

# Airports of the Near Future

BY **FRED A. BERNSTEIN**

Changes afoot in airports around the world point to a sea change in how well they support air travelers. Even domestic terminals and their passengers are getting A-List treatment.

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Soon after opening its Gensler-designed Terminal 5 at New York's JFK Airport in 2008, JetBlue began augmenting its domestic service with Latin American and Caribbean routes. Rather than make those travelers clear customs next door, JetBlue opted to add a 170,000-square-foot international arrivals facility at JFK. Gensler knew that JetBlue didn't want its passengers to experience gloomy corridors leading to windowless rooms as they came off long flights. "The arrivals facility is filled with natural light," says Gensler's Ty Osbaugh. Its clean, dynamic look fits seamlessly with T5 and supports JetBlue's reputation for low-cost, high-value travel.

Meanwhile, on the West Coast, the Gensler-designed Terminal 2 at San Francisco International Airport celebrates its Bay Area roots. Completed in 2011, the terminal features shops and restaurants with authentic local connections. Passengers spend more money at T2 than at SFO's other domestic terminals. This led the airport to ask Gensler to help create an "identity statement" that articulates the requirements for a heightened passenger experience at every SFO terminal. That way, whenever the airport plans an expansion or upgrade, this proven and jointly developed approach will be built into the process. "We're taking the lessons of Terminal 2 and applying them across the board," says Gensler strategist Amy Kwok.

In both New York and San Francisco, Gensler is defining the airport of the future. Not the distant future—the province of science fiction writers—but the near future, where invention meshes with the needs of airline passengers, incorporating technology that is being invented even as the terminals are being designed.



The Star Alliance Lounge at Los Angeles International Airport takes advantage of LA's warm and sunny climate.



The South Terminal Redevelopment Program at Denver International Airport links it by transit to downtown Denver and creates a mixed-use destination at DIA anchored by a civic plaza.

Gensler is so keenly interested in moving airports forward that a team of architects and designers at the firm has launched a research project to study the airport of the near future. The initiative is supported through Gensler’s comprehensive research program, which includes 29 ongoing studies. The aviation research follows three threads, says Gensler’s Jim Stanislaski. First is improving the passenger experience, which involves creating customized journeys through airports. Second is increasing non-aviation revenue—a priority as more airport facilities are privatized. And third is the greening of the airport, to address issues such as on-site power generation and trash recycling.

One aspect of air travel that may change most in the near future is the arrival experience. “Until now, we’ve put a lot of effort into passenger departures,” says Osbaugh. “That’s going to change in the future, when we’ll put more emphasis on arrivals.” Revenue is one factor that’s driving the change. After long competing on the basis of price, airlines are now battling for passengers based on quality of customer service, says Bill Hooper, co-leader of Gensler’s global aviation practice. Airlines that improve the ease and comfort of the arrival experience gain a competitive advantage, he says.

Fortunately, large ticketing halls, which occupy the prime real estate in airport terminals, are much less essential. “Most people buy their tickets online,” says Stanislaski. As a result, airports can be reconfigured to alter the relative importance of functions like baggage claim that once were relegated to cramped sublevels. Gensler is working currently with airline clients on terminal rehabs at two different airports in the US. Both carve out sections of the ticketing hall to bring daylight into baggage claim areas below.



Terminal 2 at Incheon International Airport gives travelers to South Korea a variety of places to relax.



Incheon T2’s Great Hall helps passengers anticipate their next destinations. T2 is a project of the HMGY consortium with Gensler as collaborating design architect.

Just as design can help by making airport arrival more appealing, so too can technology. One near-future possibility is real-time tracking of luggage, with smartphone apps that identify the precise location of passenger bags. Technology will also transform the departure experience. “Soon you’ll check bags yourself and use self-boarding technology,” Stanislaski says. “At security, you’ll walk through and be scanned from all directions, without having to remove jackets, belts, or shoes.” But things won’t improve at the same rate for all passengers. Airlines will offer an easier journey from curb to cabin to its elite travelers first, says Gensler’s Keith Thompson. “We’re seeing stratification in the passenger experience, with extraordinary catering to air travelers in the elite and full-fare categories.”

Even waiting will get a high-tech upgrade. Airports will use geofencing—software that enables businesses to target customers with messages based on their proximity—to suggest



things to do. Knowing where they have to be and when, with smartphones issuing reminders, will free up passengers to make better use of their time before and between flights.

Some design trends are unrelated to commerce. Kwok says SFO, for example, is committed to improving the passenger experience by duplicating spaces like the “recompose zone” found in Terminal 2. “After passing through the stress of security,” Kwok points out, “there should be an area where you can gather yourself in comfortable seating with access to natural light, restrooms, and hydration stations.”

While some Gensler designers are improving airport amenities, others are envisioning entirely new airports, such as London Britannia Airport, a Thames River alternative to Heathrow. Proposed by Gensler, the airport would help London solve capacity overload problems at its other airports. It could also be designed to maximize efficiency, eschewing conventional gates in favor of shuttling passengers to and from aircraft in airline-branded capsules, says Chris Johnson of Gensler London. The capsule approach would reduce the distances passengers have to walk and eliminate boarding bottlenecks.

Gensler is helping clients envision airports in more remote locations than the Thames, including several cities in North Africa. Developers are interested in building “airports as destinations” that incorporate schools, hospitals, and shopping malls.

More and more, airports are being designed or expanded as self-contained urban centers. A version of the airport city now taking shape is Denver International Airport, which is being transformed into a quasi city center with a hotel and conference center. The new hotel will also house a transportation hub, with links to downtown Denver via commuter rail.

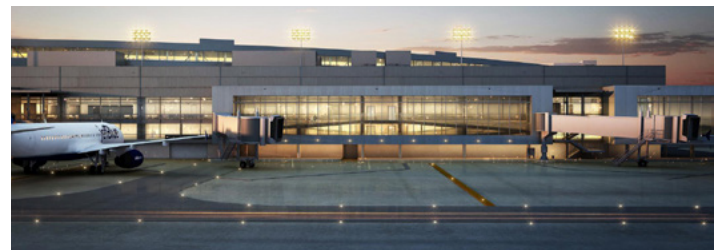
South Korea’s Incheon Airport reflects another trend that Gensler’s aviation team is researching: the greening of airports. The new Terminal 2, designed by Gensler, integrates state-of-the-art systems that will make it a model of sustainability. The terminal won’t just be green, it will also feel like an extension of nature, thanks to features such as two large parks, a rushing brook, and habitats for birds and butterflies.

Likewise, at Chennai International Airport in India, new domestic and international terminals feature enclosed glass bridges over tropical gardens filled with palm trees, orchids, and other indigenous plants. The experience is meant to feel restorative. Chennai’s new terminals elevate the passenger experience, a hallmark of Gensler’s approach to air travel. That emphasis—along with other issues being studied by



Gensler/Michael Townsend

The yoga room at SFO’s Terminal 2 shows how wellness is now part of the passenger experience.



JetBlue’s new international arrivals facility at JFK’s Terminal 5 is an expansive, light-filled space.



The expansion of India’s Chennai International Airport features garden views from the new domestic and international terminals.

the research team—generates new ideas that are reshaping the airport of the future. It’s a future that’s coming soon.

**Fred A. Bernstein** writes for the *New York Times*, *Architectural Record*, and other publications.

 **Bill Hooper** tells how future airports will move beyond takeoffs and landings. Visit [dialogue.gensler.com/v/24](https://dialogue.gensler.com/v/24)