

Airport Transit Access: A Lesson in Geography

Transit planners often prioritize airport access when designing new regional systems. The theory goes that most people don't want to have to drive to the airport and so offering direct transit there provides a useful service; as a result new lines will attract relatively high ridership. Whether or not airport-to-downtown service actually pulls in enough riders to make building line extensions is questionable - but if a city has decided to build a transit extension, how should it do it? What is the best transit-airport interface?

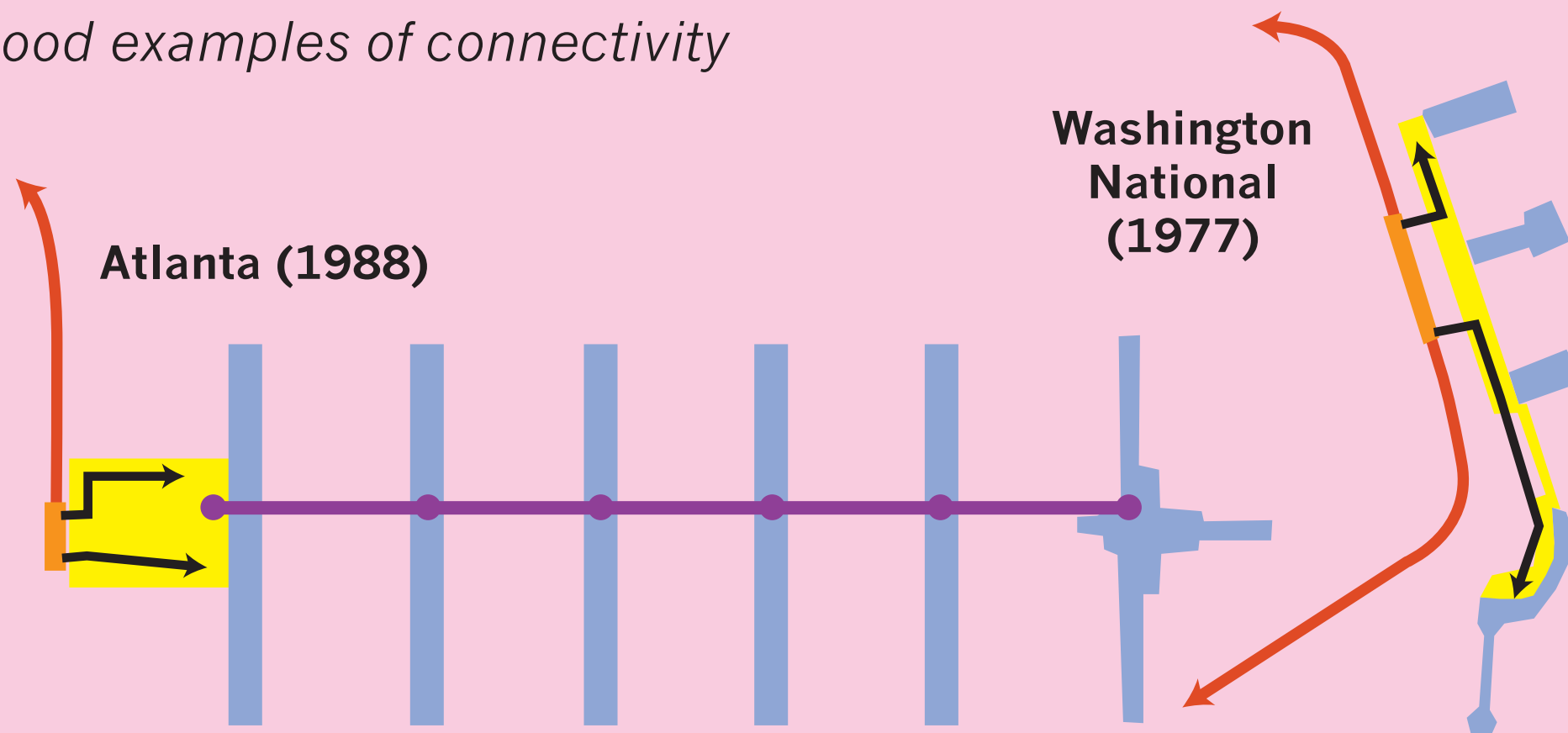
The essential elements of a strong airport transit service are transit vehicles that depart directly from downtown and which leave passengers directly in front of check-in desks. One would assume transit agencies would automatically implement such service, but as the airports shown here demonstrate, many new transit lines serve airports poorly.

People riding to airports want to minimize the distance they have to walk with their bags - any effort to decrease the number of feet travelers have to walk between arriving trains and check-in counters is appreciated.

At both the Atlanta and Washington-National airports, both of these rules are followed relatively effectively. In Atlanta, a MARTA rapid transit station is located at one end of a large check-in area. Riders can hop on a subway train leaving directly from the city's downtown and arrive at the airport 20 minutes later. They'll find themselves with a quick walk to the counters. In Washington, Metro's Blue and Yellow lines provide very frequent service to the airport from destinations all over the area. Though the older part of the airport is quite a walk from the station, the new terminal is just across a bridge from the station, and check-in counters are provided at the entrance to the terminal for several airlines.

More recent transit extensions in Chicago, San Francisco, and New York provide a less enlightened vision for how to connect transit and airlines. In Chicago, the Orange Line, which heads for the "loop," stops very far from the terminal, requiring a circuitous route through a parking deck and up and down several levels. In San Francisco, BART provides direct service, but most riders are required to transfer to a people mover before they check-in (in Atlanta, that step comes after). The fact that this metro is a spur line also makes service south of the airport inconvenient. Finally, New York City's Airtrain at JFK International compensates inadequately for a lack of direct service; walking distances to some terminals, too, is quite long.

Good examples of connectivity



Not-so-great examples

