



Denver International Airport

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Introduction

Apocalyptic theories often concern fantastic and sensational phenomena: frightening beasts, environmental catastrophes, dramatic appearances of gods and supernatural beings, etc. For this reason, it might seem odd to encounter a rather robust network of apocalyptic conspiracy theories centring on an ordinary airport in the western United States. The Denver International Airport (often referred to as DIA, although the official airport code is DEN—see Twitty 2024) enjoys an elaborate palette of creative conspiracy theories, many of which intersect with broader apocalyptic ideas that flourish in culturally Christian contexts. Unlike many contemporary apocalyptic beliefs, there does not exist much secondary (scholarly) literature on the Denver airport conspiracies. Denver International Airport is mentioned only in passing in political scientist Michael Barkun's *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (Barkun 2006), which is an excellent resource for contemporary American conspiracy theory thought. Barkun mainly mentions the theory in reference to broader theories about the Illuminati and the New World Order (NWO). Most of the existing resources are blog posts or "listicles" that outline the common beliefs in these frameworks. A large number of these websites are, understandably, concerned with debunking elements of the conspiracies. [Even DIA itself hosts information on its official website that addresses some of these conspiracies.](#)

Denver International Airport has raised eyebrows since its opening in 1995. Anyone who has flown into Denver will know that it is strangely far from the city itself: one has to travel through miles of empty countryside to get from the airport to the city. Why, many have wondered, was it built so far away from the city? The airport's enormous size has also occasioned speculation. At 35,000 acres, its footprint is "[twice as large as the next largest U.S. airport,](#)" and in global rankings, it is second in size only to Damman Airport in Saudi Arabia. Besides its location and size, the costs associated with its building were extravagant; its final budget was over two times the initial estimate, [coming in at \\$4.8 billion](#). It is perhaps no surprise, then, that soon after its opening, conspiracy theories began to buzz around the airport.

The primary conspiracy theory associated with DIA involves the NWO. According to Barkun, NWO conspiracy theories inform a broad category of apocalyptic thinking, and most incarnations "claim that both past and present events must be understood as the outcome of efforts by an immensely powerful but secret group to seize control of the world" (Barkun 2006, 40). Barkun sees NWO conspiracy theories as

merging “two distinct streams of ideas”: “millenarian Christianity, embedded in fundamentalist Protestantism” and another “secular source...a body of historical and political pseudoscholarship that purport[s] to explain major events in terms of the machinations of secret societies” (Barkun 2006, 40). This system of beliefs is extremely malleable, capable of [incorporating ideas about the US government, the Illuminati, federal concentration camps, widespread state surveillance, and antisemitism](#), to list only a few (see further Flores 2022). Regardless of the specifics of different theories, proponents generally agree that the New World Order will rise once the current one has been destroyed.

Accordingly, DIA conspiracy theorists regularly maintain that the airport was built by a secret, elite society bent on global domination. The two most common identifications for this secret group are the Freemasons and the Illuminati (see [here](#) and [here](#); other theories involve alien and lizard people). The airport is sometimes thought to function as their headquarters, from which they will craftily orchestrate a global takeover and then subsequently establish the New World Order. In other instantiations of these conspiracies, the airport is regarded as a shelter which the cabal will use to “ride out the apocalypse,” perhaps by giving these elites access to NORAD (North American Aerospace Defense Command, located in Colorado Springs, CO, some 92 miles/148 km from the airport) bunkers via underground tunnels (see [here](#) and [here](#)). Conspiracy theorists maintain that such proposals are the only way to account for the extensive underground space that the airport supposedly boasts; the space, they claim, far exceeds that which is required for normal airport operations. Still for others, the underground space is for something much more sinister that will accompany the end of the current order: [the internment of law-abiding US citizens in order to prevent them from derailing the NWO takeover](#).

Fuelling theories of Masonic origins is a dedication stone which lies in the Great Hall of the airport, beneath which a time capsule was supposedly buried in 1994. Some speculate that the time capsule contains “[something that could be part of a New World Order plot](#),” perhaps a biological weapon to initiate the apocalypse.

Image available [here](#).

Underneath the Masonic symbol on the stone (the carpenter’s square and compass), we see the date of its dedication, which many have treated as symbolic of some greater meaning (much like the numerical symbolism in biblical books such as Daniel and Revelation). One website explains, “[The stone was dedicated on March 19th, 1994 and if you add up the individual numbers \(1 + 9 + 1 + 9 + 9 + 4\) it will equal 33, which represents ‘perfection and the highest degree in Masonry you can hold’.](#)” Similar to this numerical symbolism are the ostensibly esoteric symbols “Au Ag” that are inscribed in the floor in the Great Hall of the airport. Some have argued that these letters stand for “Australia Antigen,” which is “[the Illuminati’s secret weapon to accomplish the genocide](#)” that will accompany their apocalyptic takeover. [The airport, for its part, maintains that these are merely the atomic symbols for gold and silver](#), a nod to the importance of mining in the American frontier.

