

What is Airport Urbanism?

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Executive Summary

Airport Urbanism (AU) is a people-focused approach to designing airports, and to planning urban developments around the airport. Focusing on the needs and desires of the people who use the airport on a regular basis—passengers, employees, and local residents—AU advances development strategies that deliver long-term benefits to both the airport and the city that it serves. The following article outlines airport urbanism’s core design principles and provides a practical how-to guide for implementing the AU approach.

About the Author

Dr. Max Hirsh (*PhD, Harvard*) is a professor at the University of Hong Kong and a leading expert on airports and urban development. He is the author of *Airport Urbanism: a ground-breaking study on the increase in global air traffic and its implications for the planning, design, and operation of airports.*

What’s driving airport urbanism?

In recent decades, airports have transformed from simple air transport facilities into sophisticated urban centers.

Two factors are driving that process:

1. First, successful airport authorities understand that **non-aeronautical revenue has become an essential part of the airport business model.** In fact, many of the world’s leading airports generate more income from non-aviation activities than they do from aviation itself.
2. Second, savvy urban leaders—who recognize the airport’s significance for the regional economy—are **building new districts near the airport to advance broader urban development goals.** Some cities are even turning their airports into multimodal mobility hubs, where road, rail, and maritime networks intersect with air transportation, increasing the airport’s total throughput.

Taken together, these two trends have dramatically expanded the spatial and functional scope of airport development projects, to the point that it becomes hard to say where exactly the airport ends and the city begins. **Yet these projects often fail to reach their full potential.** That’s because they don’t have a clear understanding of who their target customers are—and because there is often little coordination between what’s being built on the airside, landside, and beyond the perimeter fence.

That’s where airport urbanism comes in.

A new approach to airport design

Airport Urbanism (AU) is a new people-focused approach to designing airports, and to planning urban developments around the airport. Focusing on the needs and desires of the people who use the airport on a regular basis, airport urbanism empowers us to see more clearly what the airport’s customers want—and how those customer insights can help airports and cities grow together for mutual economic benefit.

Both a **design philosophy and a practical model for implementation**, AU is based on two core principles:

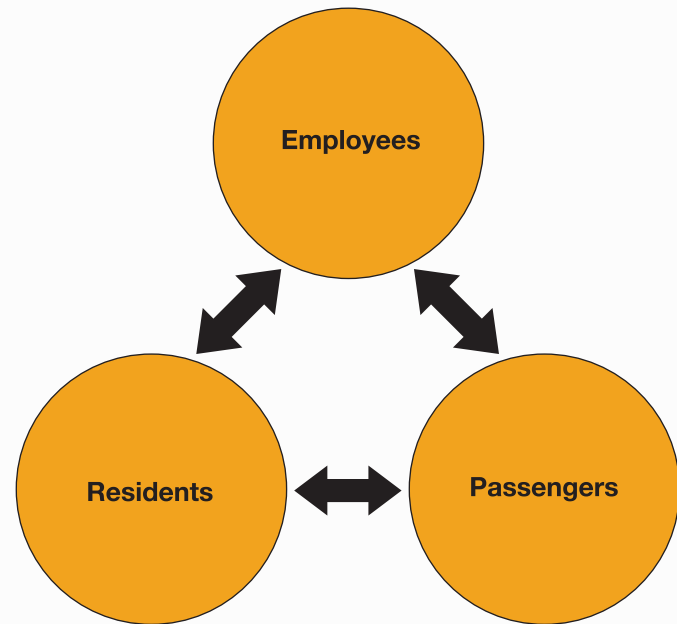
1. **Focus on people:** Successful airports focus on the **needs and desires of their customers.** That includes not just passengers, but also the people who live, work, and own businesses at the airport and in nearby communities.
2. **Growing together:** Successful airports coordinate airside, landside, and off-airport development in a holistic and mutually beneficial manner. Why? **Because airports and cities grow best when they grow together.**

Focus on people

First and foremost, AU focuses on people: specifically, the people who live, work, and travel through the airport on a regular basis. Why? Because ultimately, the economic dynamics at the airport revolve around three sets of actors:

1. **Passengers**, who fly in and out of the airport;
2. **Employees**, who work for the airport, the airlines, and in airport office parks and logistics centers; and
3. **Residents**, who live and operate businesses in the communities around the airport.

Airport Urbanism (AU) Model



Successful airport projects are designed with the needs of these three groups in mind. Strengthening the relationship between them is a powerful tool for increasing non-aeronautical revenue, improving the customer experience, and growing the local economy.

What are the benefits of this people-focused approach? First, airport urbanism highlights each airport's unique mix of passengers in order to come up with site-specific development guidelines that respond to the particular needs and desires of those customers. This is in contrast to older development models—such as the “aerotropolis”—which applied a one-size-fits-all approach to every single airport.

Successful airports have a clear understanding of who their passengers are—and who they are not. For example, many airports try to cater to business travelers by developing office parks and conference centers. That makes sense in cities that have a lot of origin and destination business traffic, and where office space is in short supply. But it's less relevant for airports that are leisure destinations, transfer hubs, or host a lot of budget airlines. **In order for airport urbanism to really take off, it's important to match your development plans with the needs of the specific passenger types that are passing through your airport.** Are there a lot of older travelers, or passengers from developing countries? Consider medical tourism before investing in that conference center. Does the airport host many foreign tourists who are visiting the country for the first time? Then it's crucial to think about how to curate those memorable first and last experiences, and focus on tourist-oriented retail and food options, combined with attractive exhibitions of local culture. If pax skew younger, a concert arena could be a sound investment. Study the airport's top 10 destinations from—do travelers on those flights have specific spending habits or dietary needs? All of these questions are essential to consider at the outset of the planning process.

