

LAX at a Glance: The Theme Building

The Theme Building is a nearly 60-year-old cultural and historic landmark in the center of LAX's passenger terminal area. It was part of the \$50-million Los Angeles Jet Age Terminal Construction Project that began in 1960. On Dec. 18, 1992, the Los Angeles City Council designated the Theme Building a cultural and historical monument.

Facilities

- At the center of Los Angeles International Airport (LAX) stands the landmark Theme Building, which features 135-foot-high parabolic arches.
- Located under the 8,000-square-foot Upper Level is a courtyard with plaques commemorating the opening of the new Jet Age airport in 1961, and LAX's first employee in 1928, Henry Bakes.
- To memorialize the tragic events of Sept. 11, 2001, Los Angeles World Airports (LAWA) and Los Angeles Cultural Affairs Department officials unveiled a permanent art piece in the courtyard called "Recovering Equilibrium." It is shaped like a compass and features words and phrases that reflect national perceptions, rights and ideals.

The Upper Level

Several concepts called the restaurant level home through the years, most recently the Encounter restaurant that opened in January 1997 with a space-age interior and spectacular exterior lighting designed by Walt Disney Imagineering. Encounter closed at the end of 2013.

Current Occupants

The Bob Hope USO relocated to the lower level of the Theme Building in July 2018, moving out of two fabricated buildings that are in the path of the future LAX Automated People Mover.

LAX Guest Services Division, including the Volunteer Information Professional (VIP) Program and Pets Unstressing Passengers (PUPs). An information desk is also available.

Building a Landmark

This was the first time supporting steel arches of this design were used. An unusual amount of steel falsework was constructed prior to erection of steel. Three temporary 80-foot towers were constructed to support the arches. Each tower was equivalent in height to an eight-story building. Approximately 900 tons of structural steel were used for the entire building.

Construction began April 1960 and completed August 1961 at a cost of \$2.2 million. The general contractor was Robert E. McKee. Architecture and engineering was a joint venture of Pereira & Luckman Associates, Welton Becket & Associates, and Paul R. Williams. Landscape architect was Robert Herrick Carter.

Parabolic Arches: Giant steel arches, including horizontal legs which tie them to the round central core of the building, weigh a total of 348 tons. Arches were erected in two segments – lower section 107 feet long and upper section 105 feet long. Arches meet 135 feet above ground.

Central Core: The core is reinforced concrete, 85 feet high and 30 feet in diameter. It contains three passenger elevators and one freight elevator.

Steel Fabrication: Built and erected by Kaiser Steel's Montebello Fabricating Division, steel fabrication began March 1960 and was completed August 1961. Fabrication sections include: four upper arch sections each weighing 10 tons and 105 feet long; four lower arch sections each weighing 30 tons and 83 feet long; tension and compression ring weighing 33 tons and six feet long.

Transportation: Steel sections were shipped to the site by truck during light traffic hours due to the size of the pieces. In the case of the arches, dollies were used with the arch forming the body of the truck.

Steel Erection: Tension-and-compression ring was erected on Aug. 2, 1960, and placed on the central column 70 feet above ground. The ring helps support the restaurant and observation deck. Two large cranes weighing 30 tons and 80 tons, respectively, were required. Installation of the arches was completed on Dec. 12, 1960. The lower sections were welded to the horizontal legs, which are attached to the central core. The upper arch sections, in turn, were welded to the lower arch sections and a top weldment.

Renovation

- The three-year, \$12.3-million renovation began in February 2007, after a 1,000-pound, 5-foot-by-10-foot panel of the stucco “skin” fell off the underside of the east upper arch.
- The renovation included a significant seismic retrofit, complete reconstruction of the stucco façade of the upper and lower arches, and upgrading Americans with Disabilities Act features.
- This was the first time the arches were redone since the building was constructed.
- Upon completion of the renovation, the Theme Building’s observation deck, located above the restaurant, reopened for the first time since the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. It was open weekends until 2016, when the schedule was reduced to the second weekend of the month. As of September 2018, the observation deck is again closed.
- LAWA won two prestigious awards from the California Preservation Foundation (CPF) for the renovation. The organization’s Preservation Design Award for Preservation Technology recognizes projects that sustain the original form and extent of a structure while aiming to halt further deterioration through structural stability with a minimum of rebuilding, restoration, or rehabilitation.
- The Trustees Award for Excellence in Historic Preservation, which is entirely at the discretion of the board, is only awarded if a project is deemed to be of very high importance to California architecture or history. The CFP Board noted the Theme Building as a great monument to mid-century design.

The Future

One of the benefits of the new Automated People Mover (APM) train is that it will bring a significant number of airport guests into the vicinity of the Theme Building, greatly increasing the foot traffic nearby.

While the APM stations do not directly connect to the Theme Building, the East CTA Station includes a viewing platform, and two of the stations will provide easier access than currently available. Guests will be able to exit to the street from the East CTA and Center CTA stations and walk over to the building. Each station will be approximately 200 feet from the Theme Building.

