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ACE: Architecture, City and Environment = Arquitectura, Ciudad y Entorno [en línea]. 2009, Año 4, núm. 10 Junio. P. 9-19

ISSN: [1886-4805](https://doi.org/10.1080/18864805)

Website access: http://www-cpsv.upc.es/ace/Articles_n10/PDF/ACE_10_SA_10.pdf

UPCommons Access: <http://hdl.handle.net/2099/8025>

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Architecture, City, and Environment

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REINVENTING AIRSPACE: SPECTATORSHIP, FLUIDITY, INTIMACY AT PEK T3

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Remisión artículo: 19-01-2009

Remisión definitiva: 23-02-2009

Key words: airports, air travel, transience, mobility, intimacy, spectatorship

Abstract.

In this article, I explore the contemporary practice of air travel conceptualizing airports as socio-technical mobilities. Drawing both from the notion of “space” posited by Michel de Certeau and that of “non-place” by Marc Augé, I argue that the supermodern nature of air travel has generated forms of crisis that have embedded themselves in the architecture and the modus operandi of contemporary airports. Airports are necessarily located in a physical and tangible sense, yet their function is so tightly coupled with transience, mobility and spectatorship, that they bring anthropological accounts of “place” to unprecedented extremes. In this article, I analyze three tensions that are inherently bound to the contemporary practice of air travel and that present themselves as symbiotic phenomena: spectatorship/solitude, fluidity/control, intimacy/sameness. I explore the presence and interplay of these tensions in the spatial (spectatorship), technological (fluidity) and physical (intimacy) arrangements of the recently completed Terminal 3 at Beijing's International Airport.

1. Introduction

Airports are relatively recent architectural conceptions. The earliest airports appeared at the beginning of the twentieth century in Europe and in the United States and were merely open, spacious, grassy fields. They were built around their functional premise – allowing for the landing and take off of aircrafts – and thus consisted, essentially, of a runway. Since then, the architecture of airports has come a long way. In contemporary airports, functional design requirements are addressed alongside myriad technological, institutional, political and economical requisites that define the modern practice of air travel. Nowadays, airports accommodate a number of facilities that ‘have nothing to do with aviation’ (Ibelings, 1998). Services currently offered at and nearby major passenger airports include luxury hotels, shopping areas, business lounges, fine dining restaurants and nightclubs. Air travel has become a complex phenomenon and, in turn, airports have become complex structures. The contemporary practice of air travel is having a profound effect not only on the architectural arrangement of airports but also on the surrounding urban fabric in which they exist: the airport is becoming an integral part of the urban infrastructure; in turn, the urban infrastructure is becoming an integral part of the airport (Guller & Guller, 2003). City and airport infrastructures have become one: an assemblage of social, technical and virtual commodities that are so entrenched in the fabric and practice of the environment in which they exist that they are normally taken for granted and promptly forgotten (Bowker & Star, 1999).

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"[Airports] extend and redefine the metropolis; they explode boundaries and limits." (Tschumi, 2008)

Like cities, airports are 'socio-technical mobilities' (Graham, 2002). Flows of goods, people, services, electricity, waste, water, money and information are at the core of the urban infrastructure of a city and such a networked environment is very well replicated in airports. In socio-technical mobilities, these networks interconnect seamlessly in logistical orchestration and sustain the flow to (more or less) distant "elsewheres" (Graham, 2002). In the case of airports, the flow to/from "elsewheres" is evidently associated with the movement of people, cargo, luggage and planes that takes place between airports. Thus, for an airport, "elsewhere" is necessarily another airport. Yet, when we think of air travel, we normally think of traveling between cities, rather than airports: traveling from an airport to another acts as a surrogate for traveling from a city to another: 'airport hub to airport hub' (Urry, 2002).

