# Globalisations utopia? On airport atmospherics

John Urry [a], Anthony Elliott [b, *], David Radford [c], Nicola Pitt [c]

[a] Department of Sociology, Lancaster University, UK
[b] Hawke EU Centre for Mobilities, Migrations & Cultural Transformations, Hawke Research Institute, University of South Australia, GPO Box 2471, Adelaide, South Australia 5001, Australia
[c] Hawke EU Centre for Mobilities, Migrations & Cultural Transformations, Hawke Research Institute, University of South Australia, Australia

## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

The article argues that the highly managed atmosphere of airport terminals is particularly characteristic of the 'global' era. Acknowledging that the thesis of airports as 'non-places' has been a useful provocation, the article contends that airports are in fact distinct spaces with particular kinds of atmosphere (of emotions, affects, passionate intensities). Moreover, these atmospheres are moving out into many other places that appear to be more and more similar to airports. Mapping connections between the transformation of airport terminals and globalization, the paper draws upon research based on ethnographic observation and interviews conducted at European airports to situate airport atmospherics in terms of extensive sequencing, information, consumer culture and ever-increasing technological intervention.

© 2016 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Today my favourite kind of atmosphere is the airport atmosphere … Airplaces and airports have my favourite kind of food service, my favourite kind of bathrooms, my favourite peppermint Life Savers, my favourite kinds of entertainment, my favourite loudspeaker address systems, my favourite conveyor belts, my favourite graphics and colors, the best security checks, the best views, the best perfume shops, the best employees, and the best optimism. Andy Warhol (1976, 145)

## 1. Introduction

In this paper we discuss transformations currently underway across many airport terminals worldwide. These transformations, which are rarely analysed as such, concern what Andy Warhol termed the "airport atmosphere", and are linked to global institutional and cultural changes in the contemporary world. We suggest that the atmosphere of airport terminals is highly characteristic of global processes that over the past two to three decades have so powerfully transformed almost all societies around the globe. We see the highly managed atmosphere of the airport terminal as particularly characteristic of the global era. The airport space is globalization's utopia, the perfect form that globalization takes, stemming from the very best optimism. This utopic atmosphere is then copied, simulated and rolled out in towns, cities, resorts, islands, festivals, and events around the world. In short, the airport atmosphere, at once regulative and experimental, is on the move.

This utopic atmosphere of airports appears to exemplify what Ohmae (1990) described as: "the free flow of ideas, individuals, investments and industries... the emergence of the interlinked economy brings with it an erosion of national sovereignty as the power of information directly touches local communities" (269). Ohmae argued that this borderless world would generate new business opportunities, international friendship, family life across distance, international understanding, greater openness of information and more wealth. In this utopia it was thought to be good to move, as well as to receive flows of people and objects from elsewhere. Many believed that these mobilities would reinvigorate societies through new ideas, information and people, making societies, places and people more cosmopolitan (Beck, 2006). Bauman (2000) conceptualised these processes as a "liquid modernity", contrasting them with a more fixed and stable older modernity.

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: anthony.elliott@unisa.edu.au (A. Elliott).

This paper will examine this utopia via the notion of the airport atmosphere. We begin with a brief history of how these utopic spaces came to emerge. The atmosphere is emblematic of this utopic impulse, which can be seen to carry over into twenty-first century and the contemporary global airport hubs of today.

At the outset, however, some preliminary comments are necessary regarding the term atmosphere. It is broadly recognized that atmospheres are fundamental to the constitution, reproduction and reinvention of society (Elliott, 2013). There has been an increasing body of research across a number of disciplines on the theme of atmospheres (Sørensen, 2015; Bille et al., 2015). It is important to recognize that, while the notion of atmosphere is deeply interwoven with associated terms such as affect, emotion, ambience, and attunement (or what Anderson refers to as "collective affects" (2009; 78), we are talking essentially about a vague concept, and certainly one not easily defined. There is an indeterminateness, ambiguousness or openness about atmospheres which suggest it is a quality of experience that has a "singular affective quality" (Anderson, 2009; 79). Anderson furthers elaborates on this when he describes atmosphere as something which holds in tension a series of opposites, "presence and absence, materiality and ideality, definite and indefinite, singularity and generality" (Anderson, 2009; 80).

