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Learning from Airports' History

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In the last two decades many researchers have taken diverse approaches to the study of airports. The airport was long considered a topic for specialists and designers, or admired as a monument celebrating the spectacle of aeromobility—from early aeronautical shows to later Sunday excursions to the huge observation terraces overlooking the airfield. Today the airport as a critical issue permeates the literature at various angles. Why such a profusion and what do these works offer the history of mobility?

The airport as a metaphor

The airport is a recurrent metaphor in many urban essays. From this *a priori* decentred position, authors investigate acute paradoxes embodied by the contemporary city, the analysis being here accusatory, critical or prospective. However, this shift has not been sudden. Even then in 1939, Lewis Mumford, in *The New Yorker*, denounced the “series of bungles, missed opportunities and hideous misapplications of ornament” afflicting the new La Guardia airport, nearly ready to serve the New York World Fair.¹ Some twenty years later, another renowned architectural critic, Reyner Banham, published a pioneering article, “The Obsolescent Airport”.² Considering the London and New York airports, Banham condemned what he called “landscapes of hysteria”, while emphasizing the instability and the ephemeral character of the numerous components of the airport complex. In France, Michel Ragon followed close behind; he also diagnosed acute urban obsolescence in airport buildings: “Many aerodromes have been left unfinished because they were inappropriate for the latest types of airplanes, even before completion They even had to blow

1. Lewis Mumford, “The Sky Line: Millions for Mausoleums”, *The New Yorker*, 30 December 1939, 49–50.

2. Reyner Banham, “The Obsolescent Airport”, *Architectural Record* (December 1962), 250–253.

up a bridge in Orly two weeks before the official opening in order to extend a runway for the new Boeing 707. How can we plan the city of the future and its access roads with such uncertainty about the future?”³

This transformation of perceptions is due to the shift of aviation from a pioneering, elitist and unusual mobility, to a routine and massive mobility, more opened to criticism once the fascination passed. In parallel, a critical perspective on airports has deepened, combining both admiration and fear of futurist and gigantic achievements. In the meantime, the territorial encroachment of airports has become more controversial. Their gigantism and most of all their complex character of hypermodern space⁴ placed them on the first rank of both the metropolitan “space of flows” era and the criticism of the consumer society.

Next emerged a literature by essayists and scholars who considered the airport as a focus of urban aporias—more a symptom than an affliction, privileging a few key thematics. First among them is the disappearance of the place. Marc Augé uses the airport case to illustrate his “non-place” theory and reinforce his criticism of the highly disembodied contemporary environment.⁵ Also thematic is the interplay of scales, from the gigantic to the detailed, from the cosmopolitan to the local. To illustrate his reflections on *Bigness* and large-scale architecture, the architect Rem Koolhaas chooses the airport reference—which also opens his manifesto on the “generic city.”⁶ For his part, Manuel Castells raises another structural dialectic in his book *The Network Society*,⁷ using airports to enlighten his concept of “space of flows”—a fluid and virtual space allowing us to be both here and nowhere. He contrasts this with the “space of places”—a visible and material form of the built environment conducive to the experience of a local place. “Non-place”, “generic city”, “space of flows”, “edge city”⁸: diverse concepts qualify spaces which resist more common analytical tools. Thus the airport experience, qualified by Hans Ibelings as the “emergence” of a “strange phenomenon”, crystallized *in vivo* the current urban tensions, the vocabulary used to describe this new “study ground for sociology” altering the prism of the urban imaginary.⁹

Going deeper into this decentred perspective, Deyan Sudjic analyzes the city from the airport edges, considering them as the authentic places of the contemporary¹⁰ and thus taking a position close to that of the science-fiction

