Big airport projects have often been prone to controversy. Schiphol’s Polderbaan project, Heathrow’s expansion, and the construction of Berlin’s new airport all suffered from political, financial or technical issues. However, Denver International Airport (often referred to as DIA) caused uproar in so many ways that it easily tops any other major airport project in history.

RIGHT FROM THE INITIAL PLANNING PHASE UNTIL DECADES AFTER IT’S OPENING, THE AIRPORT MADE HEADLINES WITH COST OVERRUNS, TECHNICAL FAILURES, PROVOCATIVE ART DISPLAYS AND EVEN DOOMSDAY CONSPIRACIES. WHAT CAUSED ALL THE CONSTRUCTION PROBLEMS AND HOW DID IT TURN INTO A SOURCE OF INSPIRATION FOR CONSPIRACY THEORISTS? AS ONE COULD EXPECT, THE ISSUES ARE NOT COMPLETELY UNRELATED FROM EACH OTHER.

THE POWER OF AIRLINES
Denver International Airport was opened in 1995 after years of delays to replace the ageing Stapleton Airport that had been serving the Denver metropolitan area in Colorado, USA since 1932. Stapleton Airport suffered from typical old airport issues: it had an inconvenient runway layout, there was no more room for expansion and it received many complaints about noise from local residents. Forecasts for the air traffic demand in Denver predicted that a major capacity increase would be needed in order to meet future demands, and to achieve this it was decided to build a completely new airport, far outside the city limits on a land site twice the size of Manhattan. However, it quickly turned out that the used forecasts were overly optimistic, and actually, the demand for flights went down after the construction of the new airport had commenced. How did this happen?

At a major airport like Denver, demand is heavily dictated by the presence of major hub carriers. Stapleton was a hub for three carriers: Frontier, Continental and United. Frontier went bankrupt in 1986 and was taken over by Continental. Continental and United were not convinced at all by the new airport plans, but because it was vital to get these airlines on board to be hub carriers for the new international airport, both airlines had the power to demand very ambitious design changes before they would agree with the construction plans. Continental demanded that a two-level bridge, which would span dual taxiways, would be built to connect the main terminal with the Continental concourse, in addition to the planned tunnel system. Also, it was requested that a maintenance hangar and flight kitchen would be built and paid for by the airport. United demanded the same facilities, as well as that the bridge which connected to the Continental concourse would be covered with opaque glass, such that passengers on their way to the United concourse would not be able to see the Continental aircraft looking shiny in the bright Colorado sun.

All these requirements drove up the construction costs beyond limits, especially since the cost estimations were kept deliberately low for political reasons. Within a year after Continental signed a lease, it went into ‘Chapter 11’ bankruptcy, which allowed the airline to walk away from the signed contracts. In 1994, Continental decided not to operate from Denver at all. Thus, United remained as the only carrier to operate a hub at the new airport. Funnily enough, Continental and United were merged in 2010 as a result of yet another bankruptcy!

THE BAGGAGE SYSTEM FROM HELL!
United also demanded a baggage handling system with extremely ambitious specifications, and it demanded that the airport would only be opened once the baggage handling system functioned as specified. United only requested to have
this system implemented for its own con-
course, but the Denver city government
decided to build it for the entire airport.
This made it a project of size and complex-
ity never seen before, and there was not
a single company that offered a design
proposal, which would meet the require-
ments. Finally, BAE was given a practically
blank check and unrestricted access to
the building site to realize this system.
However, the originally planned $183 mil-
lion construction costs grew by $1 million
per day, and even after years of delays,
the system never really worked. During a
demonstration on national TV, the system
failed dramatically, literally eating bag-
gage and throwing it around. Only United
decided to use the system for outgoing
flights, and in 2010, the system was com-
pletely removed, saving United $1 million
per month on maintenance and repairs of
the system.

CONTROVERSIAL ART AND
CONSPIRACY THEORIES

While cost overruns, delays and technical
problems are not that uncommon, what
really makes this airport stand out is the
bizarre, sometimes daunting art displays
that are spread around the terminal. The
first thing that greets you when driving
towards the terminal entrance is a sculp-
ture of a giant blue mustang with red
glowing eyes (See Figure 1). This sculpture
has its own scary story: the artist who cre-
ated it, died because the horse structure
fell on top of him when a cable snapped.
It had to be completed by his family. After
driving past the horse, the main Jeppe-
sen terminal building catches the eye
with its circus tent-like rooftop structure
(See Visual), resembling the white caps of
the Rocky Mountains nearby. Inside this
terminal building, several mural paint-
ings can be found, each depicting rather
disturbing scenes. For instance, there is
one mural where a giant military
figure wearing a gas mask is shown, holding a
machine gun and a sword, with scared
children around him who are suffering in
darkness (Figure 2). Another mural shows
three dead women in a coffin, each of dif-
ferent ethnicity and with a burning city in
the background. According to the artist,
the whole collection of murals represents
a story where man-made environmental
destruction and genocide is eventually
turned into a world coming together in
harmony and peace. Conspiracy theorists
think otherwise, saying that the murals
show signs of an upcoming New World Or-
der, where one large government formed
by the world’s elite rules the world, after
the world population has been reduced to
two billion. They believe that the airport
was merely built as a cover-up for an un-
derground secret military base, with many
facilities to even run an underground city.
In these underground bunkers, chosen ci-
vilians and the world elite can seek cover
from an inevitable massive doomsday
scenario. According to some conspiracy
theorists, it is also not a coincidence that
the runway layout resembles a swastika-
like shape, and even the failing baggage
system was simply a cover-up so that the
tunnel systems can be used for other evil
purposes. Absurd ideas can be found ev-
everywhere on the internet about what is
hiding deep underneath the airport build-
ings, and as far-fetched as they seem, they
do provide some food for thought.

A DECENT AIRPORT IN THE END

In the end though, for the average travel-
er, Denver International is just an airport
like any other. And right now the airport
functions perfectly fine, with a manually
operated baggage system, and being a
hub for United as well as a newly formed
Frontier Airlines. Between 2005 and 2010,
readers of Business Traveller Magazine
awarded “Best Airport in North America”
to the airport for five years in a row. One
might wander by a mural and wonder
why on earth these scenes are shown at
an airport – as if flying isn’t already scary
enough –, but most will not really care as
long as they don’t miss their connecting
flights.

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