Perhaps the most intriguingly apocalyptic items at DIA are the two large, multi-scene murals by [artist Leo Tanguma](#). The first one is entitled “Children of the World Dream of Peace,” and depicts, first (below right), a scene of war and death, prominently featuring a gas-masked soldier wielding a sword and a machine gun (recalling, for some, a Nazi soldier). A second scene in the first mural depicts representations of people surrendering their weapons, while the corpse of the soldier lies at their feet (below left). A rainbow ribbon links both scenes: image available [here](#).

The second mural, entitled “In Peace and Harmony with Nature,” is painted in the same style as the first. Its first panel features a scene of mourning over people and over the destroyed environment, while its second scene shows the restoration of humanity and the earth: scene 1 of mural 2 available [here](#); scene 2 of mural 2 available [here](#).

Conspiracy theorists have sought to link the imagery in these murals to apocalyptic scenarios by fixating on their violent imagery. One description highlights the themes of “[war, death, pollution and environmental destruction...\[and\] the rise of totalitarian world government.](#)” A more speculative analysis proposes that “[the painting was commissioned by the Illuminati/New World Order and that a Nazi uprising, via the underground bunker, is imminent.](#)” Leo Tanguma himself prefers to emphasise the non-violent details: overcoming war to achieve world peace, reversing environmental degrading to live in harmony with nature, and embracing cultural differences to enjoy a diverse, global society.

Denver International Airport also showcased a curious photography exhibition by Alex Sweetman that was linked to apocalyptic sentiments. The exhibition seemingly presented photographs that captured the “[physical environment of the high prairie,](#)” but some have noticed that many of the photographs featured wilting or dead crops—potentially consequences of war and other apocalyptic events. One, for instance, shows [a field of dried-up sunflowers,](#) their faces bent to the ground.

Even some other eccentricities of the airport that don’t immediately appear to be apocalyptic have been connected to these broader theories. For instance, when one arrives at the airport, one is greeted by a giant blue horse statue. The statue is officially named *Mustang* as an homage to the wild horses in the American West; it recalls “[the spirit of the West,](#)” according to the creator ([Luis Jiménez](#)). However, it has been nicknamed “Blucifer” (and occasionally “Broncula”) due to its disturbing appearance and unfortunate legacy. The statue is rumoured to be cursed because part of it tragically fell on Jiménez, severing his artery and killing him. What’s more, some have viewed this statue not just as a public art installation but as an embodiment of biblical imagery. Specifically, this statue [has been connected with the horseman of the Apocalypse](#) (Revelation 6). As one website explains, “[\[s\]ome even claim that his glowing red eyes indicate that he represented one of the steeds that will be ridden by the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.](#)” *Mustang* images also available [here](#) and [here](#).

Finally, we cannot forget the claim that the layout of the runways at DIA intentionally call to mind a swastika. This layout, conspiracy theorists maintain, only confirms that an elite group (perhaps aspiring to Nazi fascism to achieve the New World Order) calls the airport home: image available [here](#).

We can pull out a kind of general apocalyptic posture that is animating many of these specific claims, despite the variation of individual theories. For one, these frameworks are obviously characterised by a dualistic worldview. They posit a cabal (i.e., the bad guys) that is furtively plotting evil acts to gain power over ordinary people (i.e., the good guys) (“global elite” is often a dog whistle for Jewish people in these frameworks: see Barkun 2006 and [here](#)). This evinces a common sentiment that characterises many apocalyptic frameworks: the binary opposition between good vs evil (or light vs dark, righteous vs unrighteousness, children of God vs children of Satan, etc.). The structuring of history on a timeline toward apocalyptic destruction (that is, the elimination of the current order to make way for the rise of the New World Order) reflects another characteristic feature of apocalyptic thought: the depicting temporal stages, usually evincing some sort of spiral downward to a tragic end. The NWO takeover, of course, will be violent and disruptive, akin to the extensive destruction predicted by such texts as the Apocalypse of John. The

conspiracy theorists themselves can even be considered analogous to the biblical prophets and apocalyptic seers: they believe they have somehow acquired knowledge about what is *really* going on, and they are trying to awaken the rest of humanity before it is too late. While DIA conspiracies are largely secular apocalyptic frameworks, one could easily see how it would be rather simple to refigure the narrative to account for, say, the antichrist working alongside the evil cabal to take over the world.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of these conspiracy theories is that DIA has leaned heavily into them. As noted at the outset, they address these theories on their website, providing [a conspiracy theory “Fact Sheet”](#) for anyone interested (as one might expect, they debunk most of the claims). The airport’s Twitter account also occasionally jokes about the doings and dealings of the Illuminati within the airport:



In addition, one of DIA’s past art installations was [devoted entirely to conspiracy theories](#). Finally, DIA developed an advertising campaign and featured an exhibition that [capitalised on several of the claims by conspiracy theorists](#). Examples of this campaign that foreground apocalyptic ideas are below.

In sum, the DIA conspiracy theories demonstrate the extent to which apocalyptic ideas are alive and well in American society, even outside of explicitly religious frameworks. This case underscores how apocalyptic ideas are flexible and adaptable to new cultural contexts, and so we will continue to see them made relevant to new people, places, and situations. The creativity with which conspiracy theorists have reframed DIA’s modern art and architecture in apocalyptic narratives attests to the ongoing appeal of these ways of viewing society and its possible futures.

Images from **Conspiracy Theory Promotional Campaign** available [here](#).

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Further Links

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