

# Aesthetics of Mobility: Comparing Singapore's Changi International Airport and Manila's Ninoy Aquino International Airport

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## Abstract

Airports as gateways play an important role in our globalized society where intercontinental travel is an everyday occurrence. Airport mobilities have traditionally been measured through managerial and economic concepts. Hence, few scholars considered looking at the physical layout of an airport and how it affects the cultural understanding of passengers through an experience of mobility and efficiency. This paper explores efficiency as: (1) a system, (2) a trope, and (3) a privileged value in two Southeast Asian airports – Singapore's Changi International Airport and Manila's Ninoy Aquino International Airport. By analyzing their systems and politics of mobility, I maintain that the measure of efficiency inside both airports goes beyond quantitative measures, arguing that the architectural layout of the two airports can be used as another alternative measure of efficiency. Their similarities and differences reflect socioeconomic and cultural conditions that characterize the position of Singapore and Manila in a globalized world. My proposed redefinition augments the overall experience of the global traveler which mirrors the current economic and cultural status of the two cities: Singapore, a seamless network of structured urban rhythms and cosmopolitan flows, all converging into this small city-state that is already a globally acknowledged, economic giant; and Manila, a congested port city, where movements are constrained because of mismanagement and misplaced bureaucracy, thus opportunities are diverged elsewhere.

**Keywords:** airport studies, Manila, mobility, Singapore, Southeast Asian studies

## INTRODUCTION

*Le Corbusier envisaged the airport as a new kind of threshold, around which the city—and the nation—would reshape itself. “A city made for speed,” said Le Corbusier, “is made for success.”*

A near hit is still a miss. The first time I visited Singapore, I almost missed my return flight back to Manila. As the MRT doors opened, I quickly ran toward the terminal while carrying my luggage and backpack. As I reached the cold, well-lighted check-in counters of the Singapore Changi Airport – Terminal 2, I almost fainted as I saw my flight status: boarding. I looked around, panicking, and realized I was clueless about what to do. A middle-aged man, wearing an airport uniform approached me and grabbed my passport and printed itinerary. He led me across the long queues of other check-in counters and as we turned the corner, I saw the Express Lane. I made it. As my heartbeat slowly returned to its normal rhythm, it got me thinking: had it not been for that Singaporean, wasted time and wasted cash would have been my last impression of Singapore.

In Manila, it is a requirement for a passenger to allot anywhere between two to three hours from their residential location to the Ninoy Aquino International Airport (NAIA). On top of this, an additional two to three hours should be allocated to clear airport procedures – check-in, immigration, and security check among others. NAIA has been described as an airport of perpetual waiting. The last time I traveled abroad, I was designated to line up along the OFW lane. After a full hour of waiting, it was the turn of a middle-aged woman in front of me. I heard the conversation between her and the immigration officer. Hired by an agent, she was on her way to Saudi Arabia. After sifting through the lady’s documents, the immigration officer told her, “*Niloloko ka lang ng employer mo! Ikaw naman, nagpaloko!*” [Your employer fooled you. And you’re clueless enough to get fooled!] The immigration officer shrugged, laughed a bit, and mockingly gave the lady a “good luck” message. She was going to be deported anyway. What angered me was that the immigration officer did not instruct nor help the woman. I waited another half an hour to clear the security check because there were no

clear signs of instructions. It is as if NAIA expects every passenger to be a frequent flyer. The ground staff needed to instruct every passenger on security policies. When I reached the boarding gate, there were no seats left for passengers to relax while waiting for boarding announcements.

Movements and interactions inside airports present us with problems concerning “local-global linkages and the comparative study of modernity.”<sup>1</sup> The convenience experienced in Changi and the horrific tales at NAIA highlight efficiency of mobility or the lack thereof. The physical layout of these infrastructures lends to a spatial reading that reflects both the socioeconomic and cultural conditions that characterize the position of Singapore and Manila within a globalized world. This study aims to compare and contrast the arrival formalities of two Southeast Asian international airports to highlight how efficiency reflects their social and spatial cultures. I selected these two locations as my objects of inquiry because both airports were commissioned by presidents who envisioned a new society or a global city of man – the architect of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, and the former Philippine dictator, Ferdinand Marcos, Sr. Furthermore, Manila and Singapore were colonial port cities where these trade and transport infrastructures were crucial in the advancement of both urbanized locales.

The architectural or physical layout of airports leads and instructs passengers to follow a certain flow that affects airport efficiency. Efficiency measurement is critical for “industries where firms do not face strong competition in the market.”<sup>2</sup> Examples include transport infrastructures such as airports. Their physical structures, including the visceral and bodily movements caused by these layouts, contribute to the notion of efficiency that reflects a bigger articulation of their socio-political and cultural milieu. One concept that has to be considered in studying these two airports is that unlike American airports (publicly

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas Hylland Eriksen, “In Limbo: Notes on the Culture of Airports” (presentation, Annual Conference of the European Association of Social Anthropologists, Prague, Czech Republic, August 30, 1992).

<sup>2</sup>Katsuhiko Yamaguchi and Yuichiro Yoshida, “Efficiency Measurement Theory and its Application to Airport Benchmarking,” *GRIPS Policy Information Center* 7, no. 13 (2008): 1.

owned by local governments), Asian airports are “publicly owned but see increasing private participation in expansion plans.”<sup>3</sup> This expectation of privatization is enough to reorient and influence airport management toward profitability and customer service. Also, additional considerations should be made with the increasing passenger volume and longer “dwell times”, airports must think about overall movement within their immediate premises. All of these elements converge to the ever-changing structure of airports. These layouts aim to optimize the limited space of an airport and at the same time, produce a meaningful experience for passengers.

