

Book Reviews

ASIA COMPARATIVE/TRANSNATIONAL SINGLE-BOOK ESSAYS

Airport Urbanism: Infrastructure and Mobility in Asia. By MAX HIRSH. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 2016. vii, 157 pp. ISBN: 9780816696109 (paper).
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This well-written monograph uses airport infrastructure development as an innovative lens for understanding cross-border mobilities and their embedding in broader social, spatial, and economic changes in five East and Southeast Asian cities. Focusing on the under-researched but exponentially growing “*nouveaux globalisés*” (non-elite travelers), Max Hirsh aims to offer a reconceptualization of the relationship between mobility, transport infrastructure, and urbanism, and a humanities-based methodology adapted to study rapidly developing urban environments. *Airport Urbanism’s* introduction draws on existing scholarship (in the fields of mobility and urban infrastructure) and on Hirsh’s own biographical details to explain what airport urbanism is.

Chapter 1 discusses three infrastructure projects in Hong Kong, namely the Airport Express (high-speed train), the Airbus network, and the Tung Chung subway. The train’s underperformance illustrates what happens when infrastructure is not adapted to the changing demographic profile of travelers. The cheaper double-decker “Airbuses,” which connect the airport with many of Hong Kong’s districts, are much more popular. Finally, the Tung Chung Line, built to shuttle airport employees between Tung Chung New Town and Hong Kong station, turns out to be used by many locals who do not want to travel on the expensive train. These examples serve as evidence that transport infrastructure is used and adapted in ways that were “neither intended by planners nor detected by scholars” (p. 49).

The second chapter draws on an analysis of SkyPier, a Pearl River Delta “upstream” check-in terminal, to contrast over-researched iconic airport architecture with “un-iconic” (unspectacular) air transportation facilities. The fact that mainland Chinese can fly through Hong Kong International Airport, bypassing Hong Kong’s customs and immigration procedures, forces us to rethink the concept of borders. The described messy nature of mobility and infrastructure is “endemic to situations where overarching political ideologies are not, or are no longer, consonant with socioeconomic realities on the ground” (p. 72).

Chapter 3 zooms in on the Shenzhen airport’s cross-boundary shuttle bus system (particularly at Shenzhen Bay) as an illustration of the crucial role of international mobility in the development of “special border zones.” In this case, aviation infrastructure

reflects the tension between Shenzhen's aspirations to become as "cosmopolitan" as neighboring Hong Kong and the limitations imposed by regional and national security regimes on the cross-border mobility of its residents.

The last chapter deals with budget air travel and how it has reshaped social and spatial dynamics in Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok, and Singapore. Hirsh covers three modes of engagement with low-cost aviation, namely "entrepreneurial populism, trickle-down infrastructure, and future-city science fiction" (p. 107). The first is perhaps best evoked by AirAsia's slogan "Now Everyone Can Fly." The demand for budget travel gave rise to new low-profile technologies, such as low-cost travel centers. The "science fiction" refers to the painful gap between the technocratic elite's utopian visions of airports as "first-class hubs" and the chaotic reality of socioeconomic inequality. This situation "demands a fundamental reevaluation of prevailing planning mechanisms and design techniques" (p. 135).

In the conclusion, Hirsh connects the various case studies through three interrelated themes: (1) the absence of coordination between the various actors designing and managing cross-border mobility; (2) the contrast between the everyday experience of cross-border mobility and the utopian visions held by planners and architects; and (3) the branching of the middle class into an expanding mobile global group and a shrinking immobile local group. The author reminds the reader how profound the impact of changing transportation and migration regimes can be on people's cross-border mobilities and ends by giving some concrete recommendations for urban policy, design, and research.

Throughout the book, Hirsh combines visual analysis (from design) with archival and site-specific ethnographic approaches (from the humanities). While this has the obvious advantage of covering the topic from refreshingly different angles, some specialist readers may have the feeling that the discussion remains too superficial (according to the disciplinary taste). Reading this monograph as an anthropologist, for instance, I noticed how the author's own positionality sometimes gets in the way when trying to represent the point of view of the different groups of people under study. The conclusion, rather disappointingly, advances a rather essentializing (and, thus, problematic) binary of "mobiles" versus "immobiles." What exactly does mobility and immobility mean here for the different actors involved? More engagement with the latest scholarship in (critical) mobility studies would possibly have led to a more nuanced position.

These remarks raise the question of whom the intended audience of *Airport Urbanism* is. Given the expert nature of the topics, scholars and advanced graduate students would be the first target group. In this respect, though, it is remarkable that the book contains no reference list. Hirsh also has a clear message for policy makers, urban planners, and architects, but a monograph is probably not the best format to reach these publics. Despite these reservations, *Airport Urbanism* is certainly a book worth reading, by everybody with an interest in mobility and transport (broadly defined), to understand the urban development challenges that lay ahead in Asia and beyond.

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