A brief history of transport infrastructure in South Africa up to the end of the 20th century

Chapter 6: Urban transport – a saga of political indecision and lost opportunities

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URBAN TRANSPORT INFRASTRUCTURE
The history of urban transport infrastructure in South Africa up to the end of the 20th century is a relatively short one (only four decades approximately) compared to the other facets of transport infrastructure.

In this chapter the meaning of urban transport infrastructure is broadened to include vehicles used (taxis, buses and trains), as well as urban freeways which, although part of the national primary road network, play a major role in traffic distribution in urban areas.

The short history of urban transport in South Africa during the period described is characterised by lost opportunities, mainly because of political indecisiveness, or lack of acceptance of proposals from the professionals, and funding shortages. The importance of urban transport infrastructure is emphasised by the fact that by far the greatest percentage of the South African population lives in cities. Unfortunately, the urban transport infrastructure milieu in South Africa during the past three to four decades is a story of lost opportunities caused by a failure to ‘grasp the nettle’ in addressing the burgeoning traffic problem in our urban areas.

One of the essential requirements of efficient urban transport is the balancing of journeys – primarily commuter journeys. Ideally, when the peak flows occur the optimum mode of transport should be in place to handle peak demand volumes.

South Africa’s absence of these appropriate institutional arrangements and coordination of modes, as well as grossly inadequate levels of funding in the past 30 or more years, saw urban transport in a parlous state at the start of the 21st century.

THE 1950s
During the 50s, urban transport in South Africa was restricted primarily to bus and tram travel in the cities, together with commuter rail travel – predominantly in the Cape Town and Witwatersrand areas. On the whole, these facilities handled the demand adequately, and no attention was given, or needed to be given, to modal transfer infrastructure. The advent of the Group Areas Act, however, led to a growing number of long-distance travellers, leading to rapid growth in bus and rail commuting, which was supported by a subsidy system. In some cases the subsidisation of travel costs to an affordable level for the poor paradoxically exceeded the cost of providing adequate housing closer to their place of work. During this period of
the late 50s and early 60s the existing urban road and rail infrastructure was, on the whole, able to handle demand, particularly with the construction of new commuter rail lines mainly in the Cape Town and Witwatersrand areas, but also in Durban, Bloemfontein and East London, to accommodate the travel demands of the poorer segment of the population.

THE 1960s AND THE BIRTH OF URBAN FREeways

The 60s was an era of political unrest, with attempts to stem, or rather cater for, the growing commuter tide and growing car ownership. There was a dualism in the infrastructure provided, with urban arterials being used mainly by white-collar commuters, and rural gravel roads and rail being the infrastructure provided for blue-collar workers. However, the low rate of motor car occupancy, together with the rapidly growing rate of car ownership, was starting to become a problem, as was the thorny issue of the bus subsidy system. The first signs of a breakdown in respect of rail infrastructure capacity, including inadequacy of road/rail transfer stations, also began to manifest.

With the realisation that the rapidly growing motor car population would ‘choke’ the small city streets in densely populated areas, as well as developments in the field of traffic engineering and road planning, it became evident in the late 1950s that an improved form of road was necessary in urban areas. This saw the birth of urban freeways in our larger cities.

The provision of freeways in dense urban areas has many pros and cons in respect of the efficient movement of traffic, but this will not be discussed here. Suffice to say, the cost of these projects was beyond the scope of the rates income of the cities concerned, and a contribution to their initial cost only, and not towards future maintenance, was made by the National Transport Commission (NTC).

In 1961 the contributions to the major cities began, which allowed construction to commence. However, despite an initial estimate of the cost contributions to the five major cities in the country (R51 million in rand values of the time), by 1967 only R5.5 million had been paid out because of delays in initiating the projects.

Construction of the original city freeway schemes commenced in the early 60s, reaching fruition in the mid to late 70s, and included the ‘ring roads’ around Durban, Johannesburg, Port Elizabeth and Pretoria, which were primarily used by urban traffic.

