

Document name: Anatomy of an airport
Document date: 2004
Copyright information: Proprietary and used under license
OpenLearn course: Passports: identity and airports
OpenLearn url: <http://www.open.edu/openlearn/society-politics-law/passports-identity-and-airports/content-section-0>



Anatomy of an airport

Gillian Fuller and Ross Harley

Fuller, G. and Harley, R. (2004) 'Anatomy of an airport', *Aviopolis: A Book about Airports*, London, Black Dog Publishing, pp. 16-49.



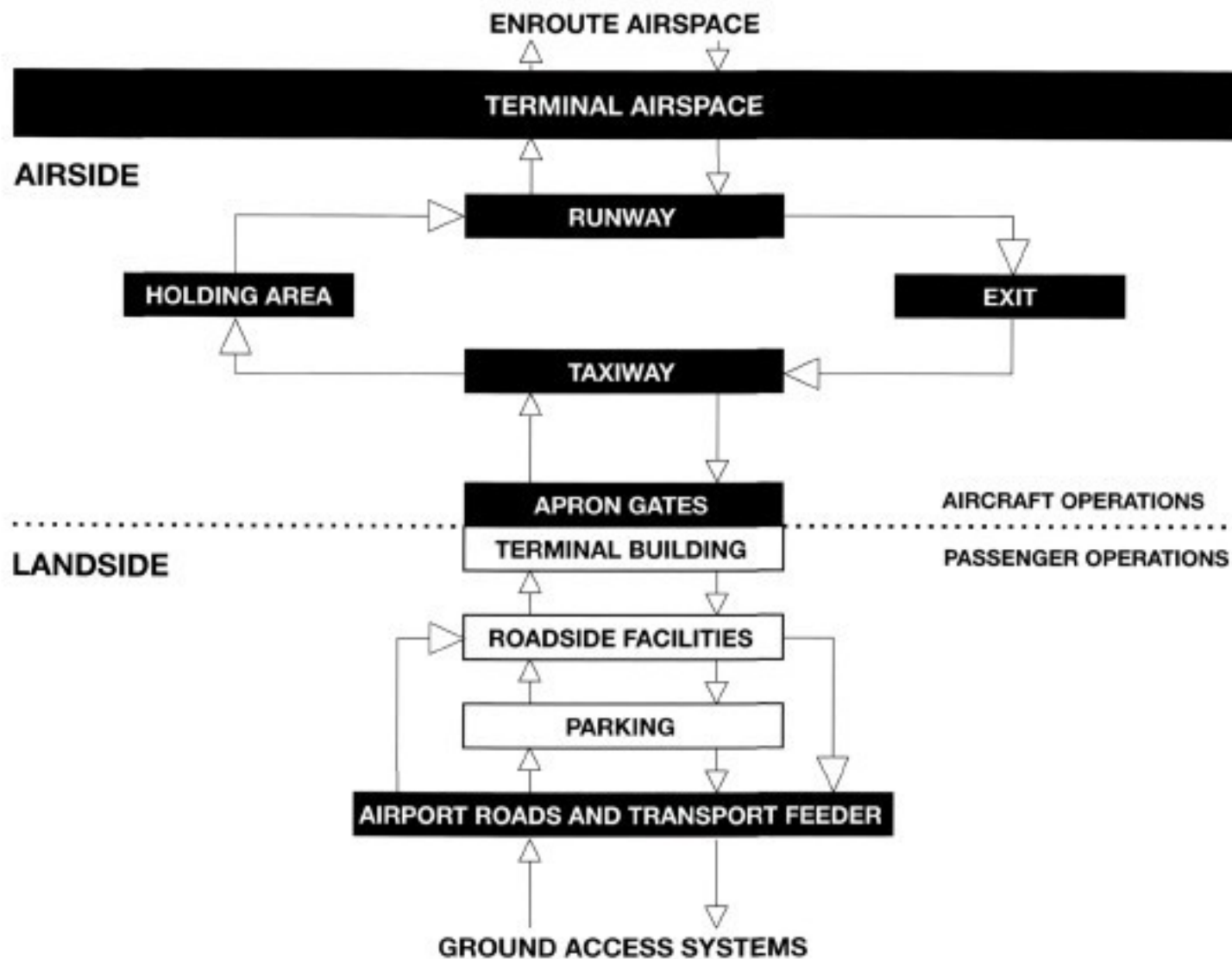
ANATOMY OF AN AIRPORT

AN AIRPORT PROCESSES TRAFFIC. IT IS A MACHINE FOR CAPTURING AND CONTROLLING FLOWS IN THE MOST LITERAL MANNER IMAGINABLE. THE MOVEMENTS OF PEOPLE, MACHINES AND CARGO, ARE PROGRAMMED TO KEEP A STEADY PACE AND FOLLOW DISTINCT TRAJECTORIES. OFTEN STAGED IN RELAYS FROM POINT TO POINT, EVERYTHING THAT MOVES AT AN AIRPORT MUST CONNECT TO A CERTAIN PART OF THE NETWORK AT A PARTICULAR MOMENT, AND THEN CONTINUE ITS JOURNEY ALONG PREDETERMINED PATHS AT A PRECISE VELOCITY.

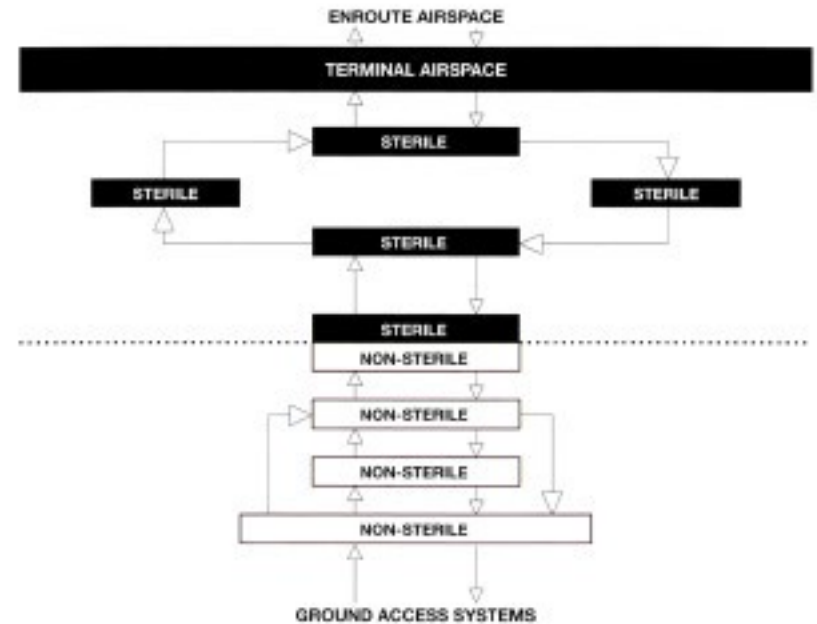
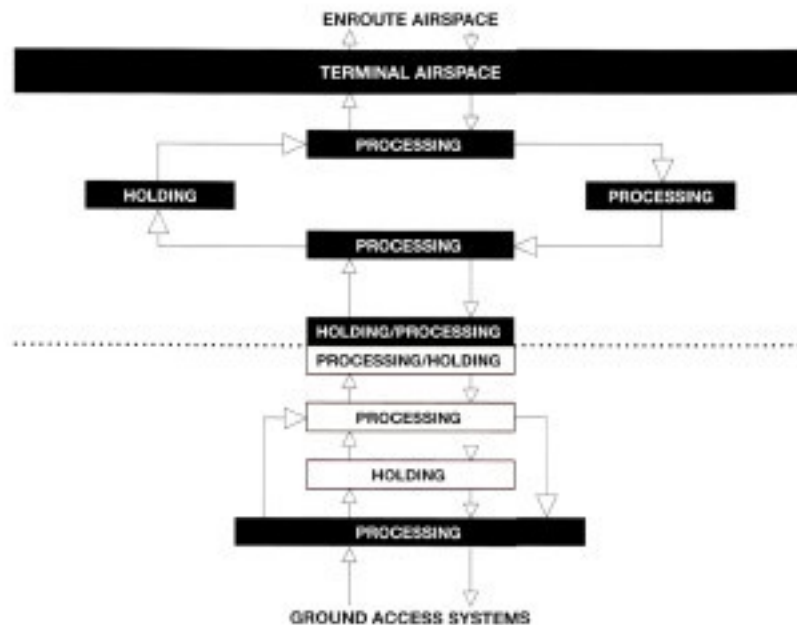
ALL MOVEMENT IS CONTROLLED - FROM THE PLANES ON THE TARMAC TO THE CORRALLING OF PASSENGERS IN RETAIL AREAS. AS NODES IN A GLOBAL NETWORK OF MOVEMENT AIRPORT ARCHITECTURES FOLD THE LOCAL INTO THE GLOBAL, CONVERTING INFORMATION INTO TRAJECTORIES, AND CONSTRUCTING A TRANSITION FROM LANDSIDE TO AIRSIDE (AND VICE VERSA).