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3. Michel Ragon, *Où vivrons-nous demain?* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1963), 174.
 4. Read in particular from François Ascher, *La société hypermoderne, Ces événements nous dépassent, feignons d'en être les organisateurs* (Editions de l'Aube, 2005).
 5. Marc Augé, *Non-lieux, Introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité* (Paris: Seuil, 1992), 7–13.
 6. “Bigness” and “Generic City”, in Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, *S, M, L, XL* (Monacelli Press, 1998).
 7. Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Blackwell Publishing, 2000).
 8. Joel Garreau, *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier* (New York: Doubleday, 1991).
 9. Hans Ibelings, *Supermodernism: Architecture in the Age of Globalization* (NAI Publishers, 1998).
 10. Deyan Sudjic, *The 100 Mile City* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1992).

writer James Graham Ballard. Himself a former resident of the London Heathrow Airport area, Ballard even dedicated a “hymn” to the airport, qualifying it as “the true city”.¹¹ Probably because it ideally embodied the confusion between reality and fiction, truth and illusion, film makers took the airport figure as a plain character, as Jacques Tati did in *Playtime*, which was, as early as 1967, enlightening the ambiguity of such spaces.

Contextualizing global artefacts

These works show that while the fascination for airports did not vanish, it has constantly been balanced by a parallel criticism of their effects. As I have elsewhere contended, a quasi “icarian” tension between power and failure, between celebration of achievement and accompanying criticism, has characterized, since the beginning, the construction of airports.¹² Reyner Banham emphasized this tension, rather pessimistically, when evoking the structural obsolescence of the airport field.¹³

Within this frame, how can historians appropriate such topics that are so often wholly dedicated to the future? The concepts of the “present future” or “past future” may explain the dual pathology that characterizes the airport figure: on the one hand, the *ahistoricity* of the “true city”, on the other the *aspatiality* of the “non-place”.¹⁴ Historical research can offer historical thickness for the approach of such global artefacts and shed light on the new issues and directions for research this topic raises.

For nearly twenty years—corresponding to the rise of a critical analysis of the airport as an urban phenomenon—scholars have developed a problematized and critical history of airports. Several *global* histories have been published, covering a wide range of worldwide references, aimed at embracing the whole airport development from the beginnings of aviation until the expansion of huge airports into exurban areas. John Zukowsky seems to have opened this cycle when he presented a successful exhibition in 1996 at the Art Institute of Chicago, entitled “Building for Air Travel”.¹⁵ Certainly, this event was not the first retrospective on the airport. Focused on technological innovation and process, books had before retraced the main steps of airports' development.¹⁶ However, the catalogue book

11. James Graham Ballard, “Airports”, *The Observer*, 14 September 1997.

12. Nathalie Roseau, *Aerocity, Quand l'avion fait la ville* (Marseille: Editions Parenthèses, 2012).

13. Banham, “Obsolescent Airport”.

14. Nathalie Roseau, “Airports as Urban Narratives: Toward a Cultural History of Global Infrastructures”, *Transfers* 2:1 (Spring 2012), 32–54.

15. *Building for Air Travel: Architecture and Design for Commercial Aviation*, ed. John Zukowsky (New York: Prestel, 1996).

16. Martin Greif, *The Airport Book: From Landing Field to Modern Terminal* (New York: Smithmark Publishing, 1979); Alastair Forsyth, *Buildings for the Age: New Building Types, 1900–1939* (London: Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, 1982).

of the Chicago exhibition selected from abundant airport references. It included essays from historians such as David Brodherson, Robert Bruegmann, Koos Bosma and Wolfgang Voigt, who developed a critical analysis aimed at recontextualizing the airport topic within urban issues, architectural theories and doctrines, or municipal history (for example).¹⁷ The book occupies a pivotal place in airport historiography since it provokes debate about how to make airports' history, beyond a pure dialectic between celebration and execration. Other retrospective initiatives have since been engaged. If they rarely avoid the temptation of a positivist narrative of technological progress and architectural inventiveness, some adopt a more analytical approach, while considering how the construction of airports has interacted with the building of modern culture.¹⁸

Facing this century-old worldwide history, other historians focus more deeply on a period or a specific region. Deborah Douglas and Janet Bednarek, for example, study the "formative" period of American municipal airports from 1920 to the late 1940s.¹⁹ Such contextualized research, based on exhaustive archival work, take the topic further from the globalizing temptation, and inscribe airports' history in a more scientific frame.

