Decentralized Airports: The Safe, Efficient, and Pleasant Way to Fly

How will the innovations from the global pandemic revolutionize the air travel experience?

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The first line of defense against a global pandemic must occur in international airports. Airports offer a series of thresholds that filter millions of passengers from a public sidewalk, to a secure plane and back again, into another community and culture. In airports, strangers are forced to exchange luggage and boarding passes, and with these, germs. The current pandemic shows us that we must limit contact between individuals and communities, to limit the transference of deadly germs and viruses. Smaller, fuel-efficient airplanes are already replacing the jumbo jets like the iconic Boeing 747 to provide passengers with more direct flights and airline companies with flexible business models (Wall, 2018). Decentralized airports will not only respond to this shift in transportation but also provide a more efficient, safe, and pleasant journey in a post-pandemic society.
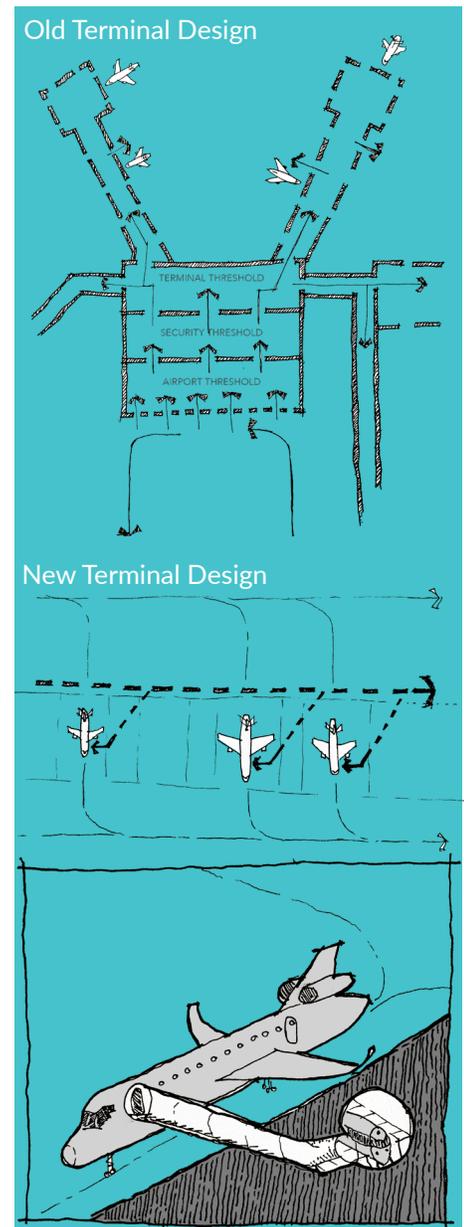
No Luggage

The first step of regionalizing the international airport is to eliminate the space and infrastructure required to process, x-ray, and transport luggage. The pandemic has generated unprecedented competition in the delivery industry allowing most consumers to receive their packages within a day or two of purchase (Jones Lang LaSalle Inc., 2020). Door to door shipping technology could enable travelers to ship their luggage with less effort and cost than it would take to drag it behind them or pay the inflated checked baggage fee. If every passenger on an airplane only carried a purse or briefcase, boarding would be a breeze and passengers would have the freedom to stroll without the responsibility of transporting their belongings on buses, escalators, or in overhead compartments.

Security Queues

Elimination luggage would also revolutionize the security process in the decentralized airport. Before the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, few bags were thoroughly scanned at security checkpoints (Peterson, 2016). Now every bag and passenger is meticulously reviewed for potential threats resulting in the standard two hour long process that prefaces every fight. Some experts predict that the new medical tests, which may become a standard preflight assessment, will increase the wait time to four hours (Jasper, 2020). The demand for an efficient technology that can analyze safety and health will most likely streamline this process in a manner similar to the current digital boarding passes present on smartphones. Big data and dogs are already used to detect viruses and security threats. Futuristic and antiquated technologies, like the data and dogs, could potentially transform the security process from a two-hour check-in to a body scan that only requires passengers to stroll through a doorway (Serkal, 2019).

Airport Terminal

If the security checks can be streamlined to a simple body scan, and luggage is shipped independently of the traveler, then airports

Old Terminal Design

New Terminal Design

will become much less crowded and as a result, more pleasant to visit. Travelers will be able to take the subway or train directly to Gate 34C and board their plane after a simple security check and medical scan presumably without lines and without being exposed to thousands of passengers in the airport. The current feeling of vulnerability that passengers are now required to endure will be transformed into a personalized and relaxing commute to their intended destination. This luxurious experience will also continue inside the plane where companies and designers are already beginning to suggest innovations like private pods. New screens and enclosures will be standard for every guest to ensure each passenger's exposure to germs is limited. This new enclosure will also isolate noise and allow each passenger to tailor his or her privacy preference well beyond what is currently provided by an undersized armrest.

Door to Door Service

The luxury of air travel could become a standard for all passengers to ensure safety and promote the most efficient journey possible. Door to door service will be available for passengers and luggage. Safety will be streamlined and become as easy as walking through a doorway. Airplanes will develop into quiet, customizable living rooms that offer direct flights to more cities than ever before. This new standard may not be available for the same price as before, but the global population has already adapted to limited air travel and the new infrastructure for virtual communication has revolutionized our business and social relationships.

Closing Thoughts

Airports across the world were growing to unprecedented sizes, but this pandemic has forced businesses and communities to adapt and innovate more efficiently than anyone thought possible. It is likely that technology will streamline the process of travel and safety regulations will adapt rapidly to the new threat as they did after September 11th. The new, luxurious travel experience will revolutionize the perception that travel is only about the destination, and make it also about the pleasure of the journey. Decentralized airports will make air travel more efficient, limit dangerous exposure to global germs, and streamline the boarding process to make flying in a post pandemic society a more enjoyable experience than it has ever been before.