflect the excitement of the Jet Age. In 1960, Pan Am built the flying saucer-shaped Worldport at John F. Kennedy (JFK) Airport, designed by Ives, Turano & Gardner Associated Architects and Walther Prokosch of Tippets-Abbett-McDarthy-Stratton. Sadly Worldport was demolished in 2013. In 1962, Eero Saarinen's TWA Flight Center at JFK opened, and that same year Saarinen's terminal at Dulles International Airport outside of Washington D.C. was dedicated by President John F. Kennedy. While portions of the original TWA Flight Center have been reconfigured, the Saarinen-designed head house at JFK has been renovated and now serves as a destination hotel for travelers. Eero Saarinen's Dulles Main Terminal remains as a well-known landmark. In 1961, the Los Angeles International Airport LAX opened its Theme Building by William Pereira and Charles Luckman. This iconic flying saucer on stilts design remains at LAX.

Completed in 1963, the centerpiece of Chicago's new O'Hare International Airport was the Rotunda Building designed by Gertrude Kerbis. The Rotunda Building remains largely intact and is one of the few remaining elements of O'Hare's Jet Age design and C.F. Murphy's contributions to this important early airport design. O'Hare's Rotunda Building was not only notable for its design but also for its trail blazing female architect who was at the forefront of Chicago architecture working in the modern style in the 1960s.

Chicago 7: Seven Continents Building / Rotunda Building

Seven Continents Building / O'Hare Rotunda Building, exterior rendering. Courtesy Gertrude Lempp Kerbis Archive, Ryerson and Burnham Archives, The Art Institute of Chicago

Seven Continents Building / O'Hare Rotunda Building, interior rendering. Courtesy Gertrude Lempp Kerbis Archive, Ryerson and Burnham Archives, The Art Institute of Chicago

Gertrude Kerbis was born in 1926 to German and Russian immigrant parents on Chicago's Northwest Side. She had been attending the University of Wisconsin when she became inspired by a Life magazine article on Frank Lloyd Wright. This prompted her to travel from Madison to Wright's Taliesin Estate in Spring Green, Wisconsin. Gertrude became entranced by the interior rooms as she peered through the glass walls of Taliesin, and she managed to climb through a window to spend the night there. In a short film made about her life, Kerbis recalled that when she awoke she knew she wanted to become an architect.

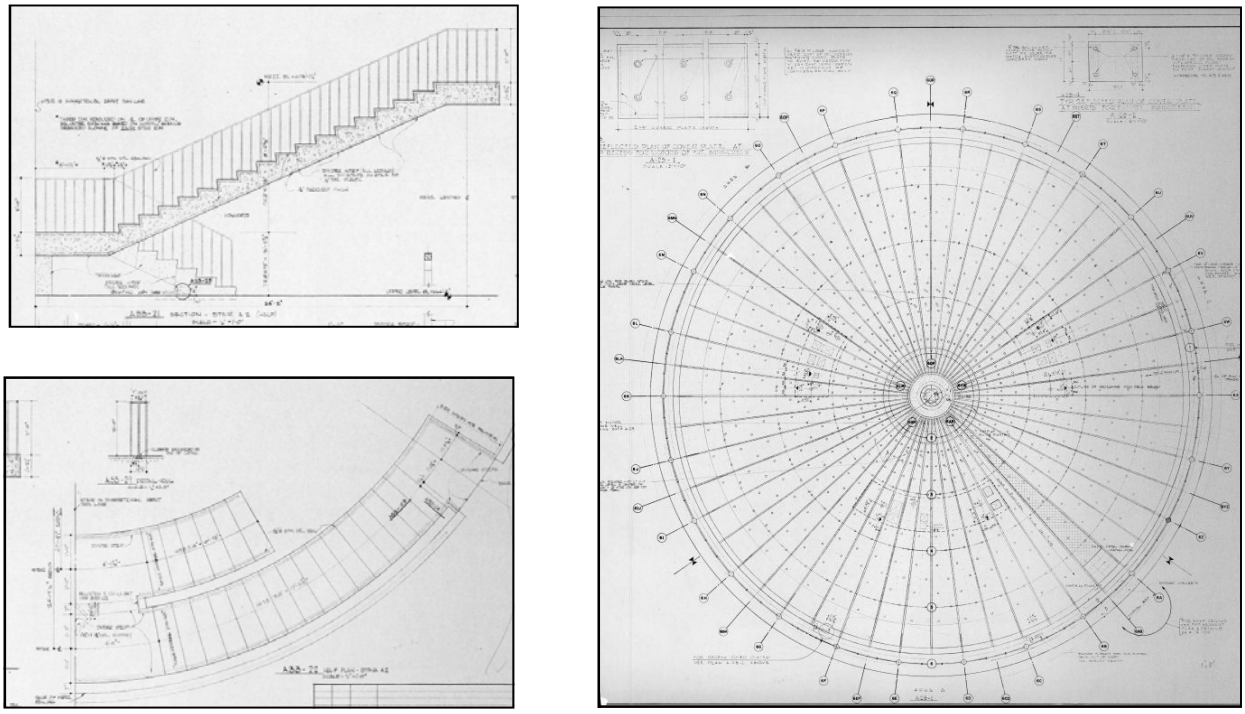
The University of Wisconsin did not have an architecture school, so she transferred to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, graduating in 1948 with a bachelor of science in architectural engineering. She then went on to attend Harvard University's Graduate School of Design, where she studied with architect Walter Gropius. Ger-

