Global tourism growth: Remedy or ruin?
Rise of the aerotropolis

One index of the rapid growth of global tourism is the emergence the world over of the aerotropolis, i.e., a city built around a new or existing airport. Challenging the claim of its proponents that it is a growth engine, Rose Bridger says it is a disastrous model of development that must be opposed.

A DISTINCTIVE urban form is emerging all over the world. It’s called an ‘aerotropolis’, or ‘airport city’. Inverting the traditional model of airports being built to serve established cities, an aerotropolis is a city built around a new, or existing, airport. Shopping malls, hotels, restaurants, and cultural and leisure facilities are conveniently situated to capture the flow of air passengers. Manufacturing and assembly plants, logistics and distribution complexes are linked with the airport’s cargo facilities. The clustered development is designed to be aviation-dependent, to serve the growth of the airport by maximising passenger and cargo throughput.

Flying is the most carbon-intensive mode of transport, and aviation one of the fastest-growing sources of greenhouse gas emissions. Yet, even as the urgency of reducing emissions to prevent devastating climate change becomes ever more evident, a global wave of airport-centric infrastructure development threatens to lock us into an even higher level of fossil fuel dependency. Barely a day goes by without at least one announcement regarding planning, commencement or progress of an aerotropolis somewhere in the world.

The rise of the aerotropolis is also a threat to vast tracts of farmland or wildlife habitats as developers seek out greenfield (undeveloped) sites.

Non-aeronautical revenue

The secret of success of the world’s established major aerotropolis developments – including Schiphol, Frankfurt, Hong Kong, Incheon, Dallas/Fort Worth and Kuala Lumpur – is that the airport owns a large area of land surrounding it, and reaps ‘non-aeronautical revenue’ from commercial development upon it. Aerotropolis pioneers receive income streams from hotels, restaurants, and cultural and entertainment facilities such as exhibition centres extending beyond the airport boundary, capturing passenger expenditure. Office blocks, meeting rooms and conference centres ensure that business travellers spend money on airport land.

Airports also secure income from green space. Golf courses are ubiquitous, an easily replicable commercialised green space that is uniquely compatible with airport operations as the risk of bird strikes – collisions between birds and aircraft that can result in fatal accidents – is minimised, because the manicured monoculture of short grass is inhospitable to insects that attract birdlife. Notable golf courses on airport land include Nine Eagles at Hong Kong Airport, with an island green and night lighting, and Melbourne Airport Golf Club, known for its water features. Much of Kuala Lumpur Airport’s 100-square-kilometre land bank remains as oil palm plantations, providing a revenue stream from palm oil sales until construction of more lucrative developments, such as South-East Asia’s largest outlet shopping mall, which opened in May.

Airport income from land can include food and non-food crops, and the two largest aerotropolis developments in the US, Dallas/Fort Worth and Denver airports, profit from fossil fuel extraction. Dallas/Fort Worth Airport was one of the world’s first sites for fracking, extracting gas from shale wells on its 73 square kilometres of land. Income from fracking supplements conventional commercial development including shops and hotels. By July 2008, 60 gas wells were in production, but the entire aerotropolis site is carefully landscaped so that people travelling around it will not see a single well.

The aerotropolis uses non-aeronautical revenue to cross-subsidise charges to airlines, such as for landing and navigation. Thus, airlines are incentivised to use the airport, and a symbiotic relationship between growth of the airport and the development clustered around it is established. An aerotropolis may proclaim itself ‘self-sustaining’, but it achieves this status only by virtue of being gifted the land for revenue generation, which is a form of subsidy.
The ultimate all-inclusive

Holidays with an ever-increasing proportion of visitors’ time and money spent on airport-owned land herald the dawn of a tourism model that resembles the cruise ship industry, where, as well as accommodation, as much as possible is provided on board – meals, casinos, cinemas and other entertainment, and leisure facilities such as gyms. Passengers only leave the boat for excursions. Little economic benefit filters down to the local community, which nevertheless has to contend with hordes of visitors and high concentrations of health-damaging diesel pollution from plumes of dense black smoke belching out of the cruise ship funnel.

Air pollution from planes is invisible, but people living near airports and under takeoff and approach flight paths are exposed to high levels of aircraft noise, which is a causal factor in illnesses including heart conditions and strokes. And evidence is mounting that the cocktail of air pollutants emitted by aircraft causes serious health problems including respiratory conditions and certain types of cancer.

The intensive industrialisation that enables flight – most importantly the vast amounts of concrete and the aviation fuel supply chain all the way to airport fuel tanks that can hold millions of litres – is hidden. In the same vein, aerotropolis tourists are profoundly ignorant of the harsh realities of poverty, ecological destruction and dissent outside the tourism complex bubble. Visitors have no genuine learning or interaction with the local community, and are oblivious to what has been destroyed to gain quick and convenient access to a desirable destination. Their experience in the aerotropolis resembles airport passenger terminals – funnelled through retail, advertising and whimsical representations of local wildlife and culture. Separate from the aerotropolis facilities for tourists, devoid of the veneer of artworks and architectural flourishes maintaining a pretence of local specificity, there is a cargo complex, an area colonised by a rectilinear grid of identikit ugly grey rectangular sheds.

Exclusion

The title of the book Aerotropolis: The Way We’ll Live Next, by Professor John Kasarda, the most high-profile proponent of the aerotropolis, and Greg Lindsay, a journalist and speaker, implies futuristic settlements in which all of humankind will be welcome to participate. In reality, the aerotropolis is built for a privileged minority – a hypermobile elite of frequent flyers criss-crossing the globe for power-broking meetings in airport business premises, pampering themselves in luxurious hotels, and shopping in vast duty-free malls.

