



The Evolution of How We Build Airports

The shift from close-in spaces to far-flung outposts like Denver International reflects changes not only in travel, but in the culture.

By Anthony Flint

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For most people, airports are places to rush through and minimize time in. You select the security line that looks the fastest, then hunt down the free Wi-Fi.

The airport, however, holds a special place in the urban landscape. Its evolution, from close-in Love Field where JFK and Jackie landed in Dallas, to far-flung outpost like Denver International, reflects changes not only in travel but in the culture.

When hot-air balloons took off before the turn of the 20th century, they did so from parks and gardens. The first airfields were simple and straightforward acts of engineering, according to Sonja Dumpelmann, co-curator with fellow landscape architecture faculty member Charles Waldheim, of "Airport Landscape: Urban Ecologies in the Aerial Age," a major exhibition in the lobby of Gund Hall at Harvard's Graduate School of Design through December 19.



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When land was leveled and paved over, the chief requirement was for aircraft to be able to land in all directions, depending on wind and weather conditions. As commercial flight took off, as it were, from the middle of the 20th century, the airport started to be a little bit more like the city train station – much more functional, but relatively close-in, exemplified by National Airport in Washington, D.C. If there was a cozy and nestled quality to those operations, the burgeoning traffic and passenger demands of the latter half of the 20th century prompted leap-frogging further and further away from town, serviced by multi-lane roadways carved into the landscape. In the move to the outskirts, airports went from a mere 100 acres to 17,500 – the size of the sprawling Dallas-Fort Worth complex, prominently featured in the exhibit.



Early photographs of Chicago Municipal Airport and Washington National Airport, close-in fields succeeded by O'Hare and Dulles respectively



The tentacles of parking, rental car, and taxi, bus, and limousine operations spread out. With the post-9/11 security industrial complex added, many airports hold the single greatest number of employees in a metropolitan area. They are major institutions, part of the city's identity, if not its fabric.

Today, the narrative has come full circle. Major metropolitan areas consider a rail link to the airport to be prerequisite. European airports are getting back in touch with nature, deploying green tactics to better manage storm and wastewater, being more thoughtful about open space, and integrating wildlife – though going easy on the avian, keeping in mind the disastrous consequences of bird strikes in jet engines.

The most compelling part of the story may be the places left behind – the mostly close-in airports abandoned as hopelessly obsolete. These places get filled in quickly and their past put behind them. Stapleton in Denver comes to mind, where a New Urbanist neighborhood has risen up on the runways. I remember on a tour some years ago, the guides didn't even want to talk about where the terminal and the taxiways were. That was the past, and they had moved on.



An airport being filled in by nature.

"Airport Landscape" was revelatory on this phenomenon – just how many former airports are being reclaimed and transformed, hundreds of sites, all around the world. Some are being handed back to nature, with green grass poling up through the disintegrating tarmac. The Stapleton model seems most prevalent, however: a filling-in of valuable real estate, a re-imagining of open space and housing in vital patches of the expanding city. The old sites – and many existing ones, like National or Boston's Logan Airport, enduring through all the change, like ballparks built in 1912 – have an inherent relationship with the metropolis that cannot be denied.

All images from the exhibition, courtesy of Justin Knight/Harvard Graduate School of Design.

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