

AIRPORTS IN GLOBALIZATION: SPECTACULARIZATION AND THEMATIZATION OF THE INFRASTRUCTURE AS A CITYMARKETING TOOL

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In the current era of mobility, airports have emerged as necessary infrastructure for any global city. Besides connecting places physically, they have a prominent role in the consolidation and maintenance of world cities and are symbolic sites linked to the leisure, where consumption acts in a dominant role. We want to focus on the second question, analyzing various aspects such as luxury stores and global brands that appear in them, and their morphology which has been acquired through the so-called modern architecture.

Before that, we affirm that this infrastructure has evolved in time, from complementary to essential. At present, the role played by airports in the context of globalization is crucial, not only as aviation infrastructure (complementary role), but mainly because they facilitate the connectivity required not to be isolated from the contemporary global links (defining role).

This does not mean that the airport concept has been reversed, that is, that creating an airport is capable of generating the birth of a city. However, we say that a big airport provides cities, now more than ever, with features that enable them to participate in worldwide dynamics. In addition, we consider that airports generate mechanisms that favour cities' urban competitiveness, which is then translated into a better position in urban rankings.

Thus, proximity or remoteness to this type of infrastructure, especially large ones, determines the suitable insertion of cities into the global context, validating the hypothesis according to which the airport and the city constitute a required symbiosis; that is, there is no global city, at present, if it does not have a large airport with a geographically diverse and intense connectivity and vice versa, since both elements interact, provide feedback and are mutually supporting.

From an empirical point of view, there are several works that have studied the airport and its territorial influence from a quantitative and economist perspective: 1) many indicators, including passengers, the number of aircrafts, the type of air traffic and cargo volume have been used to classify and quantify its importance within a global airport hierarchy, which in many cases has been used as an indicator to determine an urban hierarchy (Derudder and Witlox, 2005a, 2005b ; Bel and Fageda, 2008; Cordoba and Gago, 2010, 2012); 2) Other works focus on the economic impact of airports on territorial areas where they settle (Neufville and Yajima, 1972; Hakfoort et al, 2001); 3) other lines of research focus on the internal organization of these infrastructures.

Following this latter line of research, it should be noted that the organization of activities in airports, especially the larger ones, have gradually transformed with the emergence of new facilities, services and sources of income, which can be classified as “non aeronautical revenue” in some cases extending its business scope and economic impact beyond the physical limits of the infrastructure, not only functions related to air transport, but complementary and ancillary.

This is materialized in the expansion of business functions and the wide development of other related recreational activities, which aim to welcome and entertain passengers in the waiting times. Plus, those logistical services should be noted (rail, metro shuttles, buses, warehouses and hangars, etc.), which are designed to provide increased connectivity and productive activity in large cities. Thus, the business idea of modern airports goes beyond the movement of aircrafts and provides a variety of commercial and industrial opportunities which often extend beyond the airport fences.

Many new business parks are designed in order to stimulate the production and circulation of abstract labor (Cheng et al., 2004), feeding the renewal of cities and participating in the “knowledge economy” (Yigitcanlar et al., 2008). Thus, proximity to a major airport becomes a very important element in the resulting economies of scale.

As a result, from an academic point of view, there are new concepts that attempt to synthesize the increased physical dimension acquired by the airport and the multiplication of diverse activities: aerotropolis (Kasarda, 2001), airport city (Guller and Guller, 2003), airport corridor (Schaafsma, 2003), aviopolis (Fuller and Harley, 2004); airea (Schlaak, 2010) or AeroSCAPE (Krafczyk, 2012), among others.

The above ideas expressed the magnitude and the physical-functional characteristics that many airports have acquired in relation to mobility processes at global scale. These infrastructures are conceived as real cities, with internal links and shopping-leisure areas, constituting an outpost of globalization, a “window to the world”. All of the above highlights the importance of these infrastructures in globalization, since they ensure air connectivity to every city that wants to feel integrated into globalization and because of the socio-economic revitalization involved in the surrounding areas of this infrastructure.