Two traits can be evinced from the analogy between cities and airports presented above: the pervasive nature of airports – an airport lives in symbiosis with the city, extending it and redefining its boundaries – and their transient nature – an airport is built around the notion of mobility. These traits – pervasiveness and transience – make airports ideal prisms through which to speculate on the anthropological meaning of "place", for "place" is necessarily associated with contrasting notions of *boundary* and *permanence*. In *Non-places: Introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity*, Marc Augé (1995) defines airports as "non-places". Augé's formulation of non-place, is a derivation of, or rather a deviation from, the idea of "space" posited by Michel de Certeau (1984), according to whom it is the act of social practice that transforms a "place" into a "space". Thus, a deserted street is a "place", but the intersection of moving bodies transforms it into a "space". Augé reformulates the notion of place/space in anthropological terms, by focusing on the individual, rather than collective spatial experiences. He posits that certain places, although being frequented, are inherently uniform and flat to the point that they resist any sort of subjective, emotional attachment: they are spaces, in the sense postulated by de Certeau, but also non-places, as they incite no sense of belonging.

The notion of non-place is not unique to airports. Non-places are also other constructions of the everyday world such as railway stations, aircrafts, hotels, shopping malls and leisure parks (Acevedo-Riker, 2004). All these non-places share the fundamental characteristic of being supermodern – excessively modern. Supermodernity inflates and accelerates a defining characteristic of modernity – the movement of goods, capital, people, and information via the advance of communication and transportation technologies – to the point that a tension with the spatial arrangement of the place is created: a non-place. Airports are a peculiar kind of non-place for they bring supermodernity to an unprecedented extreme, by collapsing distances and providing a spatial rapprochement between nations. In this article, I analyze three aspects relative to the supermodern nature of airports that are evident in their architectural arrangement. They present themselves as symbiotic, tensional phenomena: spectatorship/solitude, fluidity/control and intimacy/sameness. I speculate that airports' performance of spectatorship creates new ordeals of solitude (§2), the need for continual fluidity is attained by oppressive control and mechanization (§3) and the attempt to make passengers feel at home results in flatness, sameness and the aseptic uniformity of the airport atmosphere (§4). These crises are not isolated from one another. They coexist in the architecture and in the *modus operandi* of contemporary airports. Can reworking the architectural design of airports solve such tensional crises?

Redesigns of airports in the past few decades have specifically addressed some of the crises described thus far (de Neufville, 1995). Some projects have targeted fluidity and motion, by reinventing passenger transportation and the arrangement of luggage conveyor belts; some have targeted the intimacy/familiarity component, introducing private lounge areas and

providing free wi-fi Internet access to passengers; others have targeted solely the functional/mechanical aspect, redesigning concourses in light of increased passenger traffic and security. Rarely, however, have these design considerations attempted an all-inclusive reinvention of the airport. One such attempt is evident in the recently completed Terminal 3 extension of the Beijing Capital International Airport (IATA code: PEK T3). This airport terminal, designed by Norman Foster, and completed in a record five-year period, just in time for Beijing's 2008 Olympic Games, reflects the need to entirely reinvent airspace by rethinking the airport from scratch. This article explores the aforementioned tensions by situating them with reference to the spatial, technological and physical arrangements of the recently completed Terminal 3 at Beijing's International Airport.

2. Spectatorship/solitude

A manifestation of the supermodern nature of non-places is the performance of spectatorship (Adey, 2007a). In shopping malls, for example, spectatorship transcends the individual and manifests itself as the 'totality of the visual': the spectacle is a fundamental constituent of the shopping mall landscape, its capitalism and its social relations (Debord, 2005). In airports, however, spectatorship inhibits social interaction, rather than augmenting it.