This essay investigates how architectural and interior layout is utilized as a measure of efficiency in the comparative study of Singapore’s Changi and Manila’s NAIA and how their similarities and differences reflect the socioeconomic and cultural conditions that characterize the status of these two cities in a globalized world. My proposed redefinition augments the overall experience of the global traveler which mirrors the current economic and cultural status of the two cities: Singapore, a seamless network of structured urban rhythms and cosmopolitan flows, all converging into this small city-state that is already a globally acknowledged, economic giant; and Manila, a congested port city, where movements are constrained because of mismanagement and misplaced bureaucracy, thus opportunities are diverged elsewhere.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review briefly traces two aspects that are vital in this paper: design aesthetics of airports and mobility inside transport infrastructures. The first subsection focuses on studies of airport designs and structures, particularly how such monumental feats focus and thrive on operational efficiency. Moreover, it frames the concept of how aesthetics is operationalized within the paper. The second subsection highlights infrastructural mobility and how airports are understood

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<sup>3</sup>Paul Hooper, “Privatization of Airports in Asia,” *Journal of Air Transportation* 8, no. 5 (2002): 289.

through movements, pauses, delays, and screening. The intersection of spatial configuration and aeromobility frames this study of Changi and NAIA.

Roseau problematizes airport spaces, not just as possible sites for urban narratives, but as urban narratives themselves. Furthermore, she highlights the significance of the rigid process of designing airports and how urban locations and contexts contribute to the final aesthetics of airport terminals. She argues that airport narratives (narratives of airports, narratives occurring inside airports, and narratives produced because of airport spatiality) have informed our notions of the “modern urban imaginary”<sup>4</sup>. This notion of urban imaginary expands to airport spaces and how these structures are designed. Their designs are also assessed alongside the immediate areas and locations. In this regard, immediate communities residing within airports are ideally considered when constructing and expanding these infrastructures. Much like Roseau, Schaberg detests the idea that airports are generic places, arguing that such spaces can be designed to give an identifiable character to them.<sup>5</sup> The designs, particularly of airport terminals, contribute to how the cities are imagined, visualized, and ultimately, experienced.

Even before Roseau's and Schaberg's airport discourse, Edwards already wrote about the unique characteristics of Asian airports, both in their historical developments and their current progressive narratives, stating that “[Asian airport] terminals mirror the aspirations, wealth, and prestige of the country, not the free play of market forces (as in the UK) or ruthless airline efficiency (as in the hub airports of the USA).”<sup>6</sup> These contrasting views offer an interesting cusp when dealing with Asian airport terminals. He further exemplified how during the 1980s, Asian

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<sup>4</sup>Nathalie Roseau, “Airports as Urban Narratives: Toward a Cultural History of the Global Infrastructures,” *Transfers: Interdisciplinary Journal of Mobility Studies* 2, no. 1 (2012): 36.

<sup>5</sup>Christopher Schaberg, *The Textual Life of Airports: Reading the Culture of Flight* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011), 6.

<sup>6</sup>Brian Edwards, *The Modern Airport Terminal: New Approaches to Airport Architecture* (New York: Spon Press, 2005), 29.

airports were already seen as spaces ahead of their time. Terminals located in the Middle East and the Far East already “explored the relationship between airports and nationhood, which found expression in grand civic terminals.”<sup>7</sup> Admittedly, there were studies conducted that highlight the significance of airport terminals as grand statements of nationhood, particularly in the Asian context.

Airports, as studied and problematized by architects, scholars, and geographers, can be described through movement and non-movement. *Mobility* refers to the socio-cultural processes involving movement. Sheller extends this definition, stating that mobility “focuses on the embodied practice of movement and their representations, ideologies, and meanings attached to both movement and stillness.”<sup>8</sup> She further qualifies how the concept of movement is not a recent or notable feature of contemporary times. However, she argues that “forced mobility, movement due to unpredictable risks, climate change, and environmental limits, highlights the need to capture the exchanges occurring due to these movements.”<sup>9</sup> Zuskáčová traces the multi-layered concept and how it eventually became ascribed to four main discourses: the mobility system, the norm, the embodied practice, and the lifestyle discourse.<sup>10</sup> Adey augments Sheller’s suppositions by further positing that mobility “examines the processes, structure, and consequences of the movement of people, resources, commodities, and ideas.”<sup>11</sup> These movements articulate the nuanced possibilities and trajectories of understanding the critical spatial cultures of airports.

Basing his framework from Adey and Sheller, Schaberg further qualifies airport spaces as “modern terror machines” where passengers

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<sup>7</sup>Edwards, 33.

<sup>8</sup>Mimi Sheller, *Mobility* (Philadelphia: Drexel Publishing Group, 2009), 4.

<sup>9</sup>Sheller, 10.

<sup>10</sup>Veronika Zuskáčová, “How We Understand Aeromobility: Mapping the Evolution of a New Term in Mobility Studies,” *Transfers: Interdisciplinary Journal of Mobility Studies* 10, no. 2 (2020): 6.

<sup>11</sup>Peter Adey, *Mobility* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 15.

are “exposed, scrutinized, and paused.”<sup>12</sup> Such *screening* dictates how passengers experience their mobility or immobility inside these processing machines. Deriving from Gottdiener’s claims that airports are sites where travelers experience “transitional and de-territorialized status”<sup>13</sup> and Cresswell’s argument that terminals are locations where “nationalities are abolished”<sup>14</sup>, Kellerman posits that a person’s movement from one country through the next, as practiced inside airports, is an experience of being “disembedded” in its most literal sense.<sup>15</sup> As per Kumar and Moledina, mobility, both as a methodology and a framework, acts as an inclusive interdisciplinary approach to understanding migration. This intersection of mobility and migration produces scholarship that highlights both the quantitative movement of people across political borders and the dynamic relationships between such movement to other aspects such as objects, ideas, or any considerations of power or discourses.<sup>16</sup>

Looking at aeromobility as a larger set of assemblage, Lassen and Galland studied the case of Mexico City International Airport and argued that an airport articulates how “the city, the region, and the nation prioritize to be connected to the global corridor system of aeromobilities.”<sup>17</sup> This is an example of how Zuskáčová describes aeromobility as a multi-layered concept where scholars “examine

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<sup>12</sup>Schaberg, 57.

