Peter Davey arrives at Stansted and gives a general description of the building.

As most other people will, I want to Stansted by train. After a few stops and starts in east London, the Stansted shuttle wakes satisfactorily through the Essex countryside, taking about 40 minutes to arrive at the white ballast and sapling groves of that most rare artefact, a new piece of track laid by British Rail; it is the spur to the airport.

Down in the tunnel and cuttings of the spur, you only get a brief glimpse of the terminal building before arriving at the underground station. This huge cavern, with its great concrete side walls is rescued from gloominess by lighting. The long wall is bathed in golden luminance, quite unnecessary for the convenience of the public on the platforms (p79), but which in parts to what could have been a gloomy hole a sense of magic and expectation. As the station becomes more busy, I do not imagine that many passengers will be able to appreciate exactly why it will seem friendly instead of dreary and grim, but the decision to use light rather than cladding will pay off in ways too subtle to quantify.

You rise out of the station on a rather Persian series of ramps, bridges and escalators to emerge on to the great platform through transparent devices, the most dramatic of which is an inclined glass enclosed walkway that gradually reveals the enormous porte-cochere that fronts the whole north face of the building. Here, the glass wall has been drawn back by one bay from the edge of the roof, forming a partially enclosed space for those people who have chosen the less dramatic approaches of arriving by car or bus.

This first sight of the building proper immediately reveals its enter. From a 36m square grid of square structural support points, long spars fly diagonally to take the loads of the square shallow domes of what seems to be a miraculously light and transparent roof.

(As a detailed structural description is given on pp76-76.) All the support elements are in white tubular steel, reducing their apparent size, and refinement is further enhanced by the pin joints, which allow the spars to taper at each end.

In the middle of the diagonal grid of each dome, a square rooflight is created, which is again penetrated on the diagonal by an opaque square, creating four triangles of light. The importance of this axis is not immediately apparent in the porte-cochere, which is open on three sides. But it becomes much more clear as you work towards the middle of the huge enclosed space.

Entry

It must be said straightaway that Foster's vision of the prospective passenger being able to look through the shed and see the aeroplane in which he is going to take off has been compromised (p58). This was inevitable from the start, and presumably Foster always knew it, but the idea of the great place, all on one level, has been carried through with fidelity. As you enter the space, the route is clearly straightforward and, above all the small internal structures that a modern airport needs, the sky can be seen through the huge glassed wall of the south face. The effect of progression towards the airport is enhanced by the subtle device of making the upper four pannels of the two flank walls of frosted glass, so that passengers are continually drawn forward by the view of sky and clouds.

The roof supports organise the space in a clear and unassuming way, it seems amazing that the huge expanse of roof can be kept flowing without little apparent effort. The supports themselves are not visually like trees to which they have so often been