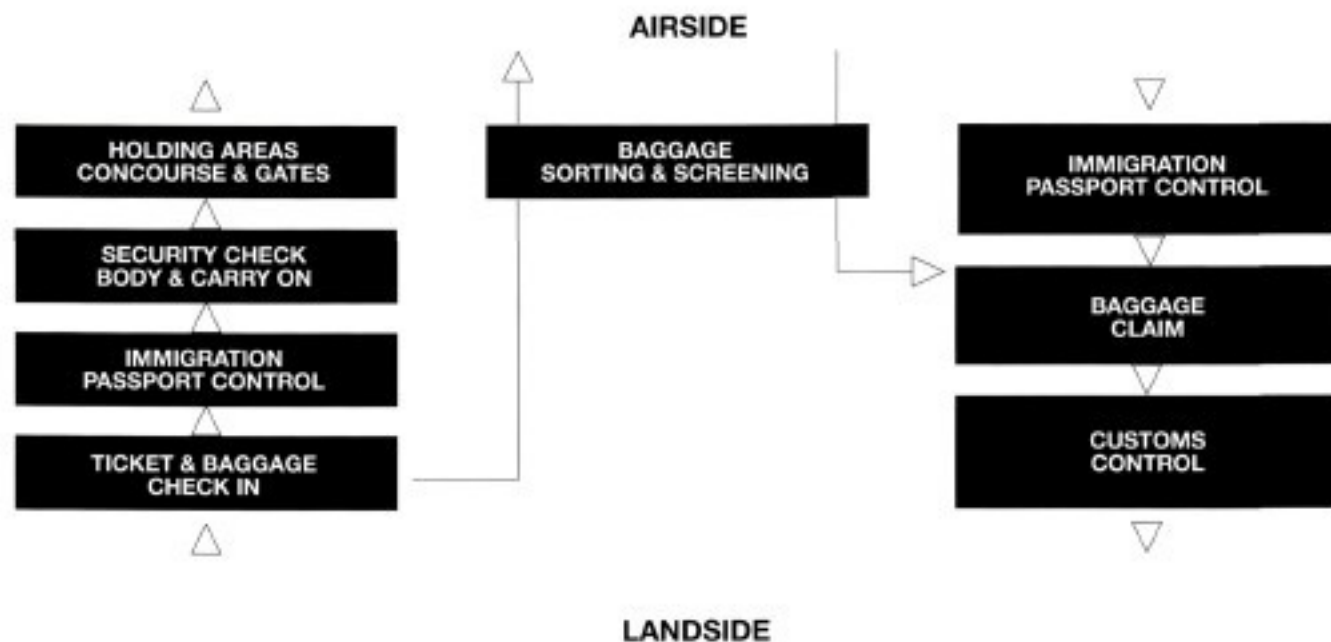
THESE MULTIPLE EXCHANGES BETWEEN DIFFERENT SYSTEMS CREATE A CONSTANT ELEMENT OF INSTABILITY. AIRPORTS, THEREFORE, DEPLOY MULTIPLE METHODS TO MAXIMALLY STABILISE ALL TRAVERSALS WITHIN THE SPHERE OF ITS CONTROL.

WHAT FOLLOWS IS A SNAPSHOT OF SOME OF THE LOGISTICAL, INSTITUTIONAL AND ARCHITECTURAL ELEMENTS THAT ENABLE AIRPORTS TO FACILITATE AND COMMODIFY MASS GLOBAL MOVEMENT.



The airport is a machine for processing things from land to air. All movement systems are designed around separation and flow, access and control. The airport is a complex machine, a series of interdependent and cross-referenced systems, functions, jurisdictions and modalities. What the airport is, depends on where you are in it, and how and why you are travelling through it. Internal processing is concerned with corporate or governmental screenings. Passengers and bags are cross-referenced, then sorted and packeted along different routes.