However, the current analysis focuses on the symbolic connotations acquired by airports because we suspect they are keys to guarantee the representativeness, brand image and the symbolic value of cities. All of them help to position cities on the global map from a cultural perspective.

The extreme competitiveness between major cities in the world to acquire the adjective “global” (Storper, 1997; Porter, 2002; Camagni, 2003, Jessop, 2003; among others) is not

only focused on attracting multiplicity of economic flows but require particular forms of cultural capital (symbols, images) that emphasize the identity and cosmopolitan value of cities. This way, giving importance to the cultural production of space has become a way to attract and sustain human and economic flows.

Among other activities, it should be remarked the celebration of sporting events and festivals, and the construction of distinguished heritage structures like skyscrapers, museums and airports. These acts, clearly neoliberal, try to promote territorial competitiveness and develop an urban brand which emphasizes distinction, modernity and avant-garde position (Markusen and Shock, 2006; Fuentes, 2011; Canosa and Caballero García, 2012).

Consequently, original architecture has become one of the main mechanisms used in cities to compete globally (Jencks, 2006; Knox, 2012). Architects, many of them renowned, strive to achieve sophisticated airports with the aim of reinforcing the urban image of the city and the country in which they are located. Therefore, the previous transit areas without aesthetic entity are now replaced by prestigious “laboratories” of modern architecture, where unique materials, ultra-modern forms of complex architectural solution and eclectic inspirations become essential elements. Thus, shape, appearance and design of airports, besides being the first impression a visitor gets of the city, often are carefully prepared to project an attractive, modern, innovative, competitive, ultimately overall picture of the city, the region even the country where the infrastructure stands.

In turn, this factor and image representation has been developed in ancillary activities of the airport, where tax free shops project elements belonging to “all global” through the big brands that are a phenomenon also easily visible in any large mall. This way, the huge airport halls, waiting rooms and duty free facilities are also shopping centers or malls where the intangible cultural globalization patterns are staged through a dramatization of place (Disneyzation), but adapted to local peculiarities (glocalization).

It should be remembered that “global brands” and their icons have become a worldwide benchmark, being supported by transnational systems of production and marketing that enable their universal recognition, cosmopolitanism and distinction (Lipovetsky, 2006). Most of them belong to the sectors of fashion, catering and luxury.

Following the development of activities related to consumption, trade becomes a pretext and purpose for the leisure time of passengers. As a result of waiting times that passengers have to endure in these infrastructures, no wonder that airports have participated in this lucrative purchases, ostensibly increasing their profits, since users are considered as buyers rather than travelers (Geouens et al., 2004).

The duality that is set in global cities between homogenization and singling is also observed in airport infrastructure. In this sense, some authors interpret this fact as a dialectical relationship, linked to the consumer societies. Faced with the homogenization of the activities that occur in an airport (check-in area, passport control, global brands, so on), we are witnessing a phenomenon of particularization or “exaltation of the specificity of place” both inside and outside the infrastructure. Examples of this can be found in the airport buildings and the different activities they host.

Regarding the architecture, buildings having a similar functionality, shape and appearance regardless of geographic location begin to acquire certain identity that allow them to be singled out within the homogenizing power of the so-called “eclectic modern architecture”

(Markusen and Shock, 2006; Knox, 2012). Thus architectural criteria that refer to the indigenous culture (motifs, shapes and colors) are adopted, allowing the passenger to identify the building with the place, region or country where it is located.

Moreover, local identity is staged not only in airport stores that offer local products of the country, such as gastronomic specialties, souvenirs or local handicrafts, among others, but also in restaurants and shops, where other experiences are offered. These experiences emphasize fun, leisure and relaxation, and have revolutionized the “bland” waiting room. Examples of airport uniqueness are shown in this article.

The analysis highlights the importance of airports as vectors of contemporary mobility and applies, therefore, to be considered “places of globalization”. We believe that their significance goes beyond the movement of people and goods as it is commonly considered, since they have become symbols of the current way of life. Thus, it has been noted how non-aeronautical applications are increasingly present in these places, which have caused a change in philosophy, in their design and in the developed activities.