



THE CIRCLE

A New Form of Airport Architecture
Joseph Reaney interviews architect Riken Yamamoto



For many decades, airports have been at the forefront of large-scale creative architecture. From the inviting contemporary curves of Incheon International in South Korea to the lush ring-shaped oasis of King Abdulaziz International in Saudi Arabia, revolutionary airport designs around the world have immeasurably improved the passenger experience, making flying more of a pleasure than an ordeal.

Yet for Japanese architect Riken Yamamoto, that ambition isn't enough. He believes airports should aim not just to be passenger transport hubs, but multi-purpose centres for the whole world to share – and he is showing the way with a radical new development at Zurich Airport. It's called **The Circle**.

"The Circle is not just a building, but a city," reveals Yamamoto. "The area is 270,000 square metres. This is a huge building, with two large hotels and various types of facilities such as restaurants, bars, shops, event halls and offices." In fact, that's only a part of it. The project, to be built between 2013 and 2017, will also incorporate medical facilities, spas and education centres – among other things.

Yet for all this, it is The Circle's autonomy that really makes it stand out from regular airport projects. Yamamoto's design, which saw off 90 other impressive entries, depicts a building entirely apart from Zurich's main terminal – a building he believes will become 'a cornerstone' of the city's architectural landscape. He dreams of a place the whole world wants to be... even if they don't have a flight ticket.

It takes only 15 minutes by tram from the downtown of Zurich to The Circle," says Yamamoto, "so it will be easy for people living there to enjoy the world's most advanced entertainment, information and [restaurant] dishes." In fact, he argues, with easy connections here also by plane, train, bus and car, this is somewhere that can be used by both the local communities and the planet at large. "This is the centre of the world and a centre of their daily life... a city where the world will be connected."

With this unique ambition in mind, Yamamoto came up with a design based not on previous airport developments, but on Zurich's own medieval Niederdorf Quarter. His stated intention was to create 'an entire urban environment,' where individual hotels, shops and offices are linked by quaint lanes, squares and thoroughfares. He even envisages it adopting the urban desire for regular reinvention.

"Gradually a city changes itself as time goes by," says Yamamoto. "It happens that a restaurant can change into a retail shop or that the colour of its outer walls can change. Sometimes, a building may even be completely demolished and rebuilt. Almost every part of a city changes little-by-little over time." However, he argues, this only works because they have an inherent 'structure'. "The city of Niederdorf has a structure which has consistently remained from the Middle Ages. Only this makes it possible for its parts to change. I wanted to realise that kind of a city in The Circle project – a system that includes a mechanism for change. So the completion of The Circle is not the end, it is the start."



The designs that have been released show a large sweep of glass containing exactly what Yamamoto describes; a thriving, modern, urban space. There are even distinct neighbourhoods named for what you can expect to find there – from ‘Health & Beauty’ to ‘Events & Culture’. The scale is astonishing.

The question is whether this marks a turning point for airport architecture. There’s little doubt that if The Circle is successful at attracting both passengers and residents, it will become the blueprint for a variety of copycat developments worldwide. This city concept could yet mark the future for airports.

Or, as Yamamoto would say, this is only the start.

THE SKY’S THE LIMIT

- The Circle is Europe’s largest airport project
- Its construction will cost in the region of \$1 billion USD
- On completion, the total area of The Circle will be 270,000 m²
- It’s parking space will cover 20,000 m² - equivalent to about four (American) football fields
- Zurich Airport welcomes 67,000 passengers a day, or 24 million per year