White Heat London 3 / Aviation

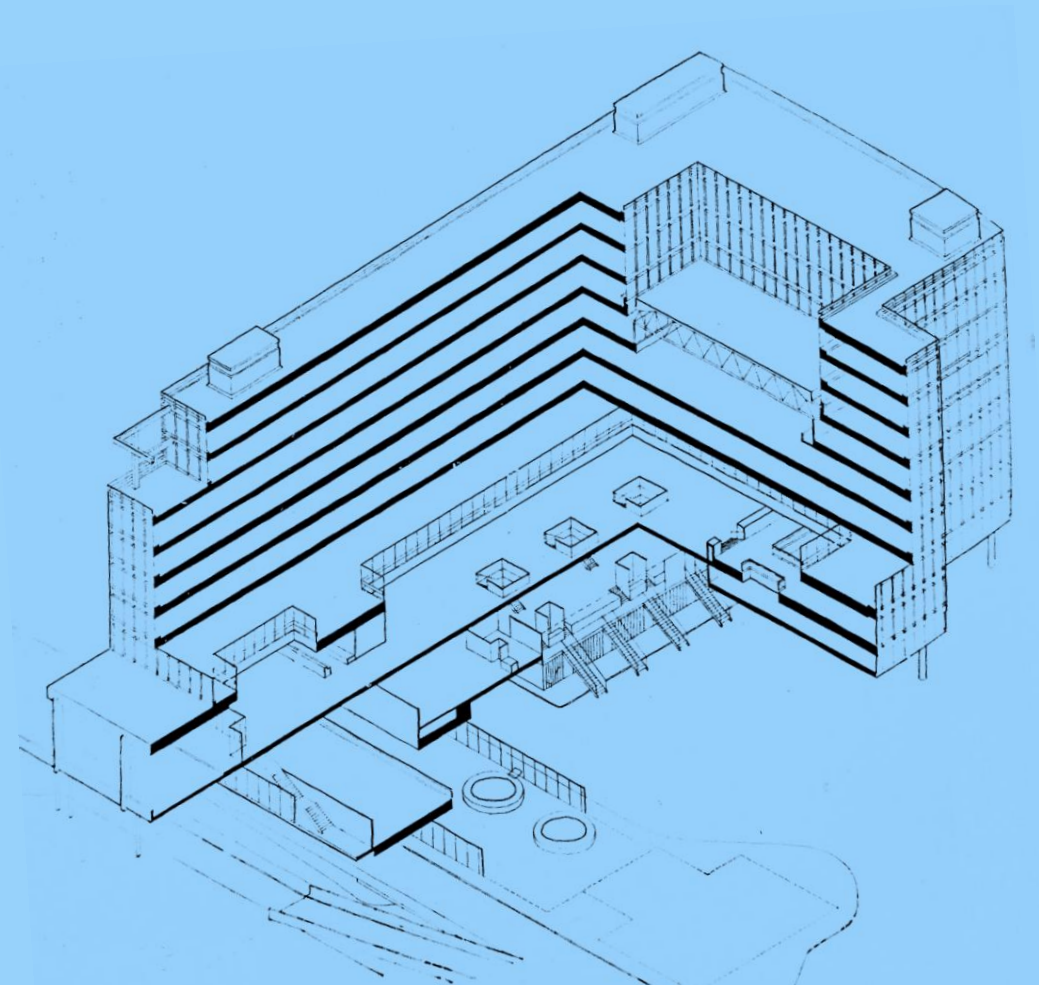## West London Air Terminal Pioneering remote bookings

Sir John Burnet, Tait and Partners

1961-63

London's principal airports – Croydon originally, Heathrow after the war – were remote enough to make the start or end of a flight slow, expensive and unreliable for many. City terminals to handle such passengers more efficiently and bus them to and from their aircraft were built for both, that for Heathrow opening on Cromwell Road as an interim structure. Within a few years it was replaced by a multi-storey complex by a prolific inter-war commercial partnership.

Many airlines served this new terminal. Its passenger facilities were on the lower floors with offices above, into which state-owned carrier British European Airways – the world's fifth largest airline at the time – moved its entire staff. Cars used spiral ramps to reach elevated accessways which in turn gave onto to a sequence of spaces for the public. After checking in and dropping their luggage passengers could visit the duty-free shops, bank or eat and drink before settling down in the double-height departure lounge with its television screens showing flight information.

BEA's desks were soon linked to its computerised reservation system capable of managing passenger records, bookings and flight schedules up to eleven months ahead and available around the clock for overseas users. Upstairs around two hundred telephonists accessed the same system in one of Europe's earliest large-scale call centres. Changing passenger habits meant closure in 1974 and, many years later, reconstruction as a residential block.

The building's tower held a lift and stair core wrapped by a continuous ramp for trolleys that echoed the arrangements for vehicles. As with airport terminals, departing and arriving passengers were segregated architecturally.

On exiting the checking hall passengers progressed to the main concourse, moved from there to the lower concourse and thence to the coaches one floor below again. Here too arriving passengers de-bussed, waited at carrousels to collect baggage and exited to a taxi rank, all on one level.

A BEACON unit at a BEA agent's desk. A physical card has been inserted to represent a given route; use of the push-buttons next to it, a keyboard underneath and a teleprinter completed the transaction. The hardware, including twin mainframe computers, was housed on the third floor and cost almost as much as the entire building.