Seven Continents Building / O'Hare Rotunda Building, construction aerial view. Chicago Aerial Survey Co., photographer, Courtesy Gertrude Lempp Kerbis Archive, Ryerson and Burnham Archives, The Art Institute of Chicago

trude left Harvard to attend Chicago's Illinois Institute of Technology where she studied under Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. She graduated from IIT in 1954 with a master's degree in architecture and planning.

Gertrude Kerbis began her career in the drafting room of the Chicago architectural firm Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM) where she was one of very few women. While at SOM, she designed a futuristic cadet dining hall at the U.S. Air Force Academy campus in Colorado Springs, Colorado. The dining hall was designed to serve thousands of cadets at one time. Before leaving SOM, she designed the Skokie Public Library, which won national design honors from AIA. Working at Naess & Murphy/C.F. Murphy & Associates from 1959 to 1967, Kerbis designed the Rotunda Building at the newly built Chicago O'Hare International Airport. Starting her own firm in 1967, she took on the unusual role of simultaneously designing and developing her projects. These projects included the award-winning Green House Condominiums at 2131 N. Clark Street and a Highland Park tennis club for her second husband, tennis pro Don Kerbis. She also taught architecture at Harper College in Palatine and helped found the group Chicago Women in Architecture. Kerbis was very supportive of women in architecture and strived to show by example what a woman can accomplish.

Kim Kerbis, daughter of Gertrude Kerbis, said: "Trailblazing Chicagoan Gertrude Lempp Kerbis became an architect at a time when most women in the field were either receptionists, secretaries or relegated to the interior departments despite their qualifications. Inspired by and then studying and working with modern masters, she forged a unique career that merged her engineering passions with her modernist aesthetic; a fierce independence with a



Seven Continents Building / O'Hare Rotunda Building original ceiling plan and staircase details. Courtesy Gertrude Lempp Kerbis Archive, Ryerson and Burnham Archives, The Art Institute of Chicago

desire to strengthen the architectural community (particularly for women); and her continued pursuit of individual architectural excellence with a desire to pass those skills on to the next generation of architects. Modern architecture made its mark on Gertrude Lempp Kerbis, and in return she left her mark on it."

THREATS

Planning is underway to build a new global terminal to replace O'Hare's Terminal 2. The Rotunda Building is directly adjacent to this $8.5 billion expansion project. With the Seven Continents Restaurant, shops and public gathering places closed or modified, the Rotunda Building now serves as a vestibule and throughway and houses TSA offices. It has been insensitively remodeled over time, with oversized advertising to Terminal 3's Concourse G. A new control tower built adjacent to the Rotunda Building blocks visibility of this architectural gem.

Preservation Chicago is concerned that the Rotunda Building won't be properly valued during the largest and most extensive expansion in the airport's recent history. The potential failure to recognize this important Midcentury Modern building by a trailblazing woman architect could result in an inappropriate treatment or possible demolition.