<sup>13</sup>Mark Gottdiener, *Life in the Air: Surviving the New Culture of Air Travel* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), 32.

<sup>14</sup>Tim Cresswell, *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 222.

<sup>15</sup>Aharon Kellerman, “International Airports: Passengers in an Environment of ‘Authorities’,” *Mobilities* 3, no. 1 (2008): 174-175.

<sup>16</sup>Maansi Kumar and Amyaz Moledina, “Mobility Studies: An Inclusive Interdisciplinary Approach to Understanding Migration,” *Challenging Borders* (College of Wooster), June 13, 2017, <https://challengingborders.wooster.edu/blog/tag/mobility-studies/>.

<sup>17</sup>Claus Lassen and Daniel Galland, “The Dark Side of Aeromobilities: Unplanned Airport Planning in Mexico City,” *International Planning Studies* 19, no. 2 (2014): 141.

the not-so-obvious relations, elements, and processes in which air travel is embedded, can be considered the main contribution of the systematic discourse in aeromobilities research.”<sup>18</sup> This pushes the boundaries of what constitutes aeromobilities, specifically when evaluated through spatial configuration and design. These arguments and methods aid in framing the general arguments problematized in this paper, triangulating the airport space, mobility and movements, and the passenger experience. The next section contextualizes and explores the histories of the two airports alongside the economic and socio-political junctures that these infrastructures are operating upon. It establishes the vital similarities of comparing these two cases while interrogating the differences.

### Globalized Spaces: A Tale of the Two Airports

The field of global studies “emerged in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century in response to the impact of new economic, social, technical, and cultural globalizing forces around the world.”<sup>19</sup> The study of globalization views the world as a “single interactive system,” rather than an interplay of discrete city-states. The airport is at once “a place, a system, a cultural artifact that brings us face-to-face with the advantages as well as the frustrations of modernity.”<sup>20</sup> But with transnational migration happening everywhere, airports also function as a gateway to other places, not just for a period of leisurely travel, but for the greener pastures.

Flows are critical elements in globalized societies and narratives. Movements of commodity, capital, and labor assemble an efficient assessment of a city. Mobility, then, is a “fundamental feature of the flexible capitalism that dominates the world of exchange, production,

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<sup>18</sup>Zuskáčová, 9.

<sup>19</sup>Richard Appelbaum and William Robinson, *Critical Globalization Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2005), xi.

<sup>20</sup>Alastair Gordon, *Naked Airport: A Cultural History of the World's Most Revolutionary Structure*, (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004), 4.



and consumption.”<sup>21</sup> If there is one transport infrastructure that reflects this penchant for efficiency in terms of trans-local and transnational movements, it has to be the airport. Though a growing community of scholars is concerned with the subject of airports, there are still several iterations of fields that can be combined to produce crucial frameworks that heighten the scholarship of airport studies. This paper argues that airports can be viewed as a repository of cultural reflection informed by the movements and bodily flows of passengers and instructed by the physical layout of the space.

The histories of these two airports from archipelagic Southeast Asia trace back to the administration of two nation leaders and their New World visions. Singapore’s Lee Kuan Yew and the Philippines’ Ferdinand Marcos, Sr. shaped the histories of their nations by commissioning the construction of Changi and NAIA (formerly Manila International Airport), changing not only the aviation landscape of the capital cities but their overall socioeconomic and political standing. Since its independence in 1965, the Singaporean economy experienced rapid economic development. Singapore’s strong economic performance “reflects the success of its open and outward-oriented development strategy.”<sup>22</sup> The importance of services to the Singapore economy also grew, as evidenced by the “increasing share of the financial and business sectors of the economy.”<sup>23</sup> In the last 40 years, a “culture of migration” has emerged in the Philippines, with millions of its citizens eager to work abroad, despite the risks and vulnerabilities they are likely to face. According to the Central Bank of the Philippines, amid the pandemic and the continuous rise of global prices, cash remittances sent by OFWs through banks “increased by 3.6% to \$32.54 billion

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<sup>21</sup>David Lyon, “Filtering Flows, Friends, and Foes: Global Surveillance,” in *Politics at the Airport*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 30.

<sup>22</sup>Ryan Howell and Colleen Howell, “The Relation of Economic Status to Subjective Well-Being in Developing Countries,” *Psychological Bulletin* 134, no. 4 (2008), 539.

<sup>23</sup>Howell and Howell, 541.

in 2022.”<sup>24</sup> The vigorous inward remittances, reflected in its record-high figure, and the increasing demand for foreign workers amid the reopening of global economies, exhibit the impact of Filipino labor migrants, not only in the Philippines but globally as well.

Changi is the main airport of Singapore and is considered to be a major aviation hub in Southeast Asia. In 1988, after applying efforts to continuously develop and improve its services, Changi won its first “Best Airport in the World” title from Business Traveller (UK) magazine. A decade later, Changi was voted as the best by the same institution for ten consecutive years. Singapore has witnessed rapid urban development in the last 40 years. The efforts to “modernize in postcolonial regions such as Southeast Asia have evolved in the guises of the global city – highly interconnected, open entities which function as command centers of regional capitals.”<sup>25</sup> Its landscape changed from slums and squatter areas in the immediate post-war years to a city of gardens and high-rise, high-density housing. While reshaping the economy, the city-state created another miracle by managing to remain a garden nation. Considered to be a large, global airport hub, the city-state has become “market-oriented.”<sup>26</sup> With monthly records reaching millions of passengers, and millions of dollars for expansion projects, Singapore solidifies its position as an efficient global hub and the standard for aviation supremacy.

