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Beyond the Terminal: Designing Airports as Integrated Economic and Mobility Hubs



Chukwuma Umeh
Team Leader, Urban Transport and Urban Development
Egis, KSA

Aviation & Airports



Across the region, airports are being reimagined as engines of economic growth. Realising that ambition depends on planning capacity, passenger experience, connectivity and commercial development as one system.

35 years
concession to operate, manage and develop

3 airports
Muscat International, Salalah and Sohar

5 october
concession signed by Oman's CAA and Oman Airports

2040
Oman Vision for economic diversification

On 5 October, Oman's Civil Aviation Authority and Oman Airports signed a 35-year concession to operate, manage and develop Muscat International, Salalah and Sohar airports. Beyond capacity and service quality, the agreement sets out a clear ambition: **to transform the airports into integrated logistics and commercial hubs that support economic diversification under Oman Vision 2040**.

It reflects a wider shift across the Middle East. **Airports are no longer judged only on how many passengers pass through their terminals**. They are also judged on the economic activity they generate around them, in logistics, tourism, business and the communities that grow alongside them. Getting that right takes more than a larger terminal. It requires a masterplan in which every element supports the others.

"It requires a masterplan in which every element supports the others."

From gateway to destination

The land around an airport is often among the most strategically valuable in a country. Logistics parks, free zones, maintenance facilities, hotels, offices and retail can all draw on the connectivity an airport provides. Together they create employment and revenue well beyond aeronautical charges.

That value is only realised when commercial development is **planned alongside the airport, not added around it late**r. Land use, access, utilities and phasing need to be considered together from the outset. Commercial districts can then grow in step with the airport, rather than competing with it for space, power or road capacity.

Capacity that grows with demand

Long-term concessions give operators something rare in infrastructure: **a planning horizon measured in decades**. That makes it possible to phase investment against clear traffic triggers. Terminals, stands and airside systems can expand as demand materialises, while land is protected for future runways, cargo facilities and commercial growth.

Modular terminal design, flexible stands and scalable systems allow capacity to be added without disrupting live operations. The result is an airport that **avoids both overbuilding ahead of demand and the costly congestion of building too late**.

Passenger experience as the organising principle

Every element of an integrated hub ultimately serves the passenger journey, **from the kerb to the gate and on to the final destination**. Intuitive layouts, digital processing, clear wayfinding and comfortable spaces reduce stress and queuing time. They also create the conditions for commercial success, because passengers who move through processing quickly and confidently have more time to spend in retail and food and beverage areas.

The balance matters. **Commercial space should complement passenger flow, never obstruct it**. The experience must also work as well for transfer passengers and business travellers as for holidaymakers.





Connected beyond the airfield

An airport's catchment is defined by how easily people and goods can reach it. Rail, metro, road and bus links should be planned as one intermodal network, with seamless interchange for passengers and dedicated, efficient routes for freight.

For cargo, the strongest hubs connect directly to ports, free zones and industrial areas, creating logistics corridors that move goods between air, sea and land with minimal friction.

For the many thousands of people who work at a major airport, reliable public transport is just as important. Planned this way, live operations. The result is an airport that **avoids both overbuilding ahead of demand and the costly congestion of building too late**.

Resilient by design

Integration also strengthens resilience. When airside, terminal, landside and utilities are planned as one system, **redundancy can be built in where it matters most**, and operations recover faster when disruption occurs.

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Aligning the people behind the plan

Even the most ambitious masterplan will fall short without governance to match. Integrated hubs bring together aviation authorities, concessionaires, airlines, investors, transport agencies and local planners, each with their own priorities. A shared long-term vision, clear responsibilities and an operator's perspective from the earliest design stages are what **turn a collection of projects into a coherent hub**.

Developing national talent to run these assets, as Oman's concession explicitly sets out to do, keeps that capability in the country for the life of the infrastructure.

THE TAKEAWAY

For governments, concessionaires and investors, the message is clear. **The airports that create the most value will be those planned as integrated economic and mobility hubs from day one**, where capacity, experience, connectivity and commercial development reinforce one another.



Chukwuma Umeh
Team Leader, Urban Transport and Urban Development
Egis, KSA

www.egis-group.com