Financial Times Global Traveller Soapbox

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"The airport of the future"
Lord Foster

I am really quite passionate about flying, which may explain why I protest that most airports are depressingly more and more divorced from the experience of flying. You barely see the aircraft and when you do you are inside and you are anaesthetised with drinks, food and movies. Almost anything to pretend that you are doing something other than flying, which may be what the interior is all about. Somewhere there is a missed opportunity here. An airport should be a celebratory structure. It is a celebration of flight and a celebration of place. It should combine a strong visual identity with a humanistic sense of clarity, so that the experience of air travel is uplifting, secure, welcoming and efficient. Airports are the gateways to cities and nations and are the windows on the world. The airport of the future will capture all of this.

Both flight and design involve unseen forces, obey certain rules and for their realisation depend totally on the distillation of highly complex systems into a single vision. An airport is pure infrastructure; if you like, it is inhabited infrastructure. When I worked on Stansted in the early 1980s, I was determined to recreate a sense of the reassurance of early airfields – when you would arrive by road, and the runway would be clearly visible on the other side of the tent. The progression from landside to airside was a walk through the terminal and out onto your plane, which was always in view.

We achieved this degree of clarity in Stansted by turning the conventional terminal 'upside down', banishing the pipe and ductwork of heavy services usually found at roof level to an undercroft, so that movement through the building would be direct and the concourse would be flooded with natural light. This was a reinvention of the airport terminal that has been emulated worldwide ever since.

With Hong Kong International Airport, completed in 1998, our manifesto was once again to create what I describe as the 'analogue experience'. Unlike the digital world - where you move around in a kind of black box, guided, by numbers and codes – we achieved that similar clarity of movement through the building.

Only this time, we were creating what was then the world's largest ever airport – and the dialogue was now between scale and clarity. We also recognized the commercial reality of the requirement for shops, and we integrated this into the design in a way that did not compromise the travel experience.

If Stansted and Hong Kong have provided some lessons from the past, we can turn to our Beijing project as a further step towards the airport of the future. Nearly two and a half times the area of Hong Kong International, its physical size is unprecedented. It is simply the largest building ever constructed. For example, if you combine Heathrow's new terminal 5 with the existing terminals 1, 2, 3 + 4 and then add an extra 17% of the total - you arrive at the size of Beijing and mostly under one roof. Rather than the sprawl of many separate buildings, this is essentially a compact terminal, using less land and bringing everything closer together for ease of communication in one efficient structure. This move to a more sustainable model is a vital trend for future airport design, as the aircraft they serve eventually become cleaner, safer and use less energy.

In terms of pace, it will have been designed, built and commissioned, within a mere four year period – contrast this to the four year public inquiry into Heathrow's Terminal 5. Apart from the baggage handling system and the tracked transit, everything in this building has been made in China at a scale and quality which is awesome. Some commentators have remarked that the speed of construction has only been achievable by the ability to muster a workforce of up to 50,000 at times of peak activity. In my view, this is misleading – However, in my view, this is misleading because the achievement is more about the intelligent deployment, management and organisation of resources rather than the quantity of those resources.

This is a building also borne of its context. It communicates a uniquely Chinese sense of place and will be a true gateway to the nation. This is expressed in its dragon-like form and the drama of the soaring roof that is a blaze of 'traditional' Chinese colours – imperial reds merge into golden yellows. There are moments in this building that are magical – as you proceed along the central axis, a view of the red columns stretching ahead into the far distance evokes images of a Chinese temple.

Beijing also moves the dialogue between scale and clarity to another level. The curve of its diagram reinforces the clarity of movement from landside to airside by drawing you through the building and offering panoramic views of the aircraft beyond. When you arrive at the forecourt, you can immediately see through to the action of the runways. You are always aware of the elements and the context. No matter where you are in the building, the relationship is there.

Each of these examples – Stansted, Hong Kong International and Beijing Capital – have created new thresholds and as we look to the future, we see an increasingly significant role for the airport in terms of its wider urban function. The airport is just one component of the infrastructure that binds a city together, and there is the potential to integrate it as a more generic centre for related activities such as leisure, shopping, hotels, conferences, exhibitions and entertainment. In that sense, the airport of the future is moving closer to the city in microcosm.