The (fallen) dream of Marcos, embedded in his concept of *Ang Bagong Lipunan* or The New Society, was to situate Metro Manila as a global hub, similar to that of Singapore. To mobilize the economy

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<sup>24</sup>Bjorn Biel Beltran, “Understanding the critical importance of remittances to Philippine economy,” *Business World*, March 27, 2023, <https://www.bworldonline.com/special-features/2023/03/27/513633/understanding-the-critical-importance-of-remittances-to-philippine-economy/>.

<sup>25</sup>Joanna Phua, “Visual and Sensorial Innovations in Urban Governance: The Singapore Landscape Spectacle,” paper presented at the Tenth Berlin Roundtable on Urban Governance: Innovation, Insecurity, and the Power of Religion, Irmgard, Coninx Foundation, (18-24 March 2009).

<sup>26</sup>Asheesh Advani and Sandford Borins, “Managing Airports: A Test of the New Public Management,” *International Public Management Journal* 4, no. 1 (2001): 97.

faster, he envisioned Filipinos to flock to the capital city and generate manpower for a booming national economy. The metropolitan region was established in 1975 through Ferdinand Marcos Sr.'s Presidential Decree No. 824 in response to the need to sustain the growing population and the creation of the center of political power and seat of the government of the Philippines.<sup>27</sup> Consequently, it was his First Lady, Imelda Marcos, who became the first governor of the National Capital Region, while also functioning as the Minister of Human Settlements. She launched a re-branding campaign aimed at improving the image of Metro Manila as "The City of Man." They imagined Metro Manila as a prime hub for international trade and industry. To position the country with better leverage, international affairs were required. In 1982, the Manila International Airport Authority (MIAA) was created. The country's premiere airport was originally a US Air Force base until 1948 when it was turned over to the Philippine government. It became the principal airport of the Philippines for both international and domestic air traffic. During that time, Manila International Airport became one of the best airports in the modern world. But much like what happened to the Marcos regime, power and position were not maintained; hence, the current state of the airport reflects the demise of the regime.

The same socioeconomic history can be said about the countries as well. Singapore started as a little red dot at the tip of the Malaysian peninsula but now solidified its global economic position. For Singapore, when it gained independence from Malaysia in 1965, Lee Kuan Yew knew the resource-poor country as a model of "development and wealth creation encrusted with Asian values, corporate innovation, and transparent governance."<sup>28</sup> These initiatives, together with Singapore's political and macroeconomic stability, excellent telecommunications and infrastructure, strategic geographical location, and a skilled and educated workforce have contributed to Singapore's development into

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<sup>27</sup>Supreme Court E-Library, "Presidential Decree No. 824: Creating the Metropolitan Manila and the Metropolitan Manila Commission," <https://elibrary.judiciary.gov.ph/thebookshelf/showdocs/26/17327>.

<sup>28</sup>Leo Suryadinata, *Nationalism and Globalization: East and West*, (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2002), 28.

a dynamic Asian business hub. His dream for Singapore was to be a global city despite its size and lack of natural resources. All national efforts, including the aviation industry, contributed to his vision. Manila, like NAIA, is a congested, fragmented, and mismanaged city. The airport became a tool for exporting Philippine human labor, a travel infrastructure that facilitates the inflow and outflow of migrant workers. The country's ascent as a major labor exporter in Asia and worldwide is based on various factors. When large-scale labor migration from the Philippines started in the 1970s, the "push factors were very strong but made worse by the oil crisis in 1973."<sup>29</sup> The alarming levels of unemployment under the Marcos regime impelled the citizens to pursue employment abroad. The passage of the Labor Code of the Philippines in 1974 augmented the government's thrust for its overseas employment program. In a way, both airports contributed to how these two cities posit themselves across a globalized world. The next section focuses on how mobility and immobility are manifested in both locations as informed by the spatial layout and organizational structuring of these two airports.

### MNL and SIN: The Lived Experience through Airport Layouts

Changi and NAIA share an interesting history in that both airports were air bases during the colonial occupation of the British and the Americans until they were modified as commercial airports. Moreover, the locations of these airports are now peripheral to the capital center. Thus, the spaces for their new settlement, Changi and Pasay, encompass outlets to the open sea. Such infrastructural constructions cannot be separated from a system of commercial exchange geared towards global travel and international trade and commerce. Starting with the first piles driven onto the shores, every single site inside both airports had to be planned and realized by people – by political 'chiefs' and groups surrounding them, and those who performed the work of construction itself. The relationship between a place built by collective will and thought on the one hand and productive forces of the period on the other, is noticeable. These are spaces that have been "labored

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<sup>29</sup>Yves Bouquet, *The Philippine Archipelago* (Berlin: Springer, 2017), 379.

on.” Hence, each work occupies a space. Each product, too, occupies space and circulates within it. What relationship might exist between these two modalities of occupied space?

Social space contains a great diversity of social objects including networks and pathways which facilitate the exchange of material things, conditions, and information. Lefebvre’s concept of space is directed by three essential elements: representations of space, representational space, and spatial practices.<sup>30</sup> Representations of space or conceived spaces are created and imagined by urban planners, architects, and other professionals. Representational space or lived space relies on the individualized and subjective experience of a specific place that is shaped by symbols, images, and personal emotions. Spatial practice or perceived space is the physical organization of a location. This triad operates simultaneously and produces spatial cultures. Hence, as Lefebvre posits, a space then becomes a product and a means of production. If so, how are airports viewed as a product and a means of production? Relying on socially produced and constructed environments, how does movement affect human relations inside Changi and NAIA? This section explores the two sites through the lens of Lefebvre’s spatial triad by focusing on representational spaces because it highlights airport images that aid in passenger movement and the emotions and lived experiences that these visuals generate while traversing the spatial configurations of Changi and NAIA. The general lived experiences of passengers are highlighted in this section to articulate how spatial layout and design dictate mobility or immobility inside airports. It explores how these cases reflect the bigger economic movements of these two nations.

