With the demolition and removal of office buildings and aircraft hangars that once occupied the north end of Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport, the palette is clearing for the construction of a New Commuter Concourse that will replace passenger movement through the infamous congested Gate 35X. Presently, six thousand passengers a day journey through 35X, boarding buses that drive them to remotely parked aircraft. When the new concourse opens in 2021, 14 gates with jetbridges will replace the busing system, and the less-than-pleasing traits of Gate 35X will be retired.

Designing the new concourse is a labor of love for Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority architect Louis Lee. He oversees the team that developed drawings for the new concourse through multiple stages with greater detail and refinement at each stage. Lee says the concourse design will continue the look and feel of its neighboring three piers, opened in 1997, while employing new technologies and lessons learned from 20 years of experience using the terminal.

Increasing passenger comfort and convenience was a priority for designers, according to Lee. After lengthy discussions with airlines and concessions operators, Lee’s team developed an integrated concept that allows for easy circulation and sight lines between open space, concessions and gate area seating. “The concept is a new trend in the industry that enhances passenger access and blurs the lines between seating space and food and beverage opportunities,” said Lee. “The point is to give everyone in concession areas a clear view to the gate areas so they can see the status of their flight and feel more relaxed.”

From the outside, the new structure will boast the same style and scale as the rest of the building it will join, extending the shapes and hues that are hallmarks of the iconic Terminal B/C — originally the work of renowned architect Cesar Pelli. The main refinements will be more apparent within: Fewer obstructive columns. Wider open space. More raised ceilings and lighter floors. And new restroom designs — for humans and also for service animals that now have to hold any urges until leaving the terminal. Advances in technology through the years will translate into more energy-efficient construction materials and more electric ports available for power-hungry personal devices.

As the final structure to be built on a clean slate at the north end
of the airport, the New Commuter Concourse provided a design opportunity to add something different. Instead of a 90-degree angle where the hallway turns towards the gates, Lee’s team made the turn more appealing. Expanding walls outward from the pinch point, they created a new zone they call a “centrum,” where comfort and convenience meet. “The centrum will be a relaxing environment with ample seating, lighter-colored materials and an abundance of controlled daylight and high ceilings — a pleasant place for passengers to congregate before their flight,” Lee said.

Elsewhere in the concourse, more generous dimensions will benefit passenger flow. “Wider column spacing in the New Commuter Concourse will reduce the potential for congestion,” Lee said. “In the design world, there is no such thing as too much good circulation. Plentiful circulation space translates into a high level of service — something we really strive for.”

The familiar domed ceilings prevalent in Terminal B/C will also be right at home at the end of the new concourse, but fewer of them will mean fewer columns are needed to support them (and obstruct gate views). The columns will be topped with Pelli-inspired steel tree branch beams seen elsewhere in the airport, which is significant to Lee. While at Yale University, he was fortunate enough to have Professor Cesar Pelli as one of his design project critics. Fast-forwarding to today, the charge to continue Pelli’s original vision for Reagan National is in Lee’s control. “I think he would be pleased to see we are continuing his architectural language in the New Commuter Concourse,” said Lee. “Ten years from now, passengers looking from outside will probably think Terminal B/C and the New Commuter Concourse were built together from the same drawings.” Few people other than Louis Lee will know better.