Airport *Consulting*

A Quarterly Publication of the Airport Consultants Council

ARE AIRPORTS NON-PLACES?

By Stephen J. Appold and John D. Kasarda, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Social scientists view airports as quintessential 'non-places.' 'Places' communicate identity, social meaning and history while 'non-places,' lacking these attributes, are held to be anonymous, disorienting and off-putting. Airports — and the larger surrounding airport cities — are not limited to being anonymous and without meaning. Identity and meaning need to stem from the users and their activities, supported by the urban design work of architects and planners rather than from creating distant historical allusions and local programs.

Traditional Approach

In response to the 'non-place' criticism, airport executives, planners and architects have attempted to infuse terminals with local identity and symbolism. Naming or renaming the airport or terminal, local food and specialty shops and focused public art programs are three prominent strategies currently being used to achieve this goal.

The easiest and most common strategy, naming, creates ties to people and history and thus identity. For example, Ronald Reagan National Airport evokes stronger meaning than the name National Airport.

Likewise, John F. Kennedy International Airport — or even more so, JFK — creates associations that Idlewild, the airport's former name, never had.

The second strategy, creating commercial space in airports, has likewise been an integral component to creating community significance for many years. A growing number of airport restaurants were elevated from nameless cafeteria fare to franchise restaurants as the amount of passengers increased, but sameness persisted. As a result, Memphis barbecue, Philly cheese steaks and Indy 500 Authentics can now

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INDIANAPOLIS INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT CIVIC PLAZA:
A plaza surrounded by local specialty shops cornerstones Indianapolis' new terminal.

HONG KONG INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT SKYCITY PHASE 2: SkyCity next to Hong Kong's Terminal 2 incorporates modern urban design principles.

be found in their respective airports, using local food and specialty shops as a way to connect with a regional identity.

Another traditional strategy, public art programs, is in place in nearly all major airports. Many highlight regional art and local artists. Locally visible businesses and terminal design attributes reflecting the region provide further identity and uniqueness to counter airport mass uniformity. Some, such as Indianapolis, place these businesses around a civic plaza in the main terminal.

While valuable, these three strategies for transforming 'non-places' into 'places' have limits. Historical allusion may only be tangentially related to airport locations or reliant upon traveler memory. (Who was Lieutenant Commander Edward "Butch" O'Hare anyway?) The national proliferation of regional food has ensured that few dishes are truly local anymore and the best art typically taps into common human, rather than regional, themes. Because planners and architects work from the same playbook, efforts to differentiate result in interchangeability. None of the strategies are wrong, but they frequently miss accomplishing the aim of making airports significant 'places' in communities.

Urban Design Approach

Airports and their immediate environs are taking on many commercial functions previously associated with metropolitan downtowns, including hotels, shopping streets, office buildings, upscale restaurants, and cultural and entertainment facilities. In the process, many city airports are transforming into airport cities.

The spatial and functional core of the airport city is the passenger terminal which may be likened to an urban central square: it operates as its multimodal commercial nexus, offering a variety of increasingly specialized goods and services.

Appropriately applied, urban design can help make both terminals and their surrounding development interpretable, navigable and therefore welcoming. Design for human use can evoke a warm, safe feeling and airports and airport cities can become meaningful places because people are increasingly able to accomplish their social and business purposes there.

Urban design, a fusion of architecture with site planning transportation planning and landscape architecture, is primarily concerned with the physical form of the city or community. Urban design encompasses many dimensions, including designing for local transportation and communication, designing for a healthful experience, and designing for interpretability.

The common objective is creating an urban environment for the 21st century that is economically efficient, aesthetically pleasing and environmentally sustainable. Like many planning goals, there is a certain tension among these aims but they also reinforce each other to a large degree.

The nascent field of airport city design is based on four key observations about airports and airport areas. Each of these is driven by the rising numbers of people — and goods — travelling by air.

1] Airports are the central stations of today. They attract commercial activity, employment and supporting real estate development.

2] Airports have evolved into airport cities. As they spill from airport grounds into surrounding areas, they take on many functions of an urban downtown.

3] Accessibility to airports is a critical concern. Thus, land use and transportation planning need to be fully coordinated.

WASHINGTON DULLES AEROTROPOLIS CORRIDOR:
High-tech offices line the Washington Dulles Aerotropolis corridor.

4] Designing an airport city is an urban and regional planning task. Therefore, airport cities cannot be ignored in the development plans of municipalities and regions.

The basic principles of urban design, distilled from good practice half a century ago, provide a solid foundation for airport city place-making. According to Kevin Lynch's research on "place legibility," people need to be able to imagine the spatial layout of a place in their minds in order to find their way around and to feel attracted to that place. He found an interpretable city to be a network of five key design elements: paths, edges, districts, nodes and landmarks.

Good urban design creates airports and airport cities which lead travelers along their way to their desired destinations. Such "wayfinding" facilitates movement and can help visitors accomplish their aims.

Airport cities generally have two central nodes, one for passengers and the other for cargo, with the former taking precedence for most purposes. Each tends to be surrounded by a district which, in the case of the passenger terminal, contains paths to ground transportation, retail and hotels.

The passenger district may have finely demarcated edges indicating its boundaries. Landmarks, recognizable but not necessarily monumental or even well-loved, provide points of reference.

In most cases design ends at the airport fence and, at times, at the terminal door. As airport cities continue to grow around major airports, the paths need to extend outward to the districts containing the most common destinations. These districts may be centers providing lodging, food, entertainment and other services for travelers. And they may be districts of higher order service provision containing offices or medical facilities. The cargo side of an airport city typically has a logistics district containing freight forwarders, distributors and other time-sensitive goods handlers important to the region's economy where the layout of facilities and transit paths may either facilitate or hinder efficient flows.

Challenges Ahead

Until recently, urban design was not often applied to airport areas because it adds costs to real estate development and the benefits are not always apparent. Urban design also often stops at a project boundary, most often at the property line, and there is a subtle cultural denigration of "sub-urban" areas among design professionals which seemingly makes airports (beyond the passenger terminal) and their inhabitants less worthy of attention. Many airport and urban design architects and planners avoid the metropolitan periphery — the suburbs, the edge cities and the airport cities — as if it were inherently anonymous. In some circumstances, it is understandable, particularly where the vicinity of an airport abuts or crosses legal and jurisdictional boundaries, complicating coordinated design efforts. For example, Dallas-Fort Worth Airport is in two counties and four distinct municipalities while being owned and controlled by two other cities. Nevertheless, airport and urban designers cannot ignore that most development takes place at the periphery of existing development.

Fortunately, with the rise of airport cities, these obstacles are shrinking. Addressing the challenges calls for a new approach bringing together airport planning, urban and regional planning and business site planning with an underlying conviction among architects, planners and government officials that urban design is essential to create better airports that will enhance passenger experiences and strengthen the regions they serve. ✈