### *Constricted Flows: Infrastructural Obstacles and the Ninoy Aquino International Airport*

Spatial practice or the perceived space involves human activities in certain social spaces. This includes production, utilization, control, and movements of appropriation. Airports typically operate

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<sup>30</sup>Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (New Jersey: Wiley, 1992).

through a template, an almost generic system of checks, controls, and categorizations. Hence, the flow of such functions involves strategies, policies, and instructions that ideally construct an efficient movement within the aviation network. The case of NAIA is already a representational space once aircraft arrive. “*Mabuhay! Maligayang paglapag sa Paliparang Pandaigdig ng Ninoy Aquino.*” [Welcome! We have just landed at Ninoy Aquino International Airport.] As the plane taxis and heads toward the disembarkation gate, problems in passenger experience are already manifested. Frequently, due to heavy air traffic and limited runway, the aircraft takes an additional 20 to 30 minutes at the tarmac waiting for a designated disembarkation gate. Passengers encounter unnecessary fatigue and exhaustion as they anticipate the arrival procedures after proper disembarkation. Sometimes, passengers are asked to disembark in the middle of the tarmac, either to walk or ride a bus to reach the terminal. This becomes challenging for passengers with bigger luggage, or passengers with disabilities. These seemingly minute aspects, when taken aggregately, affect the larger air traffic situation. From operating over and above its capacity, the national airspace can also shut down abruptly due to “critical technical issues.” For instance, on New Year’s Day in 2023, “a power outage at the Philippines’ Air Traffic Management Center has led to a total closure of the country’s airspace...forcing a flurry of flight delays and cancellations.”<sup>31</sup>

These two cases reflect the overall infrastructure problem plaguing the airport. In terms of its current design (representations of space), the two parallel runways are inadequate to service the number of flights (departing and arriving) designated at NAIA. Moreover, the passenger terminals are also deficient in catering to the number of passengers and aircraft, both inbound and outbound. These situations block the movements of social subjects, creating a constriction of flow as manifested by long queues in check-in counters, immigration and security checks, customs, and even baggage retrieval. Edwards argues that airports function on the basis of traffic forecasts: “Many airports

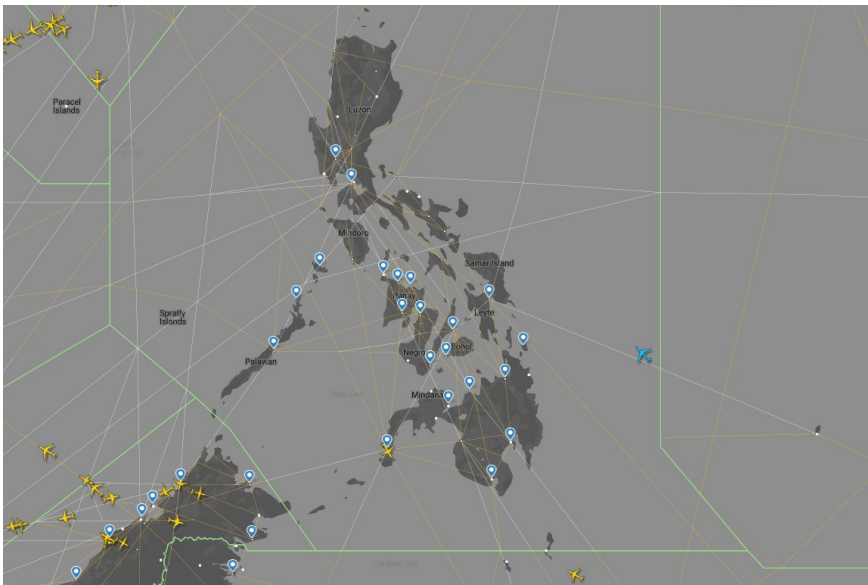
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<sup>31</sup>Alfred Chua, “Technical snag forces Philippines airspace closure on New Year’s Day,” *Flight Global*, January 1, 2023, <https://www.flightglobal.com/air-transport/technical-snap-forces-philippines-airspace-closure-on-new-years-day/151497.article>.

experience passenger or airspace overcrowding for limited periods of the year and this normally justifies expansion.’<sup>32</sup> However, the expansion strategies of NAIA fail to address the root of the problems. Such mismanagement of an iconic and major transport infrastructure that represents and services the capital region is a blatant reflection of the lapses in administering not only the airport but the governing of cities, provinces, and even the nation. Moreover, these problems that disrupt the supposedly efficient flow in NAIA – ridiculous interrogations by immigration officers, limited desks available for airport services, lack of properly functioning service facilities, pest infestation, and the bribery and exploitation issues with customs officers (to name a few) – merely legitimized the eventual privatization of the airport. Thus, the argument of Edwards in terms of justifying the expansion of airports also includes an expansion of private power retained by the elite.

**Figure 1**

Closure of Philippine airspace on 1 January 2023 due to technical issues.  
(From Aviation Updates PH)



<sup>32</sup>Edwards, 40.

Aaltola describes the hub-and-spoke aspect of international airports and posits that inside international airports located in the Global North, dwell time is a privilege rather than an inconvenience. She states that “the notion of stop-and-go movement provides a tool for the fuller appreciation of the airport experience.”<sup>33</sup> However, this argument fails to recognize the anxiety experienced by passengers when their movements across airports are impeded not just by airport authorities but by failures in terms of logistical operations. This is reflected in how NAIA handles transit flights. Transferring passengers rely on signs from the transfer desk to the next terminal for proper movement. In airport geography, it is normally understood that terminals under one complex are interconnected. The four terminals of NAIA, however, are not linked by any efficient mode of transfer. While transfer desks provide hourly bus transfers, another hindrance occurs when a passenger lacks ample time to move from one terminal to the next. If a passenger rides a cab or a public bus, heavy traffic adds another 40 to 50 minutes. Hence, transfer functions in NAIA produce a social space that is inept for transiting passengers with limited time. The problems in the airport mirror the urban difficulties of Metro Manila. The congested city of around 13.5 million is serviced only by three railway transit lines. Since the time of Marcos, Sr., Filipinos imagined and fantasized that Metro Manila is the country’s “Big Apple.” Metro Manila continues to “expand geographically to reach its present metropolitan status.”<sup>34</sup> However, this economic development translates to years of migration, displacement, congestion, and marginalization. In a sense, the airport is the city, in as much as the city is the airport.