PVG

STERILE

NON-STERILE

FISCAN

MSP

ALL
GATES

CHECK POINT 4

4

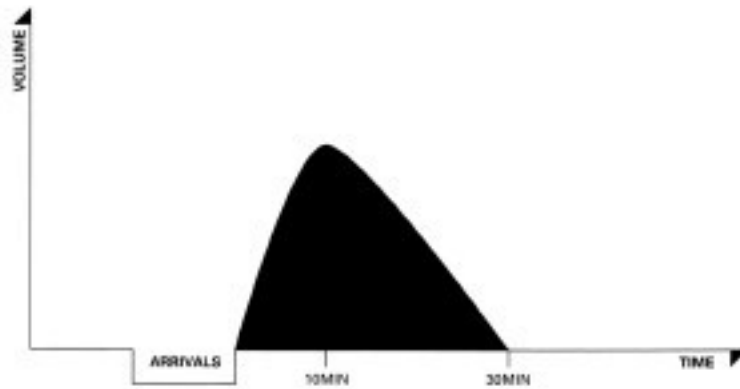
International
Check-In

STERILE

NON-STERILE



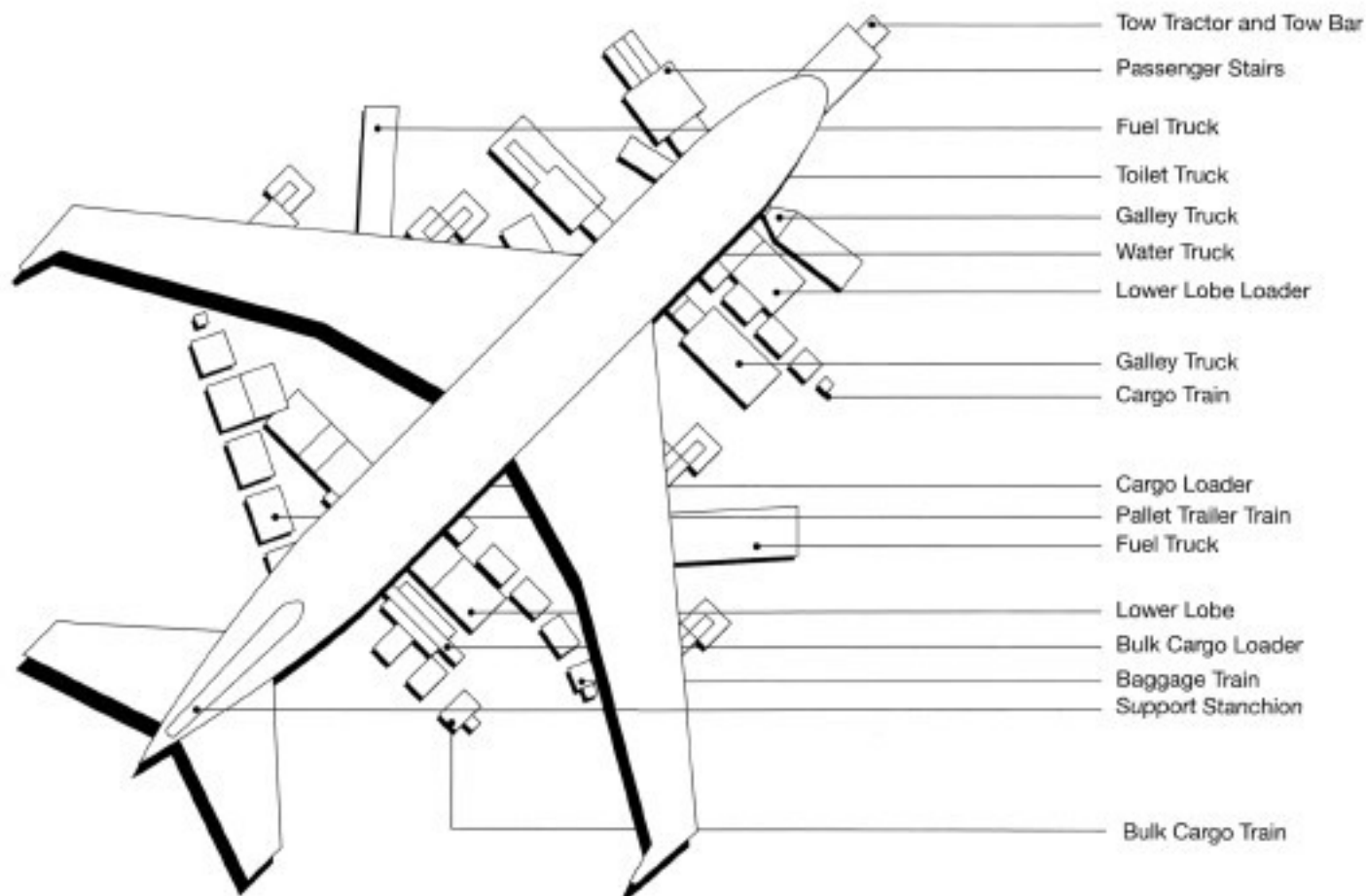




Most airports use elevated road systems to divide traffic into Arrivals and Departures. Each of these uploading and downloading systems have distinct time frames.



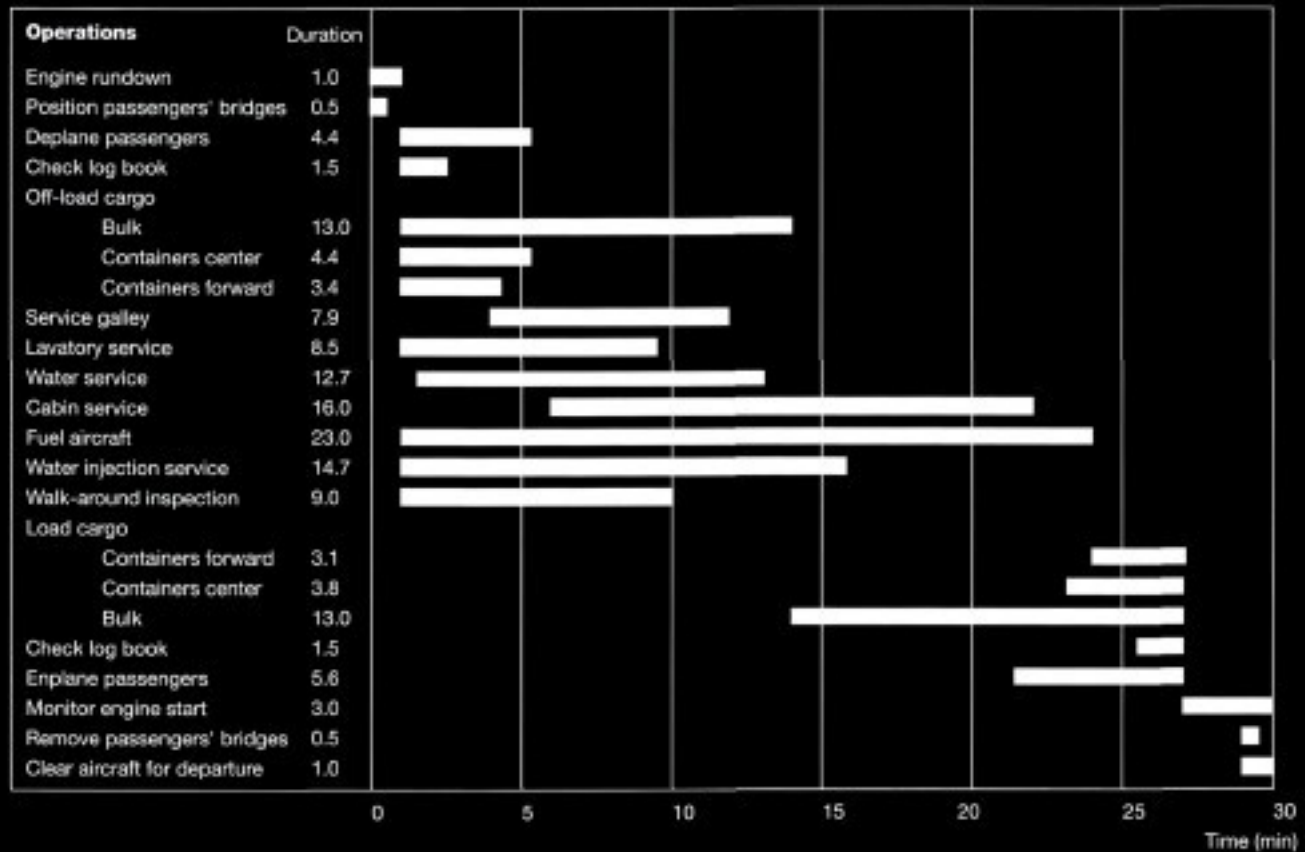
Boeing 747 Turnaround Service



Logistical precision governs all aspects of planning, design and operation at the airport. Each flow of movement is tabulated and tracked. Each component of the airport is designed to handle variable volumes of traffic.

It can take less than one hour to 'turnaround' a fully loaded long haul 747. Purpose built machinery plugs into a plane as soon as it arrives, downloading passengers, baggage, excrementa, rubbish and uploading new passengers, new baggage, fuel, food and other necessities for life in the air.

Aircraft servicing activities at gate



This Gantt chart indicates the processes, time frames and sequencing for servicing and turning around a 'typical jet' at the gate.

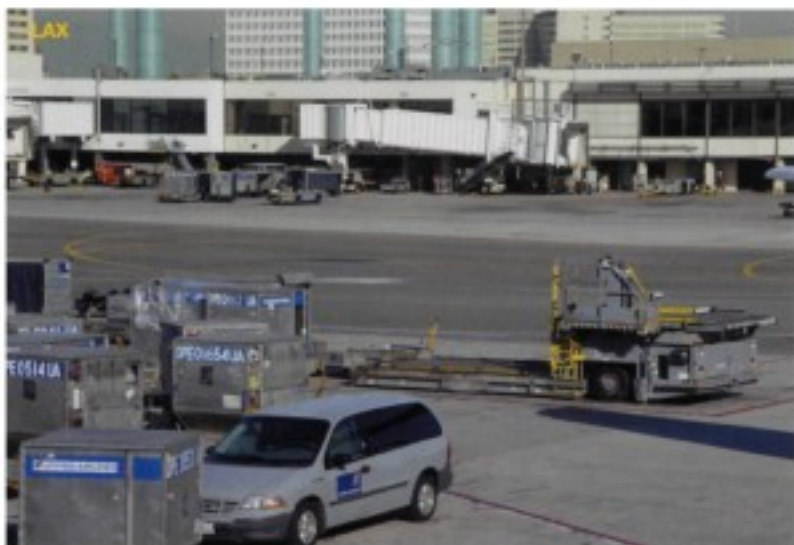
(Source Federal Aviation Authority.)



Tractor and pallet dolly.



Pushout tug and tow bar.