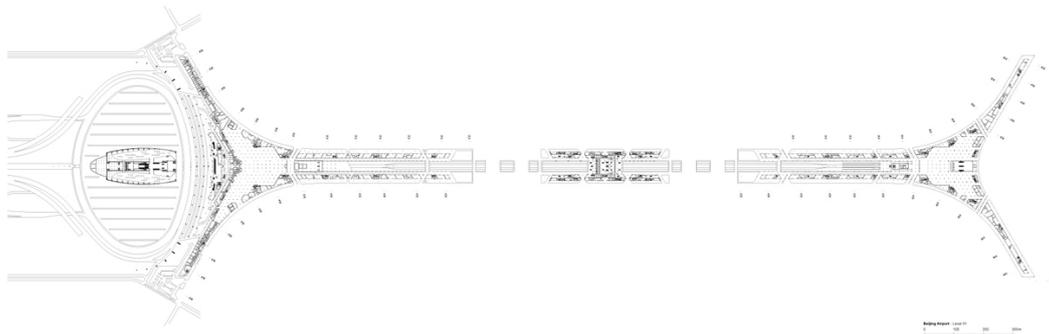
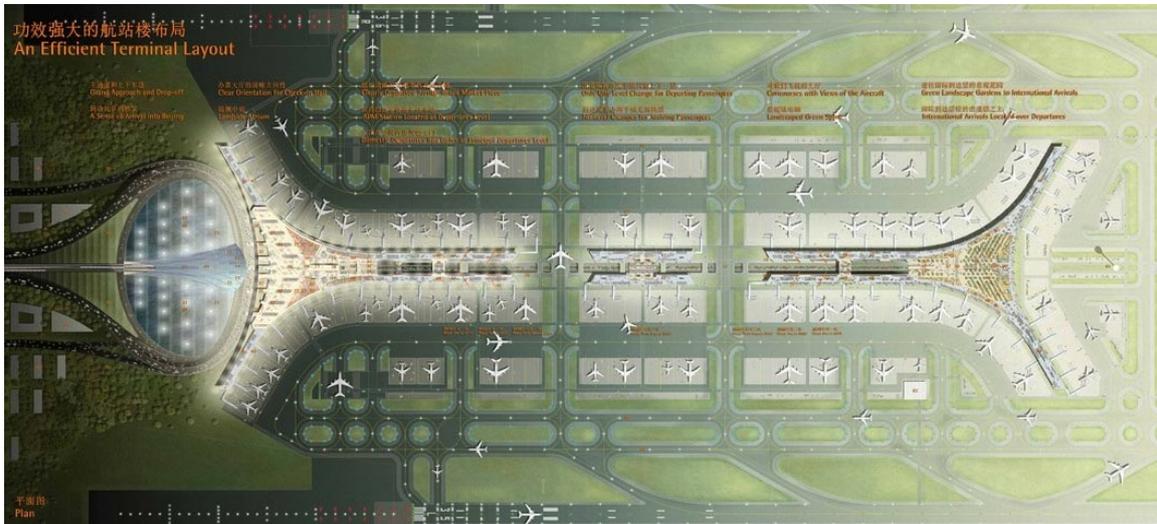
"The individual feels himself to be a spectacle without paying to much attention to the spectacle. As if the position of the spectator were the essence of the spectacle" (Augé, 1995).

In airports, the line separating spectators and non-spectators blurs to the point that passengers in an airport behave like tourists not only when on holiday, but also in everyday life (Ibelings, 1998).

The spectator/spectacle duality was first explored by Charles Baudelaire (1846) in his analysis of the 'primal modern scenes' of nineteenth century's street life in Paris. From the viewpoint of his table in his favorite café, Baudelaire's gaze dissolves in the landscape to become object of third-party spectatorship. How does Baudelaire's view of spectatorship translate into the transitory nature of contemporary airports? As Marshall Berman (1988) suggests, Baudelaire's view of modernism has become 'exotically archaic' for we now live in a 'far more ordered and protected' place, away from the 'human moving chaos' of Paris in the 1850s. Thus, if the chaotic street of Paris depicted by Baudelaire encompasses a modern experience of spectatorship, the airport, the epitome of order and protection, sits at the opposite extreme, providing a supermodern experience of spectatorship (Pascoe, 2002). This kind of spectatorship creates a new form of solitude. The spectator in an airport, being confronted with a landscape of constant activity and anonymity, becomes a component piece of such landscape - a spectator and a spectacle at the same time.