Aerotropolis projects are instant cities built to a standardised template, the very opposite of the incremental involvement of a multitude of civic organisations that characterises the history of the world’s enduring cultural centres. An aerotropolis has a high degree of autonomy over activity on land it owns, and local communities have little or no control over planning and governance. Construction often begins with erection of a fence to keep out the local population and eviction of people living within it. For example, the Nepalese government has allocated funds to fence off an 80-square-kilometre site for the planned second Kathmandu airport. Mainly forested land, it hosts a resident community of 6,000 people, mainly from the marginalised Tamang community, who face displacement and are concerned over how they will be rehabilitated.

Citizens were not even informed that Istanbul’s third airport is actually a vast aerotropolis. The 77-square-kilometre site, predominantly forested land and also lakes and farmland, is being systematically destroyed by swarms of bulldozers and earth-moving trucks. Campaigners opposing construction of the airport discovered the plans through research on investors and contractors. The emerging aerotropolis is a key component of a megaproject complex which also comprises a third bridge across the Bosphorus Strait, a canal alongside it, and multilane highways. All feed each other’s growth. Istanbul’s aerotropolis plan is inspired by the artificial concrete jungle that is Dubai, to the extent that it plans its own temple to hyperconsumerism – the world’s biggest duty-free shopping mall.

An aerotropolis requires heavy-handed, centralised planning and enforcement, so it is not surprising that the largest aerotropolis developments progress unimpeded in autocratic countries in the Middle East. Dubai’s new airport, Al Maktoum, is the starting point for Dubai World Central, on 140 square kilometres of land.

Like Istanbul’s third airport, Kilimanjaro Airport plans to emulate Dubai, claiming 110 square kilometres of land, long occupied by Maasai pastoralists, as its ‘estate’, triggering protests by 10,000 people threatened with loss of land and livelihood.

In India’s Andhra Pradesh state, massive protest by thousands of farmers facing dispossession for a 60-
square-kilometre aerotropolis at Bhogapuram led to reduction of the project area to 20 square kilometres. India’s first aerotropolis at Andal, in West Bengal, has been stalled by land disputes since 2009, but became operational in May. An ‘industrial township’ is planned around the airport. Citizens subsidise Andal aerotropolis – it is lavished with tax exemptions – but they have no control over it as it has been granted authority to sanction building and to collect taxes. It is becoming a mini-city with its own laws.

**Economic enclaves**

All aerotropolis projects claim to be ‘growth engines’ or ‘economic engines’, a panacea that will inevitably result in miraculous prosperity for the wider region. A more apt description of an aerotropolis, however, is ‘economic enclave’. The aviation industry already benefits from tax exemptions on aviation fuel for international flights and duty-free shopping. Typically, at least part of the aerotropolis site is designated as a ‘free trade zone’ (which might go under another name such as ‘special economic zone’) bringing a slew of tax exemptions and other subsidies, all geared to minimising the costs of international trade, accelerating corporate growth and maximising profits. Connective infrastructure, a road network encompassing ring roads and access roads, water and power supply, plus high-speed fibre-optic network, without which the aerotropolis could not operate, is typically publicly funded.

Claims that an aerotropolis galvanises the economy of the surrounding region are belied by the intention that these developments become ‘destinations in their own right’, with visitors spending as much time, and money, as possible on airport land. The aim is not to create wealth in the wider region, but to concentrate wealth on airport property. Facilities like malls and entertainment centres also capture trade from the resident population, and the result is to drain rather than boost the local economy. The relationship of an aerotropolis to its hinterland is essentially parasitic.

**Taking on the aerotropolis**

Aerotropolis plans might seem like pie in the sky, outlandish schemes that will never actually materialise. Common sense dictates that they cannot all achieve ambitions of becoming ‘global hubs’ or ‘global gateways’. But major aerotropolis schemes are among the biggest megaprojects being imposed by a fusion of government and corporate power. Gargantuan schemes progress on a piecemeal basis, the requisite physical and regulatory infrastructure slotting into place.

Aerotropolis plans with astro-nomical growth projections for passenger numbers and cargo volumes, such as Istanbul’s third airport’s projections for 150 million passengers per year and the new Mexico City airport’s masterplan for six runways, may well prove unfeasible. But it is certain that land is being allocated and there will likely be an airport and some degree of aeronautical activity and commercial development that utilises air services. Several local opposition campaigns suspect the aerotropolis is a pretext for a land grab, under which land is handed over to corporations for real estate speculation, for example Istanbul’s third airport, the planned Bhogapuram airport and Taoyuan Aerotropolis on 37 square kilometres of prime farmland.

Kasarda was right when he described the aerotropolis as ‘the physical incarnation of globalisation’. It is an urban form providing physical infrastructure, and a supportive regulatory framework, for turbocharging corporate globalisation. Whilst local opposition to aerotropolis projects is widespread, there is remarkably little critical analysis or opposition from NGOs or academia. An audacious move of global networked capitalism is slipping under the radar. The aerotropolis is a disastrous model of development, a neoliberal nightmare that must be vigorously opposed. A new organisation, the Global Anti-Aerotropolis Movement (GAAM), has been formed to bring together movements for social, economic and environmental justice to build resistance, research and raise awareness of the aerotropolis, support affected communities and build an international campaign community.

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Rose Bridger is a founder member of the Global Anti-Aerotropolis Movement (GAAM) and the author of *Plane Truth: Aviation’s Real Impact on People and the Environment*, published by Pluto Press.

**Source material**


Rose Bridger (2015), ‘Aerotropolis alert! Airport mega-projects driving environmental destruction worldwide’, *The Ecologist*