

From rocky horror to peak performance



Sat in the shadow of the Rocky Mountains, Denver International Airport survived its ominous start to become a successful travel hub with grand aspirations. Manager of Aviation **Kim Day** tells Phin Foster about the inevitability of growth, and the realities of operating and developing “a city in its own right”.

Kim Day

Manager of aviation Kim Day has more than 30 years of experience in the industry. Prior to her recruitment by Denver International Airport, she served as executive director of Los Angeles World Airports. She also spent 20 years as an architect and planner, specialising in airports.



Time is a great healer. Denver International Airport (DIA) opened its doors on 28 February 1995 in the midst of one of the region’s all too frequent snow storms. With construction costs having already doubled, from \$2.5 billion to \$5 billion, it was a less than auspicious start, and worse was soon to follow. Damaged runways, faulty trains and an errant baggage system that gobbled up \$700 million – as well as its fair share of luggage – before being unceremoniously dumped, all pointed towards a facility hurtling towards white elephant status. Its location, 23 miles from downtown Denver, only served to sharpen this perception.

Fast forward to 28 February 2010 and 15,000 cupcakes are being handed out to passengers and staff passing through the Jeppesen terminal as management marks DIA’s 15th birthday. These are certainly

not hollow celebrations; DIA has grown to become the fifth busiest airport in the US, welcoming more than 50 million passengers annually, and has recently been anointed the nation’s best airport by Executive Travel for the third successive year. It is the world’s fifth busiest hub by traffic movements and saw operating revenues for 2009 rise by 4.4% to \$564.5 million. The airport is widely regarded as the primary economic engine of the state of Colorado, generating more than \$22 billion in annual economic benefits.

“The real story here is the growth,” declares Kim Day, DIA’s manager of aviation. “We have hit 50 million passengers two years in a row and we are now the second biggest Star Alliance hub in America. Southwest Airlines has come in and grown unbelievably over the past three years, with close to 150 flights leaving daily.

“It may have taken a lot of money to build this facility, but right now we’re in such a good position: economically we’re sound, our relationship with the airlines is great, the market is competitive and the fees are low. There’s great potential for growth.”

And growth is very much on the agenda as the airport hurtles towards its original design capacity in double-quick time. While competing city airports tear their hair out amid wrangling with put-upon neighbours and local governments hesitant over expansion requirements, one thing DIA does not lack is space. Sitting on 53 square miles of real estate, it is the largest international airport in the US and the third biggest on Earth.

“It all stems from the vision of [former mayor] Federico Peña and his contemporaries,” says Day. “We don’t generate noise, traffic problems or pollution adjacent to a population area and there’s no danger of us bursting at the seams. DIA was designed to be a hub facility and there was an understanding from the very beginning that it would stoke the economic engine. That has come to be.”

So, with planning restrictions an irrelevance, it is a question of when, not if, Day calls in the construction workers. The airport's original master plan is under review, and external consultants have already been employed to hone it further.

"If we have a master plan that's not prescriptive, that doesn't tell us how we're going to grow, but gives us a few options as to how we enable it, we can always stay ahead in terms of having a plan and being thoughtful about where and when we embark on new projects," Day says.

"The real challenge here is to stay nimble because you never know what's going to happen in this industry. We've seen Frontier go through a bankruptcy, Continental and United are merging, and Southwest is talking about alliances with international carriers. We must remain flexible and be able to react to such changes. That means not overbuilding as well as being able to reshuffle and maximise our existing assets."

Grand designs

One major development that is certain to go ahead is the South Terminal project. This involves the construction of the airport's first onsite hotel, to be operated by Starwood Hotels and Resorts, a Regional Transportation District light-rail station and a plaza.

Completion is set for 2015. Conservative estimates peg construction costs at \$750 million, and with much of DIA's success thus far due to minimising costs to airlines, one might expect to see a few eyebrows raised airside.

"Yes, there was some opposition to the train station," Day acknowledges, "but I think airlines have resigned themselves to the fact that we have a sound financial plan in place and that it will benefit their employees and passengers.



A rail station will be built as part of the South Terminal project, linking DIA to Denver's Regional Transportation District transit system.

"In terms of the hotel, we have a revenue-sharing system in place with the airlines and, having studied the proposal in great detail, they see this as something that will help them with their own bottom line. It's really important the airlines know we've done our homework in regards to all the financial aspects and the knock-on effect it will or will not have on their costs. I appreciate that for DIA to continue to grow we must maintain competitive costs for our partners and they have to be alongside us every step of the way."

