



What to do with old airports?

By Kevin Hartnett

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Over the last one hundred years, America and the world has built a lot of airports. Now many of them have become obsolete, either because they're too small, in the wrong places, or no longer needed by a military that's been trying to pare its stock of airfields. So, what do you do with these flat, concrete, often urban spaces, once they're no longer needed for air travel?

To landscape architects, it's a delightful question, and one that has generated an enormous amount of activity over the last fifteen years or so. And last month the Harvard Graduate School of Design hosted a two-day conference called "Airport Landscapes" that brought together dozens of scholars tantalized by the possibilities of forsaken airstrips.

"Because of their expansiveness, size, horizontality, the fact that they're left over spaces, they just offer new grounds for experimentation and design," says Sonja Duempelmann, professor at the GSD and co-organizer of the conference.

"Airport Landscapes," along with an exhibition by the same name that's running at the design school through December 19, looked at landscape innovations at airports that are still functioning, along with some of the most innovative makeovers that have been given to decommissioned airports. These include turning airports into "urban prairies," building alternative energy sites (solar cell arrays fit particularly along old runways), and creating some of the best park and playground space a land windsurfer could ever ask for. Old airports are useful for lots of purposes, but their transformation is captivating in a different way, too: It's just really cool to walk where airplanes used to land.



Crissy Field in San Francisco. Photograph by Sonja Duempelmann



Tempelhof Airport, outside Berlin. Photograph by Sonja Duempelman



A stuffed peregrine falcon, positioned to scare off swallows that get caught in jet engines. Photograph by Justin Knight, Harvard Graduate School of Design.

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