Airports come of age

We all know the boredom, disorientation and general disagreeableness of airports. As a means of moving from one mode of transport to another, they totally lack the structured and enjoyable experience that catching a train or a boat once had.

It must be admitted, these days, railway stations are more and more designed to be as like conventional airports as possible and most people’s experience of sea travel is nothing more than joining a slowly moving queue of cars to park in a floating multi-storey structure.

Yet in the great days of rail, getting a train from St Pancras, Grand Central or the Gare de Lyon was an exciting and not undignified experience. There was a clearly defined sequence: arrival, getting tickets, entrance to perhaps a concourse, then the great shed (partly filled with smoke and steam that gave a veil of mystery to transition), purchasing preliminaries to travel, then, finally, embarkation. Progress through the great ocean liner terminals was not dissimilar in essence, though the streamer-beset, resigned act of departure was more ceremonial and the arrival often more humdrum.

In airports, experience is usually completely different. From the highly structured bureaucratic maze of Charles de Gaulle, through the organised chaos of Heathrow, to the haphazard nightmare of many American airports (where each airline has its own terminal), air travel – the mode of transport of our era – has not until now evolved a humanly satisfying way of moving from land transport to flight: in itself, one of the most exciting and dramatic experiences that twentieth-century technology has to offer. Even airports like Gatwick or Kastrup, which started with simple and elegant diagrams, have become overgrown with so many accretions that their original clarity has been lost.

Now, a new generation of airports is beginning to emerge. Stansted is the first. It is not surprising that its main author is Norman Foster who, with his love of flying and preference for bold, simple, generative ideas, seems perfectly cut out to invent a new way of approaching flight (p58). His proposal was based on two key propositions. First, the path from land to air should be carefully delineated, agreeable and dignified; and, second, the drama of air travel should be celebrated.

While Stansted is the first of the new generation (that is why so much of this magazine is devoted to it), others are soon to follow. Noteworthy among these are von Gerkan & Marg’s Stuttgart airport (p4), and the projects for Kansas by Renzo Piano (p83) and for Marseille and for Terminal 5 of Heathrow by Richard Rogers. Like Stansted, these airports will offer sensible human progression. They will be capable of extension without dissolving into experiential chaos, and they will be places worth visiting in their own right, not just the abstract environments that now cater for our entrances and exits.

Now, at the end of the twentieth century, at the beginning of which people learned to fly, airports are coming of age as a building type: a truly contemporary type which has its own rationale and organisational structure dictated by modern technology, but which has roots as old as the time when mankind first celebrated journeys.