Preservation Chicago has submitted a Landmarks suggestion for the Seven Continents/Rotunda Building to the Commission on Chicago Landmarks, and Landmarks Illinois included Gertrude Kerbis' Rotunda Building on their Landmarks Illinois' Most Endangered List in 2017. These recommendations have been made, but to date the Rotunda Building does not have a Landmark designation or any protections.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Preservation Chicago supports a Chicago Landmark designation for the Seven Continents/Rotunda Building and a full restoration of the building. The structure meets and fulfills four of the seven criteria set forth for Proposed Designation of Chicago Landmarks and it also fulfills the "integrity criterion" required for Landmark designation. Landmark status would protect the Rotunda Building from neglect or demolition as O'Hare Airport plans for the future. With the $8.5 million modernization effort and replacement of Terminal 2, it is our hope that the Rotunda Building will be restored and returned to become a lively center of activity. With new uses that both honor and restore the integrity of this remarkable structure and its complex and sophisticated spaces and finishes, it can be enjoyed by the public once again. If the positioning of the Rotunda Building will not allow for it to function as a public thoroughfare, it should be considered as a special lounge area with a fine dining option.

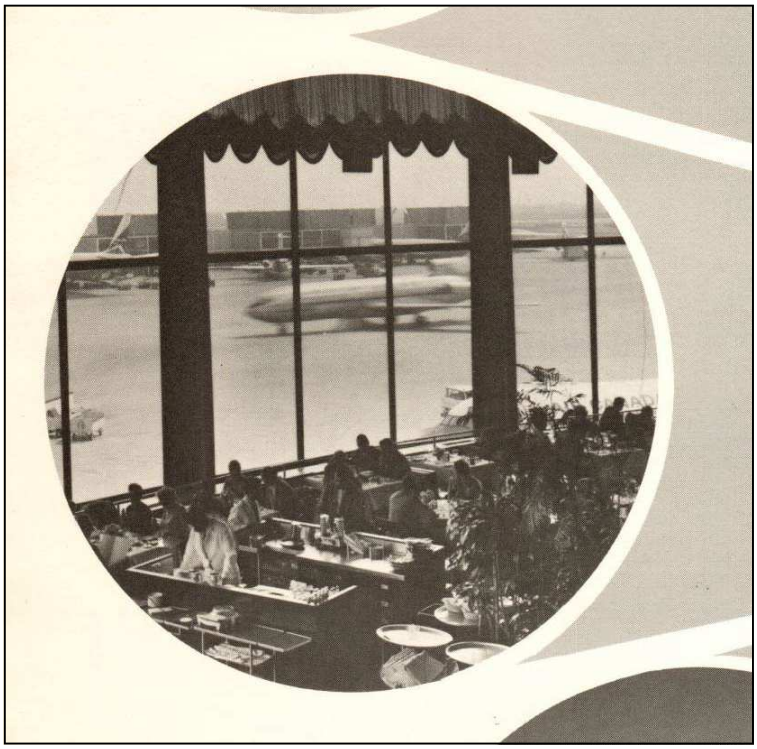
Seven Continents Building / O'Hare Rotunda Building, interior view of stairs. Courtesy Gertrude Lempp Kerbis Archive, Ryerson and Burnham Archives, The Art Institute of Chicago

Seven Continents Restaurant on the mezzanine level of the Rotunda Building, Seven Continents Restaurant interior view. Hedrich-Blessing, photographer Courtesy Art Institute of Chicago

There has been an effort at airports across the country to restore and reuse the Midcentury Modern airport buildings. The TWA Flight Center headhouse by Saarinen at JFK is being redeveloped as a hotel and the Theme Building at LAX by Pereira and Luckman is anticipated to be preserved in the airport's master planning efforts. The Rotunda Building should be included in this group of Jet Age, Midcentury Modern airport architecture.

Gertrude Kerbis and this incredible structure should be honored in March 2019 for Women's History Month. Chicago Landmark designation would properly honor the Rotunda Building's place in women's 20th century achievements in architecture and aviation, and it would protect it during current and future expansion plans at O'Hare. After years of additions and remodeling throughout O'Hare Airport, the Rotunda Building has endured, and it is as interesting, fresh and relevant as ever.

Preservation Chicago was instrumental in working with the Kerbis family to facilitate a donation of drawings, photographs, papers, and other archival materials to the Ryerson and Burnham Libraries at the Art Institute of Chicago.



Expansive views of O'Hare airfield from the ground floor Tartan Tray Coffee Shop © Preservation Chicago Archives

Owned and operated by Carson, Pirie, Scott & Co., the Seven Continents Restaurant was the white-tablecloth "oasis of civility in busy O'Hare Airport" located on the mezzanine level above the Tartan Tray Coffee Shop on ground floor below. Courtesy Gertrude Lempp Kerbis Archive, Ryerson and Burnham Archives, The Art Institute of Chicago