

ASIA 4/29/2016 @ 6:19PM | 2,648 views

Asia Looks To Airport Cities For 'Competitive Success'

Our largest and most important population and economic centers were once centered around seaports, then, successively, around river ports, railroad junctions, and highways. It's called transport-oriented development, and its fifth wave may prove to be aviation. In the 21st century, some of our most vibrant new urban developments are being built around hub airports, and some countries are hedging big bets that this is the way of the future.

“Airports will shape business location and urban development in the 21st century as much as highways did in the 20th century, railroads in the 19th, and seaports in the 18th,” declared John Kasarda, the coauthor of *Aerotropolis: The Way We'll Live Next* and an adviser to many airport-centered development projects around the world.



The skyline of the Songdo aerotropolis in South Korea.

The new economic models that globalization and the internet have created mean that people and products need to be shipped in increasing quantities to more places faster and more efficiently, and aviation is increasingly being used to fill this demand. Over one-third of total global trade value is now being shipped by air.

“For business, being close to an airport is certainly a matter of convenience, even if the business does not use air cargo services frequently and uses it only for business trips,” said Matthias Bauer, the associate director of urban design at Atkins Asia Pacific. “Nonetheless, any business will benefit from airport related infrastructure, namely highways and expressways, metro or

light rail links, modern utilities, and so on.”

Although, according to Kasarda, there is an inherent difference between how Asian and Western countries view and engage their airports.

“What I learned in Asia, in China in particular,” he began, “is the philosophical difference between the way that the US and Europe use their airports and the way the Middle East and Asia use their airports. We view them increasingly as nuisances and environmental threats, they view them as critical business infrastructure to be leveraged for competitive success.”

Rather than viewing the airport as something pernicious, loud, and polluting which should be relegated to the extreme fringes metropolitan areas, many cities in Asia are increasingly embracing the airport as a catalyst for future economic competitiveness — and some are even building entire metropolitan networks up around them.

China is currently in the process of building more than 60 new airports across the country, some of which are destined to be developed as full-fledged aerotropolises. In the six years since development began on the Zhengzhou Airport Economic Zone (ZAEZ) it is already China’s #2 FTZ, contributing of \$5.8 billion in imports and exports each year. It is also the world’s single largest site for smartphone production, with 80% of all iPhones being manufactured there. While Shanghai’s Hongqiao area has come together as a functioning aerotropolis, with a busy airport, one of the largest high-speed rail stations in the world, a budding central business district, as well as a large exhibition and convention center, which are all in direct proximity of each other and interconnected by metro line 2.

“China recognizes that these airports are essential to their competitiveness, to their export economy,” Kasarda stated.

Beyond China, this urbanization trend is being spread across Asia. South Korea’s Songdo International Business District is a cutting edge, \$40 billion new city built on reclaimed land right next to Incheon airport which has a financial area full of landmark skyscrapers and high-end residential areas. While Dubai, Singapore, Hong Kong, Kuala Lumpur, Taoyuan (Taiwan), and Clark airport in the Philippines are all developing their airport zones to be diverse economic catalysts rather than mere logistical hubs.

“In some ways, it shows us how old the cities in the West are; that many European cities, for example, are built around ports,” began Austin Williams, an urban design professor at Jiaotong-Liverpool University in China. “Many European cities were transformed by retrofitting railways into the urban infrastructure, plowing railways into the middle of Paris, London, Berlin, etc. Sadly, the airport doesn’t really allow for retrofit urbanism – you cannot just clear off central London and land jets.”

Like how cities in the United States during the 19th century were able grow up with its railways, rather than having to retrofit them as in Europe, many Asian countries are currently in the process of rampant urbanization, and are

able to build some of their new cities, districts, and economic zones from the ground up around hub airports.

“China, like other developing economies, has the unique opportunity to take advantage of the possibilities that flying to the center brings,” Austin Williams explained. “It can build cities or urban conurbations that take advantage of the new mobility opportunities.”

“Both developers and the local governments [in China] are constantly looking for potential drivers of development – be they landmark buildings, key attractions, large employers, or outstanding infrastructure and transport facilities,” Matthias Bauer explained. “An existing airport would at least cover several of these points – the airport building itself usually being a powerful landmark, served by advanced transport infrastructure, and creating demand for hotels, office space, warehouses, and logistics.”

Aerotropolises are extremely large-scale urbanization initiatives that require not only tremendous amounts of financing but also strong and coordinated political will. The more authoritarian bend of some Asian and Middle Eastern governments allow them to be able to initiate and push through massive development projects that the more democratically inclined governments of the West simply cannot do.

“It could be said that China, for example, by being a [single] party state that can railroad through big projects has a competitive advantage, due to lower wages, a malleable public, and an Asian insensitivity to loud noises, over wealthy, bourgeois complainants in Surry,” Austin Williams stated.

Kasarda asserts that the typical attitude that the West maintains regarding airports is obsolete, and we may soon find ourselves in a paradigm shift where we begin seeing the airport as an essential for global economic competitiveness rather than a nuisance to exile to the frontiers of our cities.

“We’re losing,” Kasarda stated firmly. “We’re losing because we don’t appreciate and support the critical importance of airports and aviation in strengthening our economies and making them more competitive and addressing the immutable force of globalization. As long as we constrain aviation . . . it comes at our own long term economic peril.”

Wade Shepard is the author of [Ghost Cities of China](#).

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