Following Bille et al., atmosphere can (as a first approximation) be defined as "a point of reference for the immediate human interaction with particular places", a point involving spaces and temporality, materials (objects) and experiences (Bille et al., 2015; 32). Atmospheres are dynamic contexts, in which people dwell. A "force field", as it were in Stewart's terms (2011) of lived effects; spaces which have the ability both to affect and be affected (2011; 452). Drawing considerably on the work of the philosopher Gernot Böhme, a special edition of *Emotions, Space and Society* (2015, vol. 15) investigated how atmospheres are today constructed or staged, from such disparate locations as architecturally enhanced urban environments, the home, sports stadiums and museums. Given the challenges of investigating the inherent subtleties related to "the existential in-betweenness of subject and object" in relation to atmospheres (2015; 33), this paper draws on both theoretical and empirical perspectives, situating the discussion of airport atmospheres from fieldwork conducted within airports spaces.

## 2. Airport terminals: beyond the aeronautical

Air travel went from small beginnings on a sand dune in North Carolina in 1903, with the Wright brothers' first flight, to become the industry that stands for and represents the new global order. And astonishing new aircraft are nothing without airspaces; the history of flight has been the history of massive transformations of airspace (Cwerner et al., 2009). According to Le Corbusier aircraft were the greatest sign of progress seen during the twentieth century, although at first airfields did nothing to reflect this modernity (Pascoe, 2001, 127). In a second period, airports developed into transport hubs with increasing interconnections between different modes, of planes, trains, metro and cars. Le Corbusier especially promoted the airport as a machine for travellers rather than a field oriented to the plane (Pascoe, 2001, 120–1). This shift, stemming from the growth of interwar airmindedness, involved airspaces being turned into complex and integrated infrastructures often characterised by futuristic design (Jarach, 2001; 121; Adey, 2010). The third stage saw the development of the commercial airport or the global hub, and it is these which this paper focuses upon. Airports moved away from being mainly transport hubs and became sites for mass travel and consuming, with most airports being built on the edge of cities, as camps. Such airports are strategically important within the global competition of places, cities and regions. Certain airport operators such as the Schiphol Group in the Netherlands, Fraport in Germany or BAA in the UK establish and manage new airports and airport services around the world.

This development of airport terminals involves a reworking of social and physical relations. Airports are "terraformers", reconfiguring geography according to the "spatio-temporal rhythms and cross-modal standards of global capital" (Fuller and Harley, 2004; 102–3). Especially striking are the European, Asian and Middle Eastern airports often designed on a vast scale by celebrity architects and sometimes located upon newly formed islands built in the sea, in the desert, and operating on global time (e.g., Hong Kong International Airport Terminal 2; Heathrow International Airport Terminal 5; Changi Airport Singapore Terminal 3; Abu Dhabi International Airport Terminal 3; Madrid Barajas International Airport, Terminal 4). Adey emphasizes how airports are always on the move, with endless accretions, extensions, runways, rethemings, makeovers (2006; 81––2, see also Adey, 2010).

What is also significant is that as many people and objects are more mobile in airspace, others become relatively less mobile. Overall the greater the extent, range and significance of mobility around the world, the more elaborate and complex the consequential patterns of immobilisation (Urry, 2007; Adey, 2010). An enormous fixed and immobile infrastructure affords the mobilities of people and objects, through directing, checking, monitoring, ensuring security, providing hospitality, entertaining, feeding, ground transportation, engineering, and air traffic control. These immobilities are organised around various kinds of limited movement such as planes, fuel, luggage, passengers, staff, objects, services, trolleys and consumer goods, intermittently proceeding along *mostly* pre-determined routes through the airport-city. These objects proceed around the place of the airport; on occasions being combined (passengers to get access to trolleys) and on other occasions kept apart (luggage not yet security checked must not get near planes).

Despite the notion that airports have become 'non-places' of mere holding, waiting, extended profiling, we suggest there is a kind of romantic emotional connection to the airport both for passengers and airport personnel. This connection to the airport appears to be different from other modes of transport or servicescapes in a business sense, in that the airport is regarded as a special global space in which to dwell. Something of this other world of airspace is amusingly captured in Walter Kirn's novel *Up in the Air*: "Airworld is a nation within a nation, with its own language, architecture, mood, and even its own currency – the token economy of airline bonus miles that I've come to value more than dollars" (2001; 5; see also the 2009 George Clooney movie based on this book).

The myriad entertainment and innovative, personalised, or DIY services offered by airports as they compete for customers means that understandings about airport atmosphere are vitally important to the modern day airport as a commercially viable enterprise. In drawing on recent work that investigates the role of globalization and mobile lifestyles in the development of the air travel industry combined with an examination of atmospherics, the calculated design of space and place for commercial purposes, in the rest of this paper we explore the production of airport spaces as places of increasing experimentation, experience and escape for passengers/consumers intermittently on the move. This paper draws upon extensive research based on various mobile methods conducted at different kinds of contemporary airport.

### 2.1. Globalization

Here we outline some of the powerful connections between the transformation of airport terminals and globalization. First, there is