In the design of Beijing's Terminal 3, Norman Foster delivers the performance of spectatorship, but resists solitude, by reintroducing the sumptuous and grand spaces typical of train station concourses. The terminal structure is gigantesque - covering over one million square meters - making it the world's largest airport building (Foster+Partners, 2008). Yet, the Beijing terminal is not the "endless building" posited by Koolhaas (2002), i.e. a continuous sweeping space whose borders are delimited by the "presence of air conditioning". Despite being massive, the terminal is an array of functionally diverse spaces. The building consists of two large triangular structures connected to each other via one of their vertices (Figure 1). At the far edges of the triangles are the domestic and international terminals, respectively. This arrangement spatially separates function (domestic versus international), yet retains the aesthetic and sensorial perception of arrival and departure, by placing both terminals under a single roof.

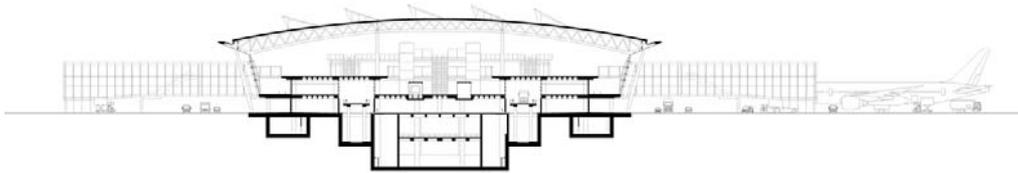
Figure 1. Site plan of Beijing's Capital International Airport, Terminal 3 (PEK T3).



Source: Foster + Partners website

The ample terminal space at Beijing references the grandness of arrival concourses in old train stations. Unlike many conventional airports in which the departing and arrival gates are located at the extremities of endless corridors, the gates of the Beijing terminal are located along the sides of the triangles of the main terminal spaces, allowing passengers to watch planes arrive and depart from the gates, much like the tracks in a train station. Also, the terminal is awash with natural daylight, diffused through the skylights in the roof (Figure 2). The sumptuous spaces awash with natural daylight recreate the spectacle and the spectatorship of air travel, in its full splendor: “The beauty of an airport lies in the splendor of its space!” (Corbusier, 1946). Ample spaces and natural light enforce spectatorship stirring away solitude (Figure 3). In such majesty of space and light, “nothing could be further from the windowless basements of Kennedy airport.” (Goldberger, 2008)

Figure 2. Spine section, roof skylights at PEK T3



Source: Foster + Partners website

Figure 3. Main concourse, natural daylight at PEK T3



Source: Foster + Partners website

3. Fluidity/control

The concept of continual fluidity is ingrained within the functional, structural and technological fabric of contemporary airports. Fluidity means incessant, ordered and controlled motion, aimed at efficiency and speed (Wood, 2003). To support this functional requirement, airports have become essentially machines for processing people, airplanes, automobiles, cargo and luggage (Goldberger, 2008). In this paradigm, the best and most functional airports are those in which planes, passengers and luggage spend as little time as possible: the less time spent on the ground, the more functional the airport. How is continual fluidity attained in an airport? Certainly not by what Baudelaire (1846) calls *mouvements brusques*, or 'the inherently human gestures of everyday life' (Berman, 1988). The chaotic orchestration of gestures and gazes taking places in the streets of Paris elicits poetry, but does not guarantee maximization of continual fluidity. Rather, fluidity in contemporary airports is attained by dynamics of mechanization, security, technology and meticulous control.

In airports, passengers are constantly watched and 'managed' by the use of surveillance cameras, assessment of biographical profiles, biometric and related technologies (Lyon, 2006). The use of such control mechanisms increases the alienation and the disembodiment of passengers from the physicality of space (Sola-Morales, 1997): airport security requires passengers to constantly prove their identity by matching their flesh bodies against their relevant digital bodies: 'image archives and credit card purchases, social security information, and travel itineraries' (Fuller, 2003). This blend of oppressive mechanization and heightened security systems contributes in shaping not only the social practices of moving passengers, but also the architecture of airports that has to adapt to the conceptual requirements of these systems. Such excessive need for efficiency renders airports much like the operating machines described by Michel Foucault (1995) in his metaphorical discourse around prisons. In airports, passengers are essentially data tagged with meta-information. Based on their metadata - business class, first class, gold card member, economy - they are compelled to dwell within specific areas of the airport - priority check-in, priority boarding, business lounge, ordinary waiting rooms².

