

ACUMEN HAS CREATED THIS CONCEPT FOR A 'BAR IN THE CLOUDS', LOCATED BELOW THE MAIN DECK IN THE AFT CARGO AREA. SEE P100 FOR MORE.



ARE ONBOARD SOCIAL ZONES A GIMMICK, AN EXTRAVAGANCE OR A GREAT IDEA? AND WHAT OPPORTUNITIES LIE AHEAD FOR SUCH SPACES? EXPERTS SHARE THEIR VIEWS...

social studies



BRANDING INSIGHT: LANDOR

Peter Knapp, chief creative officer at Landor, shares his view of the current onboard social space offer.

"The time has come to question the delivery of typical airline services and seek truly unmatched leisure experiences. Many airlines have expertise and cultures centered on only delivering operational and engineering expertise, but few have truly mastered the art of hospitality. An opportunity is emerging for air carriers to redefine their business models and import the skills that are either lacking or badly imitated by many."



A weekly poll on our website asked readers if they felt that sacrificing seating for social areas pays off. 64% of respondents said it doesn't

On-brand, not bland

For Knapp, airlines could learn from – or even collaborate with – leaders in the hospitality industry to create an outstanding social experience, not just in social spaces, but across all classes.

"What if YO! Sushi had its own designated block of seats in economy for those who wanted a different flying experience that is more aligned to their day-to-day food and beverage habits and choices? We may not be able to import the table-top conveyor belt, but the brand could still be reinvented and delivered in a new way for a chosen few at 40,000ft.

"And so to business class: for the youthful and achingly cool business 'hipsters', aka the new millennials, maybe we could import the Ace Hotel vibe? Cool and social at the same time, food, beds and music all align for a limited number of business seats to break the

expected and stereotypical delivery of bland Gordon Gekko corporate-ness.

"And for first class? What about offering the Aston Martin suite, with chic and timeless elegance, a real sense of rarity and craft that others can only envy from afar; partnered with Johnnie Walker Blue Label for a perfect pour in a perfectly fitted seat.

"Mixing up brands in this way could help to reimagine the typically tired and predictable experiences that passengers have become accustomed to as they are processed and packaged from global airport to global airport.

"So, let's mix it up a bit, start drawing upon the best of the best for our entertainment needs, and focus on what we're actually good at. After all, would you rather have coffee from Starbucks or 'Globo Airlines'? We all know the answer, now where's the solution?"



An active, adaptive space

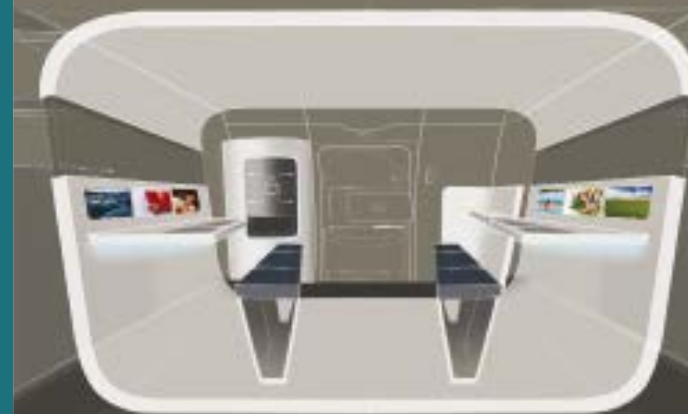
A technology-driven space would be impressive, but also a quite passive experience, says Ross Burns from AIM Altitude. Burns has an exciting idea for passengers who would like to be a little more active during flight.

"A fitness suite with exercise bikes and running machines would be great in terms of new experiences for business and first class customers. A health spa experience with treatments, a shower and massage chairs would be likely to prove popular," states Burns. "Sitting in robes afterwards, enjoying afternoon tea, could be the perfect luxury treat to start a holiday."

Further ideas include a casino, complete with card games, slot machines and roulette tables, etc, and a private office space with telephone booths that could appeal for both business and social requirements.