More specific places have also been the subjects of research by scholars seeking to reintegrate the airport topic into a local economic, political, technological and urban history—and thereby distancing themselves from an autonomization of the airport object. This is the purpose of Marc Dierikx who, together with Bram Bouwens,²⁰ wrote the history of the Amsterdam-Schiphol airport—or more recently Michael Branigan, who presents the history of Chicago's O'Hare airport.²¹ Investigating the architectural and urban design history of airports, I

17. Wolfgang Voigt, "From the Hippodrome to the Aerodrome, from the Air Station to the Terminal: European Airports, 1909–1945"; Koos Bosma, "European Airports, 1945–1995: Typology, Psychology, and Infrastructure", David Brodherson, "An Airport in Every City: The History of American Airport Design", and Robert Bruegmann, "Airport City", all in *Building for Air Travel: Architecture and Design for Commercial Aviation*, ed. John Zukowsky (New York: Prestel) 27–49, 51–65, 67–95, 195–211.

18. Hugh Pearman, *Airports: A Century of Architecture* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2004); Alastair Gordon, *The Naked Airport: A Cultural History of the World's Most Revolutionary Structure* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004); Gillian Fuller and Ross Harley, *Aviopolis: A Book About Airports* (London: Blackdog Publishing, 2005).

19. Janet R. Daly Bednarek, *America's Airports: Airfield Development, 1918–1947* (Texas A&M University Press, 2001); Deborah Douglas, "The Invention of Airports: A Political, Economic and Technological History of Airports in the United States, 1919–1939", Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1996. See also Deborah Douglas, "Airports as Systems and Systems of Airports: Airports and Urban Development in America before World War II", in *From Airships to Airbus: The History of Civil and Commercial Aviation 1: Infrastructure and Environment*, ed. William Leary (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), 55–84.

20. Marc Dierikx and Bram Bouwens, *Building Castles of the Air: Schiphol Amsterdam and the Development of Airport Infrastructure in Europe, 1916–1996* (SDU, 1997).

21. Michael Branigan, *A History of Chicago's O'Hare Airport* (History Press, 2011).

have adopted another perspective, focusing on the relations between urbanism and aeromobility through the rise of the New York and Paris metropolises and their airports. The aim of all such research is also to open the black box of the collective construction of these kinds of spaces, and to reintegrate them into the fabric of modern cities, both ordinary and extraordinary.²²

Context extends beyond history to include local context, governance of space, actors and practices, and design and planning concepts. However, such contextualization has not ended airports' privileged role in global history; instead it has enriched the study of the complex local-global alchemy, bringing in new perspectives about how phenomena partly transcend local situations while reinforcing the effects of localization. This approach offers an escape from the limits of globalization and serves the central debate opened recently by the sociology of globalization.²³

Just as airports' history must integrate a history of their urban, social and economic context, it cannot skip the linked research on the mobility it both serves and stimulates. In particular, historians must explore how the utopia of aeromobility (and its related values such as ubiquity, disappearance of frontiers, clarification and dematerialization,²⁴ as well as its dystopic aspects) diffused through modern culture. Within this perspective, airports' history would benefit from reintegrating pioneering works such as Joseph Corn's *Winged Gospel* or Robert Wohl's *Passion for Wings*.²⁵ Both works feature the imaginary inspired by aeromobility and its diffusion through diverse spheres of society. While understanding the airport as a privileged place for aeromobility, such research could follow more diverse problematics, both transversal and diachronic: heroism, transnationalism, narratives and mediations, visual and sensible experiences,

22. The role of context in airport history has been particularly deepened by papers presented in two recent panels organized by Victor Marquez, first at the 2010 annual meeting of the Society for the History of Technology in Tacoma, second at the 2011 annual conference of the International Association for the History of Transport, Traffic and Mobility in Berlin: "The Airport Whisperer: Can the New History of Airports Be Useful?" (Tacoma, USA, 1 October 2010); "From Airfield to Airport City: Complexity and Contradiction in Airport History" (Berlin, 7 October 2011).

