

Robert Sommer Plays with Airports

by Ralph Keyes

It's amazing what you can do with a bunch of chairs. Nothing



When he has time to kill between flights, Robert Sommer rearranges airport seats. He has discovered that the straight rows of chairs in airports are seldom fixed permanently to the floor and not always to each other. The only reason they're left in rows is that that's the way they're left. To Sommer, this isn't reason enough.

Once he had a couple of extra hours in the San Francisco airport. So Sommer started pulling seats apart and putting them in circles. The psychologist's thought was to encourage human community, make it easier for people to talk. His field notes tell what actually happened:

"1:35 p.m. I made . . . two circles with approximately 5 chairs each out of one straight row of 10 chairs.

"A couple came into the room a few minutes later and they occupied two of the chairs. The lady however moved hers back from a corner-to-corner arrangement so that she was sitting alongside her husband.

"2:10 Two ladies arrived and sat in the liberated zone but again moved the two chairs from corner to corner so that they were alongside one another!

"2:15 Interaction between two

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new couples who walked in and now stand at the window. They remained at the window conversing and ignored the chairs which I put in a conversational arrangement. (At this point, I am terribly discouraged—those who did sit in the two circles moved the chairs side by side.)

"I don't know what to make of this experience . . . it is like the old days in the mental hospital where we moved the chairs away from the walls out to the center of the room around tables. The patients were the first ones to move the chairs back against the walls 'where they belonged.' I think the same thing happened here. . . . People just naturally expect to converse side by side in an airport waiting area—that is how the chairs belong—the usual becomes the sacred—certainly discouraging."

Robert Sommer is an expert on the psychology of human environments. In several books (*Personal Space, Design Awareness, Tight Spaces*) he has taken the position that buildings should be pleasant to inhabit as well as nice to look at. This unconventional stand pits him against building architects who produce sculpture, and owners who dream of prisonlike security. Sommer thinks it peculiar that the more prisons fail by their own standards, the greater seems to be their inspiration for other settings. Airports for example. "Many other buildings," he writes, "such as mental hospitals and jails, also discourage contact between people, but none does this as effectively as the airport."

Sommer thinks this is a shame. "Airports used to be romantic places!" he exclaims. "Airports used to be fun places! Kids used to be taken to airports on school trips! But the romance has gone out."

With his pointed goatee and thick, black-rimmed glasses, Robert Som-

mer suggests a mad scientist more than a mad social scientist. Or possibly a good-humored Trotsky in Wallabees. Make no mistake: this man is a romantic, a dreamer. Robert Sommer not only believes airports should be more pleasant, he even once suggested to a Holiday Inn manager that they set up "Friendship Tables" for those who don't like eating alone. Sommer also engaged recently in a quixotic attempt to walk between terminals at the Dallas/Fort Worth airport. As one might expect, such a man's proposals for airport reform have rather a utopian ring.

"Why not make them nice places?" asks Sommer. "Places that people want to come to? Why not have nightclubs inside? Or rooms to rent for parties. Free movies. Exciting shops. Why not softer chairs? Why not better carpets?"

Sommer spun this fantasy for me in his second-floor office at the University of California at Davis, where he is professor of psychology and environmental studies and until recently chairman of the psychology department. Taking me to a room across the hall, Sommer put a carousel of slides on a projector. This is a horror show of airport scenes that he uses to illustrate lectures on the topic. In the slides, single bodies twist grotesquely in fixed seats; whole lines of bodies lean back and forth, like swaying worshipers, trying to talk; kids entertain themselves at insurance machines; and slick, eerie walkways mock the shuffling feet of old people.

A rare scene is of four soldiers chatting face-to-face. On their own they'd figured out airport chairs can be moved. More common is the picture of six youths lined up straight as students, straining to keep up a conversation. After taking this picture, Sommer asked the group why they didn't turn their seats to face each other. "It hadn't occurred to

them," he recalls. "Institutional mentality."

Back in his office, Sommer dumped a file box on the desk and began peeling apart its contents for me to examine. Included in the box were architects' reports, airport field notes, students' seminar papers on air-terminal usage and dittoed airport-user questionnaires. Sommer told me that the majority of those filling out this questionnaire find airports cold, sterile and inhospitable. Most also wish it were otherwise.

But I wondered if people don't say this mostly because it sounds right. Isn't it possible that we crave the isolation of an airport but think this wouldn't be Christian to admit?

"No, no," Sommer replied, jerking forward in his chair. "In fact, it's the other way around. You're not supposed to express dislikes. As a psychologist, I assure you that many users of airports not only *would* want to meet people but most defi-

nately *do* want to meet people."

But the problem, he went on, is that there simply is no incentive to make airports sociable, or even pleasant. If anything, there is a disincentive: concession income is a basic source of airport revenue; the more comfortable people feel in waiting areas, the less likely it is they'll get up to buy a mai tai or copy of the *National Enquirer*.

So the real incentive is to make an airport waiting area the sort of place you love to leave. Seats are provided grudgingly and with priorities higher than comfort. One priority is to make sure nobody falls asleep. To this end, fixed armrests are provided. Another priority is to help the custodians by attaching seats together in straight rows that are easily swept around. (Sommer feels custodians in general wield too much clout in the design of buildings.) A final priority is to make sure furniture doesn't get stolen or vandalized by making it heavy,

fastened together and sometimes battered down.

