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ON A HIGHER PLANE

Airport revamp a lofty leap in Jackson Hole's infrastructure

STORY BY REBECCA HUNTINGTON | PHOTOGRAPHY BY MATTHEW MILLMAN



Ray Bishop stands on what once marked the outside curb where Jackson Hole Airport passengers braved sub-zero wind chill on winter days. Today, the airport director stands sheltered inside a long, airy corridor of wood, exposed beam, and glass.

For Bishop, who knows every detail of the \$31 million airport expansion and renovation, this is a favorite spot—not because of the building but how it showcases its surroundings. This is the only commercial U.S. airport found inside a national park, Grand Teton National Park.

“Let’s not glorify the building,” Bishop says. “Let’s glorify the beauty of this unique place.”

Indeed, look east through panoramic panes to see Sleeping Indian, its cliff-studded headdress dusted in snow. Face west, and an upper bank of windows frame the Teton Range.

“This is the way airports are meant to be. This is where we were able to make the big wow,” says John Carney, of Carney Logan Burke Architects, a Jackson-based firm that worked with Gensler, the lead architectural firm internationally renowned for San Francisco’s airport, the

Shanghai Tower, and Houston Ballet’s Center for Dance.

A singular corridor makes the airport simple for passengers to navigate, Carney explains.

Harder to navigate was the task of keeping flights running and bags sorted, without delay, during the year and a half construction, which added 52,000 square feet and renovated another 48,000. Carney compares it to “performing open-heart surgery on a marathon runner while they’re running a marathon.”

One of the keys to keeping operations smooth, Bishop says, was meeting weekly with the airport’s nimble staff and making adjustments as necessary. In addition, careful phasing scheduled the most disruptive work in slow times, when passenger traffic dips to a fifth of that during peak travel. In contrast, during busy seasons when the airport serves as many as 50,000 passengers a month, the project shifted work to out-of-the-way areas, such as the roof.

The project used portable structural steel tunnels to keep travelers and airport workers safely moving through the terminal while construction continued all

around them. The airport also employed hosts to personally direct passengers to ticketing and security.

Now efficiency is the norm. With a new, roomier ticket lobby, which doubled the number of ticketing kiosks, and an expanded security screening area, waiting in line has dropped from forty-five minutes down to five, Bishop says.

Stepping into a secure area, Bishop shows off a project highlight that passengers won’t see. This airport was the first in the nation to receive American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funds, \$6.2 million, for baggage screening, allowing the airport to install first-of-its-kind luggage scanning technology.

It’s the most sophisticated, fully automated baggage handling system anywhere, Bishop says. A “dimensioner” literally sizes up each bag and then uses its dimensions, combined with its baggage laser tag applied by agents, to track it through 105 sensors, he explains. As the bag runs along a conveyor belt, it comes to what look like giant pinball flippers, which guide bags into lanes where six cutting-edge Reveal Imaging Technologies scanners inspect for

prohibited materials. The scanner flags a suspect bag by taking an MRI-like image and sending it to a human to scan. Transportation Security Administration officers use the picture to decide if the bag warrants a hands-on search.

As Bishop delights in showing off the marvels of the highly automated system, Carney points out how all this industrial activity is neatly hidden behind an attractive wall of dry stacked stone, which creates a play of light and shadow designed to break up the uniformity of the long wall. They both also emphasize how the project won a Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design (LEED) Silver certification for its green building efforts, a difficult task when renovating an older space.

Art runs throughout the building's in-

terior as well. An eagle "painted" with a blowtorch by Tennessee artist Richard Painter spans thirty-feet, gracing the ticket lobby's north wall. Architects designed the wall around the art—not the other way around, Bishop says. A laser-cut steel sculpture of the Snake River, created by Terry Chambers, provides a way-finder that sends new arrivals streaming toward the exit. A twenty-four-foot watercolor mural by Nelson Boren, of the lower torsos of Westerners in chaps, boots, and jeans, graces the opposite wall.

Incorporating public art "showcases and highlights the building," Bishop says. "It takes you from mediocre to outstanding." Travelers passing through would likely make the same statement about the new Jackson Hole airport. ■



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