Taking flight

Exhibition, pure and simple, that was my immediate reaction to the new BAA terminal at Stansted. And I see no reason to modify it. This, surely, is the acceptable face of modern architecture: tackling simple human and administrative problems with grace, style and the intelligent application of modern technology. Stansted is also the most acceptable face of Foster Associates. Norman Foster has a particular genius for applying simple ideas to complex problems: the simple idea at Stansted being that the terminal building should be a large box, through which you progress -- a straight line -- from landside to airside. There is none of the maddening lurching, the dodging, and the visual assault of Heathrow. -- nor, much though I admire its early phases, is there any of the worthy dullness of Gatwick. How appropriate that for many the Stansted journey will begin at Liverpool Street, one of the finest of all the cathedrals of steam.

Foster's building perpetuates the noble Victorian tradition of the architecture of mass travel. It borrows some of the intricacy and delicacy of the train shed engineers, and re-emphasises the simple direct progression implied by the railway terminus plan. We need a late twentieth-century social realist painter to celebrate Stansted in the same way that Frith immortalised Paddington Station. For air travellers have suffered indignities long enough. If you put them into an environment as antisepctic as a supermarket and bombard them with canned music and canned announcements, they go into a subhuman, zombie-like trance. This renders them easy prey to the food courts, the duty-free supermarkets and all the other retail devices which provide such an unacceptable high proportion of BAA's income.

So it is refreshing to find that at Stansted the retailing is in the exact sense of the term. It is tolerated, it is allowed its place. But has it been subjected to an architectural control. Stansted is a triumphal affirmation of the principle that air travel is about higher things. It always used to be. I am old enough to remember the pioneering days of civilisation, when planes to London landed at Northolt and passengers were led through Nissen huts by men with handlebar moustaches and 'scrambled eggs' on their peaked caps. We, and the air crew, would walk together across the tarmac. Inside the plane is a modified DC Dakota. Baker & Dobson's Jaffa cake would be distributed before take-off, with words of cotton wool to plug sensitive ear drums. In the pocket of the seat was a sick bag, which was frequently put to good use. Air hostesses and flight magazines had not been invented. It was an essentially male world with a strong post-war aftertaste. Heathrow's first passenger terminal was installed in an army marquee and there were few concessions to comfort.

It has to be said that the romance of flying, in those tentative early days of civil aviation, was largely confined to airside. On landside there was a good deal of unplaned muddle. So I wonder whether Foster, and his client BAA chairman Norman Payne, are deluding themselves when they speak of a return to fundamentals in airport design. Outside the privately owned airfields which Foster -- in his capacity as gilder and helicopter pilot habitually visits -- doubts whether the basic air terminal ever existed. Only on a very small scale indeed has it been possible to revert to the primitive sequence of car park, shed and apron. Yet that is what has been achieved at Stansted, and on a colossal scale. And it has been done with masterly conviction and effortless control. This is a building which will give air travel a good name.

Yet even as I write this I am aware that Foster buildings, all Foster buildings, inspire strong feelings, not all of them favourable. I remember visiting the Hong Kong Bank with a party of Shakespearean actors -- sensitive, perceptive people -- and being astonished at