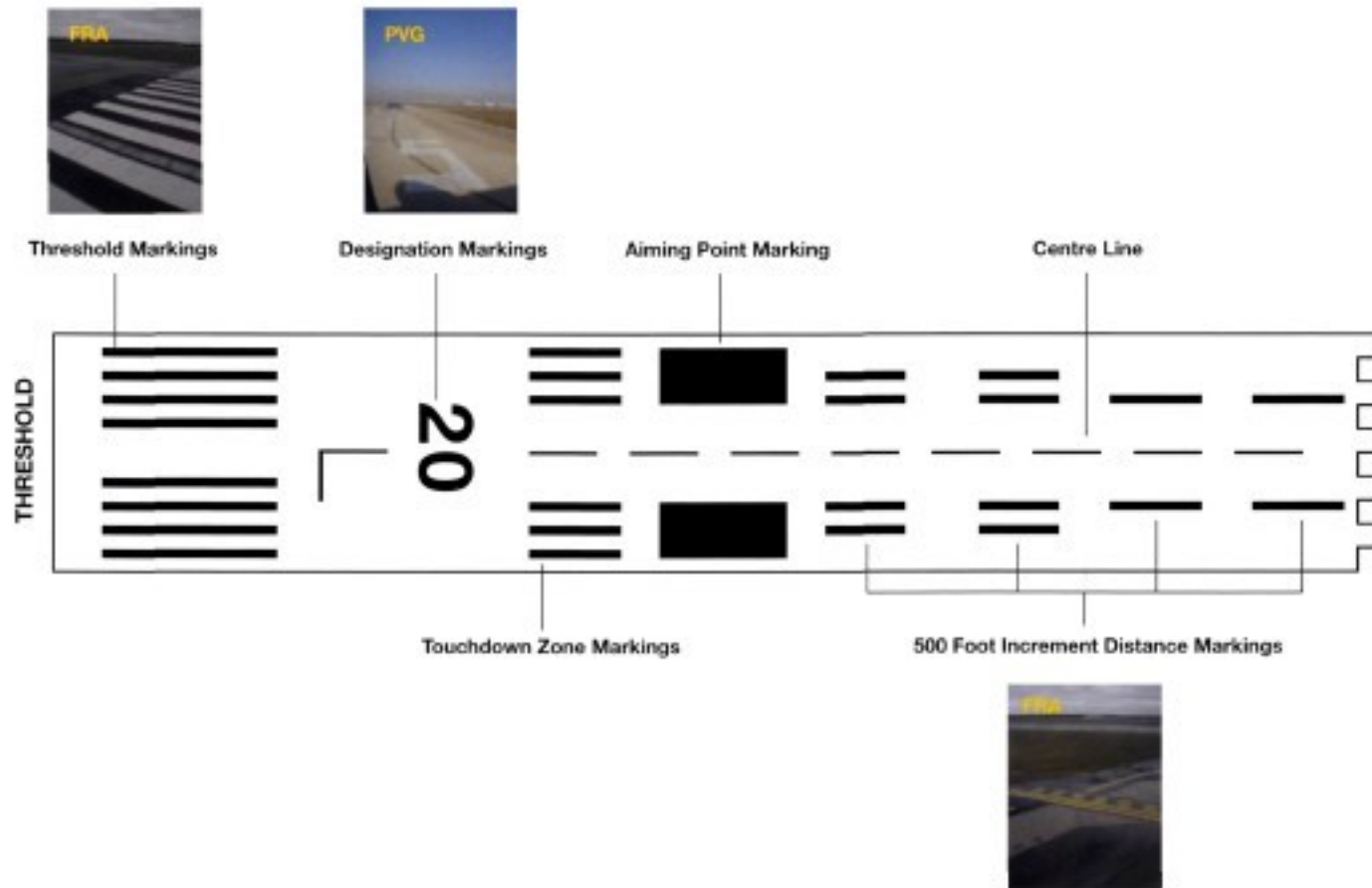
Transporter.



Mobile conveyor belt and pallet dollies.



Mobile generators (GPUs) provide power to planes while they are on the tarmac.



There is a sign for everything at the airport. Shape, colour and alphanumerics dominate the instructional language of the tarmac and terminal. All spaces of the airport are overlaid with signs.

Yellow centre lines guide planes from runway to gate.

Yellow lettering indicates location. These markers designate stop points for different jets.



White lines indicate thresholds between various airside zones.

Red lines indicate halt marks. You cannot cross this line without special authorisation.



Yellow lettering with black background indicates a location.

Black lettering with a yellow background indicates destination. This sign indicates that we are on taxiway B4, and domestic terminal 2 is to the right.

Landside, airport signage separates various kinds of flow by creating a series of decision points that constantly split the potential routes for passengers until they arrive at their destination. Like all interface systems, alphanumeric and pictographic signage stabilises both system and user. You may not need to speak the language of the country to get around; but you do need to know the techno-cultural dialect of English - the international language of the airport.







B-727



Concourse



8m Concourse

93 sq m per
Departure Lounge

Height



B-707



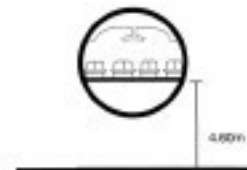
8m Concourse

140 sq m per
Departure Lounge

DC-10/L-1011



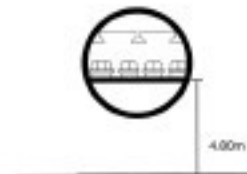
10.6m Concourse

225 sq m per
Departure Lounge

B-747



12m Concourse

511 sq m per
Departure Lounge

The form of airports is unstable, they are always upgrading. Since the introduction of jets, the general trend has been for planes to increase in size. Airbus is currently developing the A380-800 series which will seat 555 passengers.
(after Blankenship)

MIA

TOTAL INTERNATIONAL AIRPORTS

**SCHEDULED INTERNATIONAL IATA
AIRPORTS 1,195**

**AIRPORTS UNDERGOING
EXPANSION 225**

NEW AIRPORTS OPENED 4

NEW AIRPORTS BEGUN 12



**MOVEMENT: LIFE IN THE AIR CHANGES
EVERYTHING ON THE GROUND**

THE AIRPORT IS BUILT FOR TRANSIT. IT IS AN INTERCHANGE OF PEOPLE, MACHINES AND ITINERARIES. WHILE ALL AIRPORTS MAY NOT BE IDENTICAL, THERE IS A SAMENESS TO THEM THROUGHOUT THE WORLD. WHEREVER THE TRAVELLER IS IN THE WORLD, THEY KNOW WHERE THEY ARE WHEN THEY'RE AT THE AIRPORT. THEY'RE ON THEIR WAY TO SOMEWHERE ELSE. THE AIRPORT REPRESENTS 'LABORATORY CONDITIONS' FOR THINKING THROUGH THE TECHNO-CULTURAL PROCESSES AND SYSTEMS OF GLOBAL MOVEMENT.

IN THIS SECTION, WE CONSIDER THE OPERATIONS OF MOBILITY IN ORDER TO THINK ABOUT HOW NOTIONS OF 'CITIZEN' AND 'HUMAN' ARE BEING REDEFINED BY A NEW KIND OF TRANSIT-LIFE.

"IT'S ALL THIS AND MORE BESIDES."

FELIX GUATTARI

To the average Star Alliance member, the airport at Singapore, Los Angeles or Frankfurt would be as familiar as their local mall. As major hubs for global air traffic, many international passengers pass through one of these terminals almost every time they travel. Like a home-away-from-home, travellers can use the airport's business centre, smoke in the designated areas, take a nap in purpose built lounges, eavesdrop on conversations in themed environments, or buy American cigarettes at a good price. Steeped in habits learned from a lifetime of roads and shopping malls, the denizens of aviopolis move from terminal to terminal, from gate to gate with a methodical certainty. Many of these frequent flyers have, of course, never really been to Singapore, LA or Frankfurt. They never leave the airport. Singapore, for instance - whatever that entity may be - remains abstract, a concept gleaned through newspaper reports, stories told by friends and colleagues, and by time spent at its airport. They may never have been 'to Singapore', but they have been 'in Singapore'. On their way elsewhere, the occupants of aviopolis press against the nation's frontiers from somewhere within its geophysical borders. At the airport, the idea of border loses its physical dimensions and reconfigures as a series of protocols and passwords that can appear anywhere.