An important dimension of the rich ambiance created by air terminal designs involves the sign systems that function as the information net for passengers. While all interior commercial spaces require sign systems to steer customers through the environment in

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<sup>33</sup>Mika Aaltola, “The International Airport: The Hub-and-Spoke Pedagogy of the American Empire,” *Global Networks* 5, no. 3 (2005): 274.

<sup>34</sup>Isidoro Malaque III and Makoto Yokohari, “Urbanization Process and the Changing Agricultural Landscape Pattern in the Urban Fringe of Metro Manila, Philippines,” *Environment and Urbanization* 19, no. 1 (2007): 197.



the most functional manner, airports differ from themed environments because “their interiors must perform this task in an exemplary manner.”<sup>35</sup> In NAlA, signs and information monitors are situated in poorly located places that make them difficult to read because of low ceilings and passenger crowds. This accreted airport terminal suffers from signs with poor legibility, making it challenging for passengers to find the functions they need. As seen in the image below, the placement of instructional signs that provide directions toward immigration, boarding gates, and elevators are situated on a side that can only be visible if a passenger is coming from one specific direction of the departure lobby. The font sizes used in the texts are insufficient, making it difficult for passengers to read the signs. The sizes of the promotional advertisements above are more visible than the instructional signs that are supposed to aid passengers. Sign systems “must facilitate the quick movement of passengers despite the source of disorientation.”<sup>36</sup> Disorientation is a primary consequence when an infrastructure is illegible. Legibility in terms of urban design means that a city (or any aspect of the city) is relatively easy to read and comprehend by virtue of its clear spatial structure and physical form.<sup>37</sup> This clarity of urban form enables users to form a clear mental map or image of a city. Thus, if an airport is a city in itself and its operations are informed by the immediate city that it serves, then the legibility of one affects and reflects the legibility of the other. The legibility of an airport informs not only the efficiency of movements inside a limited space but also the overall impact on the nation’s economy.

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<sup>35</sup>Mark Gottdiener, *Life in the Air: Surviving the New Culture of Air Travel*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001), 75.

<sup>36</sup>Gottdiener, 77.

<sup>37</sup>Emine Koseoglu and Deniz Erinsel Onder, “Subjective and Objective Dimensions of Spatial Legibility,” *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences* 30 (2011): 1191.

**Figure 2**

Departure lobby of NAIA-Terminal 3, toward the airside.



There are ‘special’ lanes for overseas Filipino workers (OFW) in all three terminals of NAIA. From their point of embarkation, as they enter the airport premises, signs of OFW lanes are almost in every corner of the departure and arrival halls. These lanes are supposed to expedite the movement of OFWs. The dollar remittances they send home sustain the national economy. They also have the Labor Assistance Center of the Philippine Overseas Employment Agency (POEA) to assist them in handling their Overseas Employment Certificate (OEC) and other travel documents to be checked and validated. This office is located near the entrance of the departure lobby. OECs function as exit clearances and exempt OFWs from paying travel taxes and terminal fees. Passengers departing for holidays or leisure are expected to have a privileged position. Such passengers are treated with dignity and respect, while the supposed economic heroes of the country are oftentimes abused and exploited. At the onset, these special lanes are installed to generate an emotion of exclusivity, but in reality, these lanes consolidate OFWs and make it easier to exploit such passengers. Because of the exponential number of OFWs departing the country on

an hourly basis, the terminals become more congested and OFWs are unjustly blamed instead of the airport management.

**Figure 3**

OFW lanes are provided for labor migrants in all four terminals of NAIA. (Rappler)



In the arrival halls, OFWs occupy considerable space in the baggage carousels because of their *balikbayan* boxes and large luggage. They return to the Philippines with treats and souvenirs for their families, relatives, and friends after years or even decades of not seeing them. In the case of Terminal 1, the building fails to accommodate passengers coming from intercontinental flights. Larger aircraft from the Middle East, Northern America, and Europe containing most OFWs, carry around 300-400 passengers. As these passengers reach customs check, they are assigned a different lane where airport officials can bribe or extort money from OFWs. With all these negotiations and abuses occurring and limited counters offering services, choke points plague the terminal, producing unnecessary spaces of immobility.

This has been the complaint of OFWs leaving the country: they are treated differently by airport staff because they know that not all OFWs are well-educated or are from the provinces. They blame the OFWs that this is the reason why they do not know the processes involved in Manila. Just like in my experience with the lady and the

immigration officer, these staff members inside NAIA feel that they can bully these OFWs primarily because they are ‘just’ OFWs. This contradicts the whole concept of taking care of our premiere export product. The way they are treated inside the airport terminals may also reflect how most of them are treated outside the country by their employers. According to the International Labor Organization, almost 70% of travelers going out of the country are OFWs. According to Salter, part of the general trends that structure the contemporary dilemmas of global airports is the increase in passenger volume. For him, the increase of passenger flows, alongside simultaneous pressure for low-priced travel—represented by the growth in number of flights per day and the enlarged body size of aircraft—places “two oppositional pressures on airports to both increase the efficiency of movement and extract the maximum levy possible from those passing through the airport by using forced waiting zones.”<sup>38</sup> It is rather ironic that the Philippines relies on foreign labor migration as an economic engine and source of jobs and yet the primary infrastructure that facilitates their movement remains decrepit and plagued with inefficiency, harassment cases, and exploitation issues. Moreover, the supposed modern-day heroes – the OFWs – confront these problems the most.

