

Airport as City

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Figure 1. Songdo City in South Korea under construction, an airport-centric city to be completed in 2015. (Gale international and tk/pr public relations)

The airport city is a two-fold phenomenon: the areas surrounding the airport develop due to their proximity and accessibility to the terminal complex, and the terminal complex itself develops in to a pseudo-urban centre. This situation is manifest to varying extents in all major airports of the world today. In many cases, the resultant agglomeration resembles a city in terms of scale, ‘population’ (staff and travellers), infrastructural connectivity and spatial quality. As the world becomes more globalised and the demand for air travel continues its upward trajectory it seems that we are witnessing only the beginning of a new urban typology with global implications that are not yet fully known.

Airport area as airport city

The logical conclusion of a world connected by fibre-optic cables and aeroplanes is the development of cities around airports. The current thinking in this domain is business-centric. Companies that locate near to airports can operate more efficiently: they are more connected to clients and staff from abroad, meetings can be conducted face-to-face without the additional time and cost for

the taxi in to the city and participants can fly back home the same day.

A new business passenger profile has emerged, glamourised by the 2009 film *Up in the Air*, where George Clooney plays a nomadic businessman who flies 320 days a year across the US. Back in the real world, in Microsoft’s offices in Schiphol, meetings are held face-to-face with colleagues from Seattle and across Europe who then fly back the same day.

As airports are typically surrounded by hundreds, even thousands of hectares of undeveloped land there is enormous opportunity for real estate development. This development tends to take the form of office blocks, hotels, convention centres, free trade zones, logistics hubs, medical facilities, shopping malls, and golf courses; much like Joel Garreau’s concept of the ‘edge city’.

Schiphol is surrounded by business and logistics complexes, with outposts for transna-

tional corporations. The World Trade Center Schiphol bridges directly in to the terminal complex and is the most expensive office space in the Netherlands. Next door are Hilton and Sheraton hotels. Zuid-As is an eight-minute train ride away, base to companies such as ING, ABN-Amro and Akzo Nobel.

Adjacent to Frankfurt Airport is Gateway Gardens, a 35 hectare business district that includes The Squire, a remarkable 660m long building that straddles the train station. Marketed as ‘a complete city under one roof’ it accommodates 7,000 people both working and living in its offices and two Hilton hotels. It is also comprised of retail and service areas, gyms, kindergartens and medical facilities. The building is significant enough to warrant its own postcode.

In the Middle East and Asia this trend is also evident, only on a far larger scale. Greg Lindsay considers Dubai as “an airline and an airport with a city attached to it.” Emirates is the largest long-haul airline in the world and Dubai International Airport is the busiest airport in the Middle East. Capitalising on its location as the crucial trade link between East and West, it is a city of ‘free-zones’ - business districts filled with expatriates that impose no tariffs, corporate or personal income taxes, or censorship on its inhabitants. Rem Koolhaas observes: “Almost everybody who lives in Dubai also lives somewhere else...The actual inhabitation of the city is a fraction of its maximum capacity.” Dubai is an instant city in the middle of the desert.

Moving further East, Songdo in South Korea, next to Incheon International Airport is a 600 hectare city mushroomed from nothing in just over a decade, catering to the international business community. It includes luxury hotels, shopping malls, museums, international schools, a convention centre, and a golf club.

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Most recently, signs of construction are emerging towards the South of Beijing for what is anticipated to be the world's largest aviation hub. An article in *The Guardian* from September 2011 reads: "On the roadside, labourers are building an elaborate 10m-high steel and concrete map of the world topped by giant red characters declaring: 'Construction of a New Airport City for the Capital.'"

The airport city is not just a buzz-word. It is fast emerging as the only template for the future of the airport and can be seen as part of the next logical phase of globalisation.

Airport terminal as urban centre

Catching a flight at Schiphol first involves arriving by car, train, bus or even bike (there are cycling routes) and entering the terminal complex via Schiphol Plaza, a forty-unit shopping mall before check-in. There is a branch of the bank ABN-Amro, a Panorama Terrace for plane spotting and art installations by contemporary artists such as Jenny Holzer. After check-in there is a library, casino, gallery space, meditation room, spa, showers, capsule hotel, conference centre, duty-free shops, various themed waiting lounges (including one modelled as a park), an oxygen bar, as well as several sponsored pop-up installations. Behind the scenes there is an intake for the homeless and a mortuary with the capacity for forty bodies. Schiphol even has its own wedding service. It is clear that the contemporary airport is moving far beyond its traditional role as a pure transport hub.

In other major airports it is the same



Figure 2. Changi Airport's pool (Changi Airport Group Singapore)

story, of terminals absorbing unusual, city-like activities. Dubai International Airport contains a 350-unit, one kilometre-long duty-free shopping corridor comprised of a myriad of the world's highest-end brands. Hong Kong International Airport's shopping arcade includes luxury clothiers such as Chanel, Dior and Louis Vuitton. Frankfurt Airport has the world's largest airport clinic, treating over 36,000 patients annually. In Singapore Changi Airport there is, remarkably, a tropical butterfly garden, koi pond and numerous other themed gardens alongside cinemas, saunas and a rooftop swimming pool.

The airport city is a unique form of urbanism. It is a city with no residents. Its population is a transitory one of workers and passengers that pass through and leave every day. Despite the urbanisation and place-making of airports that is happening globally, no airport has yet become a destination in and of itself -

they are still only places of transit. It will be interesting to see if this situation will change in the coming decades.

The market has spoken

The main reason for the broadening of the programmatic scope of airports is due to governmental deregulation and their subsequent privatisation. This began in 1978 in the U.S. when President Jimmy Carter deregulated domestic airlines. Intra-European market liberalisation followed, reaching its completion in 1997.

In order to remain competitive in the market, airports now need to look towards non-aviation sources of revenue to fuel further expansion and maintain their existing assets. Schiphol is very much at the forefront of this trend. It is a private company that happens to have the State of the Netherlands and the City of Amsterdam as its principal shareholders. Yet the state is not allowed to use its leverage as a stakeholder for political means, only to act in the interests of the company. Schiphol has its own real estate group that develops, manages, operates and invests in property at and around airports both in the Netherlands and abroad. Schiphol Area Development Company (SADC) is a collaboration with the City of Amsterdam, Municipality of Haarlemmermeer and the Province of Noord-Holland, blurring the distinction between public and private. Its portfolio consists of property in and around Schiphol and as far as Sweden, Hong Kong and Indonesia. The airport has now reached the scale and influence of a regional governmental body and it is not slowing down. This is the future of the airport city.



Figure 3 Changi Airport's butterfly garden (Changi Airport Group Singapore)