Speed shrinks space, traversing borders that once seemed so stable. Telephone lines, radio waves and jet travel have all changed the geography of the world, replacing relations of distance and space with what seminal technology theorist Paul Virilio calls "chronography", which measures distance in terms of time and

speed.¹ At the airport the most obvious signifier for this is revealed in the answer to the question "How long was your flight?" The answer is generally given in hours not miles. Distance is a temporal rather than a spatial issue. How long is a flight? How long does something take to download? Such questions are indicative of a peculiarly networked logic, where issues like 'access' and 'flow' dominate a new set of international rules and protocols that cut through the geo-physical borders of the nation states in which we live. This process, whereby power rewrites the rules of space by creating new thresholds and new borders, may be intense at present, but the process itself isn't new. Colonialism reorganised geographical space into sovereign zones of ideological and economic allegiances. Place became *terra nullius* long ago, wiped of indigenous particularities and incorporated into a totalising space of urgent global improvement. But as Virilio also notes, speed propels geo-politics into other dimensions.

At the crossroads of this transition is the airport, where the chrono-politics of jet travel collide with the remnants of national geo-politics. In other words, airports enact another way of thinking about global relationships. They quite literally operate through a 'network logic' that cuts across the categories of nation states and territory, humans and animals, products and machines, and material and informational modes of mobility and reconnects them in new relationships to each other.

In the early 1990s, design critic Deyan Sudjic noted that airports were "high-stress landscapes, full of anxious people on unfamiliar territory".² But things are always upgrading and therefore changing

World's 30 Busiest Airports

As at October 2003 - Total Passengers Enplaned and Deplaned



| | | |
|-----|-----|------------------------------|
| 001 | ATL | Atlanta, GA, USA |
| 002 | ORD | Chicago, IL, USA |
| 003 | HND | Tokyo Haneda, JAPAN |
| 004 | LHR | London Heathrow, UK |
| 005 | LAX | Los Angeles, CA, USA |
| 006 | DFW | Dallas, TX, USA |
| 007 | FRA | Frankfurt, GERMANY |
| 008 | CDG | Paris, FRANCE |
| 009 | AMS | Amsterdam, THE NETHERLANDS |
| 010 | PHX | Phoenix, AZ, USA |
| 011 | DEN | Denver, CO, USA |
| 012 | LAS | Las Vegas, NV, USA |
| 013 | MAD | Madrid, SPAIN |
| 014 | IAH | Houston, TX, USA |
| 015 | MSP | Minneapolis/St Paul, MN, USA |

| | | |
|-----|-----|-------------------------|
| 016 | DTW | Detroit, MI, USA |
| 017 | JFK | New York, NY, USA |
| 018 | LGW | London Gatwick, UK |
| 019 | BKK | Bangkok, THAILAND |
| 020 | MIA | Miami, FL, USA |
| 021 | EWR | Newark, NJ, USA |
| 022 | SFO | San Francisco, CA, USA |
| 023 | MCO | Orlando, FL, USA |
| 024 | HKG | Hong Kong, CHINA |
| 025 | SEA | Seattle/Tacoma, WA, USA |
| 026 | NRT | Tokyo Narita, JAPAN |
| 027 | FCO | Rome, ITALY |
| 028 | YYZ | Toronto, CANADA |
| 029 | SIN | Singapore, SINGAPORE |
| 030 | PHL | Philadelphia, PA, USA |

at the airport. Before September 11, most air travellers had become used to the hybrid structures of an ever-evolving airspace system, slumping into the banality of the frustrating routines of travelling. The airport interface was no longer exotic, but had become as familiar as any global franchise - part mall, part theme park, part check point. Now, three years after these "terrible events", security offers a different spectacle where anxiety is integrated into the logic of queues (which themselves play upon the frustrating feelings of powerlessness and entrapment, of not being able to move). And yet all of this does not mean that airports no longer hold an allure. The airport is still the site of take-off, a dramatic ascent into the vertical realm, with all its attendant tropes of power and transcendence. The modern airport still offers that *frisson* of danger that characterised the very early years of aviation - "a reversal of gravity, a death defied", as writer Donald Pascoe has recently put it.³

Arrivals

Strictly speaking, there is no 'first airport'. Records indicate that operational airports existed as far back as 1909. Most of these early aerodromes were rudimentary, often a convenient repurposing of local athletic fields, parks and golf courses. Some of these airstrips were upgraded into regional airports and private landing fields. Others expanded into the terminal cities of Sydney, Newark and Orly, while a few morphed back into fields and farmlands. Sydney Airport, for instance, has been in continuous operation since 1920, developing from a modest airstrip in the middle of a swamp-lined paddock on the northern shore of Botany Bay. For 80 years this airport has been 'terraforming' its environs, sucking highways and rail corridors towards it, re-zoning its surrounding suburbs, flattening houses and changing the geography of the city around it.

Although the story of each airport is intimately connected to a most unique sense of place - Botany Bay in Sydney or Idlewild Field in New York - the spatial history of airports, whether New York or

Sydney, follows a repetitive trajectory: a marshland on the outskirts of town becomes a landing strip, which is later paved. Old sheds become international airports. Part of the history of airports concerns the ceaseless remediation of the awkward materialities of place (like swamps and farming lands) into space that can be measured, represented and standardised.

Forever upgrading into something new and better, the airport is never complete. It is in a constant state of adaptation with the techno-cultural processes that constitute its operations. When jet travel went commercial in the late 1950s, many terminals became obsolete (the most famous being Eero Saarinen's futuristic TWA terminal at New York International, later renamed John F Kennedy International). Airports had to be re-engineered to accommodate bigger planes and the higher throughput of passengers associated with the upgrading of technology (e.g. the introduction of faster and bigger jet planes). Speed overtook the airport itself.

The history of airports provides a telling snapshot of how techno-cultural innovations (such as cars or planes) and economic-political contingencies (like wars and the rise of liberal capitalism) can quite literally rewire cultural landscapes. The airport is an immanent system constantly overcoming its own limitations, branching into new dimensions and making new connections. Airstrips became airports, and airports became movies; points of memory and points of departure, sites of industry, military zones, shopping malls, brand names and more. The airport has evolved into a complex techno-cultural machine. It provides an interface not simply between material components (e.g. structures for processing from land to air). The airport's interface functions at a variety of levels, both material and immaterial, global and local. Airports stabilise contexts across distinct systems enabling a multitude of things to access its nodes. Planes, people, cars, aviation fuel, freight, and catering are constantly plugging in, peeling off or just passing through the airport. Airports are multi-platform, multi-dimensional, multi-tasking movement machines.

Like a complex overlapping of co-evolving biotechnical systems, airports around the world process millions of things (people, messages, cargo, missions, procedures) in unlimited combinations every day. Yet out of this incredible movement of multiple textures a remarkable sameness in structure seems to contain this virtual diversity. For all the speed and radical heterogeneity of global air travel, a refrain of aviation aesthetics has emerged in the contemporary architecture of airports - the beep of metal detection, the expanses of glass overlooking the apron, the international pictograms, the slick retail space. This refrain seems to soothe the disorientation produced by the constancy of transit in modern lives, where the imperatives of advance and upgrade are pre-emptive in every way: new home renovations, new technologies, new democracies, new faces. And yet despite the 'newness', everything seems to be converging into sameness. Every renovation has a water feature, every face has Nicole Kidman's nose, every democracy is becoming an American franchise and every airport speaks English. In this life of constant upgrade and movement we are assured that the future will somehow be rosier and more certain if we yield to flow and move with the rest of the traffic.