Not all of the original planning was implemented, however. In Cape Town, the urban freeway still comes to an abrupt halt in the vicinity of lower Adderley Street, and in Pretoria the scheme had not even been started by 1975 when the NTC considered that its financial obligation had been fulfilled in respect of the other four cities.

The refusal of the Commission to make additional funds available for urban freeways, and the predicament in which several municipalities then found themselves, coupled with the realisation that urban arterials and rail infrastructure alone were inadequate to solve the problem of the growing congestion in...
urban areas, moved the government to appoint a Committee of Inquiry into urban transport facilities in South Africa, colloquially known as the Driessen Committee.

The Urban Transport Act and the Urban Transport Fund
The Driessen Committee, which submitted its report to the Minister in June 1974, made far-reaching recommendations towards addressing the problem of urban transport in South Africa. Recognising that there was a growing problem in adequate mobility and accessibility in urban areas as a result of the growing economic development of the country and rapidly growing urbanisation, the Committee made recommendations which covered the fields of planning, institutional arrangements, financing and the provision of adequate urban transport infrastructure to address the growing problem.

Unfortunately the recommendations, which were accepted by government and which led to the promulgation in June 1977 of the Urban Transport Act, were not fully put in place for various reasons. For example, the proposals for the coordination and integration of all urban transport modes, as well as the integration of land use and transport planning, floundered because of political and professional jealousies. The various Metropolitan Transport Advisory Boards (MTABs) set up to promote sound planning for urban transport infrastructure in the different urban areas were, for a variety of reasons (mainly political) never fully effective in promoting and providing integrated urban transport facilities incorporating all modes. The Treasury also never acted upon the recommendation in respect of the provision of adequate funding.

The Driessen Committee had recommended that R92 million (in 1974 rand values) per annum should be made available for urban transportation facilities via an Urban Transport Fund (UTF). The subsequent White Paper trimmed this amount to R52 million (1974 rand values), of which some R8 million was to be obtained from local authority sources. For the five years preceding 1982, only some R60 million (in 1981 rand values) in total had been made available by Treasury, compared to the proposed total of some R400 million (1981 rand values) for the same period. This trend continued until 1987 when the National Transport Commission promised around R100 million per annum to the UTF (from the National Road Fund) for a period of five years. This figure declined dramatically from 1992 onwards with the pressing roads demands on the Fund. It appeared that Treasury had failed to grasp the nettle in making funds available to adequately address the growing urban transport problem; and still continued to do so up until the end of the century.

THE 1970s AND THE KOMBI TAXI INDUSTRY

The rapid growth in the Kombi taxi mode of transport, and the unwise decision by the rail authorities in the late 70s and early 80s to disinvest in commuter rail, created much pressure on the existing road infrastructure. This was exacerbated by inadequately structured and implemented multi-modal planning by the various modal authorities, primarily because of the continued reluctance of the political role players to assign the necessary authority and funding to metropolitan transport authorities.

The kombi taxi industry came to the rescue by providing transport for a great number of commuters, and at a reasonable cost. This was done in the face of much opposition and violence, and taxis became an increasingly conspicuous, yet successful feature of urban transport. They were described as the “miracle of the 1980s”.

Initially, in the late 1970s, large American saloon cars were used to convey passengers – a loophole in the Road Transportation Act of 1977 taken advantage of. Even in the face of much opposition, the kombi taxi grew during the next 20 years to become by far the most widely used mode of conveyance for urban transport journeys, and at that time accounted for some 70% of all urban transport movements. To use the words of a noted expert in the field, it has been “no easy ride”.

Unfortunately, the growth of this largely unregulated industry over two decades led to a decline in patronage for the bus and rail modes. This was deleterious to their financial profitability, despite subsidisation by government, and led to the consequent reduction in the quality and frequency of passenger services offered by them.

