

Airports: Places or Non-places – who cares?



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This presentation will consider...

- Place and placelessness (Relph, 1976)
- Non-places (Augé, 1995)
- Open and hospitable spaces (Nouwen, 1975)
- Findings from a PhD study interviewing 120 airport customers about what is important to them in their airport experience
- Recommendations for airport management and opportunities for further research



Placelessness



Relph (1976, p. v) contrasts unique places like the Acropolis or Tintern Abbey with, “the convenient and practical environments of airports and petrol stations where standardisation dominates and uniqueness is subservient”.



“At the deepest levels there is an unselfconscious ... association with place. It is home, where your roots are, a centre of safety and security... a point of orientation” (Relph, 1976, p. 142)



Non-places

“If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place... supermodernity produces non-places, meaning spaces which are not themselves anthropological spaces... and which do not integrate the earlier places”

“A world where people are born in the clinic and die in hospital, where transit points and temporary abodes are proliferating under luxurious or inhuman conditions (hotel chains and squats, holiday clubs and refugee camps)”

(Augé, 1995, p. 63)



Liminal spaces: spaces in transition

“If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place...”



“Supermodernity produces non-places, meaning spaces which are not themselves anthropological spaces... and which do not integrate the earlier places” (Augé, 1995, p. 63)

Airport architecture

“Airports, railway stations, bridges, and some hypermarkets are imagined by the greatest architects as communal spaces able to give those who use them, travellers, customer or clients, a feeling that neither time nor beauty are absent from their history” (Augé, 1995, p. xxii)

“The triumph of airport architects in the last decade has been to create a unique vocabulary for terminal facilities that does two things well: they have provided a design vision that glorifies flight and created one that eases the transition from the earth to the air. Using elements that make cities great, they have also produced a lasting sense of place for what was once a totally transient environment” (Gottdiener, 2001, p. 80)

“Foster is popular because he supplies the look of innovation without the pain of actually changing anything; the establishment likes him because he lets it feel daring at minimal emotional expense; he is the purveyor of radical architecture for people who want no such thing”
(Moore, 2002 in McNeill, 2005, p. 512)



Security and place



“All aspects of air travel – the passengers, their baggage, the planes, and the crews – are encoded in various systems as data, and their physical journey traced and regulated by the transmission of data through virtual space” (Dodge & Kitchin, 2004, p. 198)

“... increase the panoptic and regulatory control of air travel” (Dodge & Kitchin, 2004, p. 210)

“... replete with the most up to date surveillance technologies to ‘find’ and sort the population into various categories – consumer, citizen, terrorist, and frequent flyer to name a few” (Sharma, 2009, p. 129)

‘Non-events’ happen in non-places and people practice ‘civil inattention’ (Pütz, 2012)

“All passengers, regardless of age, gender, or physical condition are treated as potential terrorists, guilty until proven innocent” (Gordon, 2008, p. 261)

Kevin Ireland (2007) *Airports and other wasted days*

Air rage

....

*But there's always one
that hits the top of the list
when it comes to hate.*

*Some stewpot of officiousness,
offensiveness, exasperation,
wrath and resentment.*

Airport blues

...

*Yet the most dispiriting part of it all
Is the last, oozy crawl along the corridor
To the tube that pours you into the hull.
It's the way you also make sausages.*



What should a good airport be...?



“Behind the ideas of totality and localized society there clearly lies another: that of consistency or transparency between culture, society and individual” (Augé, 1995, p. 40)

“These places have at least three characteristics in common. They want to be – people want them to be – places of identity, of relations and of history” (Augé, 1995, p. 43)

Findings on placeness

I like the birdsong as you arrive; it is appropriate to the country's economy – it is not ostentatious; when you arrive and walk outside you can see the sky – visitors from Hong Kong like that; nice to see the rugby match on; the whole décor is very kiwiana; I like the way the koru is depicted on everything – other airports are pretty bland; I like the South Pacific feel – it feels relaxed; you have artwork on the walls – you know where you are; we like the aesthetics of the airport; the airport is like New Zealand – pocket rocket; I really like the Māori carving; an airport needs to create an image

But...

Auckland airport is more like a mall than an airport; I would rather just get through; if you were not travelling you would not be here; time to kill; I am on my three-hour countdown; flying is just a means of getting where you want to be; it's an airport – they all have the same stuff in them; an airport is a functional processing operation

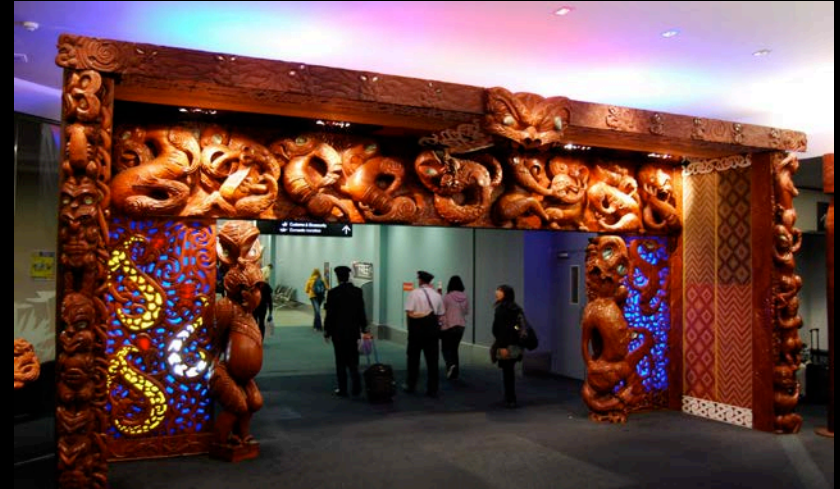


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Recommendations and further research

For management

- Welcoming people in
- Providing interpretation in multiple languages
- Giving people the opportunity to ask questions



For academics

- Tracking travellers to see what they actually do as opposed to what they say they do
- Observation instead on interviewing
- Talking to retailers and service providers
- Researching groups, frequent flyers, families, different nationalities and ethnicities, first-time flyers
- Netnography – blogs and consumer-generated material

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