The result is a setting without warmth or character. "Airports are probably the ultimate of placelessness," Sommer has written. "The placeless environment resists all efforts at personalization; it does not change in response to user inputs; a man can leave his litter but not his mark."

Reaching inside the debris on his desk, Sommer pulled out an ad for American Airlines. This is headed, "I ALWAYS THINK OF THE PASSENGERS AS EGGS." "That's the attitude," Sommer said, tapping the ad with his finger. "Passengers are like eggs. Crate 'em up and ship 'em."

In *Architectural Record*, an Eastern Airlines architect recently took pains to exception to Robert Sommer's lament. He made the point that airports were primarily "an instrument . . . for moving people" and questioned whether the opportunity for (Continued on page 152)

PLANE SPEAKING: A FEW MORE WORDS FROM THE PEOPLE WHO FLY

Mr. Kenneth, hairdresser

Airports are boring, dehumanizing, wall-to-wall polyester. I'd have hosts or hostesses, greeters, traffic directors—humans instead of announcements over the loudspeakers, and screens with flashing signs. The Las Vegas airport is appalling. They have recorded messages from comedians and comedienne—Joan Rivers, Rodney Dangerfield—joking and telling you to move to the right of the conveyor belt so that people can pass you on the left. I couldn't believe it. On top of everything else, the carpet is crawling up the wall.

Eliot Janeway, economist

I notice only one thing: how long it takes me to get in and out. I put all thoughts of luxury and congeniality out of my mind. I don't want to get sweated up or exhausted or suffocated, I want ingress and egress. The doctrine *nihil humani* doesn't apply. Why, what are you going to do, have better cafeterias for plastic food?

Beverly Sills, opera singer

I just ignore them. I just use them. I can't think what a single airport looks like. Just so long as the planes take off and land on time and the airport's not too hot or cold. They usually are too cold in the summer,

and I can get laryngitis between the gate and the limousine. Acoustically, the airports have done a marvelous job. I'm sensitive—noises bother me—but you can sit in a restaurant at Kennedy for two hours, with hundreds and hundreds of planes taking off, and you can't remember hearing anything. That's fantastic.

Kenneth Jay Lane, jewelry designer

They should have recreation at airports—a health club, a massage parlor, quick porno flicks, things where it doesn't matter at what point you walk in and out. You could show *The Stewardesses*.

John Healy, United Air Lines pilot

Airports were never designed for the convenience of passengers. People who fly know that an airport is runways, taxiways, light snow removal, good approach facilities and good maintenance. You could operate from a tent if you had to. I guess my favorite airport is Tampa—it's modern, automated and the shuttle trains work like gang busters. Very few pilots go through O'Hare without eating a hot dog at the hot dog stand. If they ever get a load of bad hot dogs they'll shut down several airlines. Philadelphia Terminal used to serve the best snapper soup, but

the rumor I've heard is that the people who made the soup have been indicted. The seafood gumbo in the Employees' Cafeteria in New Orleans airport is out of this world.

Arthur Hailey, novelist

Above all airports I like Chicago's O'Hare. The crème de la crème of air-traffic controllers are at O'Hare and New York. Expensive airport expansions should be halted. The public must accept some crowding, discomfort and delays in the interest of safety. Some airports have just gone silly with opulence; every time I go through Dallas/Fort Worth, I think of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. We've become spoiled, enough is enough, we should eschew frills and spend more money on air-traffic control. The most important part of an airport is the part the public doesn't see.

F. Lee Bailey, lawyer

Usually I've got a bunch of phone calls to make, and there's seldom a convenient place in airports to make them. You could do what I once tried—open businessman facilities, a little cubicle with a desk, a switchboard, a girl to place calls, instead of fooling around with dimes.

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(Continued from page 107) social contact was part of that purpose. When I showed Sommer a copy of this riposte, he read it eagerly, squirming in his chair, chuckling at such rejoinders and muttering some of his own. "Hmm. Oh. Now see, here he says, 'I have ridden the trains for years and have rarely spoken to a fellow commuter, let alone made his friendship.' I find that a sad statement. Kind of poignant. He's habituated to that kind of alienated setting."

With a partial exception (the design of a Seattle airport wing), Sommer says he's never been consulted officially about airport waiting areas. Yet he's not without hope that better ones will be built. And Sommer has evidence to support this hope. Among his slides are some taken at the Albuquerque airport, one of Sommer's favorites. Here, plush chairs are arranged around tables that

are handsomely inlaid with Mexican tile. About them, groups talk easily and sometimes play cards. There is also a lounge in the Albuquerque men's room, one of the few Sommer says he's seen anywhere. Other slides are of Denver's airport, with its reasonably priced shops, its poolroom and game room.

Until more such airports are built, Robert Sommer despairs of waiting-room sociability arising on its own. He feels that, like a lifer at home in his cell, we've come to accept the hideous as normal in airports without any hope of release. "Change requires reeducation of people," Sommer concluded his field notes on the San Francisco seat rearrange. "You don't do it simply by moving the chairs. People will use them in the old ways unless they are turned on to new possibilities and encouraged to use them." #