

You Must Buy before You Can Fly

The Airport Malls

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The following maps are the result of a long-term observation process that I made in many airports mainly in Europe. At the same time they represent a symbol.

The Observation Process

The maps show how the general public, and specifically the passengers, are moving in a space carefully designed by an "invisible" force. By this I mean people in power and in charge to organize the logistics and flux of things, planes, cars and people inside public buildings. The general public usually knows little about it unless it would implement a long-term research project with observations on these spaces in order to evaluate the changes. The collection of maps (that could well be an animated map) are meant to visualize an invisible process: Bit by bit the passengers' free will and freedom of movement is taken away in order to make them more willing to spend money for goods, such as expensive food and drinks (for the anecdote: In many airports, after the security check, you can find anything – millions of bottles of vodka or cigarettes – but not the shadow of a diaper if by bad luck you forgot them at home and you travel with two small kids). The maps also show the progressive reduction of the "possible public space" for the public. This space will finally force the public to move into a fully organized commercial environment. Eventually, I want to propose a methodology of observation of spaces and territories to be used by people, the public, passengers, users, in order to "reclaim the streets" and, in this case, to reclaim the fair use of their public spaces.

This requires a pretty strict and disciplined approach, which can be considered in two phases.

The first phase is purely a research initiative. Observing and monitoring a location and its evolution is a multi-parametric analysis that needs to envisage both time (vertical vision) and space (horizontal vision). A location changes with time, at a more or less fast speed, and gets organized differently according to the "need" we suppose the "sponsors" have identified as necessary. This means that the observation process is to be considered an initiative of deconstruction: It is all about evaluating the changes along the observed period and detecting the hidden intentions that lie behind these changes (why have they done this, changed that, placed this barrier here instead of there, etc.). The observation process also has to be backed up with a set of interviews with the key actors responsible for the infrastructure: architects, shop managers, airport authority and state officials responsible for technical aspects. All these actors should be asked the same fundamental questions so that the answers can be compared and interpreted. The second part of the interview is freer and more flexible and relates more to the individual (feelings, personal opinion, area of competence, wishes, interests, discomfort, etc.).

When this research phase is done and analyzed, the second phase consists of live tests done on actors and spectators and experimenting with the results: It consists of invading the field with actions to resist the process of public space grabbing, for example. Another important part is publicizing the issue to the media with maps and narratives in order to alert passengers and to launch "participative mapping projects" with them. This could challenge the involvement and impact of the main actors on people, airline

companies, social evolution, consumption society, and ultimately the environment and climate.

The proposed methodology is rather typical for a "radical cartography" approach to a phenomenon. First: data collection, visualization and analyses, finding gaps as "abnormal" situations; second: direct action in the field, on the space itself, involving the actors and spectators live in an "act of resistance". In other words, a process of linking information and action, or "providing the knowledge" and "implementing the resistance".

The Symbol

At the end, these maps describe a process that more and more deprives the public of freedom of movement while reinforcing control and surveillance. This is being imposed on society without consent. A sort of "rape" of our freedom. I wanted to cartographically ring a bell...

Everywhere – in Post Offices, Stations, Airports and Streets – Public Space Is Being Privatized and Pedestrians Are Being Diverted through Commercial Spaces

A few years ago I was at the recently renovated Kristiansand-Kjevik airport in Norway. My flight was delayed, so I looked around for a place where I could have a drink with the people who had come to see me off. But the café was on the other side of the security control. An hour went by with no plane, no news – and no information desk. I would have had to go to the boarding gates in order to find out what was happening, but the door that used to lead to the gates was closed. So I asked a security guard at the entrance to the duty-free shop how to reach them. He said I would have to go through the shop. I explained I was just going to find out what was happening, expecting I would be able to come back the same way. He said that would not be possible: If I went through the shop, I would have to go through customs again.

Instead of going directly down a public corridor to the gates, I had to walk through a shop filled with toys, perfumes, chocolates and bottles of gin. The terminal used to be open-plan but was now divided into three sections, with access from one to the next strictly controlled.

The next month, I found out on the tarmac that my two-and-a-half year old son had filled his pockets with packets of sweets and a bottle of Chanel N° 5 he had picked up in the duty-free shop that all travellers had to pass through to get to the boarding gates.

These incidents were the inspiration behind the Duty-Free Shop Project and investigating the novel strategies for the organization of space and foot traffic which are changing the nature and purpose of public spaces. At European airports I observed movements, objects, attitudes of airport staff, the decor, lighting, design and signage, and drew maps to explain the changes and their significance.

