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Design for life [1]

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The worst part of my recent trip round the Far East was the last hour ? getting through the cesspit that is Terminal 3 at London's Heathrow Airport any morning or evening. The Vatican envoy described the experience as 'like landing in a third world country' and got roundly condemned as a racist. But even a non-racist must see the similarity ? shabby, dirty, unloved, airless buildings seething with huge, confused crowds waiting in seemingly endless queues.

It's a great contrast to Shanghai, whose vast, glassy airport is reached by a 400kph Maglev.

Mind you, the socialists pride themselves in such prestige projects. The trouble is that they don't always work either. At Shanghai you walk the length of the terminal to the international check-in; the trouble is that the terminal is about third of a mile long. Then you have to walk a quarter of a mile back to get to the security check. I hate airports designed by airport designers, rather than airport users, almost as much as I hate the old bit of Heathrow, which seems never to have been designed at all.

There's a compromise, of course ? airports (and other public facilities) that are uplifting (or at least, not depressing) and built on a human scale. It can't be too difficult.

Shanghai, of course, built its airport, and much else, for the 2010 Expo world trade fair. They recognised the importance of impressing visitors. I dread to think what the 2012 Olympics visitors will think when they step off the trade and into the middle of a directionless, sweating mass of humanity. The decision to spend billions on a high speed train to take 15 minutes off the London-Birmingham trip for the locals just can't be right. Better to spend it taking 45 minutes off the trip through Britain's premier airport for all those people who want to visit and invest in Britain, and who must wonder where they have dredged up.

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