Day believes that such collaboration has been a cornerstone of all development work she has undertaken at the airport since being recruited from Los Angeles World Airports almost three years ago. This has been achieved through measures such as town hall meetings and formalised steering committees, engaging an array of direct and indirect stakeholders.

"It's vital that we get consensus both from partners and the wider community if we are to move ahead," she declares. "There's no sense in us trying to push something that's not in everyone's interests and we need to be completely clear about where our motives lie. There has been a lot of dialogue with the airlines, city council and our neighbours.

"We brought in an advisory group of about 50 people to review the master plan as it developed and have adopted the same approach to the South Terminal. It consists of business people,

architects, politicians and representatives from the state and the Federal Aviation Administration. This is a pretty robust group because one of the problems airports sometimes face is tunnel vision; they know their facility so well that it's difficult to look beyond the blinkers. The advisory committee will help identify issues that might otherwise be missed."

What's in a name?

One element of Day's plans for the South Terminal that has been garnering headlines from day one is the appointment of superstar architect Santiago Calatrava, who will design the rail bridge that runs across Peña Boulevard, the entrance to DIA, and the station. Nobody doubts the Spaniard's credentials, but some concerns have been raised about the wisdom of bringing in a big name from so far afield and whether the airport could support any more bold architectural flourishes. It is quite rightly feted for Curt Fentress' Rocky Mountains-inspired tensile fibreglass roof, which has more than withstood the test of time and come to define DIA well beyond Colorado.

Day acknowledges that the city's less than satisfactory experience with another "name" architect, Steven Holl, and his abrupt departure from work on the city's justice centre, may have led to some initial cynicism. However, she also points out that Denver is no stranger to internationally renowned practices, >>

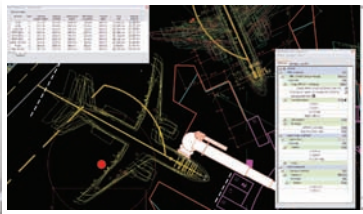


Santiago Calatrava has been signed up to design the rail bridge across Peña Boulevard.

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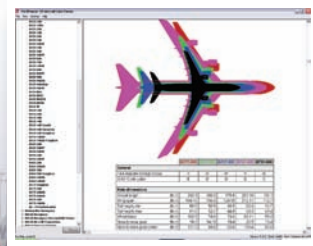
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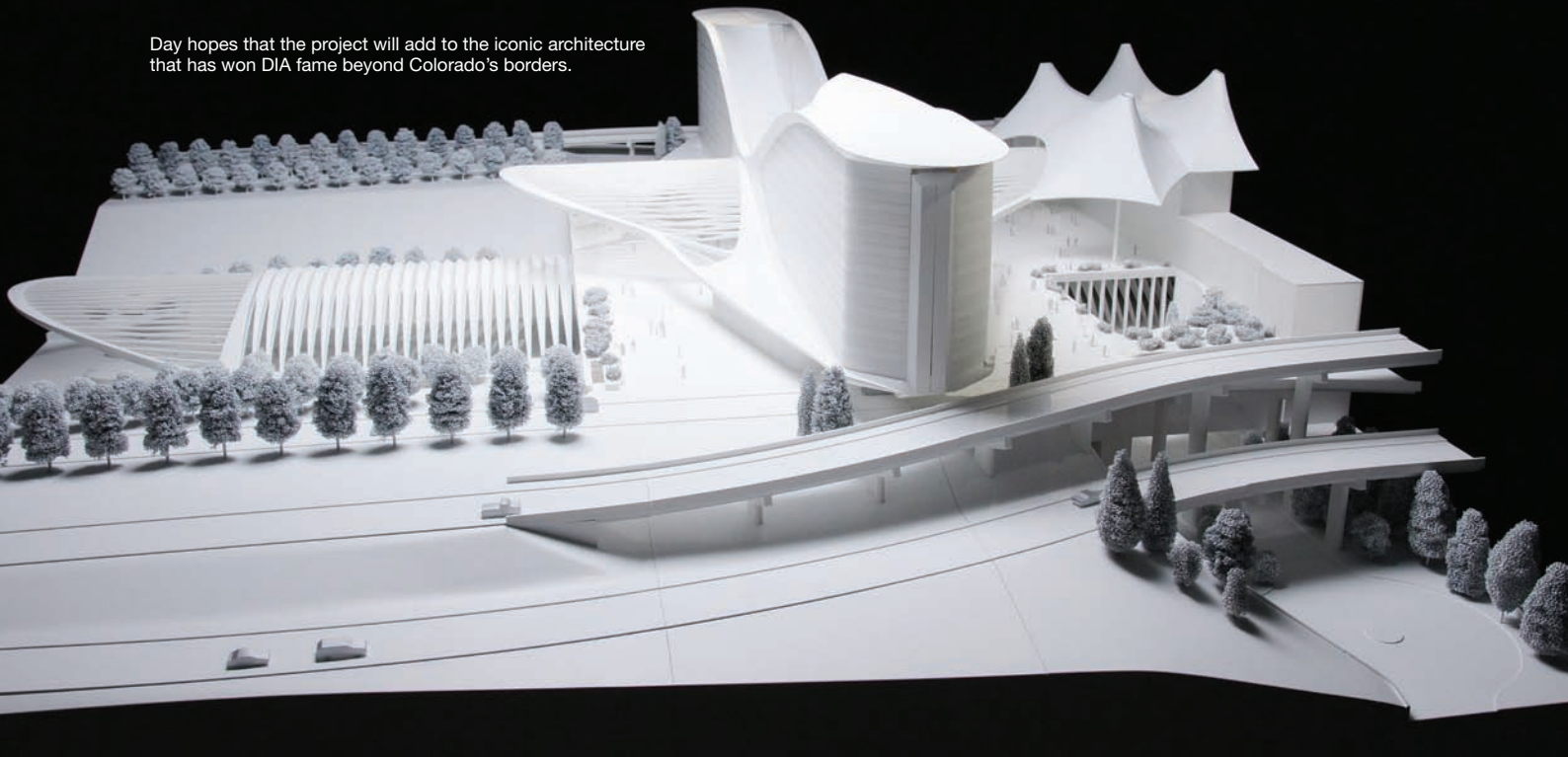
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Day hopes that the project will add to the iconic architecture that has won DIA fame beyond Colorado's borders.



