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Airbus' A380 is a huge jet, but lacks 747's glamour

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It was 1969 and the airplane designers having lunch in the conference room of Pan American World Airways were standing by the window overlooking New York's Park Avenue when Charles Lindbergh came over. The famous aviator was a consultant to the airline at the time and he had something to say about the 747 Joe Sutter and his team at Boeing were creating for Pan Am.

"This is one of the great ones." Sutter recounted Lindbergh saying, "I mean the 747, this is an airplane that will go down in history."

Thirty-eight years later, as hundreds of journalists watched the brand new Airbus A380 descend onto runways in the United States for the first time, they were encouraged to compare it with the 747. My advice to Airbus: Don't go there.

There are similarities between the A380 and the 747 of course. Both airplanes have shattered beyond imagination the limits of how much weight can be safely lifted off the ground and flown around the world. And like the 747, the A380 with its \$300 million price tag is a high-stakes gamble.

But the A380 cuts a lumbering silhouette with its unrelentingly bulbous fuselage and large vertical stabilizer. Inside, the wide staircase connecting the two seating decks is the only flourish to an otherwise conventional passenger cabin.

In contrast, when the first Boeing 747 entered service in 1970, a domed front that gradually tapered to the tail balanced its historic girth. The 747 also went faster than any previous passenger plane, improved airline economics by reducing the cost-per-seat mile and created a new class of twin-aisle jetliner called the wide-body.

Steve Hatch worked on the 747 as a young aeronautical engineer. On the 30th anniversary of the airplane, he told me about the day the jumbo jet was displayed to the public for the first time. "They were all going to be awed by it, like we were ourselves because it was the greatest undertaking of that time." It was like no other airplane ever produced and it glamorized an entire industry.

That's why it seems foolish for Airbus executives to invite comparison between a portrait of elegant sophistication and the startlingly ordinary, albeit humongous airliner they've produced just because both airplanes broke records for size.

In some ways the A380 is better than the 747. It generously incorporates lighter composite materials. Its jet engines produce more thrust and lift more weight. By minimizing fuel consumption, the A380 gives its operators slight but much appreciated wiggle room in the binding that ties them to oil prices.

Those are the kinds of benefits the accountants appreciate. The intangible factors that turned the 747 into

the "Queen of the Sky," while a Lockheed L-1011 is relegated to a footnote in aviation history are harder to understand.

"I don't think anybody really understood the impact that the 747 was going to have." Sutter admitted. "Airline ticket prices dropped 30 percent (because) everybody wanted to fly." Pan Am was the 747's largest customer in the 1970s, taking possession of 21 in the first year. But even Pan Am chairman Juan Tripp thought the airplane would be a short-termer, a 10-year bridge between the jet age and supersonic air travel. Boeing already was working on a commercial SST.

Ironically, the French-British government consortium that produced the Concorde beat Boeing to the goal. The SST plane flew from 1976 until 2003 and was not a financial prize for its makers.

An economically successful supersonic commercial airplane remains aviation's Gordian knot, but the Boeing 747 is still being produced in Everett, with more than 1,500 sold.

"The business was unpredictable back then and it's unpredictable now," says Kevin Darcy, a retired Boeing engineer and private aviation consultant. "It could be that it will be a very wise decision to develop the A380 because the market will go that way. Or maybe not."

Airbus made the decision to build the 800-seat capacity airplane believing the commercial carriers want to carry more people on fewer airplanes on point-to-point long-distance flights. Though none of the A380 launch customers have chosen a passenger cabin fitted anywhere close to that many seats.

Take an airplane 33 percent bigger than a 747 and fill it with just 25 percent more passengers and a slightly more spacious environment will be the result.

This may be enough to win over international air travelers, but in terms of glamour, the A380 is no closer to the 747 than a bedroom slipper is to a Manolo Blahnik designer shoe.

But just when I'm about to conclude that there's little panache in Airbus's ungainly whale of an airship, Robert Ditchey, the now retired founder of America West Airlines, who is also a pilot and aeronautical engineer, waxes lyrical about the plane's nuts and bolts.

"I marvel at the machine that it has such wonderful capabilities it can fly across the Pacific and carry so much weight," he said.

From palm-sized computers to cell phone video cameras, technological marvels have become somewhat routine these days. While revolutionary style can elevate an iPod or a designer sandal to the status of icon.

That's what the 747 has been for decades and the A380, for all its size, will not change that.

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