"For all passengers, I think an internet café would be very successful, providing both an internet access point and a communal area to drink hot beverages and sit in small groups. Vending machines could supply food and drink to paying customers, perhaps with interactive media via large-screen monitors," he adds.

However, he adds that the space need not be dedicated to one activity: "I would be keen to see adaptive monuments that could change their purpose during the flight. This would make the space very flexible. It may even make it possible to have a live performance area, for music, comedy, theater or dancers."



SUPPLIER INSIGHT: AIM ALTITUDE

Ross Burns, group lead industrial designer at AIM Altitude, explains the technologies that could inform future aircraft social spaces: "Interactive touchscreens will be widespread. Larger video screens and seamless integration of video walls that wrap around curves are likely to become commonplace, along with high-resolution projection systems, perhaps projecting night scenes and moving clouds."

In his vision, scanning systems may also be put in place, to identify passengers and classify their threat level, or review passenger stress levels, heart rate and well-being, while adaptive advertising linked to the projection systems could react to personal tastes.



CHALLENGE THE BEAN COUNTERS

We asked Daniel Baron, founder of LIFT Strategic Design, for his view. "The airlines who 'get it' will embrace the notion of social spaces and will keep pushing the envelope. The challenge is the other 200... It can be difficult for airline marketing or product teams, and designers, to get past road blocks set by bean counters who counter curvaceous counters with 'how the hell will giving up seats or spending a fortune on a bespoke galley improve my bottom line?' We need airframers and suppliers to join our chorus at the early stages of new-build or retrofit programs and help support the case for extra 'wow' from the get go.

Let's also focus on economy class. In an age of

increasingly shrinking living space, airlines need new ways to communicate added value through enhanced wellness. But how to translate that into tangible improvements? For example, seats located directly across from a lavatory door are guaranteed to be the most complained about spot on an aircraft. Instead of just saying, 'we need the revenue so we will accept lower customer scores', airlines could fill that space with a self-service counter or stretch zone. Even an empty space with funky lighting to stand and chat, without encroaching on crew space or other passengers, could help fuel greater loyalty negating the loss of revenue from removing two or three seats.



Casual quality

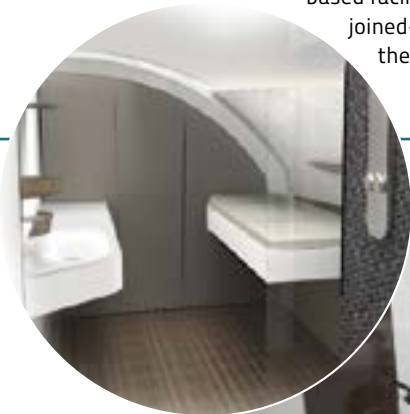
DCA's vision for an onboard bar/restaurant area has a shape and layout inspired by sushi bars, which provide a high-quality but informal dining experience. The space is intended to allow for interaction between passengers in a relaxed, unforced manner, while for those seeking to dine alone but away from their own seat, smaller seating areas separate from the main bar area give passengers freedom to dine as socially or privately as they choose.

Indulge the senses

Stress is often associated with the travel experience, be it getting to and through the airport, the flight itself, the onward journey, or the prospect of the crucial meetings looming at the destination. A high-quality spa area, including showering facilities, would enable an airline to stand out from the competition by providing a facility in which passengers could be pampered, unwind and relax.

"In this scenario, we envisaged that traditional spa services such as massage, aromatherapy, manicures and pedicures could be provided via a preflight booking system. Aromas and music could be used to further engage with the passenger at a sensory level," explains DCA's Kruizinga.

The inflight treatments could be integrated with lounge-based facilities to provide a joined-up service throughout the entire journey.



DESIGNER INSIGHT: DCA

"Social spaces are an important part of the traveler's experience, both at the airport and in flight. They also offer a great opportunity for an airline to set itself apart from the competition and reinforce its brand," explains RP Kruizinga, senior industrial designer at DCA Design International, a product design and development consultancy.

