

Re-cycling an Air Traffic Control Tower

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What do you do with an unwanted air traffic control tower? A question you've asked many times I'm sure. Your options are truly limited for obvious reasons. You could be mistaken for thinking that a recycled ATC tower falls only into the abandoned, unloved, dilapidated and old Second World war disused airfield category. The type of building a property investor or adventurous small time developer, inspired by those Lifestyle TV shows might take on as a quirky challenge. And who could blame them? Often to be found, surrounded by green open spaces and with little or no urban sprawl in sight, perfect! Or perhaps as a one-off building in an upmarket development, similar to the converted World War II tower on the site of the old (and now disappeared) RAF Findo Gask in Clathmore, Scotland. A truly splendid conversion.

However, what about the control towers from larger de-commissioned civilian airports? Presumably razed to the ground, demolished, gone forever? I'd never

really given it much thought until I was invited out for dinner one evening during a business trip to Manila and found myself in an amazing restaurant called Blackbird, nestled in the heart of the bustling and vibrant Makati region of Manila.

Blackbird is a beautiful dining experience with great food and plenty of atmosphere. Built in 1937, the restaurant was in fact the terminal, check-in area and control tower from the country's first commercial airport and is the only pre World War II structure in Makati. For comparison with modern day Makati, look at Figure 2 below. The top photo shows the original Nielson Airfield set amongst rice fields. Hardly a single building to be seen. Contrast that with the picture below showing Makati as it is today; the runways re-named Ayala Avenue and Paseo de Roxas, major roads as can be seen.



Fig 1. Nielson Airfield Terminal and Control Tower / Blackbird Restaurant.

Photo: National Archives



Fig 2. Top photo shows Nielson Airfield circa 1937. Bottom photo shows the same area of Makati today. Photo: John Tewell

How many other examples around the world must there be of ‘commercial’ Air Traffic Control towers with a similar heritage or background story? I know of a few (including a luxury B&B in the disused control tower at Stockholm Arlanda Airport), but the one which really captured my imagination is a fairly recent example and one which is much more recognisable as that of a modern day air traffic control tower.

Check out the Punch Bowl Social in Denver.



Fig 3. Punch Bowl Social, Denver (Stapleton International Airport).
Photo: Kevin J. Beaty/Denverite.com

This bar cum diner cum bowling alley occupies the old air traffic control tower building and is located on the site of the old Stapleton International Airport. Denver Municipal Airport (as it was initially known) was opened in 1929 and used primarily for air mail processing. As seems to be the tradition with many airports Denver Municipal changed its name to Stapleton Airfield in 1944 in honour of Mayor Ben Stapleton. After a new runway and terminal Stapleton Airfield adopted the ‘International’ name becoming known as Stapleton International Airport and was Denver’s primary airport for 65 years. However, after environmental issues, boundary constraints and poor runway design (all

hampering expansion) the airport was closed on the 27th February 1995. My *very* tenuous link to Stapleton is the fact the last departure from the airport was Continental 34, a DC-10 bound for London Gatwick (albeit 4 years before I started there!). The new Denver International Airport opened the very next morning, bringing an end to 65 years of service.

The photo below shows the area of Denver which Stapleton Airfield once occupied. It is now a repurposed, redeveloped, thriving urban community with over 35,000 residents. The overlay in Fig 4. shows where the airport used to be, very little of the original infrastructure remains. Parts of the runway can be aligned to new roads, but everything else has long gone.

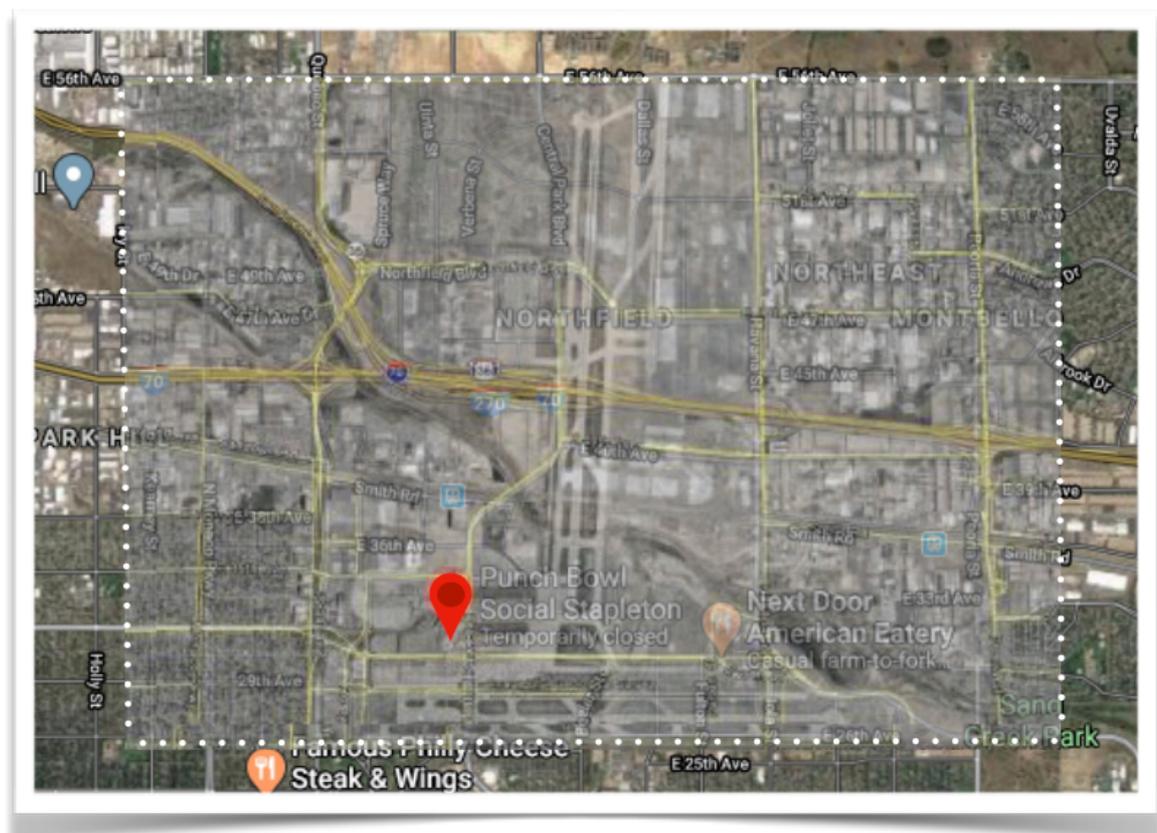


Fig 4. Denver, today, overlaid with an aerial photo of the original Stapleton Airfield
Photo: Google/Archives

After the closure of the airfield, in November 1995 the Stapleton Development Corporation (SDC) was established as a vehicle to sell and lease parcels of land. Over the coming years the concourses were demolished, hangars and terminal complexes removed including the postal buildings north of the United Airlines complex.

The only building left standing, literally, was the Air Traffic Control Tower.



Fig 5. Last Man Standing! The old control tower, Stapleton International Airport.
Photo: Archives | Amber Boutwell

After falling into disrepair for almost 20 years, restaurant visionary and creator of ‘The Punch Bowl Social’ chain of restaurants, Rob Thompson acquired the building. Together with OZ Architecture and Seasoned Development they collaborated on a unique transformation of the iconic Stapleton skyline and created what is arguably one of the most unique dining experiences and a bucket list visit for any level of aviation enthusiast.



Fig 6. The Beautiful ‘Punch Bowl Social’ converted ATC Tower diner.
Photo: OZ Architecture

www.blackbird.com.ph

www.punchbowlsocial.com