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## Place and Placelessness

As airports become cyberized and malled up, the downtown cities they serve become increasingly redundant to the business traveler. Travel will be reduced to an essence of inoffensive white space: the airport, the airplane, the airport, the airplane, the airport again.

Richard Rayner, 1998

The travelers' environment is interpenetrated by global connections and commercial modes of marketing from companies around the world. Among the characteristics of this cultural implosion is the phenomenon of world-scale franchising, which leads to ubiquitous marketing of name brands. Global franchising and mass media marketing now structure what people from every society consider to be a normative purchase to satisfy a particular need. This is especially true for consumer items such as video players, computers, cameras, clothing, packaged vacations, watches, scarves, household appliances, and sports equipment, as well as fast food. These ubiquitous commodities increasingly comprise the content of our emergent global consumer culture.

The air traveler moves through an environment containing this consumer global culture comprised of franchised stores, rental cars, commodities, and services that seem the same just about everywhere. Architect Rem Koolhaas calls this milieu "nowhere architecture." "Anyone can visit Benetton anywhere on Earth; in Slovenia you can rent a Daewoo from Hertz," says Koolhaas. "It's not necessary to buy presents when traveling because the same things are for sale everywhere" (Copeland 1994). In addition, you can buy a McDonald's hamburger in

Orange County, California, or Madrid, Spain, or Tokyo, Japan, and experience the very same kind of built environment in all three places.

Much earlier than the recent spate of writings celebrating our mobile society, the geographer Edward Relph (1984) wrote about the proliferation of new spatial forms, characterizing them in terms of "place and placelessness." By this he meant that, on the one hand, the architectural reworking of commercial spaces has produced a host of environments that are familiar everywhere, like the franchised stores discussed above. These locations are endowed with *placelessness*. On the other hand, everyday life has provided particular locations with distinctive characteristics that are relatively unique. These locations represent the quality of *place*—they possess a sense of place.

Relph's "placelessness" and Koolhaas's "nowhere architecture" are both experienced at airports and through air travel. At the terminal, we recognize brands of food and coffee franchised in our own neighborhoods. Airport mall shops sell merchandise that is all very familiar from countless hours of watching television and exposure to forms of mass media advertising. Flying has become routine. Frequent travel makes the journey 35,000 feet high a blasé experience. We know about safety measures, airline food, entertainment options, and, absent the unexpected, how to pass the time. On arrival, even to an unknown foreign country, we know that we need to negotiate the terminal space and make our way to ground transportation before reaching our hotel. In short, air travel has not only become commonplace through experience, but is now a part of our emerging global culture, structured by mass advertising, franchising, and the Internet. Air travel may be the very symbol of that worldwide culture.

However, Relph was wrong to create a dichotomy between place and placelessness because there are always elements of both in any milieu. Every good building must foster a sense of place even if it is designed to do other things as



*That venerable institution, the airport bar, provides people with a sense of place because bars are a familiar part of sociality in daily life.*

well. Every location contains within it spatial markers and a cultural style that make it a definitive location, a material realm within which people interact, linger, and live. Airports are a new kind of space that provides portals to the realms of both place *and* placelessness. The best airports are designed, not as minimalist structures or "nowhere architecture," but as distinct spaces that allow people to enjoy, relax, and interact within an environment that captures the imaginative realm of flight.

The airport is a new kind of space, a new kind of experience, and a remodeling of some very old aspects of the built environment. New terminal designs make them so interesting and attractive that they have become places in their own right, even if they are principally meant as transition spaces for the new "vectored" social practices. While terminals, for instance, are exemplars of the new environments housing people on the move, many passengers actually spend more time within airport facilities per trip than they do at the bank or even the supermarket. We just don't think of them that way.

what is place?

and placelessness?

what can be characterized  
as either for in this place

transition space