The studio has created exploratory concepts with the aim of moving away from the traditional alcohol-based value paradigm and exploring other environments that they feel could bring an increased level of differentiation and sophistication to the inflight experience.

"Much of the focus was on the idea of 'relaxed socializing'. We wanted to offer passengers activity-focused spaces in which social interaction would be natural and stress-free," explains

Kruizinga. "At the same time, we wanted to give them control over the degree to which they chose to socialize – it must feel equally normal to use these same facilities and spaces in a quiet and private way if that is your preference."

GO FOR THE BURN

One of the most common problems with long-haul travel is that passengers' movement is restricted for a prolonged period of time. Current onboard social spaces often assume that all customers want to sit and relax for the entire journey.

Not so with DCA's space-efficient gym concept, which would offer passengers an opportunity for active relaxation and informal social interaction, or simply to focus on their own private exercise routine. Time in the facilities could be booked preflight to prevent queuing and disappointment.





DESIGNER INSIGHT: TANGERINE

"Increasingly, airlines are seeing the value in creating exclusive bar and lounge areas on aircraft for their premium class travelers. These social spaces offer an opportunity for airlines to differentiate their services and build brand value with their customers," states Martin Darbyshire, CEO of Tangerine.

"As the airline industry catches up with the rapid pace of technological change being driven by the advent of the IOT and connectivity, we will see these spaces being used for more engaging and diverse activities."

However, in Darbyshire's view, social spaces will continue to be defined by the small footprint of available space on an aircraft that can't be used more effectively. Few airlines are prepared to compromise seat density for social areas.

This conflict was evident when Tangerine designed Virgin Australia's new B777 business class bar. "In order to create a spacious bar with lounge seating and provide a desirable service, the LOPA integrates business seating with the bar area to increase the available

floor space. This maintains critical seat count, while allowing the airline to offer exceptional services that empower the brand," he explains.

"The shape, form and use of social spaces will continue to be determined by the revenue that they bring. We can see an opportunity for the creation of larger social spaces if these areas can bring additional revenue that counteracts the loss of seat count. For instance, perhaps airlines could offer more interactive retail and shopping experiences, or even an inflight tax-free casino?"

Top table

Martin Tatchell, a designer at Tangerine, has created a concept interactive lounge area intended for a standard wide-body aircraft, which would be positioned between seating areas or between the business and first class cabins. The sealed, sound-proofed space would offer premium passengers an engaging and interactive social space away from the solitude of their seat.

A 65in interactive table acts as the focal point, encouraging people to gather around a shared activity. The table features an interactive touch surface that could be used for activities such as ordering food and beverages, shopping, gambling, gaming or surfing the web. The walls and flooring respond to the central activity on the table, with the lighting and mood adapting to create a more immersive experience.

Bulkhead and overhead storage features are removed from the social area to create a continuous wall-to-ceiling display with light and acoustic panels.

"This creates a perception of more space and transforms the feel of the environment, so that there is a clear disjuncture between a seated experience and the passenger's time in the social area," explains Tatchell.

So where is the bar? E-service replaces a dedicated bar counter with a host, which allows the social area to be passenger-focused and frees up additional space.

Tatchell envisages that the space could be adaptable depending on the airline, or route. Airlines could even offer private group bookings to use the space.



CHILD'S PLAY

Juliane Barbara Trummer, director of insights & strategy at Mormedi, has identified a way that airlines could use social space to differentiate themselves in the market, and increase passenger satisfaction and loyalty through the personalization of services.

The idea is simple: "A kindergarten in the sky!", says Trummer. "What could be more relieving for parents and fellow passengers, and of course the children themselves, than a space that allows little ones to enjoy the flight in a space that corresponds to their natural need for movement and under the loving care of a professional?"

"The idea is not new, but as far as I know, no airline has offered it yet. Maybe it is time to reconsider."

Glass bubble ceiling

A typical wide-body jet has two crew-rest positions concealed above the ceiling, and in White's view, these voids offer a hidden opportunity.

