

Urban crawl: Get on with improving mobility

The creator of Sherlock Holmes, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, lived in a rambling estate in the London area. He built a monorail around the grounds and, when the muse left him, he would climb in and take a trip around the garden. His good friend, HG Wells, one of the fore-runners of science fiction writing, predicted that the monorail would emerge as an important transportation system, and so it appeared in the space-age-related stories of the new comic strips of the 1950s. Urbanization in the form we know it today was then a thing of the future, accelerating with rapid population growth from the 1970s.

On the back of steam power development, railway systems took off in the mid-1800s from Britain and provided the transportation backbone to the industrialization of Europe and America. The system spread to many countries, including Indonesia, impacted by the industrial challenges and demands from Europe, in particular.

The car, followed by developments in heavy goods vehicles led to a need to accelerate the building



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of roads and road networks, especially from the late 1950s, leading to a negative impact on the use of rail as a main means of transporting goods and people. Roads have come to dominate land travel over the past half century to such an extent that personal transport have created huge problems for city transportation planners.

Two or three decades ago, most people lived in a rural or out-of-town community. But within the next 30 years some 70 percent of the world's population will be urban or peri-urban, reflecting two main changes over the past half century. These are considerable population expansion, and the significant changes brought about in the commercial and industrial life of developed or developing communities since the advent of the silicon chip brought in the computer age.

Some older cities with wide thor-

oughfares and those where planners had the foresight and support to set out a proper hierarchical system of roads, with at least 17 percent of the land area for road infrastructure, have been able to be minimally impacted by traffic congestion. However, this has not been the case for most large, fast-growing cities of Asia where congestion is a daily way of life, and no more so than in Greater Jakarta, an urban sprawl of nearly 30 million people.

The road space in Jakarta is not much more than half that required for a modern city, and this is compounded by the large annual growth in cars and motorcycles. There are now more than 8 million motorcycles registered, for example, the number increasing daily. The decisions to plan for today's development had to be made 40 years ago, when the city was a fraction of what it is now. Even then it would have been difficult to imagine the impressive level of investment that has been the hallmark of growth in the past two decades, even before the economic crisis of 1998.

When road level space cannot be expanded, providing further com-

muter capacity must be achieved by either constructing above ground, in elevation, or underground. Both options are finally being grasped, albeit belatedly, although the benefits from realization of the new transit systems to be built for the city, MRT and monorail, are yet a few years off. But it behooves the city administration to encourage the builders of these systems, and assist where necessary, to complete the works as quickly as possible.

The advantage of the monorail, apart from construction above ground being cheaper than tunneling underground, is its ability to accommodate tighter turns and changes in elevation than other systems, all essential in a highly built up area such as Jakarta. It also imposes a relatively small footprint, significantly less than other options for elevated transportation and can generally fit into existing rights-of-way. For a city like Jakarta it is hence a sensible approach to improving people's mobility, and an appropriate approach, albeit on a different scale for other highly populated cities with inadequate road space. For Jakarta one should see expansion of the first routes toward

a comprehensive network linking the future city.

The Jakarta monorail has been on the cards for a decade now, and its checkered history does not make pleasant reading; a lesson in how not to get things done, and the negative approach of the previous city administration has been a cost over the past few years. It was with some relief that Governor Joko Widodo revived the project and encouraged the private sector to invest in and deliver it as quickly as possible.

The private sector Jakarta monorail endeavor, the consortium including companies with the necessary wherewithal to complete the project, has been engaged in the past few months in resolving contractual clauses, always necessary before financial commitments are made. However, for the public the time taken seems unnecessarily long to tidy up the paperwork. What is wanted is some real action to see the monorail project underway and also the MRT.

It is crucial that the private sector be encouraged to invest in infrastructure generally, not just in Jakarta, where a prime focus, as in other ma-

jor cities, must be to provide a healthy environment for its citizens. This also means having a comprehensive water and sanitation systems. Planners and engineers call this "using water as a force for good".

At an estimated US\$50 billion a year for the foreseeable future, with the government only able to meet about one third of this requirement, there needs to be a much better effort by government to facilitate private sector resources. Facilitation here is the key word and not as I was advised once in a political period of my life "to learn to say nothing very well". Or was it "to do nothing very well" — apparently the hallmark of many bureaucracies across the world.

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