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Airport Facelifts

Airports around the world are making modifications to runways, terminals, lounges, hangars and other facilities to meet the changing needs of their airline customers.

■ By Lauren Lovelady | Ascend Staff



Photo by José Valero

Much like the airlines that utilize their facilities and drive their business, airports today are finding it necessary to continually rethink and retool operations to lower costs and improve efficiency as well as customer service. Whether it's enlarging existing runways or adding new ones, building terminals, upgrading facilities and technology, streamlining security procedures, or implementing new concepts, these changes are needed to help airports better support their airline partners, improve customer service, foster business development in the communities they serve and strengthen their operations to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

Facilities

Despite setbacks in the airline industry in recent years, the demand for air travel continues to grow. In response to this growth, airports are transforming their physical infrastructures to efficiently accommodate more passengers and flights. Runway extensions and expansions now enable major carriers with larger aircraft to serve regional airports once restricted by smaller runways and allow international airports to handle additional capacity. At the same time, the emphasis on frequent, short-haul service has meant an upsurge in the number of small aircraft and the need for rapid turnarounds. For some airports, building additional runways is

the only answer. Spain's busiest airport, Madrid Barajas International Airport, plans to open two new runways, as well as an additional terminal, this year. Currently, the airport connects more than 25 million passengers a year from the country's capital city to hundreds of destinations worldwide, and the expansion initiative will double its capacity. New runways are also under construction in major cities, such as St. Louis, Missouri; Minneapolis, Minnesota; Seattle-Tacoma, Washington; Boston, Massachusetts; Atlanta, Georgia; and Barcelona, Spain.

The need to more efficiently and proficiently handle increasing passenger traffic also



necessitates that airports renovate and upgrade terminal facilities to meet the demands of today's more sophisticated travelers. Upscale retail stores and shopping mall environments, as well as food courts featuring well-known franchises, are designed to attract travelers who find themselves spending an increasing amount of time in airports. Often inter- or intra-terminal transportation needs to be improved or added, and floor spaces need to be redesigned to allow for the latest in customer and airline technology.

While it's usually more cost effective to renovate and upgrade existing facilities than to construct new ones, at times, the best solution for increased demand and outdated terminals is to break ground. This was the case for the Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport, which opened its first new terminal this summer since the airport's initial opening in 1974. International Terminal D is more than twice as large as any of the airport's other four terminals and is its most customer friendly and technologically advanced. All international flights arrive and depart from the terminal, which offers passengers an unprecedented choice of 49 internationally and locally renowned dining,

retail and service options. Signs posted throughout the facility are written in multiple languages accompanied by internationally recognized symbols. Even the parking garage is geared for customer convenience, with signs letting drivers know how many parking spaces are available on each level. The information is updated throughout the day. The new terminal is part of a US\$2.7 billion, five-year capital development program at D/FW, which is expected to pump US\$34 billion into the local economy and generate 77,000 new jobs during the next 15 years.

The continued growth of airline alliances is also impacting terminal layouts and construction. With a goal of providing seamless service, alliance partners find it's not only attractive but necessary that their ticket counters, gates and baggage service be conveniently located for their passengers. In response, airports are realizing the benefits of placing alliance partners' operations in close proximity and, in some cases, allocating them to a single, jointly operated terminal. Earlier this year, all Star Alliance members with operations in Nagoya, Japan, moved from Tokyo Narita Airport to the new

single-terminal Central Japan International Airport (Centrair). Alliance members are located in the same part of the terminal, and they share check-in counters and ticketing facilities. As result, the average minimum connection time between international and domestic flights has been reduced to one hour as opposed to up to two hours at Narita, where many passengers had to change terminals to connect to other alliance partners' flights.

In addition, some airport authorities are now focusing on transforming not only physical facilities but airspace as well, utilizing simultaneous approach capabilities in tandem with global positioning systems and reduced aircraft separation minimums.

Technology

For travelers, customer service equals efficiency. For airlines, as well as airports, efficiency means reducing costs and increasing reliability. After all, a single lost bag can ruin a passenger's travel experience and consume manpower and revenues. By employing cutting-edge technology, airports and airlines can improve their operations and give passengers more



Photos by Scott Hunt

Above and right: The new US\$1.2 billion Terminal D at Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport opened July 23. The 2-million-square-foot facility contains room for 40 gates, 67 retail and restaurant venues, and a 298-room hotel. The facility, which will house six international airlines flying to 38 destinations around the world, is also equipped with Wi-Fi Internet access and includes a US\$6 million art program.

Left: The Madrid Barajas International Airport will open two new runways and an additional terminal to help effectively accommodate the more than 25 million passengers who connect through Spain's capital city. The new 63-gate facility is part of an expansion program that also includes associated taxiways and aprons and a people mover to connect the new terminal with satellite facilities.



Photo courtesy of Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport

control over their travel experiences.

In recent years, self-service check-in kiosks have become commonplace in many airports worldwide. Some kiosks allow check in for a single airline while others are shared by multiple carriers. Either way, they help airlines reduce their labor costs while processing the same or more passengers per hour.