having previously commissioned such luminaries as Daniel Libeskind and Michael Graves.

"We look at the bridge as an opportunity to create a new gateway for the airport," she says. "I can't imagine anyone better suited to take on this project. Everyone the world over knows we have this beautiful, iconic tent structure. With Calatrava there's an opportunity to add to that with the same level of quality."

Expanding appeal

This work is all part of a much grander aspiration: making DIA an attraction for day-trippers as well as air passengers. Day is clearly enthused when the facility is referred to as "a city in its own right", and the development of destination architecture, not to mention amenities that can be enjoyed by passengers and the surrounding community alike, is almost akin to the vision that town planners had for the great railway stations of the early 20th century.

"We can create an urban space right here," she explains. "Residents will be able to jump on the train at Denver Union station on a Sunday, have a drink in our proposed brew pub in the plaza, visit our fantastic art collection, perhaps do a little shopping and then ride home. The community has come to feel a real sense

of ownership here and there have to be ways of experiencing the facility other than travelling."

A visit to Munich Airport seems to have gone some way towards demonstrating to Day what might be possible.

"They were holding the national sand volleyball championships in the plaza," she exclaims. "Bleachers had been erected,

“There is a lot of focus on creating hub-to-hub connections, and other airports hitting capacity certainly works to our advantage.”

an airstream trailer converted into a dining car, radio stations were broadcasting from the floor; it was full of people. There's also a supermarket onsite that locals use. Munich was definitely a model when we were conceiving our initial plans."

Another area where DIA would like to mirror Munich is in expanding its portfolio of international flights. The airport only serves a handful of non-stop European destinations, for example, and it has no such routes to Asia. Dialogue is ongoing, but Day is confident that there will be developments very soon.

"There is a lot of focus on creating hub-to-hub connections, and other airports hitting capacity certainly works to our advantage. We've been touting our

low costs and geographic location – our ability to connect Tokyo to Mexico or southeast US, for example – and the feedback has been extremely positive. All Nippon Airways are scheduled to visit, which is a major step, and we're currently in conversation with a number of Star Alliance carriers. As the economy rebounds you'll see new entrants

coming into our market."

Although Day admits passenger spend has fallen significantly, the fact that DIA only saw a marginal drop in passenger numbers at the height of the financial crisis (2.1% in 2009) indicates it was less badly hit than a number of its competitors. She believes we are seeing a sustained return of the business traveller, a demographic the new hotel is being positioned to target. All the signs are looking positive for further growth and Day refuses to think anything but big.

"Maintaining the culture that got us here is the real challenge," she reveals. "Our solutions cannot be piecemeal and everything must stem from the big picture potential of what this facility can do." ■