### *Perpetual Motion and Advancement: Hyper-efficiency and the Changi International Airport*

Singapore has functioned as an importer of ideas, technologies, and economies.<sup>39</sup> The city-state thrives on the inflow of investments. As such, Singapore relies heavily on its dense networks of connections across oceans and timelines. Bok argues that Singapore’s operations are “[hinged] on Changi both as a monument crucial to nation-building and a critical link to the global economy.”<sup>40</sup> Hence, this dependence on importation warrants efficient, almost seamless airport operations.

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<sup>38</sup>Mark Salter, “The Global Airport: Managing Space, Speed, and Security,” in *Politics at the Airport*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 1.

<sup>39</sup>T.C. Chang, “Tourism Unbounded: Mobilities and Border Crossings in Singapore,” *Asian Journal of Tourism Research* 1, no. 1 (2016): 100.

<sup>40</sup>Rachel Bok, “Airports on the move? The Policy Mobilities of Singapore Changi Airport at Home and Abroad,” *Urban Studies* 52, no. 14 (2015): 2725.

Changi, for decades, upheld this expectation and continuously strived to attain and sustain aviation supremacy. Its aviation industry functions as a key component in supporting its robust and vigorous economy. This has been proven when, in 2020, the government devoted US\$84 million to Singapore's aviation sector "to cope with the impact of COVID-19" and "[to] revive Singapore's air hub, preparing it for the recovery of air travel."<sup>41</sup> While the rest of the world attempted to strategize ways how to curb the effects of the pandemic, Singapore already ensured that its aviation industry has a financial margin to survive and recover from the pandemic. For instance, it immediately established schemes and policies that would enable travelers from selected economies to enter the city-state. In September 2021, Singapore launched their Vaccinated Travel Lanes (VTLs), facilitating quarantine-free travel for fully vaccinated individuals between Singapore and the respective economy, "marking a sustained phase of recovery in air travel and volumes to Singapore."<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, the resumption of large-scale events such as the Formula One Race, the Singapore FinTech Festival, the Food and Hotel Asia Trade Event, and the Singapore Food Festival will "spur inbound travel demand and support the recovery of aviation- and tourism-related sectors in Singapore."<sup>43</sup> Extensive efforts are made to host international events and expos. For Singapore, these are indispensable initiatives to maintain its status as a regional and even a global hub for culture and the arts. Hence, the city-state assures that Changi, a symbol and

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<sup>41</sup>Toh Ting Wei, "Singapore's aviation sector to get \$84 million in additional support to cope with impact of Covid-19," *The Straits Times*, December 29, 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/transport/aviation-sector-to-get-84-million-in-additional-support-to-cope-with-impact-of>.

<sup>42</sup>Mavis Teo, "As Singapore's travel restrictions ease and more VTLs launch, are people happy that the city state is reopening to the world?" *The South China Morning Post*, November 19, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/travel-leisure/article/3156543/singapores-travel-restrictions-ease-and-more-vtls-launch>.

<sup>43</sup>Andrew Chia and Joel Lee, "Recovery of Air Travel and Tourism in Singapore," *Economic Survey of Singapore* (Ministry of Trade and Industry), August 11, 2022, [https://www.mti.gov.sg/-/media/MTI/Resources/Economic-Survey-of-Singapore/2022/Economic-Survey-of-Singapore-Second-Quarter-2022/BA\\_2Q22.pdf](https://www.mti.gov.sg/-/media/MTI/Resources/Economic-Survey-of-Singapore/2022/Economic-Survey-of-Singapore-Second-Quarter-2022/BA_2Q22.pdf).

representation of their nation and nationhood, welcomes global delegations by demonstrating efficiency and seamless mobility.

These are just some of the vital aspects of why Singapore consistently fashioned its aviation hubs to be as efficient and economical as possible. Their continuous pursuit of seamless networks and processes is reflected in their aviation operations and infrastructure. Being one of the busiest international airports in the world even changes within the overall operations will create an impact. For instance, in September 2023, they introduced another policy to make the airport experience smoother. Officials announced that they will introduce “automated immigration clearance” that allows passengers to depart and arrive at the city-state without passports.<sup>44</sup> According to Josephine Teo, Minister for Communications and Information, the use of biometric technology (end-to-end biometric clearance) will “reduce the need for passengers to repeatedly present their travel documents at touch points and allow for more seamless and convenient processing.”<sup>45</sup> This is in connection with their vested confidence that the number of inbound travelers will return to pre-pandemic statistics and continue to increase thereafter. In a way, this again reflects the level of seamlessness of travel that begins and culminates in airport spaces. While this passport-less travel may sound simplistic, it is the logistical and operational procedures in place that prove how networks and security infrastructures in Singapore’s Changi Airport are well established and supported. This is crucial because security and immigration aspects are also critically deliberated. Hence, it can be said that the fundamental procedures, policies, and processes are already established which is why it is not difficult for Singapore to finalize such decisions.

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<sup>44</sup>Heather Chen, “This world class airport will soon go passport-free,” *CNN*, September 20, 2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/travel/article/changi-airport-singapore-passport-free-travel-intl-hnk/index.html>.

<sup>45</sup>Harry Suhartono, “You will soon be able to depart from Changi airport without a passport,” *The Economic Times*, September 19, 2023, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/nri/visit/you-will-soon-be-able-to-depart-from-changi-airport-without-a-passport/articleshow/103781842.cms?from=mdr>.