THE 1980s

The 80s also saw attention being given to various and isolated public transport infrastructure projects to make public transport more attractive to the commuter. These included pilot projects promoting ‘park and ride’ facilities, improved bus services, modal transfer stations, taxi ranks and exclusive bus lanes. Unfortunately, the paucity of funding led to an attitude of cynicism amongst city authorities, which it must be said, also did not grasp the nettle in using the strong powers assigned to them in the Urban Transport Act to reduce traffic flow into the central business districts.
In an attempt to resuscitate the rail mode as an important mode of transport in urban areas, the Department of Transport in the mid-1980s commissioned a study to investigate the feasibility of a rapid rail mass transit system for Johannesburg. This study was largely carried out by a London-based firm of consulting engineers who had had vast experience in the design of large parts of London’s underground rail system. The study was concluded in 1986 with a recommendation that “it is unavoidable that Johannesburg would have to prepare itself for a rail-based mass transit system by the year 2000”. A system was proposed at a cost of approximately R1 600 million (in 1986 rand values).

The proposed system would penetrate almost all major residential and business areas in Johannesburg and has been described as a system equivalent to the London subway system, when London was at the same stage of development as Johannesburg was at the time. The system would be operated outside of the SATS system. Unfortunately, because of political indecisiveness, possible financial problems and institutional jealousies, the proposal was not accepted by government. It is interesting to compare this proposal with the 25-year-later Gautrain project which cost many times more (in real rand values) and with perhaps 20% of the penetration of the Masstran system. Once again, a missed opportunity.

THE 1990s

The first half of the 90s saw a continuance of this downward spiral of despondency amongst planners, because of the inadequacy of funding to adequately address infrastructure needs. The estimated backlog in urban transport infrastructure needs in 1995 was estimated by the Department of Transport at some R13 billion – and this did not include rail infrastructure requirements. The commuter rail system was on the point of breakdown, with much of its rolling stock exceeding 40 years in age and with, in some places, dangerously inadequate signalling systems and permanent way. Rail commuter transport was becoming, in some instances, dangerous and most definitely unattractive to the commuter.

In 1996, in an attempt to remedy the rail infrastructure problem, the Department of Transport made proposals to transfer rail commuter services through concession to the private sector in a similar fashion to the successful endeavour in Argentina. Unfortunately, this proposal was unacceptable to organised labour, and was subsequently shelved.

The bus industry was also in trouble during the period from the mid-eighties onwards, because of the lack of adequate urban infrastructure such as busways and good rural roads on which to operate. Following a short overseas visit in 1992 to investigate busways, the Deputy Director-General for Land Transport in the Department of Transport recommended to his Minister that a system of Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) routes, integrated with the other transit facilities and under the control of regional transit authorities, should be introduced. Perhaps because of the rapidly approaching change in government in South Africa this proposal was not acted upon. It is interesting to note that it has taken some 20 or so years for this proposal to be implemented during the 21st century, and with a new government.

Additionally, it is an anachronism of public urban transport in South Africa that many millions of commuters travelled up to 80 km or more from rural areas, to their place of work in cities, despite the advent of universal democracy in South Africa in 1994. The problem still persisted to the turn of the century.

CONCLUSION

The major problems for urban transport during the past four decades, namely inadequate funding and the lack of effective and decisive passenger transport authorities in the various metropolitan areas, still persisted up to the turn of the century – with the exception of the then recently constituted eThekwini Public Transport Authority in KwaZulu-Natal. Now, a decade or so after the start of the 21st century, transport authorities have been created in the other major metropolitan areas of South Africa.

At the turn of the century all facets of urban transport infrastructure in respect of rail were inadequate, and commuter transport on roads in metropolitan areas continue to be characterised by the gradual demise of the bus industry in favour of kombi taxis and private motor cars using generally heavily congested road systems. 70% of all commuter transport journeys are made by an undisciplined and supposedly, but not definitively, regulated taxi industry, with little or no attempt to coordinate land use and transport planning. The continual growth of separated urban nodes, as opposed to the densification of transport corridors, is also creating a problem for urban transport infrastructure, which will be difficult, if not impossible, to resolve easily.

The urban transport infrastructure action which is required as we enter the 21st century is, in broad terms, the speedy implementation in all metropolitan areas of adequately resourced and professionally empowered passenger transport authorities to manage all modes of transport within a specific geographical area. Only in this way is there a possibility for progress – providing an effective urban transport system in this country.