Those responsible for the changes are the airport authorities, the transport ministries and the companies that manage the commercial spaces and airport services. It's a theatrical production: They cast and train the stars and the extras: security guards, duty-free shop staff, airline ground staff, customs officials, police – and travellers; they collaborate on the interior layout of the terminals; they decide on the decor, the lighting and fields of vision. Which

areas should be "open" and which "closed"? Everything is designed to bring passengers to the point where they are ready to buy.

The airport authorities deny any involvement in the changes. Jo Kjønner, former head of media relations at Oslo Airport said, "The shop managers decide their selling strategies individually" (while being unable to look me in the eye), but the stores make money and the airport authorities get a cut.

Retail Therapy after the Ordeal

The vulnerability of civil aviation became clear in the 1950s, after two aircraft had been blown up over North America by bombs in their baggage holds, in 1949 and 1955 (the bombers' motives were marital infidelity and life insurance fraud). However, for nearly half a century longer, airports were relatively open places where families came for an exciting day out, to stare at VIP passengers and daydream in front of posters advertising exotic destinations.

The bombings of UTA (Union des Transports Aériens) flight 772 in 1988 and Pan American Airlines flight 103 in 1989 led to stronger surveillance and security systems, but the 9/11 attacks marked a new era: Air travel suffered a slump that lasted until 2005, and airlines as well as airport authorities faced an unprecedented crisis.

Many airports and airlines initially received massive public subsidies, especially in North America, but airports were soon told to cover their own running costs. This was all the more difficult, because the taxes on air tickets had been significantly reduced, or even temporarily waived, in order to stimulate growth. Airport management was outsourced to private, public or mixed public-private enterprises.

The new managements' solution was to turn airports into commercial spaces. Some became little towns, complete with supermarkets, duty-free shops, parking garages, hotels, business and conference centres. The airports took a cut based on turnover (the figures are not published).

After 9/11 the airports also revised their approach to surveillance and security. The "outside world" is now strictly separated from the "inside world", and crossing from one to the other means being scanned, searched, patted down and dispossessed of any object that presents a "threat" (including a bottle of mineral water).

Airports have become hyper-commercialized and hyper-securitized spaces, in which travellers are held prisoner. Management companies have reorganized the flow of passengers through terminals, turning them into laboratories in which subtle spatial modifications are tested. The goal seems to be to determine how to make the most money from passengers, who are manipulated and channelled through specially designed zones filled with tempting merchandise.

Everything in the "inside" space is regulated, from the freedom to gather in groups to photography. No complaints or choices of route are allowed. It is a capitalist and monopolistic economy, in which just a few multi-nationals run hundreds of shops, restaurants, bars and airline ground services, contracted out to local operators. The

right to information is denied: Notices mentioning "passenger rights" are placed where they are least visible, in dark corners or behind pillars. Advertising based on themes such as dreams, travel and sex distracts attention from the way public space has been hijacked.

The first step is to disorientate passengers. Security guards and duty-free shop staff wear almost identical uniforms. Shop staff are responsible for keeping order in and around the shops; security guards act as touts for the shops. At Kristiansand-Kjøvik, a guard pointed with authority to one of the two doors behind him, so nearly all the passengers off a flight from Copenhagen were diverted into the duty-free shop. Nobody saw the door next to it, which leads directly to the baggage claim area.

Directed to the Shops

The signage uses the same graphic codes to direct passengers to the boarding gates and to advertise the shops, so passengers think they are getting directional information, but they are actually reading an advertisement. They think they are setting off on their journey, only to end up in the shops. At London's Gatwick Airport, the main toilets are inside the duty-free shop and are treated as a customer amenity, not a public resource. To board a plane at Brussels, passengers must pass through shops – enforced retail therapy after the ordeals of check-in and security control.

Less than a decade ago, airport commercial spaces, where everything has a price tag, were separate from free public spaces, in which everything is free. Today these spaces have merged, and in London, Oslo, Bergen and Milan, "free" public corridors have simply disappeared. The two spaces sometimes exist side by side: the carefully designed commercial world, brightly lit, filled with merchandise, and with colour schemes dominated by brilliant white, bright yellow and red; the public spaces, where passengers may sit down – if they can find a seat, often a greenish grey. In airports such as Copenhagen, many seats have been removed to make room for restaurants and shops. These uncomfortable zones offer no frills: They are not seen as useful.

These changes affect only a few (only 10-15% of Europeans fly regularly), but they have prefigured what is now happening in other formerly public spaces, including rail and underground stations, whole streets and town centres. Paris' Saint-Lazare station has become a shopping centre; at Bodø, in central Norway, the whole of the main street has been privatised.