**Figure 4**

Newly installed automated immigration clearance system at Changi Airport. (Changi website)



Due to consistent development in terms of terminal capacity, runway expansion, and airport logistics design, Changi operates not only as a symbolic portal to Singapore but for millions of its citizens, “Changi is Singapore.”<sup>46</sup> Upon reaching any of the terminal buildings, passengers are presented with signs that expedite passenger movement. In Changi, when a passenger has limited time for transferring flights, express lanes or services escort them to ensure they arrive at the boarding gates on time. The four terminals are connected via Sky Train. Passengers also have the option to walk because these terminals are also linked by sky bridges and walkways that converge into Changi's prized architectural icon: the Jewel Changi. Even passenger dwell time is made easier to bear because of lush gardens, merchandise shops, and other entertainment facilities offered by the terminal complex. Changi was designed to cater to efficiency. This was also how Singapore was planned. It has an efficient subway transit system and a public utility vehicle system. The flows within the urban landscape of Singapore reflect the efficient flow inside Changi. It is such a beautiful irony that

<sup>46</sup>Nirmal Kishnani, *Changi by Design: Architecture of the World's Best Airport* (Singapore: Page One Publishing, 2002), 26.

one of the busiest and biggest air hubs in the world operates in one of the smallest countries. This is how Singapore’s vision of being a global city started. It began with the vision of Singapore’s architect, Lee Kuan Yew, and repositioning the city-state not only as a globalized city but as a garden city. His aesthetic vision of the city-state trickled toward the overall design philosophy of Changi. While for many passengers, the quickest time spent inside an airport is always the best experience, Changi has been considered a destination in itself, boasting artificial gardens, shopping malls, and other facilities that articulate both the airport and the city-state: “holistic efforts to use sophisticated planning, green regulations, iconic architecture, and constant reinvention to enhance livability.”<sup>47</sup>

**Figure 5**

Panoramic view of a *seamless* Changi Airport Complex. (Changi website)



In Tan’s view, while globalization is unavoidable and necessary for Singapore’s long-term economic vibrancy, it is important to have the best management strategies in place to maintain long-term social stability and support the base of Singapore’s economy. Singapore could benefit from being in the core of Southeast Asia, a “large emerging market region that is attracting huge investments.”<sup>48</sup> Of equal importance to Singapore’s economic achievement is a set of sound macroeconomic policies aimed at “maintaining an environment conducive for long-

<sup>47</sup>Safdie Architects, *Jewel Changi Airport* (Melbourne: The Images Publishing Group, 2020), 11.

<sup>48</sup>Howell and Howell, 544.



term investment in the economy.<sup>149</sup> The two airports may represent the efficiency and economic status of the two cities. Passengers arriving at the terminal, disembarking from flights, or requiring aircraft transfers must be able to negotiate the space of the airport terminal with ease and rapidity. The sign systems of terminals, therefore, are quite explicit in their denotative content.

**Figure 6**

Sample signage inside Terminal 2 of Changi. (Changi website)



As soon as passengers disembark from the aircraft, Changi already leads them through the signs and posts. The first arrows that an alighting passenger sees are for arrivals, transfers, and directions to the other terminals. One can never get lost inside Changi. Signs are everywhere to make sure that flows and movements inside the airport are smooth and efficient, all the time. Signs are also found in many parts of the airport containing the amount of time a passenger needs in order to get to another place or terminal. Moreover, these signs also reflect the various services offered by Changi to passengers that create the whole experience of *passing through* something worthwhile to remember.

<sup>149</sup>Economic Development Board (EDB), *Singapore Unlimited: Singapore in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Singapore: EDB, 1995), 42.

Good airline terminals are, above all, “easy places to negotiate the tasks of embarking, disembarking, and transferring to connecting flights.”<sup>50</sup> This legibility of the airport is also manifested in the legibility of the city-state. Furthermore, it is not only the terminals that are seamlessly linked; Changi is efficiently connected to the rest of the island. Their success in these tasks is due largely to the effective functioning of sign systems inside and outside the airport vicinities. Changi has monitors that are easily accessed by pedestrian passengers. Airport management situates these monitors in strategic places that make it easier for passengers to read. There is always the presence of airport ground staff in every functional area of the airport. In a way, these layouts assure passengers that at any given point, help can easily be sought. These small details all add up to why Changi is the leading global hub in terms of performance and mobility.

Today, Changi Airport’s operations and global stature are a testament to a specific brand of Singaporean efficiency and reliability, proven by its superior aviation infrastructure and facilities. As Landis argues, Changi is a monument that reminds infrastructure engineers and urban planners that “megaproject investments should be as much about responding to human aspirations as they are about achieving greater efficiency and economic scale.”<sup>51</sup> Their drive to further advance their financial, economic, and commercial supremacy in the region became dependent upon land reclamation. This resulted in various social uproars from neighboring Southeast Asian nations. How much is Singapore willing to risk and sacrifice to maintain its aviation status?

## CONCLUSION

Airport space lends itself to a reading of how social spaces are created through different modes of production. In NAIA, the concept of the privileged traveler versus the OFW comes into play. The layout of

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<sup>50</sup>Bok, 2725.

<sup>51</sup>John Landis, “Singapore’s Jewel Changi Airport: Always Raising the Bar,” in *Megaprojects for Megacities: A Comparative Casebook*, edited by John Landis (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2022), 345.

the departure lounge, for instance, already filters those whose primary aim in travel is either leisure or work. The supposedly “special” lanes are merely special so that the OFWs will not feel “othered.” In Changi, aimed at maintaining its global position as one of the best (if not the best) aviation hubs, the social space produced is that of keeping in tune with the overall projection of Singapore – an economic and financial market to easily attract investors. The two Southeast Asian international airports, though very different, have constructed spatial practices through their physical layout. It reflected how they manage movement inside the airport. Since the airport is a space of control, passengers need to follow these strict sets of policies. Because of the physical layout, movements and flows are set, but in the end, the management and organization of these spaces spelled out the stark difference between the two airports. Not only did it show a unique strategy of airports when it comes to handling mobility, but more importantly, it also reflected the wider view of the two capitals in terms of globalization.

The efficiency and performance of airports as evidenced by their architectural layouts reflect the socioeconomic positions of the two cities in a globalized world; Singapore, has a seamless network of structured urban rhythms and cosmopolitan flows, all converging into this small city-state that is already a globally acknowledged, economic giant; and Manila, a congested port city, where movements are constrained because of mismanagement and misplaced bureaucracy, thus opportunities diverge elsewhere.

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