23. Saskia Sassen, *A Sociology of Globalization* (W.W. Norton and Company, 2007).

24. "Le rêve de vol", in Gaston Bachelard, *L'air et les songes, L'imaginaire en mouvement* (Editions José Corti, 1994 [1943]), 27–78.

25. Joseph Corn, *The Winged Gospel: America's Romance with Aviation, 1900–1950* (Oxford University Press, 1983); Robert Wohl, *A Passion for Wings: Aviation and the Western Imagination, 1908–1918* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); see also Peter Fritzsche, *A Nation of Flyers: German Aviation and the Popular Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass, 1992); Christoph Asendorf, *Super constellation, Flugzeug und raumrevolution* (Vienna: Springer, 1997); Dominick A. Pisano (ed.), *The Airplane in American Culture* (University of Michigan Press, 2003); Ann Collins Goodyear, Roger Launius, Anthony M. Springer and Bertram Ulrich, *Flight: A Celebration of 100 Years in Art and Literature* (New York: Welcome Books, 2003).

new spatialities.²⁶ At the same time, they learn from other disciplines, such as geography, sociology, art or literature, which also investigate the influence of aeromobility on the construction of the contemporary.²⁷

A transdisciplinary object

In mobility studies, researchers of aeromobility should consider the whole ensemble, without separating the aerial from the terrestrial, one mode from another, or airport complexes from their urban infrastructures. In globalization studies, researchers should follow a transdisciplinary and contextualized approach to the global and the local, which will require appropriate interpretative frames. Another topic which could feed this dialectic is embodied by what we may call the “heritage of the future”. Indeed, a few 1930s and some 1960s airports entered a process of patrimonialization, which raises key issues on the historicity of buildings and areas designated to celebrate the future.²⁸

This brief and necessarily incomplete panorama shows that the airports' topic may be problematized only in a heuristic manner through the convergence of research, which will enrich the body of knowledge. It inscribes this history into the *longue durée* and emphasizes a transdisciplinary angle. It thereby confronts the central problems in contemporary urban historiography: global history, visual history, micro-history and the history of mobility. To understand these spaces and their construction, scholars must bring together diverse approaches from literature and urbanism, from art history and aesthetics, from the history of technology and political history, from sociology and anthropology. Of course, such approaches raise the problem of suitably versatile analytical frames. Meeting this challenge will bring us back to the issues raised by the mobility turn and the questions it asks of the historical discipline.

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26. This was in particular the aim of the international conference held in Paris in November 2008 on aerial culture: “Aerial Culture, Artifacts, Imagination and the Practice of Aeronautics, 19th–20th centuries”, Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers, Cité des Sciences et de l’Industrie, Musée de l’Air et de l’Espace. *La Culture Aérienne*, ed. Nathalie Roseau and Marie Thébaud-Sorger (forthcoming, 2013).
 27. David Pascoe, *Airspaces* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001); see also Peter Adey, *Aerial Life: Spaces, Mobilities, Affects* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010). See also in art and literature fields: Fondation Cartier pour l’art contemporain, *La Vitesse* (Copublication, Paris, Flammarion, 1991); Steven Bode and Jeremy Millar, *Airport* (London, 1997); Andrew Walker and Rachel K. Ward, *Terminal 5* (New York: Lukas and Sternberg, 2004); Christopher Schaberg, *The Textual Life of Airports: Reading the Culture of Flight* (Continuum, 2011).
 28. Paul Smith and Bernard Toullet (eds.), *Berlin-Tempelhof/Liverpool-Speke/Paris-Le Bourget: Airport Architecture of the 1930s* (Paris: Editions du Patrimoine, Gingko Press, 2000); Bob Hawkins, Gabriele Lechner and Paul Smith, *Historic Airports: Proceedings of the International L’Europe de l’Air Conference in Aviation Architecture* (London: English Heritage, 2005).