

2017 Most Endangered Historic Places in Illinois

Rotunda Building, O'Hare Airport

Chicago, Cook County



Credit: Landmarks Illinois

The Rotunda Building at O'Hare International Airport, built in 1962, is a jet-age relic from the airport's earliest days. It has remained largely intact while most of the original airport has been reconstructed or dramatically remodeled and continues to be redeveloped. The Chicago Department of Aviation is doing long-term planning for new terminal development and gate and concourse expansion. The Rotunda Building, while currently in use, could in the future be vulnerable as major changes and upgrades are planned at O'Hare.

In the 1950s, Chicago's Midway International Airport was the busiest passenger terminal in the country and suffering from overcrowded conditions. Orchard Field, a landing site northwest of the city and 10 times as large as Midway, was selected as the site to build a new state-of-the-art international airport, now known as O'Hare. In the 1960s, construction began on new terminals, infrastructure and support buildings at O'Hare. The architectural firm of C.F. Murphy Associates did much of O'Hare's early work.

The Rotunda Building at O'Hare was centrally located between the first two terminals constructed and served as a hinge between the two sides of the airport. At the crossroads of the airport, the Rotunda's restaurants and bars offered a place to gather and people watch. The second floor wraps around an open two-story atrium and was home to the famed Seven Continents Restaurant, a fine dining establishment in the midst of the bustling airport. At the restaurant, diners from around the world could watch airplanes take off and land. Today, the Rotunda is an oft-overlooked space in the airport, serving as a vestibule to Terminal 3's Concourse G. The Seven Continents Restaurant is long gone, replaced by various leased spaces, including a yoga studio, greenhouse and eating area. To date, the Rotunda has remained surprisingly intact and is a gem within the airport. However, its future remains uncertain.

O'Hare's Rotunda Building was unique for its design, but also for its designer, Gertrude Kerbis (b. 1926) of C.F. Murphy Associates. Kerbis was a trail blazer for women in architecture, which was

still a male-dominated field in the 1960s. During her long career, Kerbis – once a student of Mies van der Rohe at the Illinois Institute of Technology – worked with many high profile architecture firms in Chicago, including C.F. Murphy Associates and Skidmore Owings & Merrill, before opening her own firm Lempp Kerbis in 1967. Kerbis' designs were considered innovative, including the Rotunda's cable and concrete roof truss system, allowing for a very large clear span, and interior features such as a winding tandem stair and circular overlook balcony.

Many midcentury modern- era buildings at other airports are now being recognized for their architectural significance and are being redeveloped. For example, at John F. Kennedy Airport the iconic TWA Flight Center designed by Eero Saarinen (1962) is being [redeveloped into a hotel](#). At Los Angeles International Airport, the Theme Building (1961 by William Pereira and Charles Luckman) is anticipated to be preserved in the airport's current master planning efforts. With the Rotunda Building once the center piece of Chicago's O'Hare International Airport, it too should be recognized and included in the airport's master planning.



Credit: Jahn

Kim Kerbis, daughter of Rotunda designer Gertrude Kerbis, offered this support for Landmarks Illinois' decision to include it on this year's most endangered list:

“The Kerbis family strongly supports the inclusion of the Rotunda Building at Chicago's O'Hare International Airport on Landmarks Illinois' Most Endangered Historic Places in Illinois list. Trail-blazing 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, 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 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.”

**Nate Lielasus contributed to this article*

What you can do:

- Contact Chicago Department of Aviation Commissioner Ginger Evans and urge her to retain the Rotunda Building as part of future improvements and redevelopment at the O'Hare Airport: <https://www.cityofchicago.org/city/en/depts/doa.html>

Additional Links:

- AIA Chicago presented Kerbis with a Lifetime Achievement Award in 2008. Karen Carter produced a film about her life to mark the occasion: <https://vimeo.com/71756237>
- An oral history of Kerbis can be found here: <http://www.artic.edu/research/gertrude-kerbis-b-1926>