The typical ticket counter is a source of frustration for many travelers, especially frequent flyers. Stepping into the airport terminal, a traveler is usually confronted by three or four lines with 10 to 25 people waiting in each. It is much more inviting to see a group of interactive, touch-screen check-in kiosks with only a single person utilizing each station or perhaps open stations. By swiping a card and answering a few simple questions, travelers can be on their way in a matter of minutes. Some self-service check-in kiosks are now offering upgrade opportunities from coach to business class.

Realizing passengers' desire to remain in touch with and informed about the world while still on the go, airports are redesigning gates with areas for high-speed wireless Internet service access. In the future, airlines may have opportunities to "bundle" services, providing passengers wireless connections for a small fee in the gate area prior to departure using their ticket confirmation numbers as passwords.

To help minimize passenger and aircraft congestion at gates, more and more airlines and airport managers are utilizing sophisticated gate management and planning technology to identify and assign flights to available gates. These tools help facilitate quick aircraft turnarounds, resulting in increased opportunities for on-time arrivals and departures on typical operational days.

In the area of baggage management, airports and their airline partners are experimenting with radio frequency identification, or RFID, technology to track bags. According to International Air Transport Association estimates, a major airline may handle up to 70 million pieces of baggage a year, and approximately 0.7 percent of those bags are mishandled. RFID technology is expected to reduce that number by 30 percent to 40 percent. The bottom line for airports and airlines is reduced baggage recovery costs and reallocation of employees to more important tasks. For travelers, more reliable baggage handling equals improved customer service.

Another potential application for RFID technology involves the service equipment within airport terminals. Wheelchairs, catering trolleys and baggage carts are often randomly moved throughout terminals as flights arrive and depart. With RFID technology in place, needed equipment could be promptly identified and relocated.

Security

Security is and, at least in the foreseeable future, will continue to be a hot topic for the

travel industry. It is generally viewed by airport and airline personnel, as well as passengers, as a complex, time-consuming and costly — yet necessary — part of today's travel experience. Efforts to streamline the security process for all parties while maintaining the highest standards are underway, including a Registered Traveler Program at Florida's Orlando International Airport. To participate in the program, travelers pay US\$80 annually for a card that guarantees an exclusive security line at the airport and no secondary security checks. Obtaining a card requires travelers to submit for clearance their iris scans, fingerprints and digital photo to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Similar systems are now in place in some European airports and a handful of other U.S. airports.

HIGHLIGHT

... increasing passenger traffic also necessitates that airports renovate and upgrade terminal facilities to meet the demands of today's more sophisticated travelers.

However, such programs are not without controversy as airlines, airports and governments negotiate how to pay for their enormous costs; consumer advocates protest the increasing intrusion into citizens' private information; and tough questions still exist about enforcement. In the end, everyone concerned is looking for faster and more cost-effective ways to identify threatening versus non-threatening passengers.

New Concepts

Realizing security is an area with no room for compromise, airports are looking into new ideas for simplifying other aspects of air travel and moving passengers through their facilities quickly. One such idea — a low-cost carrier terminal — was recently introduced by the Civil Aviation Authority of Singapore. Currently under construction, the terminal will not employ jet bridges. Instead, passengers will walk short distances on the tarmac to and from

the aircraft, saving time and money. Snack vendors and some retail shops will be available to passengers in a restricted area, where they will wait until boarding calls are made for their flights. Limited seating will be provided for less-mobile passengers. All of this will be provided in a pleasant, efficient environment that will be cost effective for both the airport and airlines to operate. In turn, air travel becomes more convenient and even affordable to an increasing portion of the population.

For some passengers, though, the cost of air travel is only part of the challenge. As the average age of the population rises worldwide, airports are looking for better ways to ease the travel experience for passengers with disabilities — ideas that go beyond the scope of those required by governments and airport authorities. With the help of a focus group, designers of D/FW's new Terminal D conceived and implemented a number of improvements. Differing floor textures help visually impaired travelers locate where they are in the terminal. Special relief areas in terminals are designed to allow service animals to take a quick break after long flights. Security barriers in place to protect the terminal also define the curb for travelers with limited vision, and curbless crosswalks eliminate the need for disabled passengers to navigate slopes.

Airports of the 21st century will also have to transform operations and facilities to accommodate new, modern aircraft, including the Airbus A380. The 555-seat double-deck aircraft will be the largest in the world when it enters service next year. It features reduced noise and emissions levels and wider aisles and seats for passenger comfort, but it also requires more space on runways and tarmacs than aircraft currently in service. To retain and increase their business, many airports will undoubtedly want to make the changes necessary to support the operation of these aircraft.

Change to any degree in any area is not without challenges. As populations and communities grow, very few airports remain isolated "outside of town." And as air travel demand increases and airports expand in response, inevitably concerns about increased noise pollution, vehicle traffic and possibly taxes will arise. However, more communities than ever are recognizing that airports and airlines play vital roles in their economic development. Reliable air service brings new ventures, bolsters existing businesses and drives job growth. In turn, demand for air service continues to grow. In the end, the advantages often outweigh the disadvantages, especially when airports, airlines and communities work together to bring about these transformations. ■

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