"Why not strip out all the ceilings and use a projector to transform that domed space into a 'glass bubble' ceiling?" he posits.

High-definition projector technology is available that could create the night sky, rolling clouds or tree tops, giving the shared experience of a cinema, planetarium or festival.

"For those finding it difficult to sleep, can you imagine the sunsets and dawns? The aircraft's ceiling would be like a convertible car with the roof down, cruising on the ultimate road-trip."

DESIGNER INSIGHT: FACTORYDESIGN

"There is a societal shift in what people spend their money on: they are increasingly interested in buying experiences rather than products," states

Adam White, director of Factorydesign.

"For the airline industry, the point of difference has to go beyond food, wine and seat. The next big hitter is a thoroughly customized cabin."

YOGA'S NOT TOO MUCH OF A STRETCH

John Tighe, design director at JPA Design, has noticed that many onboard social spaces such as bars or retail areas are static and have a single function. He sees opportunity in creating transformable spaces that can change in function throughout the duration of the flight to add more value to passengers.

Tighe proposes a yoga space, reflecting the popularity of an industry that has been estimated to be worth US\$80bn globally. Providing for an activity that just needs some space for mats is refreshingly simple (well, as simple as allocating space in the world's most expensive real estate ever is), and time in the yoga zone could be rented as a source of ancillary revenue, or offered free as a nice value-adding service. The space could also be used at other times for other functions, such as a welcome or breakfast area.

"It's something we're excited about and it's believable," says Tighe. "We would love to put running machines in, but a yoga space is believable while still being exciting. There's a need for it, it's not just a gimmick. For super long-haul flights, the ability to move around is more than just a nice thing to have."

Tighe predicts that airlines will get better at selling the value of such spaces as booking systems become more intelligent and fleet consistency worries are removed. A great social space can become a brand promise rather than a halo branding exercise.

Even better, if the space was flexible, its size could be adjusted according to seasonal demand. This could also enable airlines to feel less bound by their choices for such spaces, making them feel more confident to experiment and update.

Public enemy

In 2013, at the reveal of British Airways' new A380 and B787 cabins, *Aircraft Interiors International* asked the airline's then managing director of brands and customer experience, Frank van der Post, if he had considered fitting a bar to the new fleet.

He was robust in his response: "No, I hate bars. If you want to go to a bar you should go somewhere in town and go to a pub or a hotel bar, not go on an aircraft. For 50% of the time an aircraft is flying, people want to sleep and a bar is very disruptive. I don't believe in bars. We did some research, and not many passengers want a bar – certainly not the most frequent business travelers, who just want peace and quiet so they can sleep. They don't want people making noise in a bar."



Café culture

"Bars and lounges are already on board some aircraft, but I'd love to explore the concept of a mini bistro, states Caon. "This space could, of course, double as a bar area and would break up the monotony of long flights and give small groups the opportunity to dine together."

According to Caon, the bistro needn't be excessive in size to function properly, and the nature of the space would push interesting treatments for the surrounding surfaces.

"Booth seating would be really cool and boost multifunctionality. We imagine single, facing booth seats cantilevered to the sidewall to maximize space, with a fixed assembly of seat and table further inboard," he adds.

The floor is key to the concept, establishing the seating areas as mini-zones, as well as enabling seats to pivot to allow access. An aircraft bistro could also reduce the noise and activity in the main cabin, as well as stimulating thinking about what needs to be provisioned in the passenger seats in terms of dining.

"Seats could be contemplated as lounging and sleeping spaces only, thus possibly opening the door to new ideas and configurations," adds Caon.

DESIGNER INSIGHT: CAON STUDIO

"I can only dream what it was like for designers in the 1970s tasked with creating the B747 upper-deck bars," states David Caon, founder of the Caon Studio in Australia.

One of Caon's previous airline projects was the design of an onboard social space, and he has taken the opportunity to study how the space has worked in practice on many occasions. The L-shaped space offers a self-service bar and a long sofa, and while it isn't serviced as a bar *per se*, Caon has found that the space is often quite busy on long-haul flights as people look to either meet up with companions seated elsewhere in the aircraft, or to escape the monotony of their seat.

