



Happy landings



Top, OMK's ribbed version of Trax, familiar in railway stations as well as airports; the versatility and longevity of a classic. Above, handsome PSS for SCP by Terence Woodgate

Rodney Kinsman is a designer who could be said to spend life flying 'by the seat of his pants' – metaphorically at least. For nearly 30 years his company, OMK Design, has piloted some of the most innovative seating systems designed to meet the demands of airport terminals.

'Airports are probably the toughest environments for seating,' explains Kinsman. 'It's not just the passengers who damage chairs through normal but highly intensive wear and tear; more damage is done inadvertently and ironically by airport operations and maintenance. As well as the heavy-duty industrial cleaners, there are now people movers, weighty carts which clip the sides of the seating as they manoeuvre around. Airport seating has to allow for and withstand extremes.'

Trax, OMK's beam seating system which combines cast technology with precision engineering, has sold more than 400,000 units and can be found in more than 60 airports world-

wide. Its design is both functional and enduringly fashionable – although Kinsman would refute the latter. 'Fashion is retrograde and suggests you are designing for an abstract market, whereas the airport environment is very specific. Here you know the customer intimately.'

According to Jane's Airport Group, worldwide airport expansion including new development and additional terminals is worth approximately £25 bn. In passenger terms, air travel is experiencing 6-7 per cent annual growth, which means that by 2012 there will be twice as many people in the air, and the rate is even faster in Asia Pacific, which anticipates 12 per cent annual growth. In China alone in 1996 there were 100 million air passengers, and this figure is expected to double to 200 million by the Millennium.

Every year approximately 90 million passengers pass through UK airports. BAA has some of the most exacting requirements for airport seating. 'We developed a specification which includes obvious price, size and maintenance

a high-tech product suits the environment in the same way that it suits their momentary mindset,' says Zoeflig with passion. 'The ideal solution would be no furniture at all – perhaps just jets of air suspending and supporting the weary traveller! The ideal is to design the most simple thing for comfort and use minimal parts so the seating doesn't add to the clutter, but enhances the look.'

Seating space allocation creates something of a dilemma. Many airports generate significant income from retail, and there has been an erosion of seating area in favour of retail space. But not everyone feels duty-free bound to shop. Operators want bums on seats whilst retailers want customers. Paul Merry, director of BDG's Kuala Lumpur office, where the consultancy is implementing architect Kisho Kurawa's scheme and retailing will take up about 15 per cent of the airport space, reveals a complex formula for calculating optimum seating accommodation.

'There is a finite number of passenger throughput known as the Dwell Time, so calculation is based upon the number of people in the departure lounge at the Busy Hour Rate, which approximates to seats being provided for about three quarters of the passengers. But much depends on the scope of the airport facilities. In Germany the airports are not so commercial so there are more seats. BAA achieves more than 40 per cent of its revenue from commercial operations.'

In most instances of new build airports it is the architect who determines the style of interior so that it contributes to the integrity of the building. At Chek Lap Kok (Hong Kong) designed by Norman Foster, Wilkhahn has just won its biggest contract to supply 13,000 units of its Tubis system. Hans-Peter Becker, managing director, is quick to point out that Tubis was not the cheapest option available amongst the 12 – 14 contenders, but believes that it reflects the character of the new airport. 'A BMW is expensive if you say it only has four wheels and a steering wheel,' he says, 'but add intelligence, quality of design, standards of engineering and the educated customer understands the offer. The same can be said of airport seating. We are more expensive but the seating is lighter to handle and to move; assembly is simplified and Tubis is easy to clean. Our two approaches based on the principle of good industrial design are: long-lasting design appeal and long-lasting life cycle.'

Tubis' popularity is evidenced by its presence in airports as diverse as Beirut, Palma, Majorca, Ibiza and Minorca. Obviously the rigours of Beirut are different from those of the Costa del Sol. Charter plane passengers, mostly holiday makers, tend to spend longer in the airport with at least two hour check-in times before flights; delays are not unknown! When inconvenience such as flight delays or increased waiting times arise comfortable seating plays its part in

reducing Airport Angst. Designers and manufacturers have to allow for passengers who will stretch out across the seats, or stand on them as well as assuming a more conventional seated position!

Space planners want a variety of configuration options for lounges, gateways, and concourses, so much well designed seating will work as well in airports as in other areas. SCP's PSS system by Terence Woodgate is planned for the new Heathrow Express, a 150-seat installation. An important introduction to the UK, as sales director Richard Leeks is quick to point out.

The designer who set the benchmark for most contemporary airport seating systems is Charles Eames. Tandem Seating, manufactured and marketed by Vitra for Europe and the Far East, is an enduring classic and 30 years after its conception is still considered new and practical. 'Seating trends have changed from individual chairs to bench systems and there are always the latest trends to consider, but Eames seemed to capture the essentials,' says Vitra's Ian Maciver.

As airport development continues, seating is set for unprecedented growth. Rodney Kinsman summarises the situation, which Zoeflig firmly endorses. 'Good design is essential, but an understanding of engineering and mass manufacturing techniques is what makes for successful, high performance airport seating. We are able to bring humanity into these huge sheds.'



Above, Another of Rodney Kinsman's contract winning designs – the Seville system for OMK, seen here in

use at Manchester. Right, Tecno's WS system sitting pretty in the Foster-designed Stansted Airport

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