"...a spatially and socially segmented world - people here, traffic there; work here, homes there; rich here; poor there." (Berman, 1988)

Peter Adey (2007) defines such act of positioning passengers through various and perhaps unconscious technological arrangements as "controlled dwelling". Controlled dwelling is further exacerbated by signage: 'an interface for social relations between humans and machines' (Fuller, 2002). By extended use of pictograms and inscriptions, airport signage creates a navigation system that links moving bodies to their presupposed position and path in space³. In whatever form (prescriptive, prohibitive, or informative), signage embodies the imperatives of global transit urging travelers to take active participation in the correct and fluid functioning of the airport machine.

Continual fluidity resonates with oppressive control and mechanization. Control and

² Besides controlling the movement of passengers in space, airports are increasing monitoring the temporal component of their stay. Adey (2007) notes that airports strive to increase dwell times by holding passengers in shopping areas and then letting them go at the suitable point, just in time to make their flights. Thus, passengers are compelled to shop, spend money and time, for as long as possible, but no longer. Much like in many urban areas, prolonged dwelling, or homelessness, has increasingly become a cause of concern for airport authorities in recent years (Harrell, March 20, 2008). In newer airports, public seating is reduced to the bare minimum to encourage patronage of cafés (Lockton, 2008), and departure gates are announced at the latest possible moment while passengers wait in the lounge. Also, the design of airport benches follows very much many urban designs that make it impossible to lie down by the use of multiple central armrests or the removal of the middle seat (Hopper, 1991).

³ Yet, the presupposed path proposed by signage does not always correspond with the desired one. As Koolhaas (2002) notes: "Where once signage promised to deliver you to where you wanted to be, it now obfuscates and entangles you in a thicket of cuteness that forces you past unwanted detours, turns you back when you're lost".

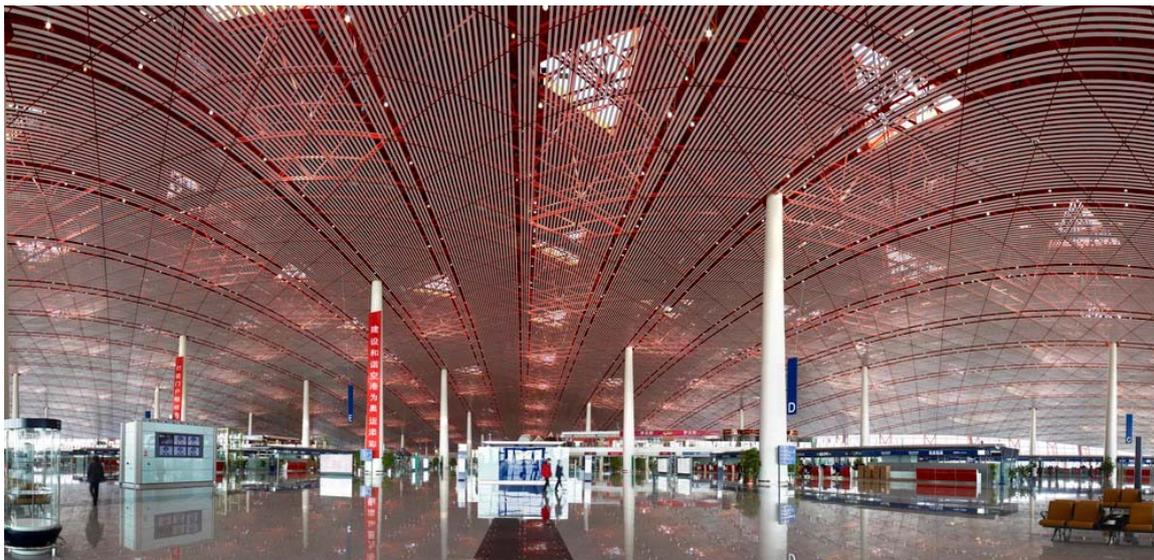
mechanization, in turn, reinforce the supermodern character of airports. How are fluidity and efficiency addressed by Foster in Beijing's Terminal 3 without incurring in an architecture of excessive control? Overall, PEK T3 was designed to accommodate an estimated 80 million passengers and 580,000 flights every year. With such a large amount of predicted traffic, it is obvious that the fluid motion of planes, passengers and luggage needs to be enforced by technology. For example, Beijing's Terminal 3 features a high-speed people mover that transports passengers between domestic and international terminals (the two ends of the triangles in Figure 1) in less than 2 minutes. Similarly, luggage moves fast upon forty miles of conveyor belts that can handle 20,000 pieces of luggage per hour. Yet, Foster's design does not solely address fluidity and efficiency by state-of-the-art technological innovations.

