Congested roads, busy terminals and long hurried walks to departure gates — just getting to flights can raise stress levels for passengers and staff. At the same time, many airports are overlooking the opportunities of becoming successful commercial districts. However, there are ways to deliver calm, connectivity and value writes IQ correspondent Anne Edelson.

One of the world’s most successful airports, Amsterdam Airport Schiphol has the passenger’s travel experience and its own economic success as the focus of its business strategy. Senior Planner at Schiphol Group, Maurits Schaafsma describes some of Schiphol’s strategies, and how good airport access helps make the overall Schiphol area such a strong performer.

**Anne Edelson — can you set the context and describe something of what makes Schiphol so successful?**

**Maurits Schaafsma** — Schiphol is one of the oldest airports in Europe, dating from 1916. Civil aviation started here in 1920. Today it’s a major global hub and we give a lot of attention to passenger experience, in particular to how travelers get to and from the airport. Going one step further, we think a lot about how to position the airport area as a valuable urban resource for the city. From increased rail access to revamped security areas, the airport’s planners place a high premium on creating an overall environment that reduces travelers’ stress, starting with surface access. Combined with our extensive network of direct destinations, the result is increasing success on all fronts, a growing airport that’s driving economic development by bringing thousands of jobs to Amsterdam and the surrounding region.

**Getting to the airport is often one of the most stressful parts of any trip. How does Schiphol’s rail access help with that?**

Improving rail connectivity to Amsterdam, as well as elsewhere in the Netherlands and the rest of Europe, eases that anxiety. The airport’s integration into the rail network gives travelers a wide range of options including direct intercity connections and international high-speed connections to Brussels and Paris and onward. All of these improve access and increase the passenger catchment area. The connectivity also induces aviation growth and economic development for the region.

**Schiphol has very good cross-modal access compared to many other airports. Is it hard to keep up with the passenger volumes?**

Airport growth has accelerated in the past years beyond our expectations. We are now seeing ourselves in a race to keep up with our own success. The airport’s rail station is one of the largest in the country since it was last expanded in the 1990s and is now facing a lack of capacity. To address the latest capacity issue at our rail station we are adding more access points to the platforms and reorganizing the airport’s core. Relief is in sight. The transport ministry recently approved a 500-million-Euro expansion project to improve rail access. We’re also exploring innovations such
as car sharing to reduce local road traffic and are looking at improving connections to Amsterdam’s metropolitan transportation system.

Is multi-modal access to the airport important just for travelers?

Reducing access friction is increasingly important for commercial activities, just as it would be for any city core. The AirportCity (our World Trade Center Schiphol Airport) is an important business destination in its own right. The airport is home to a commercial district with over 500 international companies and 65,000 employees. Microsoft and other tech companies have set up headquarters and incubators nearby. There are 60,000 square meters (700,000 square feet) of retail shopping and attractive urban environments, all within an easy 10-minute walk of the airport gates. Commercial lease rates are equivalent to Amsterdam’s central business district in Zuidas, due to Schiphol’s impressive road, rail and aviation connectivity. In total, the Dutch aviation industry gives employment to some 300,000 people.

Rail access is important, and also expensive. What else can you do that improves experience while lowering costs?

Access infrastructure is critical, but we also look to deliver an environment that makes people feel at ease. And many of our best ideas are simple and don’t require enormous investment to implement. We have acoustically themed parking areas at the World Trade Center, for example, to help with wayfinding. Other low-cost but influential initiatives are the airport’s ever-present service assistants. Staff volunteers from all parts of our company, wearing a jacket with question mark, help out in the terminal during busy travel times to provide passengers with information. In addition, security and passport control areas have been designed using innovative equipment to be as user friendly as possible to reduce stress.

How does the Schiphol team develop and implement the big-ticket major infrastructure developments ideas?

It’s all in the discussion process. National, local and regional authorities as well as the airlines and residents’ representatives sit down together and work on solutions. It can be a complex and slow process, but it helps the airport gain support for its objectives. We continuously build relationships with the surrounding municipalities, and they all participate in an integrated transport strategy that benefits them as well as the airport. Schiphol is a big airport for a small country — we have 500,000 aircraft movements per year. People are proud of our historically strong position in global aviation and that helps us become better problem solvers. All the different groups want us to succeed, so we work together to make that happen.
FOCUS ON WALKING
THE AIRPORT OF THE FUTURE SHOULD FEEL LIKE A CITY OF THE PAST

Bring terminals, train stations, bus and taxis as close together as possible to encourage smooth pedestrian movement. Traditional pre-industrial cities are pleasant and easy to explore on foot. That now holds true with airports too. The most successful airports include specialized urban areas that encourage slow-speed movement — walking and even cycling — to aviation gateways and urban nodes. Convenience and productivity are twins. Increasing accessibility makes it easier to work and create value. Overlapping transport nodes — bus terminals and local, intercity, regional and international rail makes the areas more attractive to travelers and businesses.

THINK ABOUT FRIENDS
TALK TO EACH OTHER

The best planning can achieve the close arrangement of train stations, car drop offs, specialized land uses and attractive public space. But it's not easy. Different asset classes such as aviation infrastructure, rail stations and commercial development have traditionally been separate. They often measure success in insular ways — because it's often not convenient to coordinate with others. Airport city strategies emphasize correlated economics and new types of governance that create broader opportunities for the airport and the urban region. When they are done right, emerging functions like free-trade zones and even visa-free zones reposition cities to compete in an increasingly globalizing world.

GETTING IT RIGHT

Many airports aspire to Schiphol’s accessible human-scaled travel experience, but replicating this kind of success requires careful planning. Christopher Choa, Urban Development Director at AECOM, suggests strategies for achieving globally relevant performance.

BETTER TOGETHER
DEVELOP THE AIRPORT AND THE CITY AT THE SAME TIME

Well-planned airport cities leverage the connectivity of the airport to create benefits for the broader urban region. ‘Aerotropolis’ strategy creates value by coordinating land use and specialized commerce. Increased specialized airside activities related to passengers and cargo will encourage demand for landside developments and increase land values. And as landside developments grow in variety and scale they, in turn, induce traveler and cargo destinations and create aviation growth. This is a virtuous cycle that can catalyze regional economic growth. If you expand passenger connectivity by 10 percent, this grows the regional economy by two percent. And a two percent increase in regional growth rate in turn boosts passenger demand by 10 percent. A successful airport city creates mutual wins for the airport and the surrounding region.

MAKE IT INTERESTING
THERE’S NO PLACE LIKE HOME

Successful airport city cores are emerging parts of vibrant cities, places where increasing numbers of globally minded citizens want to work and even live. Develop a distinctive identity and focus on attractive public realm — streetscape, planting and open space. Airport districts can accommodate a wide range of urban land uses, not just retail and commercial, but also entertainment, healthcare, specialized education and even active sports like ice skating and surfing. The residential areas in airport cities complement more traditional hotel offers and cater to medium-term stays for globally oriented workers who want to live near their work, and the global gateways that bring them to other homes.

Christopher Choa is advising the city of Amsterdam on the development of the Schiphol-Amsterdam corridor, a major emerging urban region in the Netherlands.