Some Thoughts on Aspen Airport as a Tool for Social Change, and Aspen as a Shining City on a Hill

Auden Schendler February 20, 2023

Here, finally, in response to Barry's harassment, is a summary of my thinking on the value of the airport redevelopment and the role of Aspen in the universe.

The short story is this: in many ways, Aspen is the wrong place to solve the climate problem. It's a center of conspicuous consumption and wealth. Ironically though, because of that, it's a center of power, a place with influence, with the ability to reach those with money and power, and the access to media and attention that enables us to broadcast ideas and model solutions. Also, because we are a wealthy community, we have the means to try new things, to succeed and fail, and to share those experiments with the world. In some sense, we have a moral obligation to do that.

With that in mind, the great opportunity at the airport is not to cut its relative carbon emissions marginally (more on that later) but to use the project to model cutting-edge innovation across the board: in transportation, design, efficiency, safety, you name it. And then to share those stories with the public, elected officials, the press, and governing bodies.

How would we do this? **We have to think of everything we do in terms of influence and power**, and we need to weaponize whatever PR opportunities come our way. So, for example:

- If a new runway enables the use of more efficient planes, but they are not the main commercial planes used, we should bring those models in as demonstrations, and get the word out. It may also be that all it takes to bring in demonstration planes is desire or political will.
- The airport can be a national model for green and transit friendly design and can itself be an educational tool through signage, "truth walls" that show construction techniques, partnerships with tech companies that display information, etc. It can showcase key design approaches that we intentionally push out into the media. This requires a robust media strategy and (a PR firm?) with the ability to cold-pitch stories.
- We can do things that are radical and press worthy but also educational: like boycotting carbon offsets, or intentionally avoiding "net zero" language and instead focusing on electrification, as a way to show others how to save resources and think bigger. Such actions need to be public and noisy, no quiet, to achieve the desired change-making effect.
- We can discuss with airlines the possibility of educational material on planes or within in-flight magazines. Not just climate stuff, but ethical ideas that challenge Aspen to do better: imagine if we had Peter Singer's puddle thought experiment looping in the terminal of one of the wealthiest zip codes in the U.S.?

Here's why this approach is important: we have a 30% carbon reduction goal, but almost no levers to achieve those goals. We are almost entirely at the mercy of aircraft technology. (And while sustainable aviation fuel is nice, it's also a bit of a logic problem.[1]) The only way we could possibly hope to achieve our carbon goals—and be able to say we had any role in it—would be to become a material part of national climate policy that fixes the whole enchilada. **That means thinking of the airport less as an airport and more as a tool for social, governance, and policy change.** Fortunately, with the media attention we get, the soapbox of Aspen, and the type of visitors we attract, we might actually be able to move the needle at the state and federal level and seed an airline industry climate movement. (Might as well think big…)

It's easy to miss the forest for the trees. But in the case of Aspen's airport, the forest is the power we can wield and the change we can drive as a result. All the rest is carpentry.

[1] In order to solve climate change, we have to stop burning things, and bring emissions to zero. If every airplane in the world moved to sustainable aviation fuel, tailpipe emissions would continue unabated. Meanwhile, the supply of the best such fuels doesn't match the demand and likely never will, displaces land required for other purposes, and potentially forces land use changes elsewhere. At best it's an optics fix, though likely a necessary stopgap given the specifically wicked problem of carbon emissions from aviation.