This text has been written inside the Oslo Airport. While travelling on one day (I often travel through this airport), I realized that the public corridor leading to the embarking gates had been closed. This poem is evocating the slow but powerful changes going on in our common public spaces. Some invisible people are strategically organizing this space in which we evaluate, walk, dream or which we use just to go from one place to another. They are – in a way – forcing you into environments you would not enter spontaneously on your own, and I felt this was frightening. This poem aims to remain a symbol of a very specific form of a growing totalitarianism: being forced to consume.

Translation by Charles Goulden

An airport is a zombie zone between two worlds.

Not Never Never Land.

Just Nowhere.

You get temporary citizenship
between check-in and boarding.

They lure and bully you into a dreamscape
of corridors and walkways, and the local paradox
between tightly closed security and wide-open shops.

They confuse you, too.

Everything is signposted and labelled,
but you still don't know where you are;
everything is there to tempt you, luxury goods and foods,
but you feel totally deprived, and trapped.

The retail spaces are seductive,
yet you didn't choose to shop here.

You didn't choose to be here.

They are controlling you, guiding you, harassing you:
Will you be able to resist a purchase?

≡ OSLO GARDERMOEN ≡

AFTER THE HUSTLE AND BUSTLE OF THE OUTSIDE WORLD, IT HAD GOOD TO REST IN THE CALM AND SILENCE OF THE COMFORTABLE, VILLA-MODERN DEPARTURE LOUNGE



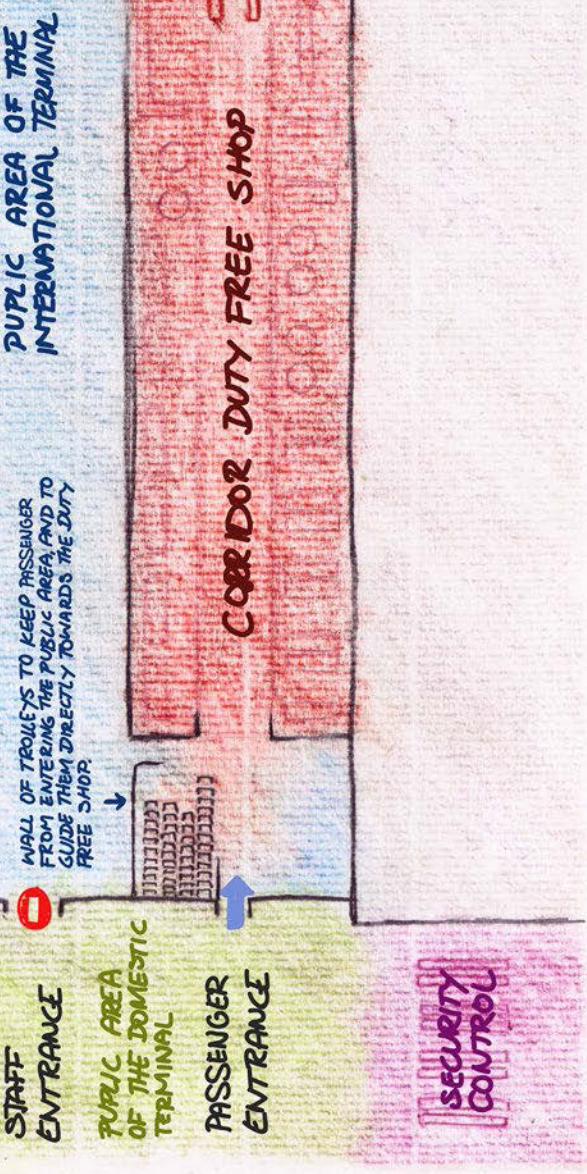
2005

THEY ALSO INVENTED A WALL OF TROLLEYS. SOMEWHERE, THEY HAD TO FIND A PLACE FOR IT

2006

I SEE! THE AIRPORT MANAGER WAS PROUD OF HIS CONCEPT: A CORRIDOR-SHOP WHERE EVERYTHING CAN BE GRABBED JUST BY REACHING OUT LEFT OR RIGHT





2007

"A PUBLIC CORRIDOR?"
SAID THE AIRPORT SPOKESMAN
"ALL RIGHT, IF YOU MUST"

YOU HAVE A CHOICE: SQUEEZE PAST THE TROLLEYS, OR RUN THE GAUNTLET OF CIGARETTE CARTOONS, WARNING OF A SLOW AND PAINFUL DEATH

