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Book Review: [Airport Urbanism](#)

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Book Review

Hirsh, Max. Airport Urbanism: Infrastructure and Mobility in Asia. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016. ISBN 978-0-8166-9610-9.

Airport Urbanism

by Shannon Sanders McDonald

Transportation is one of the most important aspects in design; often referred to as mobility, the ability to move where one needs to go for work and pleasure is an assumed part of modern life and is a generator of urban and architectural form. Currently, we are seeing many new forms of mobility emerge, such as car share and driverless cars, as transportation and urban relationships have become strained in many locations. Within these urban discussions of challenged mobility, travel by plane is not commonly discussed. However, airplanes and airports can be the most important link of a journey for some, one that creates new urban challenges. The book, *AIRPORT Urbanism: Infrastructure and Mobility in Asia*, by Max Hirsh explores the airport and urban relationships currently in use in Asia.

Airports have typically been designed for an upwardly mobile traveler to connect to any place in the world in a timely fashion. Airports, soaring architectural visions that represent the modern connection to the world and aspirations of a place, now define the future that has arrived for many. Planes provide the ability to travel far distances, beyond state and country boundaries, for work and pleasure, thus creating our global society, which has become everyday for many. As Max Hirsh explains, this mobility was first seen among international business people and tourists, so airports were designed to meet their travel needs, providing places to exchange money, rest, eat and shop while emotionally preparing the traveler to enter new worlds. Amazing architectural accomplishments, airports are a grand vision of modern life. However, travelers must still find their way to the airport from within their existing urban environments, as airports are not typically designed within urban centers, and older ones now surrounded by growth are no longer able to serve international travel. Airports are large sprawling complexes meeting every need of the planes and people who use them: space for landing and takeoff, gates, fueling and baggage handling, shops and restaurants, restrooms, airline check-in, customs and border crossings, and now safety/security checks for everyone. They also serve cargo and mail needs, and are often the major economic engine of the community. A large international airport, such as Atlanta Hartsfield-Jackson airport, has 4,700 acres to accommodate all of these programs, naturally separating the airport complex from its urban center. Most people do not want to live near airports or within the flight patterns of planes because of noise and visual intrusion, and often codes limit many building types and building heights near airports. These complexes are not walkable internally nor do they provide the ability for passengers to walk to the airport. Connections to highways, rail, and transit systems are crucial, while internal movement systems such as movable walkways and people movers are used to navigate within the ever expanding airport.

New urban ideas have emerged from these challenges, such as, recently, the aerotropolis (an aviation metro area or sometimes known as an airport commerce city, an urban area near an airport). This concept is based on large scale visions of sports, commercial, and recreation centers that bring crowds of people to one location for a specific activity. This is in contrast to a thriving urban area where people enjoy living, working, walking, and being within a complex group of building types, uses, and urban spaces. An urban center is a more spontaneous interactive, interconnected place—as contrasted with traveling by plane to an activity area such as an aerotropolis. One is a local vision

and the other is international. The overlap of urban areas and airport mobility is what Max Hirsh is describing in his book as now occurring in Asia. This type of interconnection has come about from a bottom-up approach to meeting the needs of the everyday person now using planes, not those of the international business traveler or upscale tourist.

Hirsh's book, at the broader level, addresses the "urban implications of paradigmatic social and technological shifts-in particular as they relate to the accelerated cross-border movement of goods, people, capital and ideas." He describes the new flying public: budget tourists, retirees, and migrant workers using visual, archival, and ethnographic approaches from multiple urban disciplines. He has conducted research about transportation in a rapidly developing area of the world – China and Southeast Asia. Autobiographical vignettes begin and end the text, reflecting Hirsh's own personal experiences with this type of mobility. He noticed over time more security checks and fewer passport controls, along with construction, construction, and more construction. The focus of the book is on five cities in East and Southeast Asia – Bangkok, Hong Kong, Kuala Lumpur, Shenzhen, and Singapore. For example, Hong Kong, within three short decades experienced a tenfold increase in passenger air traffic and overhauled its airport infrastructure, creating what is now mainly an international airport. Meanwhile, the well-publicized Airport Express (the high-speed airport train), one of the innovative and amazing infrastructure systems connecting Hong Kong and the airport, is used by only 15% of airport passengers. The new flying public relies on other options that move passengers more cheaply from a wider range of locations around the city, for example, SKY PIER, a cross boundary ferry terminal creating a "transborder" system.

