AIRPORTS ARE ESSENTIALLY MACHINES FOR PROCESSING PEOPLE, AIRPLANES, AUTOMOBILES, CARGO, AND LUGGAGE—ALL OF WHICH MOVE IN DIFFERENT WAYS, AND WHICH NEED TO BE CONNECTED AT CERTAIN POINTS AND SEPARATED BY RIGID SECURITY AT OTHERS. JUST GETTING ALL THE PARTS TO WORK TOGETHER SEEMS OVERWHELMING—indeed, it did overwhelm British Airways last month at Heathrow, outside London, when Terminal 5, an eight-billion-dollar structure that was supposed to transform Heathrow from a congested tangle into a place that would thrill passengers with the joy of air travel, all but shut down on its opening day, when a computerized baggage system malfunctioned.

Airports, in short, are a logistical nightmare, and this is surely the reason that most of them today are such depersonalized wastelands. With all those moving parts to organize, the last thing that cash-starved airlines and airport authorities want to think about is aesthetic appeal. Most airports built in the last generation, at least in the United States, have followed a simple, established pattern, along the lines of the huge ones in Atlanta and Denver. Gates, arranged in long, boxy concourses set way out in the field, are linked to central terminals by underground trains. Driverless trains enhance the sense that the whole thing is less a piece of architecture than one big machine. Within the concourse, you walk, sometimes as much as a half mile, or ten city blocks, between gates. It is an efficient layout for airport operations, as long as you don’t consider passenger pleasure to be a part of airport operations.

Architects trying to reinvent the airport have done so at their peril. Paul Andreu designed the first terminal at Charles de Gaulle, north of Paris, as a doughnut-shaped structure with glass tubes crossing through the middle, but when it came time to expand the airport, in the nineteen-eighties, only a few years after the first part was finished, his futuristic form seemed more like a cartoon than like a functional building, and more conventional terminals were ordered up. Eero Saarinen tried twice. His T.W.A. terminal, in New York, whose soaring concrete shell became an instant modernist emblem in the early nineteen-sixties, turned out, in the age of jumbo jets and security walls, to be about as futuristic as a log cabin, and no more adaptable. At Dulles, outside Washington, D.C., Saarinen tried to protect his glass-and-concrete terminal from the ugliness of conventional jetways; he came up with a scheme that kept the planes parked out on the field,
where they were reached by custom-built trailers that rose up to the airplane doors like hydraulic elevators. It was all very dramatic, but it didn’t work, either, and, when the airport expanded, conventional concourses were built out on the field.

Since then, airport authorities have been wary of letting any architect have a say on what should go where. Now most architects don’t get to do much more than give the main concourse a big, swooping space with natural light—like the one in the new American Airlines terminal at Kennedy airport—which acts as little more than a distraction from the banality of the rest of the terminal.

But recently Asian countries, and some European ones, have been approaching the problem with a bit more imagination. The best new airports in the world right now are in Beijing, where Norman Foster’s Terminal 3 has just opened, and on the outskirts of Madrid, where Terminal 4 at Barajas, designed by Richard Rogers Partnership, has been in operation since 2006. Foster has achieved what no other architect has been able to: he has rethought the airport from scratch and made it work. Foster has done for airports what the architects Reed & Stem did for train stations with their design for Grand Central, a building whose greatest achievement is not its sumptuous main concourse but its orchestration of an intricate web of people, trains, taxis, and passing automobiles into a system that feels straightforward and logical, as if the building itself were guiding you from the entrance to your train. Foster, likewise, has established a pattern so clear that your natural instinct to walk straight ahead from the front door takes you where you need to go. The sheer legibility of the place would be achievement enough, given its size. Foster’s office claims it is the largest building in the world: it has a hundred and twenty-six aircraft stands, and it had to include separate sections, with their own security stations and travel-document-control areas, for domestic and international travel; a train station for a new rapid-transit line to downtown Beijing; an array of luxury shops; and even a Burger King. Even more remarkable than this organizational feat, however, is the fact that Terminal 3 is also an aesthetically exhilarating place to be.