Second, **airport urbanism focuses attention on the desires of the people who work at the airport every day.** Airports are one of the city's largest employment centers, providing jobs for tens of thousands of people. All of them are potential customers for local goods and services, and potential tenants for nearby housing developments. When thinking about how to plan for their needs, it's often the “little” things that can have a big impact. Does the airport offer places where employees can exercise during their lunch

break, relax after work, or pick up groceries on their way home? Successful airports recognize that these kinds of amenities drive employee satisfaction—which helps to retain talented workers—and that they double as sources of revenue. These facilities also make the airport a more attractive place to do business, thereby increasing the value of the airport's commercial real estate.

Third, **AU's focus on people enables airports to expand their customer base to include residents of local communities.** Less successful airports think of these residents as troublesome “stakeholders” whose complaints about noise and air pollution can constrain future growth. **Successful airports, on the other hand, view people who live near the airport as potential customers,** and develop a variety of commercial and recreational facilities that cater to their needs. That might include children's play areas, where parents can shop and eat during the airport's off-peak hours. It could also include event spaces for weddings, dance competitions, and high school graduations. Around the world, these kinds of community-focused design changes have led to a big improvement in residents' perception of the airport, while also increasing non-aeronautical revenue. In other words: they make people more likely to spend money at the airport and less likely to fight your expansion plans.

Finally, airport urbanism's focus on people draws our attention to the needs of the local business community. Many older development models claim that the airport is, by definition, an attractive place to do business. **Unfortunately, that's just not true.** Unless your employees need to be at the airport on a daily basis, there's no compelling reason why any business should relocate to an airport office park, or why they should hold a meeting or conference there. That's why it's crucial to understand what local business owners and entrepreneurs need to grow, and how new developments at the airport can enable them to do so. What challenges do they face in terms of recruiting talented staff, finding suitable production facilities, and managing their supply chain? How can future airport developments respond to those unmet demands, and how could local products and services improve the passenger experience? Bringing business owners into focus empowers us to see where the strategic interests of the airport and the local business community intersect, and how we can strengthen those connections.

Growing together

Creating successful airport development projects requires a deep understanding of both the global aviation industry and of the local urban context. **But it also requires a willingness to forge meaningful collaborations across departments and between institutions.** In less successful cities, the airport authority, airlines, concessions operators, urban planners, and private developers view each other with suspicion rather than as partners. They're reluctant to share data, or to share their aspirations for the future. That leads to poor coordination between the development of airside, landside, and off-airport facilities: producing both gaps and redundancies that have a detrimental effect on the customer experience, and preventing those facilities from delivering a healthy return on investment.

How can airports tackle these barriers? One option is to commission a lengthy market demand and feasibility study. But in many cases, airports can pinpoint opportunities more quickly and efficiently through an **Airport Urbanism workshop**: a focused one-to two-day event that helps airports generate creative development strategies and a concrete implementation plan (see text box at right).

Successful airports recognize that they need to be open-minded yet also realistic when it comes to planning future developments. In the past, older development models like the aerotropolis grossly overstated the attractiveness of the airport as a place of business for multinational corporations. These models ignored critical issues about financing, land ownership, and—above all—market demand. Based on a shaky business case, the majority of these airport office parks and convention centers failed to deliver a significant return on investment.

Learning from those past missteps, AU takes a very different approach. Rather than dictating a predetermined set of building types at the outset of the design process, airport urbanism starts by focusing on the needs and desires of the people who use the airport on a regular basis. **It then draws on those customer insights to develop site-specific design guidelines and development strategies.** In so doing, airport urbanism doesn't

rule out building office parks and convention centers—if that's really what local market conditions call for. At the same time, by taking a people-focused approach, AU opens up a much wider range of development options that respond to the needs of each airport's unique mix of passengers, employees, and residents. Doing so empowers us to see more clearly how airports and cities can grow together for mutual benefit.

Further inquiries about airport urbanism and the AU research method can be directed to Max Hirsh at hirsh@post.harvard.edu.

The AU Workshop: Finding Opportunities for Airport Urbanism

In these one- to two-day events, participants brainstorm creative airport urbanism development strategies and identify new opportunities for collaboration. AU workshops can be organized internally or in collaboration with multiple institutions. Throughout a series of expert presentations, site visits, and strategy sessions, workshop members apply the **three-step Airport Urbanism method**:

- 1.** First, we identify **pre-existing assets** “on the ground” that can be leveraged in future development projects. What industries, attractions, and skills are already located at or near the airport, and how could potential synergies with the airport be incorporated into future plans?
- 2.** Second, we uncover **the desires of the people who use the airport on a regular basis**—passengers, employees, residents—and determine how airport-area developments can satisfy those needs. What kinds of services and amenities are currently missing at the airport, and how could new developments address those unmet demands?
- 3.** Third, we connect these local factors to **broader technical, spatial, and demographic changes** that are taking place in the aviation industry and at airports all around the world. This enables each airport to better understand how it fits into a larger global picture.

This three-step approach produces a **site-specific blueprint for action** that aims to deliver sustainable, long-term benefits for the airport and for the city that it serves.