Max Hirsh uses the term *nouveaux globalizes* to define this group of people who are accounting for the double-digit year-on-year increases in air traffic in this area. They have had profound implications for airport design in ways not recognized by glamorous star architecture airport design strategies. The additions and changes to the urban infrastructure servicing this large and growing population have previously not been studied, and this book provides an excellent description and analysis of these systems, which have "radically reordered the cross-border flow of goods and people in the 'Pearl River Delta.'" What was not understood by airport elite consultants was that the everyday traveler represented a wider socioeconomic spectrum and a wider dispersion throughout the city. They also had different travel needs and patterns of travel, such as a Filipino cleaning women working in Hong Kong. The leap in individual mobility experienced now by almost everyone, often frequently for job opportunities, has been enabled by continuing advances in transportation and telecommunication. Often these travelers are considered "transborder" air passengers, as during parts of their journey they are literally in non-places, neither in China or Hong Kong but rather in an "extraterritorial maritime corridor that functions as an extension of international airspace." The architecture has truly become "placeless, with no social or aesthetic function" and "a strange set of political and economic contradictions that led to its genesis." Hirsh believes that his study shows the "vanguard role that such transborder infrastructure systems play in both anticipating and advancing systemic changes in the global flow of goods, people and information."

Hirsh provides very detailed descriptions of the existing systems, spaces, and flow of people as they navigate hallways, busses, ferries, and trains as part of their Asian airport travel experience. In the new airport, the city is linked in unassuming and often maze-like ways, as checking into your flight can now occur in a booth at a local shopping mall. The book describes the quickly expanding everyday user demographic and the current travelers' ad-hoc transportation conditions, with the traveler often not even seeing the exterior of the airport. All the while, better solutions are not being explored. In the early 2000s, Atlanta's Hartsfield-Jackson International airport had explored creating a check-in system that began at metro stations along the link to the airport. Theoretically, one could have checked one's luggage, and checked into one's flight miles away from the airport – but the events of 9/11 and security screening ended this approach. Other technological ideas are being explored to create secure check-in of luggage and people even from remote locations, including a

vehicle that could pick you up at your home and travel directly into the airport, depositing you at your gate with all systems complete.

Referencing texts such as *Splintering Urbanism* and *The Rise of the Network Society* that have described new airports as designed for a global managerial elite, scholars and architects discuss airports as non-places, areas separated from the flow of everyday life. However, Max Hirsh has brought to our attention an entirely new urban system of travel based upon “mobility, infrastructure and the everyday.” Grounding his observations and experiences within these emerging urban corridors of home to airport, he briefly discusses historical transportation transitions, such as the automobile, and their effect on urban design. He takes up the fundamental question of how changes in human mobility lead to shifts in urban form – also connecting geographic mobility and social mobility with spatial and conceptual understandings of our modern world.

While the relationship of mobility to urban form is studied intensively by architects and urban planners, this newly emerging protected flow of people across borders while just going to and from an airport is presenting new potentials of power and purpose. Hirsh, linking mobility and the study of the everyday, has opened up the deeper analysis of spatial changes that can have broader urban social and political implications. The book takes up connections of home to airport, drawing on design theorists, such as Melvin Webber and Henri Lefebvre, who have tried to decode such connections for the everyday traveler. This focus advances the discussion of modern mobility and communication and of their impact on spatial change.

Hirsh concludes his detailed analysis of these systems by referring to writers and theorists such as Kevin Lynch and Margaret Crawford. Kevin Lynch favors incremental design, rather than the grand gesture of the airport, as the approach best suited to urban environments; Margaret Crawford brings out how daily life has been interrupted on a grand scale and how the pick-up of movement has fundamentally changed the organization of space. Hirsh also acknowledges anthropologist Pal Nyir, stating that “travel and displacement heighten people’s susceptibility to new ideas and interpretations of the world, and relax the boundaries of what is socially acceptable.” Air travel has come to dominate mobility in this region of cross-border transportation and “has not developed an aesthetic vocabulary that appropriately reflects the new regime of hypermobility,” nor have the changes in public policy been coordinated with innovations in urban design. As Hirsh says, “architects and urban planners will be much better equipped to engage with these societal transformations if *scholars* begin to participate more actively in public conversations about urban development,” thereby drawing attention to broader changes in global mobility patterns and to implications to urban form, these having been often overlooked by policymakers and designers. I could not agree more.

Shannon Sanders McDonald is an assistant architecture professor at Southern Illinois University. Her research and areas of interest are with emerging movement technologies and their impact on the built environment. She has written and spoken extensively on these areas and written a book – *The Parking Garage: Design and Evolution of a Modern Urban Form*. An exhibit based on the book was on display at the National Building Museum. She has also practiced architecture with a focus on public buildings. She is licensed in four states, LEED and NCARB certified. She holds a master of architecture from Yale University, 1992; a master of fine arts from Maryland Institute of Art, 1980, and bachelor of science degrees in art teacher education and in psychology from Towson State University, 1976.

