how hostiles their reactions were. Despite my attempts to draw their attention to minor, and indeed major, failings in that astonishing building, they remained unmoved. Or rather, they remained adamantly in their determination to move, so precisely as possible, from a large slice of architecture which they regarded as hostile and oppressive. Banks, over the best banks, can have that effect on people, but very few Foster buildings have been exposed to public scrutiny. So it is worth mentioning that I have heard similar reactions from one that is the Sainsbury Centre. There are those, for all know the majority, who enter the Sainsbury Centre and, like me, are enchanted by the volume and the constantly changing play of light on its roof trusses and catwalks; and there are those who feel, in some obscure way, that the building has got it in for them. The same evidence can produce diametrically opposite emotional responses. The emotive power of his buildings is not something which Foster cares to discuss. The word ‘poetry’ is part of his public vocabulary, and so is beauty — but they are by-products; they cannot be measured or quantified. Thus the grumpy platitude at Stansted is not justified on the grounds that it looks better than tamazo — which it undoubtedly does — but that it was cost-effective. And I feel sure that it would be possible to go through the entire terminal building, almost item by item, and demand, and justify, similarly for every design decision that was made. Words like ‘poetry’ and ‘architectural excitement’ are seldom mentioned at client meetings and presentations. They don’t tell buildings. But these virtues survive. And a good thing, too. Foster may have had to sell his design to the hard-headed engineers of the British Airports Authority. But BAA, in turn, has sold Stansted to the flying public.

The new terminal is the triumph of what has been bromeliated by wealth and oil, of London’s third airport. It has been a long haul. Stansted was built by American engineers in 1946. Seven years later, in 1963, it was identified in a Government White Paper — a reserve third London airport. There was a good deal of dragging. Public inquiry number one produced another White Paper in 1987 which confirmed the findings of the first, but the following year a second public inquiry resulted in the selection of Hounslow as a desert, unless controversial issues are stubbornly on the ground that Brent Greese don’t have the vote. Then, after some work had started on site, Foulness was cancelled and new terminals at Heathrow and Gatwick were proposed as a short term measure to alleviate airport congestion. Not until 1970 was there an unambiguous Government decision to convert Stansted into a third London airport. Foster and Associates were duly briefed in 1981. So the new terminal has been in gestation for 16 years. This is a long time by Foster’s normal quicksilver standards, yet it does not appear to have blunted his cutting edge. The Stansted terminal has all the immediacy of the Computer Technology air tent, inflated one cold February morning in 1970 in 55 minutes. But unlike that temporary office structure, and unlike all other Foster buildings, it has no appeal to, and meet the needs of 30,000 passengers or people. Eight million air travellers in the present phase. 18 million when, or if, the additional two bays are added at the western end and one on the eastern. This is Foster’s first genuinely public building. For a man who believes passionately in supermarkets or sheds just as effectively as in perspective classrooms and lecture theatres of convention and education. It does not happen to battle with Foster’s Newport proposal, spawned from any deep held educational purposes; but what is beyond question is that they were strongly influenced by the Californian Hughes Construction Systems Development (Hughes) which Foster must have seen in prototype form on the Stanford University campus.

The core of the SCSG scheme was a deep roof, with integrated services floated over a deep plan space. This had many attractions, since it disposed, at a stroke, of all sorts of formal concerns like plans and elevations with which architects habitually get bogged down. There was no plan. There was not even much in the way of elevations. The roof of the terminal was composed of trusses which could be repeated until the site, or the budget, decreed that they stop. ‘Begin at the beginning,’ said the King. ‘And go on until you come to the end. And then stop.’ Except that there was no true beginning and no local end: it was all middle. Even now, Foster cannot bring himself to terminate his buildings. Only William Faulkner, impressed by his first-line site like an outlaw in a pan, is complete in itself. All of his great sequence of sheds, from Newport to Stansted, imply unlimited lateral growth. For the Newport scheme, Foster took the open-plan, space-frame roof idea and honed it and enlarged it into an immense 137 m x 60 m rectangle covered by a 1.2 m deep roof of lattice trusses. Below the constant roof level, floor levels could change, either in response to the contours of the site or the needs of the brief. Double height spaces were created by lifts in the terrain, or simply gouged out of the ground. Because it was never built, the purity of the Newport concept was never compromised. The closest it came to built reality was the pilot head office which Foster Associates designed for IBM at Colnham, outside Ponders End, in 1970-71. True, there were significant changes, dictated by time and cost. The roof line was a constant, but too was the floor slab. And sight lines, crucial in a deep-plan office, were badly affected by IBM’s influence on floor-to-ceiling height compartments for their senior personnel. Partly as a result of this, the building, for all its superior design opportunity, was a remarkably unappealing working environment.

Stansted was Newport School had to have top-lighting. IBM had, none. Artificially lit, deep-plan interiors are gloomy and claustrophobic, the gloom and the claustrophobia rising in intensity as you move towards the centre of the interiors. Yet in one way, IBM was atypical, for Foster has always been preoccupied with the problem of introducing natural light into deep-plan spaces. One thinks of the seldom published Skybreak House of 1965-66, with its stepped section and inclined planes of glazing, or most dramatic solution of all, the sunken coop at the Hoogkraak Bank, which harvests sunbeams and spills them into the bank’s cavernous atrium.

Stansted builds on the experience of the Samsbury Centre, and Foster’s first collaboration with the brilliant lighting engineer, Claude Engle. But, in essence, it is the Newport School proposal inverted. With all the services banished in the undercroft the roof becomes a membrane for excluding rain and admitting light. As such, the Stansted terminal is Foster’s most optimistic building. Does it perhaps also mark a new, spiritual dimension in his architecture? Is he, metaphorically, as well as literally, beginning to see the light? In the foreword to the latest in the series of books he is producing on his work, Foster describes a visit to the abbey of Fontenay, in Burgundy. This is not the first time that a modern architect has found fellow feeling with the austere ruin of the Cistercian builders. And Fontenay, with its barrel-vaulted domitory block and rhythmic patterns of buttresses and arched windows, is exactly the kind of building one would expect to appeal to the architect of the Sainsbury Centre and Stansted. But Foster has been sufficiently moved to concide (quote St Bernard’s definition of the Almighty: ‘God is length, width, height and depth.’) He consoles that after seeing Stansted on a cold day in January, his mind kept returning to some lines by that old unbelief, Philip Larkin: ‘And immediately Rather than words comes the thought of high windows; the sun comprehending glass, And beyond, the deep blue air...’