URBAN MOBILITY AND PRIVATE CAR DEPENDENCY

(South) Africa’s Choice

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In a recent paper concerned with the evolution of future urban habitats in a mixed First and Third World society – with Johannesburg providing the example – the authors argued for the development of a city largely dependent on motorised road transport for its mobility needs (Carey, Froneman and De Boer 1995). The basis for this proposition was that other (non-motorised) means did not suit the expansive – historically and politically-dictated – urban geography, and could not meet the mobility aspirations of the ‘newly franchised’ Third World segment of the population. It was also suggested that any negative environmental consequences of such a policy might not be given the importance they have come to assume in First World countries since the ‘realities of the needs and perceptions of the population are completely different’ (ibid). Given the country’s political legacy from a purely short-term and local perspective these views may be understandable. But serious issue must be taken with them precisely because of the precedents they would create for the medium and long term.

Locally, South Africa’s short and turbulent history is sometimes cited to support the notion that in many ways it is ‘different’ from other countries, and therefore has to evolve a different path to development. Whilst there is clearly some truth in this assertion, it is taken too far when it is used to support the idea that the Republic (therefore) can ignore the hard lessons that other countries have learnt and the global environmental obligations that all countries – rich and poor – increasingly have to come to terms with.

From an African perspective it seems inevitable that South Africa, as the sub-continent’s most advanced and successful economy, will increasingly be seen as the role model of development fashions. The styles it adopts in the transport, as in other sectors, are thus not just of local significance. As the article by Marius de Langen makes clear, most African cities confront daunting and vital mobility problems. The way South Africa deals with these problems will be carefully observed.

This paper explores some of the more recent urban trends and research findings to demonstrate that:
i. The development of a city largely dependent on private car transport for its mobility needs is no longer a realistic option even among the wealthiest of nations and that this is demonstrably more the case for the poorer urban areas of Africa.

ii. As a consequence of this, public transport and non-motorised forms of movement will have to be given much greater prominence than they have in the past, and this has implications for the pattern and control of land use.

iii. Environmental concerns will ensure that both these considerations increasingly become the received urban transport planning wisdom.

CAR-DEPENDENCY

Rich Countries

The popularity of road transport owes much to the example of its most successful exponent, the United States of America. It underwent a dramatic transformation in the short space of twenty years, from 1920 to 1940, when nearly 1,500,000 kilometres of roads were surfaced and over $40 billion was spent for construction and maintenance. Although there was a lag effect, due to the depression in the 1920s and early 1930s, the per capita real gross national product doubled in the space of just ten years from 1933 to 1943 (Samuelson 1976).

This experience, and the continued advancement of the economy in the 1940s and 1950s, led the eminent economist Walter Rostow to equate automobile-dependence – really private car dependency – with the highest stages of economic growth (Rostow 1962). Similarly, and more generally, Wilfred Owen, in his seminal work *Strategy for Mobility*, made a persuasive plea for the benefits of modern, and especially road, transport systems (Owen 1964).

It was to be more than thirty years before analysis of Japan’s performance was to challenge these views and to show that investment in the road transport sector was not a significant factor in that country’s equally astonishing economic transformation. From the perspective of the 1990’s, Japan has achieved the fastest rate of economic growth and increase in productivity of all the countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Yet it is also the least dependent on the private automobile of all the OECD countries, and the most dependent on mass transit, as well as on the bicycle and walking. Even more remarkable is that its economic and productivity performance has been achieved at the cost of committing only some 11 per cent of GNP to the transport sector compared with between 18 and 21 per cent in the more auto-dependent United States in a comparable period (Hook 1994).