The Story of Lagos and Schiphol

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The daily direct KLM flight from Amsterdam Airport Schiphol in the Netherlands to Murtala Muhammed International Airport in Lagos, Nigeria is not the only thing connecting these two airports. Some say the design of the airport in Lagos is a copy of Schiphol and although this is not entirely true, one can certainly find similarities between the two. This article tells the story of how that came about.
The development of aviation in Nigeria

From as early as 1920, the British Royal Air Force operated regular civil and military flights in Nigeria. In 1946 the West Africa Airways Corporation (WAAC) was established to provide air transportation services in the British West African colonies of Nigeria and Gold Coast (Ghana). Kwame Nkrumah pulled Ghana out of the WAAC upon the country achieving independence in 1957. The Nigerian government then obtained new aircraft from Fokker Aircraft Works in the Netherlands. With Nigeria gaining its own independence, the government took full control of WAAC in 1961 and renamed it Nigeria Airways. The proudly green-and-white flag carrier formed the basis of civil aviation in the country for decades, serving domestic, regional and international routes including Amsterdam, New York, London and Rome.

In the early post-independence years, Nigeria developed rapidly, leading to strong population growth, urbanisation and increasing demand for air transport. The legal framework for the regulation of aviation in the country was formed by the Civil Aviation Act of 1964, which placed all aspects of aviation under firm government control. The task of upgrading air transport infrastructure in the country to accommodate the growing number of flights and ever-larger aircraft, thus fell directly to the government.

In 1971 the Nigerian government appointed Netherlands Airport Consultants (NACO) to carry out a survey of existing international airports, prepare a master plan and conduct feasibility and economic impact studies for the upgrading of Lagos airport and 13 other airports in the country. This was the start of the first wave of airport development that would take place during the 1970s.
The emergence of Amsterdam Airport Schiphol

Aviation in the Netherlands had gone through its own development several decades earlier. In 1919 Royal Dutch Airlines (KLM) was founded as one of the first commercial airlines by a group of businessmen, including one young aviator by the name of Dr Albert Plesman. Although the airline grew steadily, it encountered tough times in the post-World War II transition to the jet age. The airline was effectively nationalised in the 1950s subsequently merging with Air France in 2003 to form one of the world's largest airline groups. Both Paris Charles de Gaulle Airport in France and Amsterdam Airport Schiphol in the Netherlands are now key hubs for the airline.

Schiphol airport underwent substantial renovation and expansion following the second world war, with a new terminal building being constructed in 1949. NACO was founded in the same year by Dr Plesman, who foresaw a need for specialist expertise in the rebuilding of airports in the Netherlands and around the world. From its involvement in the development of Schiphol airport, NACO has become one of the world’s leading airport consultancy firms, with its expertise deployed at more than 600 airports across 100+ countries.

In the early 1960s, NACO began work on a new terminal building that would establish Schiphol as a modern, international airport with a distinctly Dutch style. The building would incorporate the typically Dutch characteristics of frugality, purity and openness. When it opened in 1967, the new terminal building could already handle in excess of 3 million passengers.
A new airport for Lagos

The master planning work by NACO in the early 1970s kicked off an era of rapid airport development in Nigeria. In 1973, NACO was appointed to carry out the design and construction supervision of a new international airport in Ikeja in nearby Lagos, then the nation’s capital, and 17 other airports, including Kano and Port Harcourt. During a visit to the Netherlands, Schiphol airport caught the attention of the Nigerian Minister of Aviation, K.O. Mbadiwe who had the ambition for the new international airport to mimic Schiphol’s role as a regional hub. This led to the vision of Lagos airport as the international gateway to Nigeria.

As part of the expansion of the airport in Ikeja, construction of a second parallel runway (36L-18R) and connecting taxiways, as well as an overlay of the existing runway and taxiways was required. The existing terminal building was to be expanded but also had to remain in use during construction of the new terminal building. Also known as Ikeja Airport, the existing terminal building would later be used for handling domestic flights. The new Lagos airport was meant to be distinctly international, not an African airport. Nevertheless, the design was tailored to the African context with Nigerian engineers, architects and artists involved in the development.
NACO, in association with local firms such as Egbor & Associates, put together a team for the project that comprised some of the engineers and architects who had also worked on the new terminal building at Schiphol. Schiphol’s interior designer Kho Liang Ie Associates was also appointed to the project. Several young Nigerian engineers were assigned to the project by the government and were closely involved in the design and supervision phases. One of the engineers, Engr. Saleh Dunoma, would later go on to become Managing Director of the Federal Airports Authority of Nigeria.

The new terminal building was designed to minimise walking distances and provide views of the aircraft parked outside. As with Schiphol, arriving and departing passengers are split between two levels, with baggage handling in the basement. The design features an elevated frontage road leading to departures, while the arrivals are on the ground floor. NACO’s design philosophy was that “without affecting functionality and convenience, the total must be designed to a pleasant human scale”. This resulted in a modern, functional design decorated with artworks from Nigerian artists including Demas Nwoko. To this day, the characteristic façade of the terminal building and iconic control tower are instantly recognisable.

With construction carried out by contractors Strabag and Julius Berger, the new terminal building opened in 1976 and was re-named after former Nigerian military head of state Murtala Muhammed. The Nigerian Airports Authority (NAA) was established in the same year with the mandate to manage the newly completed Lagos airport and to drive the development of airport infrastructure in the country. The NAA, known since 1995 as the Federal Airports Authority of Nigeria (FAAN), still operates and develops the country's airports.
Looking ahead

Schiphol airport continues to grow steadily and by 2018 was handling more than 70 million passengers annually. It remains one of Europe’s busiest hub airports and plays an important role in the local economy. The airport’s infrastructure has also continued to expand and with the creation of Schiphol Plaza in 1995 the only part of the original 1967 terminal remaining is the current Departures 1 area. While the old control tower still exists, it was replaced by a new one in 1991, along with a satellite tower for its newest runway in 2003. Schiphol recently embarked on a multi-million-euro expansion programme incorporating the construction of a new terminal and pier that will accommodate an additional 14 million passengers.

Lagos airport has also expanded considerably since 1976 with traffic now approaching some 7 million passengers per year. It is the busiest airport in West Africa and the continent’s fifth busiest cargo airport. The international terminal building has been expanded several times since the 1970s and in 2007 the private domestic terminal, Murtala Muhammed Airport 2 (MMA2), was opened. More recently, a new terminal building was constructed in partnership with the Chinese government.

While these expansions support the growth of air traffic to and from Lagos, much work remains to be done if the airport is to retain its position as the regional hub. Arguably, the potential for Lagos to grow is now greater than ever, with African aviation on the cusp of serious growth as governments around the continent consider liberalisation of airspace and private investment in infrastructure and airlines. FAAN and the Nigerian government will also have to invest to provide capacity for growth, improvements to safety, security and the passenger experience, and also to compete with other growing airports in the region.

Bearing in mind the historic connections between these two airports, Lagos may well find inspiration in its “twin airport”, Schiphol, as it prepares for the future.

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