

FAST COMPANY

What Should We Do With Abandoned Airports?

Older airports are being jettisoned for newer, regional behemoths. An exhibit from Harvard's Graduate School of Design considers what the airport landscape might become.

By Shaunacy Ferro

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Chances are, when you arrive at the airport, you're more worried about forking over obscene amounts of cash for a checked bag than what's over that grassy knoll beyond the runway. The airfields of JFK or LAX certainly wouldn't be anyone's idea of a picturesque landscape.

Charles Waldheim, co-curator of a new exhibit at Harvard University entitled *Airport Landscape*, has a different take. "Our basic argument is that the airport sits in a kind of blind spot, culturally. It's been dealt with in a technical way," he tells Co.Design. "It's a site for engineering, but the design disciplines have paid less attention,"

Designing an airport is a monumental puzzle for an architect to solve. Consider how the terminals need to accommodate increasingly larger planes and shifting security requirements, confused tourists and wayward baggage, air control and transit connections. After taking care of the myriad functional aspects of air travel, airport plans have generally left little room for natural beauty.



Yet Waldheim and his co-curator, Sonja Duempelmann, both landscape architecture professors, argue that airports are complex ecological design projects. And as older airports are increasingly

decommissioned and, oftentimes, turned into public parks and wildlife habitats, the links to landscape design become even clearer.

Airports have often been built on the outskirts of cities, as was the case in Denver or Chicago, but as the city grows, it rises to meet the airport, which once seemed distant. “We believe airports are more central to the life of cities than they have ever been,” Waldheim says.



They also “tend to be fairly complex sites in terms of the mix of species and biological management,” according to Waldheim. Airports are frequently built on top rich wetland environments, where wildlife, including birds, thrive. Though much of the land has been engineered to divert water and paved over for planes, the open space set aside as a safety measure for landing planes looks attractive to animals--an uncultivated plot in the middle of the urban environment. Yet bird strikes can pose a deadly threat to aircraft. Thus, airports walk a fine line between managing wildlife, controlling water runoff and pollution, and making the runway surroundings both aesthetically pleasing and safe. “It’s easier for us to describe it as a complex piece of landscape architecture,” Waldheim says.

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Airport Landscape examines these issues through the lens of photography, like Yann Arthus-Bertrand’s images of runways, and through case studies, many of them surrounding the issue of decommissioned airports, like San Francisco’s Crissy Field, a former military airfield and hazardous material dumping ground that has been rehabilitated as a public park in recent years. It’s an issue faced by cities around the world--what to do with these enormous, often contaminated airfields from the early 20th century that no longer fit the region’s needs. Many cities are now choosing to slowly adapt them into public parks, as has happened in places like Berlin, and Orange County, Calif.

"I'm interested in a kind of emotional honesty about [airports]," Waldheim says. "They're not going away." Rather, we should be thinking about airports as a complex public landscape, one that should be designed to fit into both the city and environment around it.

The exhibit ends this week at Harvard's Graduate School of Design.

[Photos by Justin Knight]

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