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Carpet Makes the Concourse:
Successfully Renovating the St. Petersburg-Clearwater International Airport

For many, the St. Petersburg-Clearwater International Airport serves as a popular gateway to the Tampa Bay area. Boasting an array of options for passengers including low-cost carriers and service to charter and private planes, the smaller airport and terminal environments can be exceptionally easy to navigate and offers a calm pace for travelers.

Over the past few years, the airport had experienced a steady growth in the number of air travelers. Therefore, it was important for community leaders to capitalize on this development. However, the emphasis on area air travel comes as no surprise as the Tampa Bay area is considered the birthplace of modern-day commercial air transportation.

With this in-mind, it was decided to move forward with a comprehensive renovation and design project. The renovation, which started off small, but grew when a \$5.36 million federal stimulus grant became available, was part of a \$12 million construction project.

Tourism Taking Flight

In 2006, with a steady growth in the number of air travelers, the St. Petersburg-Clearwater International Airport, wanted to renovate its terminal building to make it even more appealing and welcoming to travelers.

The airport was originally constructed in 1941 and was first used as an army Air Force training base. It became the Pinellas County Airport in 1947 with commercial passenger service beginning in the 1950s as tourism in the area boomed. It later changed its name to St. Petersburg-Clearwater International Airport. After more than five decades serving as the gateway to the Bay area, the airport needed to update the look and feel of its terminal, but creating a new environment posed several design challenges.

"The airport was built in 12 phases, so our goal with the renovations was to make everything look like it was all built simultaneously," said Noah Lagos, the airport's director.

The airport, which offers service to 25 cities in the U.S. and international flights to Canada, is visited by more than 700,000 people a year and encompasses 2,000 acres of land, half of which are occupied by the terminal building and airfield. This civil-military airport is also the home of the busiest Coast Guard Air Station in the world.

Design in Flight

Kelly Taaffe Design Inc., a Tampa-based design firm specializing in airports, was tasked with creating this unified look. They also wanted to create an environment that would be comfortable in an otherwise hectic environment, but that could also help the flow of traffic from one area to another.

"The biggest design challenge was unifying the look of the whole terminal building. It looked disjointed at first, so selecting the right products, from the carpet to the ticket counters, was essential to the success of this project," said Kelly Taaffe Noto, owner and principal of Kelly Taaffe Design, Inc.

The carpet, which was one of the most important interior finishes of the project, was a major component in the renovation due to the high traffic. Taaffe wanted to select only the most durable and best performing flooring products in the market, but she also wanted them to accommodate her design vision and serve as "connective tissue" for the desired unifying effect of the renovation. Her main design considerations when it came to the flooring selection were safety, lifecycle costs, ease of maintenance, and wayfinding (pathing).

For Taaffe, creating a perfect marriage of signature design and product lifecycle considerations is what makes airport interior design a true specialty. One of the biggest ways a designer can create this signature look is through the flooring surface that is selected, due to its enormous design possibilities and expansive space. By selecting the best flooring for this high-impact, high-traffic surface, with a goal of a 15-year lifecycle and uncomplicated maintenance costs, the set design goals would be achievable.

Taaffe custom-designed a carpet, which Bloomsburg Carpet fabricated with Zeftron® nylon. The carpet is made with premium nylon 6ix fiber systems that offer style, performance and recyclability. Being fully recyclable, it is also Cradle to Cradle Silver certified by McDonough Braungart Design Chemistry (MBDC).

The carpet reflected the natural indigenous beauty of the surrounding flora and fauna of the Tampa Bay area through a color palette of greens, blues, sand and black. The design also included a swirling pattern and watery look that flowed well with the porcelain sand colored tile located in the transfer areas. Another design element that reflected the native environment was an exterior court in the terminal building featuring hand-made palm tree mosaics that soar above at nine feet tall.

More than 65,000 square feet of this one-of-a-kind carpet was installed throughout the airport in gate holding areas, public concourses, baggage claim and sections of the ticketing area.

The custom material was a unique pattern that was made especially for the St. Petersburg-Clearwater Airport. Taaffe selected a 60 oz. carpet construction made with a three-frame Wilton woven loom, due to its proven lifecycle in airport settings.

"We worked very closely with Bloomsburg's computer technicians and their artists to translate our design inspiration into a carpet that could actually be constructed and would perform perfectly," said Taaffe.

In order to create the unified look, the designer also decided to have a carpet pattern with huge 6'-foot-by-6' foot design repeats. This created swirling patterns across the terminal unifying the new and old terminal building areas.

The Bloomsburg product that was installed helped soften the design and added sound attenuation, providing a comfortable look that translates into calmer passengers. Even the custom-designed concave ticket counter finishes made them more inviting for passengers needing to approach ticket agents. Furthermore, the seats that were selected for the gate holding areas also had this concept of optimum comfort as their main feature.

Taffee was also able to use the flooring to achieve pathing throughout the airport, so that travelers could use the carpet as a strong, memorable visual guiding them to gate holding areas, concourses, and ticketing areas to facilitate the flow of traffic.

Always a Perfect Landing

When selecting the custom-product from Bloomsburg, the fiber with which the product was made was also an important selling point for the designer.

"I have been using carpet made with Zeftron nylon for over 15 years and it has performed beyond expectations. I like their approach to solution dying and the guarantees that come with the fiber, as well as the optimum size and shape of the yarn lobe which adds strength, durability, and color reflectivity to the carpet," added Taaffe. "I also find it easy and exciting to design with their fashion-forward yarn color palette."

The fiber met her expectations, and those of the airport director, who had seen first hand how well carpet made with Zeftron nylon performs in similar high-traffic environments.

"Prior to working with the St. Petersburg-Clearwater Airport, I worked with the Sarasota Airport and saw how well the carpet performed there. It's still in great shape and wears like iron," said Lagos.

Ready for Take Off

Just in time for the busy holiday travel season in November 2009, the St. Petersburg-Clearwater International Airport opened its doors to travelers with its new design.

"This exceptionally relevant design is warm and welcoming with a nautical theme that reflects what makes our area so special: beach, sun and surf," said Lagos.

The airport now consists of 13 gates, with the renovated gates (gates two through six) holding 500 seats, including new concession stands, two new jet bridges, commissioned glass wall selected by the airport and the Pinellas County Public Arts Committee, a new air chilling system, new doors that make the building more energy efficient and new roofing.

The future for the Clearwater Airport looks sunny and airport officials hope the signature design will attract more carriers and make it even more inviting to travelers.

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