In layout, the airport is roughly like a pair of triangles whose points face each other and are connected by a long line. Foster has likened its shape to that of a dragon. I suppose you could consider either of the triangles, whose sides curve inward and whose roofs swell upward in a generous swoop, to be a dragon’s head, and the long, straight section connecting them to be its tail, but the comparison is silly. Had Foster built the airport in Mexico City, would he have said that it looked like an iguana? Besides, one of the main strengths of the building is that you’re not really aware of its layout, even as it subtly directs you. But you are
aware of the structure’s sensuous curves, which all but embrace you as you approach on an entry road. It makes you think of movement, while still appearing serene. Its long, low shape appears to rise gradually, as if its roof touched the ground at each end. Inside, the terminal, with its high, vaulted ceiling and walls of glass facing the airfield, loosely recalls Saarinen’s T.W.A. terminal. But this room is big enough to contain that entire building.

Foster placed the gates for domestic travel along two sides of the front triangle, which means that some of the planes, instead of being on a faraway concourse, nestle right up to the building. That’s one part of his reinvention. The other is in the kind of aesthetic experience that Foster gives international travellers as they disembark. In most airports, you are hustled off the plane and up stairs, down escalators, around corners, and along endless low-ceilinged, interior corridors before you have the privilege of standing in a line to show your passport. At Beijing, Foster has put all the international flights in the rear three-sided building, which is similar to the front one and almost as grand, and you walk off the plane right into his vast space, a celebration of arrival awash with natural light. Nothing could be further from the windowless basements of Kennedy airport.

The Beijing terminal cost $3.65 billion to build, which in China bought a structure bigger than all five terminals at Heathrow put together, for less than half the cost of the new Terminal 5. The project was conceived, designed, constructed, and opened in four years, whereas the Heathrow terminal, from conception to completion, took twenty years. (That building, by Richard Rogers, is a somewhat compromised version of his original design—far better than the rest of Heathrow, but much less interesting than Rogers meant it to be.)

These widely divergent timetables are not a matter of Chinese efficiency versus British dallying; the British, like the Americans, pay the price of democracy. The Chinese government does not have to contend with environmentalists, financing problems, or recalcitrant airlines; the public hearings over the Heathrow terminal took the same amount of time as the entire construction of the Beijing one. China simply decrees what it will build, and floods the construction zone with migrant workers whose daily pay probably wouldn’t buy a British construction worker’s lunch.

Toward the end of the project, the Beijing Capital Airport Authority must have had some misgivings that Foster’s cool modernity did not seem sufficiently Chinese, because it filled the elegant halls with oversized reproductions of traditional Chinese sculpture and enough potted plants to stock a nursery. At Barajas, the Spanish felt no such need for the crutch of kitsch. Then again, Richard Rogers designs warmer, more playful buildings than Foster does. There’s no question that Foster’s solution to the airport problem is more fundamentally inventive than Rogers’s, but Rogers has another kind of inventiveness, which shows you how good an airport can be, even when the architect doesn’t rethink things from scratch. The aircraft gates are organized around the kind of long, straight gate concourse you see everywhere, but Rogers’s version is more breathtakingly beautiful than any airport I have ever seen. The ceiling is lined with bamboo slats and supported on a series of enormous Y-shaped steel trusses running down the center which are painted in the colors of the spectrum. When I emerged from my plane at one end of the concourse, I saw red columns in front of me, and it was only as I walked down the concourse that I saw that the columns were becoming orange, then yellow, then green and blue and violet. Rogers puts you inside a rainbow that stretches for half a mile. The colors make the space exuberant, the bamboo makes it warm, and together they make the building as much an exercise in sensuous comfort as in structural bravado—although the swaggering structure is there, too, replete with glass and natural light and a sense of grand space everywhere. Before I went to Madrid, I would have said that an airport architect’s most important task was to reduce the distance you have to walk to and from the planes. But, at Barajas, you want to keep going.

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