There are at least two architectural components of his design that are fundamentally innovative. First, rather than reducing and fragmenting available dwelling spaces, forcing passengers to move along narrow corridors and within specific spatial and technological arrangements, Foster blows up space, fitting the entire terminal under a single unifying roof (Figure 4). Second, Foster reduces signage to a minimum, embedding the navigation system into the color scheme of the terminal. The terminal's roof, visible from anywhere in the airport, is painted in 16 different color tones: from red at the entrance of the domestic terminal through to orange and yellow at the far end of the international terminal (Figure 5). The airport thus feels straightforward to navigate: it guides passengers around the terminal without excessive signage. These architectural components challenge earlier airport designs that regard humans' non-mechanistic, organic traits as obstacles to fluidity – only overcome through mechanisms of containment and control. Foster chooses to harness humanness rather than struggling to minimize it. In turn, his airport design not only improves fluidity, but also enhances the subjective experience of its passengers.

Figure 4. Cross section of PEK T3: a single unifying roof



Figure 5. PEK T3: The roof's color palette – 16 tones, from red to yellow



Source: Foster + Partners website

4. Intimacy/sameness

Although constantly striving for speed, motion and fluidity, airports also exert an immobilizing force on passengers. As soon as they are done dealing with security, check-in procedures, passengers rush into commercial stores to 'experience the reality of [their] momentary availability' (Augé, 1995). Airports seek to convey a sense of familiarity to their passengers by offering the most convenient setting in which to spend their time, and their money. Frequent travelers quickly become acquainted with airports' designs, their services, and their standardized modus operandi by developing habits and routines. Routine and familiarity, in turn, make travelers feel at home (Tuan, 1984). Yet, the type of home that passengers construct in their interplay with contemporary airports does not emerge from a "struggle" in a modern sense⁴. Passengers do not familiarize themselves with the uniqueness of airports; they do not develop an intimate, corporeal relationship with an airport's distinctive customary and sensorial traits. Rather, they acquaint themselves with the sameness of the airport atmosphere: lavatories, restaurants, cafes, Internet points, and news stands that all look the same. The airport is a supermodern home.

"Today my favorite kind of atmosphere is the airport atmosphere. [...] my favorite kind of food service, my favorite kind of bathrooms, my favorite peppermint Life Savers, my favorite kinds of entertainment [...] my favorite conveyor belts, my favorite graphics and colors, the best security checks, the best views, the best perfume shops, the best employees, the best optimism." (Warhol, 1977)

Worldwide globalization contributes to the flattening of the 'airport atmosphere' posited by Warhol. Fueled by a recent economic growth and the opening of its markets to the West, China, more than any other country, is certainly subject to such flattening effect. The infiltration of global networked mobilities into China's infrastructure is evident. The spirit in which the new Beijing terminal was designed and built, in light of the 2008 Olympic Games, fully reflects such dynamics. PEK T3 boasts 64 Western and Chinese restaurants, including a Burger King, many luxury shops and even a massage parlor (Goldberger, 2008). Expensive cappuccinos and high-end perfume stores have landed at the new Beijing terminal via the airways of globalization.