The integrated flows of aviation were not always so seamless. Flying was once the adventure of the reckless and the dashing. Unreliable aircraft generated real anxieties for a potential public up until the 1960s. Flying was uncomfortable, noisy, turbulent and expensive. Small propeller planes flew at low bumpy altitudes, stopping frequently to refuel. In the early 1960s, 70 per cent of the most frequent flying nation in the world, the USA, had never taken a commercial flight.⁴

Modern jet aviation reassured passengers' underlying anxiety about air travel. As traffic increased so did the complexity of corporate, individualist and nationalist forces that regulated airports into nodes of a symbolic, moral and material economy of global movement. Much of this regulation occurs through the airport's diagrammatics of technical compliance: a runway must be so long and so wide, and a departure gate must be able to accommodate a series of different

model planes. The variety of internationalist protocols, immigration, flight path routing, safety standards, corporate 'customer focus', airside management, signage systems, landside access and flow management converge and create architectures of global logistics. While all airports may not be identical, there is a sameness to them throughout the world. Wherever you are in the world, you know where you are when you're at the airport. You are on your way somewhere else.

Transit

According to French anthropologist Marc Augé, today we live in a world,

... where people are born in the clinic and die in the hospital, where transit points and temporary abodes are proliferating under luxurious or inhuman conditions (hotel chains and squats, holiday camps and refugee camps, shantytowns threatened with demolition or doomed to festering longevity); where a dense network of means of transport which are also inhabited spaces are developing; where the *habitude* of supermarkets, slot machines and credit cards communicate wordlessly, through gestures, with an abstract, unmediated commerce: a world thus surrendered to solitary individuality, to the fleeting, the temporary and ephemeral.⁵

This is a world of constant transit. At any given moment, about three million people spend at least part of their day being propelled in superlight alloy cocoons across the sky. However, the world of transit doesn't operate at the same velocity, or in the same modes in every place. For instance, the USA is, by far, the number one nation in terms of total-tonne-kilometres and passenger-kilometres. Of the over 1.6 billion passengers moved in global civilian airspace in 2003, 36 per cent were carried on US-badged airlines. Of the top 25 airports in the world in terms of passenger throughput, 17 are located in the USA. The world's busiest airport, Atlanta's Hartsfield, processes around 78 million passengers per year. Chicago's

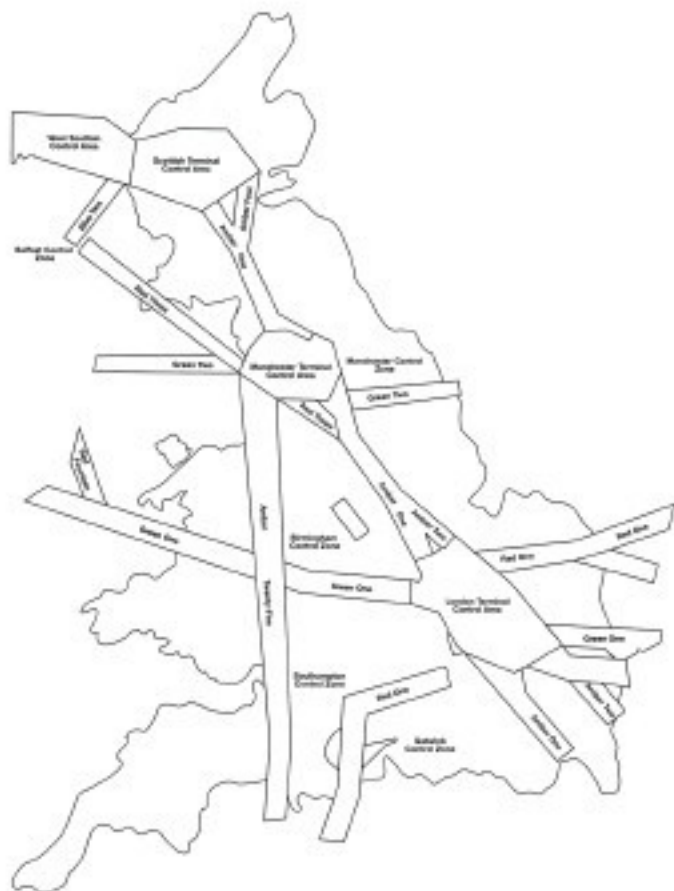
O'Hare, the world's second busiest airport, processes 72.5 million passengers per year. Both of these airports are major domestic hub airports and US traffic is overwhelmingly commuter-based and domestic.⁶

As a machine for processing and controlling mobility, the airport operates according to the seemingly paradoxical logic of transit, where 'stop systems' (like border control, baggage and identity checks) integrate with 'go systems' (like capacity and flow control techniques). The two essential documents for moving, the passport and the boarding pass, represent the different logics of stop and go and respect two distinct but related sovereignties. One authenticates national citizenship by verifying identity while the other scans the co-ordinates of logistical units into the global and corporate network of aviation.

Like data in a network, packets of information-made-flesh are transmitted to other places. For instance, as the citizen of aviopolis travels from Sydney to Egypt, they engage in a series of mostly involuntary protocols. They are routed through the geography of IATA acronyms in set ways: SYD/SIN/CAI (Sydney-Singapore-Cairo). If that is unavailable they could reroute SYD/BKK/CAI (Sydney-Bangkok-Cairo).

Cairo Airport may look nothing like Singapore's Changi Airport, but its information architecture is the same - it is designed to process mobility. It is a self-renewing machine that 'refreshes' after each take-off and landing. Planes download passengers, baggage, cargo, excreta, and rubbish, and, then, upload passengers, baggage, cargo, fuel, food and packaged gadgets. The airport propels and regulates direction and flow. The sky is turned into bandwidth as planes move along specified air corridors.

Each piece of baggage is scanned and tracked and matched with regulated precision. There is a path and position for everything at the airport. Media theorist, Scott Bukatman notes that although the airport may be like a mall, "the airport doesn't deny the outside



All airspace is tightly controlled. This diagram shows the major highways of the air over England.

world - it just privileges directionality".⁷ A destination firmly in mind, we 'wayfind' through the airport, negotiating the banal procedures of check in, immigration and security with the exotic (in every sense of the word) promises of an 'other' space. At the airport the near and the elsewhere coalesce into a series of macro- and micro-connected itineraries that are simultaneously real and mythical.

The airport not only transforms a body on the ground into a body in the air, but it also involves the incorporeal transformation of the travelling body into a series of processing categories, like citizen, passenger, baggage allowance, threat (code red) or innocent. The airport constitutes a space where a series of contractual declarations (I am Australian, I have nothing to declare, I packed these bags myself) accumulate into a password where one is free to deterritorialise on a literal level - one may take flight, but not without a cost. Scanned, checked and made to feel guilty - one could be a smuggler, a terrorist, an illegal alien, a disease vector. The categories of 'guilt' expand constantly.

