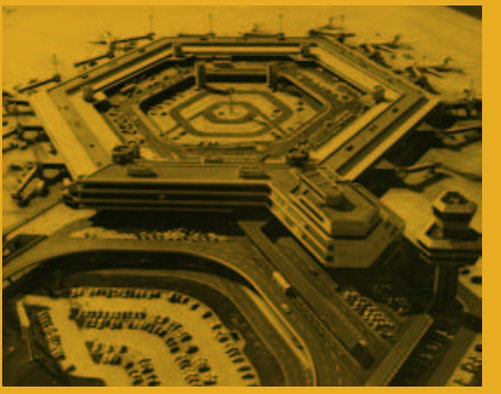
MEINHARD VON GERKAN. INTERVIEW WITH JASPAR JOSEPH-LESTER, SUSANNE PRINZ AND JULIE WESTERMAN HAMBURG, NOVEMBER 2012

WESTERMANN: You won the commission to design Tegel airport right at the beginning of your career. I would like to know how you set about the design process, what were your influences? Did form follow function or visa versa? Were your starting points a series of problems to be solved, perhaps the logistics of the airport, were you looking for an almost mathematical solution; or did you start from the experience of the passenger? Or was there another inspirational leap that took you to the hexagon

VON GERKAN: You have to understand that, the competition was in 1964, the twentieth century was a time for the evolution of airports all over the world, each one was different to the others. Most of them were configured with a centre and fingers or satellites. You had to walk from the check-in through a tunnel to the airport itself. As air travel grew, airports became larger and larger. As the airports got bigger, so did the distances to the departure gate, and the passengers had to walk further. Consequently airlines began to study and research to find a way to shorten the distance, to make it more comfortable for the passengers to get to their aircraft.
The competition to design Tegel airport was open for all European architects. We (Meinhard von Gerkan & Volkwin Marg) were straight from university and had built nothing before. The challenge was to create a building where air and road traffic could be integrated. They called it check in by your gate, you could check in where you deposit your luggage and from there you are free. You have only a lounge in-between and the whole distance is a maximum of 30 or 40 meters, no more. We also tried to find a way that passengers arriving by car could get as close as possible to their check-in desk, ideally allowing them to leave their car near to the point where they would depart.
It was the main matrix of our thinking to find a functional solution that would integrate all these different necessities and desires. The first idea was a circle, but everybody who is familiar with buildings, especially architects, knows that if you build a circular building every piece of it needs to be specially constructed which makes the price far higher than a rectangle for instance. So we thought perhaps a hexagon system based on a triangular grid would fulfill this idea as close as possible, almost like a circle. The most important idea was to enclose it and bring the car inside. There had to be access to the enclosed terminal, a way to arrive inside the circle. The journey for the passenger would be shortened by almost 90% and the handling of the luggage was also reduced to a minimum. It was a revolutionary design at the time. After we won the competition, we thought that this is the solution for the future because there is no other three dimensional configuration which could



Aerial view