At PEK T3, the 'airport atmosphere' is present and tangible. Yet, Foster has attempted to situate Beijing's Terminal 3 in the urban fabric from which it arises, by blending into the design a number of elements that are typical of traditional Chinese art and architecture. The use of such elements has created a variety of critiques that have analyzed the success (or failure) of the marriage between different architectural styles. The website of Foster+Partners (2008), for example, describes the external edges of the building and the interior palette of red and yellows to be evocative of traditional Chinese temples and colors, respectively. Its golden roof has been noted to resonate with the Forbidden City. The triangular shape of the terminal's roof has also been compared to the shape of a dragon, a traditional Chinese symbol.

Drawing a parallel between the shape of the airport terminal and that of a traditional Chinese dragon, along with other similar speculations constructed a posteriori, are questionable, but unnecessary exaggerations. Rather, the decoration of the interior, with traditional Chinese sculptures and colors (Figure 6), certainly achieves much better the goal to bring locality and situatedness into the terminal's design without resulting in the "gross caricatures and kitsch" of adjusting universal design to local cultural conditions (Rowe, 1996). The fundamental point is that the ensemble of the components discussed thus far - the ample concourse spaces, the natural daylight, the simplicity of the navigation system, the Chinese lines and colors - makes Beijing's Terminal 3 a memorable airport, unique in its own way. PEK T3 is a memorable airport precisely for being *a memorable airport*. It is in such a space that

⁴ Marshall Berman (1988) defines modernism as a 'struggle to make ourselves at home in a constantly changing world'.

passengers can develop an aesthetic, sensorial and corporeal perception of familiarity. Passengers departing from or arriving to Beijing's Terminal 3 experience the airport in its unique nature, rather than a surrogate airport atmosphere. The uniqueness of T3's design attempts - and possibly succeeds - to break the inherently non-placeness of contemporary airports.

Figure 6. PEK T3: Interior decoration



Source: Foster + Partners website

5. Conclusion

In this article I have argued that in the design of Beijing's Terminal 3, Norman Foster has challenged the conventional architecture of airports, solving three crisis that are tightly coupled with their supermodern nature. The scenario presented in this article situates airports at the tensional intersection of spectatorship/solitude, fluidity/control and intimacy/sameness. In order to provide the spatial sensation of spectatorship, contemporary airports create new ordeals of solitude; in order to attain continual fluidity, oppressive control technologies are enforced; finally, in an attempt to make passengers feel comfortable, airports become uniform, aseptic, supermodern homes. At PEK T3, these tensions are relaxed. By reinventing the airport terminal in the image of train station concourses, Foster rediscovers the splendor of space awash with natural daylight, to resist the solitude of travel. The straightforward orientation system, embedded in the color palette of the roof, coupled with the spatial arrangement of domestic and international halls, provides natural fluidity without incurring the costs of oppressive signage and control. The use of traditional Chinese colors and lines is an attempt to situate the airport in its local cultural fabric, opposing the flattening effect of the globalized airport atmosphere.

Certainly, reinventing the airport at Beijing came at a cost. Not only in monetary terms - the airport cost over three billion dollars to be built - but also in terms of labor, public space and policy. The entire terminal structure covers an area of more than one million square meters and about 10,000 residents were evacuated to make way for Terminal 3. Also, in order to allow completion of such a large structure in a record five-year period, 40,000 construction workers physically relocated to the site (Design Build Network, 18 Jan 2008). Only in the fertile architectural setting of modern China could a project of this caliber have taken place. The pressing need to build a state-of-the-art airport in light of the Olympic Games, overshadowed possible issues linked to poor working conditions, environmental considerations and urban planning. In order to reinvent the airport as a place and rework airport design from scratch,

Foster had to operate a small-scale *tabula rasa*. In these terms, Beijing might be considered an experimental platform that will hopefully inspire a number of other projects that, like PEK T3, revive the nostalgic romance of air travel.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank anonymous reviewers of ACE, the Journal of Architecture, City and Environment and Dana Cuff of the Department of Architecture and Urban Design at the University of California, Los Angeles for their useful comments and feedback. I am also grateful to Chris Starr, for reading an earlier version of this manuscript, and to Cara Walsh, for many inspiring conversations about air travel.

The source for all illustrations and images used in this article (Figures 1-6) is the Foster + Partners website (<http://www.fosterandpartners.com/>), Project: Beijing Airport.

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