Orientation

In the pursuit of our itinerary, the place - that ethnographic imaginary of organic sociality - becomes little more than a sign saying 'you are here'. In our need to move, we submit to a series of invasive procedures and security checks that are becoming pervasive and yet are still rationalised through a discourse of exception - "Only at the airport". In transit spaces one doesn't see landscape as one sees landmarks (and oneself) indefinitely 'othered' as pax, citizen, consumer, security risk, traveller or anonymous free spirit. As the passenger moves through the airport, they focus on symbols for orientation and pass through thresholds that authenticate identity. As Marc Augé says "there will be no individualisation (no right to anonymity) without identity checks".⁸

At the airport place is turned into passage and identity is transformed into a biometric (literally, the measure of life). The

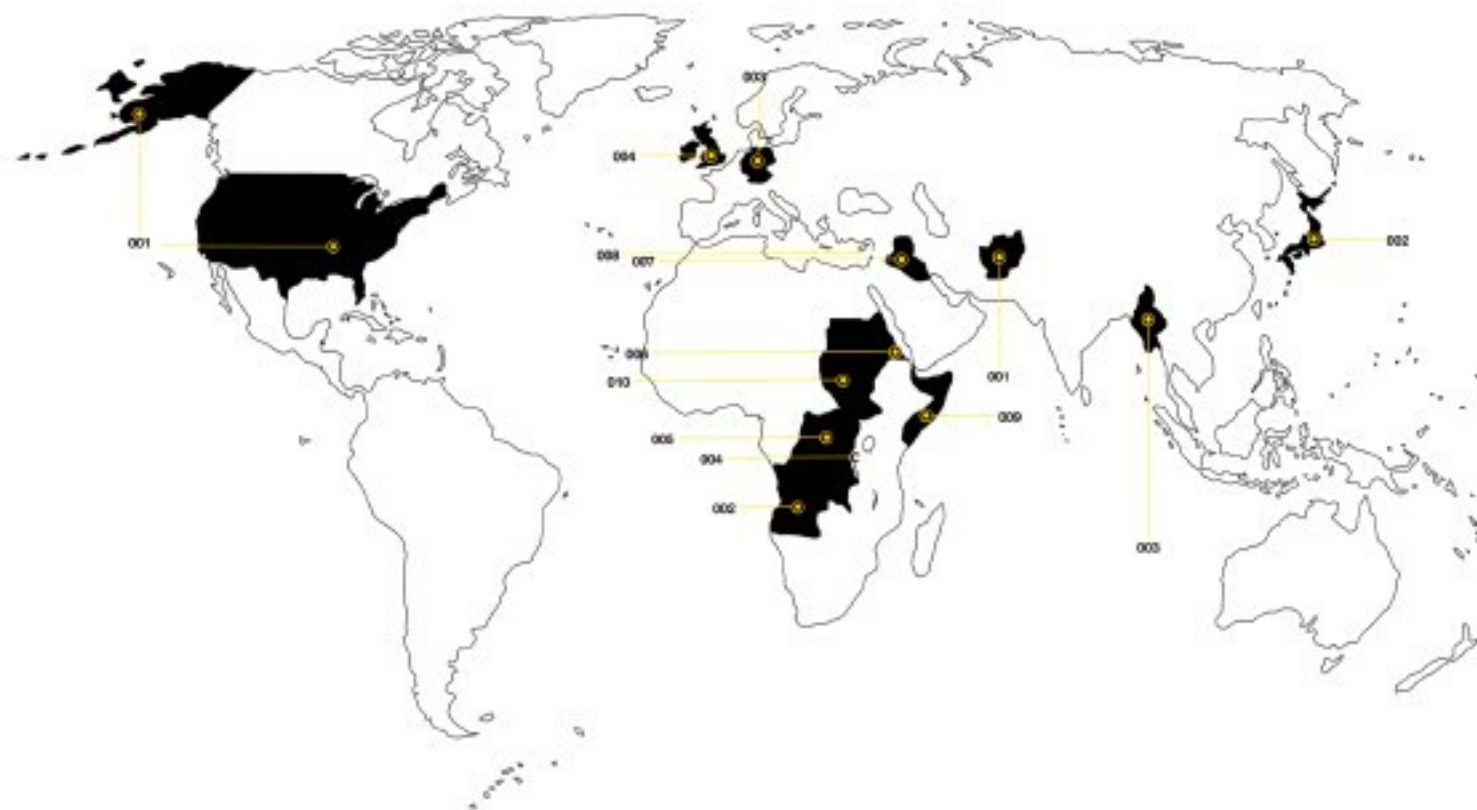
airport is a non-place: its *topos* is primarily symbolic and transitory; its sociality is solitary and contractual.

Non-places are increasing - everywhere we are addressed as agents of one kind or another in a landscape of signs - "do not eat on the train", "shop at 'HeathLow'", "please present boarding pass and passport" - yet this agency is highly modulated. The conditions of traffic or the rules of use address a virtual 'average man' subject to a series of silent exchanges and injunctions (turn left, insert card now, Welcome to Chicago), where contractual modes of interaction are sharply defined and textually mediated. Yet if the non-places of supermodernity are so overwhelmingly contractual and solitary, why can driving down the highway or walking to the departure gate feel so liberating?

In Michel Serres' ficto-critical exploration of the networked world of airports, *Angels*, one of his frequent flying characters, Pantope, eulogises on the joys of jet travel:

The wild passion of letting yourself be transported by wind, by burning heat and by cold space... the pleasure of being anonymous, of being quiet for a long time, of existing in no place at all... where the dialogues of others continually slip in... the pleasure of leaving, of being far away, of being missing... the subtle pleasures of erasing the presence of your body, your words and your shadow, of counting for nothing, of hiding yourself, of becoming so light that you fly away....⁹

There is something pleasurable about the motionless motion and placeless place of jet aviation. There is a certain sublimeness in becoming airborne, anonymous, absent, and a corresponding banality to becoming stuck and identified. In the world of transit, operational logic is utterly calibrated to movement. Everything is organised around motion. By dint of this ontological twist from 'being' to 'becoming' (as a material organisational principle) a whole series of previously held concepts organised around more static concepts like category or position don't seem to have the



Top Four Nations For Total Volume Of Traffic
(Passengers, Freight, Mail) Year Ending 2002

| | | |
|-----|----------------|-------------|
| 001 | USA | 31 per cent |
| 002 | Japan | 6 per cent |
| 003 | Germany | 5 per cent |
| 004 | United Kingdom | 5 per cent |

Top Ten Source Countries For Refugees

78 Per Cent Of All Refugees Come From Ten Countries. Year Ending 2002

| | | | |
|-----|----------------|-----|-----------|
| 001 | Afghanistan | 006 | Eritrea |
| 002 | Angola | 007 | Iraq |
| 003 | Burma | 008 | Palestine |
| 004 | Burundi | 009 | Somalia |
| 005 | Congo-Kinshasa | 010 | Sudan |

same purchase on the real as they once did. In the case of airports, operations are set toward the dynamic unities of traffic, rather than the categories and positions of particular planes. The world is on the move. Money, people, machines, data whirl around the planet, and in so doing the world necessarily changes: new continuities and discontinuities emerge. There is a time-space recalibration that is at one level totalising (producing standardised networks of material and information highways, generic travel experiences and 'by the numbers' biometric processing), but which at another level is deeply personal: the discontinuities of mass-migration, mass-transit and mass-media produce actual lives and 'real' experiences.

When citizenship of a mass-transit world entails neither blood (born of citizen parents) nor soil (born in sovereign territory), as in many 'multicultural' countries, like the USA or Britain, "the continuity of man and citizen, nativity and nationality" is broken - and with it some of the fundamental presuppositions of modern sovereignty.¹⁰ Travellers, immigrants and refugees may be 'released' from the shackles of earthly citizenship, out of which new virtual relationships emerge. But on the whole, at the airport, these relationships are coagulated into highly public and semiotised contractualities. As theorists of biopower, such as Giorgio Agamben, and theorists of globalisation, like Manuel Castells, have noted, states don't deal well with the strange particularities of networked and virtualised individuals.¹¹ They prefer to keep the subject within more knowable constraints of identity.

Departures

"The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule."