"It has proved to me that the provisioning of social spaces on board aircraft is welcomed by flyers," states Caon.

INNER PEACE

Extensive long-haul travel takes its toll on the body, and Caon Studio has been exploring ways to minimize stress on the body during flight, with key themes being exercise, stretching and healthy eating.

"Given a blue-sky brief, we would certainly explore a communal area to promote these values to passengers. Rather than providing a massage room or spa or similar, I fundamentally believe the passenger should be active in their well-being, and as such, I imagine a flying yoga studio of sorts. With the big windows or digital walls of

future aircraft providing an amazing skyscape to set the scene, we imagine a space where a small group could assemble and be led in a guided yoga or meditation session by a trained cabin crew member," states Caon.

Advanced technologies such as augmented reality and virtual reality could assist in multilingual instruction, in creating the right aural ambiance, and in compensating for the limited available real estate.

"Control over the atmosphere of the space or the oxygen content lends powerfully to the concept," he adds.



DESIGNER INSIGHT: CRISTIAN SUTTER

“Designing flexible social spaces that deliver a relevant customer experience addressing myriad passenger requirements, while keeping sight of airlines’ routes and operational flexibility, is key to justifying their cabin footprint over installing additional seats,” states Cristian Sutter, a cabin design specialist working for British Airways.

Sutter believes that technologies such as virtual reality, floor-to-ceiling image projection, flexible seating and augmented reality can enable and influence the design of customizable cabin flexible spaces. The flexible aspect means that such zones could be easily transformed from a

social area for families, to business-oriented networking spaces, or even pop-up food and drinks experiences themed to match with seasonal menus and destinations.

“Customizable cabin social flex-zones will enable airlines to target passenger groups and to accurately deliver a relevant experience to them throughout flight phases, destinations and even seasons. The possibilities for creating new themed experiences (and ancillary revenue) are almost endless, changing the current rigid cabin social space paradigm to a flex zone that will act like a white canvas for delivering new and exciting passenger experiences.”

High society

How about a viewing area where passengers could really experience what it is like to travel across the world at 500mph at 34,000ft, but not take away any cabin space? This is the vision of Acumen, which has designed a ‘Bar in the Clouds’, located below the main deck in the aft cargo area.

“The huge panoramic windows and natural incline would give passengers unparalleled views across the landscape – truly feeling like they’re on the edge of space,” says Anthony Harcup, an associate at Acumen. “To keep the area crowd-free and relaxing, passengers could book a slot during the flight to experience the space.”



DESIGNER INSIGHT: ACUMEN

“Social spaces usually consist of small bars and lounges nestled among the premium seats. Airlines seem reluctant to embrace such spaces, as they take away cabin real estate – which could be given back as more pitch or bed length,” states Acumen’s Harcup.

“However, some areas, such as the Virgin Upper Class bar, are part of the experience, suggesting that these spaces can be effectively used to build brand loyalty.”

DESIGNER INSIGHT: PRIESTMANGOODE

According to Nigel Goode, director at PriestmanGoode, there are a number of key things to consider when you’re thinking about creating social areas on board aircraft.

“Firstly, the reality is that commercial imperatives remain the drivers in

aviation, so if you’re talking about dedicating space to social areas, this will be for first and business class passengers. Interestingly, as the seat environment gets increasingly luxurious, it also becomes harder to draw passengers out of the seats and into social spaces.

“The biggest opportunities if you want to maximize seat-count, but still have social spaces, lie in using non-revenue areas, spaces that cannot be used for passenger seats for various reasons (height restrictions or no windows, for instance), such as parts of the luggage hold.

“Being able to turn these spaces into social areas or experience spaces – a VR cinema or sleep pods, for instance – not only presents an opportunity to create amazing experiences that could be made available to all passengers, but will also enable airlines to create additional revenue.”

