Chapter 16

From process to pleasure

Raymond Turner
British Airports Authority
There is a recognition by airport operator BAA that its business is not just about providing places for aircraft to use but is also about moving millions of people and managing their expectations. T5, Heathrow airport’s new terminal, will not just be a landmark building but a role model of inclusive design and instinctive wayfinding.

By 2012 there will be twice as many people flying, which means at least twice as many people in the airport terminal building. In the next few years the equivalent of the population of China will pass through BAA’s seven UK airports, which include Heathrow, Gatwick, Stansted and Southampton in the South and Glasgow, Edinburgh and Aberdeen in Scotland.

Even for the most experienced traveller the scale and complexity of the modern airport terminal makes it hard to find your way around. Add the physical impairments that result from ageing and the airport experience becomes a truly daunting prospect.

In common with most other airports around the world, BAA’s terminal buildings were never designed with inclusivity as a priority. It’s fair to say that they seem to have been designed by (and apparently for) young, fit and able-bodied architects. As a result BAA has had to retrofit accessibility into its older buildings and there is a practical limit to what can be done.

Space has also been a severely limiting factor. With the exception of Stansted, BAA’s terminal buildings have grown exponentially but have had limited room in which to expand. Heathrow airport has always been particularly constrained for space. As a result, BAA has had to become expert at squeezing new facilities into whatever spaces happen to be available, adapting existing spaces to new purposes and shoe-horning new activities into existing areas. This inevitably makes wayfinding more difficult and has led to a reliance on signposting to make up for the shortcomings of the built environment.

The problem of wayfinding gets exaggerated the bigger the scale of the building and they don’t come much bigger than T5 – the proposed new terminal for Heathrow. T5 will be the biggest terminal building in Europe, 5 times the size of the terminal at Stansted airport and, with a baggage hall 1/4 mile long, it will easily be the biggest facility that BAA has ever built.

As large as it is, even T5 will be constrained. Following the public inquiry the site shrank to within the existing Heathrow ‘unofficial’