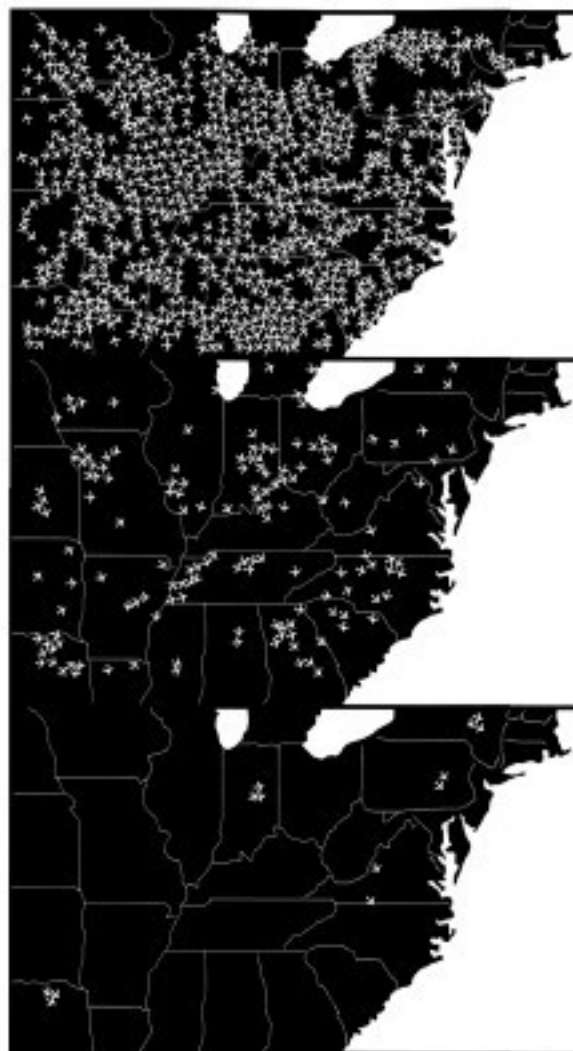
Walter Benjamin¹²

At the airport the upside of transformational possibilities, of being given the 'all clear' to become a passenger, or a businessman or a traveller, is only available to the 'innocent'. And the technical nature

of innocence is changing. The airport is in a constant state of emergency - its structures prepare constantly for disaster. As shoes are searched and fire teams do drills, innocence is not presumed: it must be proven. After September 11, examples of the exception becoming the rule are myriad. Any skin irritation is a possible case of anthrax, rather than a more common allergy. Every Muslim is a possible terrorist.

The markers of identity which may once have derived from the cross-matching of body to passport have expanded into more comprehensive modes of biometrics in which iris scans and face recognition systems, nationality, bank accounts, age/gender/ethnic profiles and itineraries assemble innocence - which also becomes the criteria of an increasingly complex virtual identity. (No wonder we want to get inside the plane to feel the embrace of anonymity.) For Giorgio Agamben, every attempt to rethink the political space of the West must begin with a clear awareness that we no longer know anything of the classical distinction between private life and political existence, between man as biological life and between man's political existence in the city. All forms of life have merged into a form of what he calls 'bare life', where the social and biological body opens up directly to political power.

For Agamben, bare life is the state of pervasive exception where "power confronts nothing but pure life, without any mediation". Agamben focuses on the more extreme bio-politics of the west, which manifested in Nazi policies of genocide and human experimentation. Yet unlike much of the voluminous contemporary Holocaust literature in which the procedural and systemic operations of power are exceptionalised into a humanist narrative of atrocity and thus comfortably resolved with "never again", Agamben claims that the so called 'exception' of the Holocaust lays the ground rules for life today. It has been over 70 years since Walter Benjamin took flight from Germany, and yet unsurprisingly his damning insights on the rhetorical functions of 'progress' and 'the future' - "the current amazement that the things we are experiencing are 'still' possible in the twentieth century is *not* philosophical" - are especially



SEPTEMBER 11 2001
09:49 AM
3,667 FLIGHTS

SEPTEMBER 11 2001
10:35 AM
1,147 FLIGHTS

SEPTEMBER 11 2001
11:40 AM
290 FLIGHTS

prescient as the 'war on terror' legislates exceptional provisions to bypass the global rules of war, as well as the national constitutions of many liberal democracies.¹³

Transit Life

If freedom of movement is one of the most elemental of freedoms, then the camp provides the ultimate backdrop to the sublime feelings of placelessness that many experience as they wander through the airport. The camp, like the airport, is built for transit. Yet in the camp, no one moves. Both airport and camp constitute zones of exception. Each is framed by a rhetoric of emergency, each limits concepts of the other. One facilitates movement and the other denies it, yet both are zones of perpetual transit and futuristic promise.

The asylum seeker held in Australia's infamous Baxter detention centre is there on a promise that protection and a life elsewhere is at hand. As they wait, for sometimes up to three years, over 60 million passengers have transited through the terminals at Sydney. On the other side of the world, Israeli bulldozers destroy Palestinian houses and farms to complete a 400 kilometres network of 'settler by-pass roads' which are off-limits to Palestinians, ostensibly for security reasons. These roads criss-cross the West Bank and connect illegal Israeli settlements to each other and Israel's 1948 borders. The effects of these roads are twofold: they materially hook Palestinian land into the Israeli road traffic network, further fragmenting the territory of Palestine; and they duplicate the most modern of time/space displacements in a land overburdened with history: this is the production of a non-place. The Holy Land becomes a type of Hollywood. Like the commuters of LA who can drive for years and never see the slums below, Israelis can travel through Palestine along the settler roads and never encounter an Arab.

All spaces today are complex and multi-dimensional. As cultural theorist Michel Foucault puts it,

We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and the far, of the side by side, of the dispersed. We are at the moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein.¹⁴

Increasingly, life is a series of itineraries and transit stops: home to work, gym to supermarket, Sydney to London, the Middle East to a detention centre (and increasingly, deportation back). Transit life is the life form of this millennium. If the nation state is floundering, control moves from geophysical borders to borders of jurisdiction which themselves are constantly upgrading in response to 'new threats'. The polis itself is increasingly organised through the logic of exception and flow control that dominates the airport. As Deyan Sudjic notes, "the transience of the airport embodies contemporary urbanism in a real, as well as a metaphorical sense".¹⁵ As the centre of our home city, Sydney, undergoes another upgrade and new motorways cut into the ground so that we can travel from the centre to satellite suburbs miles away and never see a single suburban street or house, we know Sudjic and Virilio are right: the airport is the city of the future. But what of Agamben's claim that "the camp, which is now securely lodged within the city's interior, is the new biopolitical *nomos* of the planet"?¹⁶

For Agamben, any zone where normal order is suspended is a camp. A camp is a space where anything is possible (including death). New camps emerge daily: dogs sniff commuters on trains, detention centres are a growth industry and the category of refugee is constantly being redefined. The post war refugee, the brave dissident fleeing communist regimes, has been upgraded to become the queue jumper and the illegal alien. Over at the airport, in the interests of efficiency, the traveller too has undergone some upgrading. The sophisticated experience of the jetset traveller of the 1960s is now available only to those travellers in business class or with the right loyalty scheme. The rest are now in the queue, as well, waiting for a bag search and body pat down.

- 1 Virilio, Paul and Lotringer, Sylvere, *Pure War*, New York: semiotext(e), 1983.
- 2 Sudjic, Deyan, *The 100 Mile City*, London: Flamingo, 1992, p. 169.
- 3 Pascoe, Donald, *Airspaces*, London: Reaktion Books, 2001, p. 45.
- 4 Cited in Lewis, William, *Airlines Executives and Federal Regulation; case studies in American enterprise from the airmail era to the dawn of the jet age*, Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2000, p. 34.
- 5 Auge, Marc, *Non-places: An Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, J Howe trans, London: Verso, 1995, p. 78.
- 6 All figures from ICOA Annual Report 2002.
- 7 Bukatman, Scott, *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1993, p. 126.
- 8 Auge, *Non-places*, p. 102.
- 9 Serres, Michel, *Angels: a Modern Myth*, Paris: Flammarion, 1995, p. 262.
- 10 Agamben, Giorgio, *Means without End*, V Binetti & C. Casarino trans, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000, p. 131.
- 11 Castells, Manuel, *The Rise of the Network Society*, Vol. 1, Oxford: Blackwell, 1998.
- 12 Benjamin, Walter, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in *Illuminations*, Hannah Arendt trans, London: Fontana, 1992, p. 248.
- 13 Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 249.
- 14 Foucault, Michel, "Of Other Spaces", *Diacritics*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 1986, p. 22.
- 15 Sudjic, *The 100 Mile City*, p. 152.
- 16 Agamben, Giorgio, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Daniel Heller-Roazen trans, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998, p. 176.