A DISABLING PUBLIC TRANSPORT SYSTEM?

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ABSTRACT

Public transport does not make satisfactory provision for Special Needs Passengers (SNP) and this isolates them from employment opportunities, recreational and educational opportunities.

This study focuses on what one might term mobility-handicapped persons who find it difficult to move around, or to hear and see. The term SNP or mobility-handicapped persons encompasses more than just disabled persons. It includes customers laden with shopping bags, pregnant women, or someone with a broken leg, and so on. The public transport system should enable persons with disabilities to experience the most optimal level of independence.

The public transport system can be divided into 4 categories namely, Infrastructure, Shared Road and Pedestrian Environment, Information and Vehicles. At present, these components of the system do not function efficiently.

Therefore it is imperative that legislation, policies and implementation strategies that aim to provide equitable public transport be assessed to the extent with which they cater for SNP's.

It is crucial to have an accessible public transport system, because this is the first step in achieving independence for many SNP's. At present the system does not even satisfy the needs of able-bodied persons. How then is it supposed to respond to Special Needs Passengers?

1. BACKGROUND

The past apartheid policy is one of the issues which has had a major influence on public transport today, in that previously disadvantaged people were moved far away from job opportunities and access to amenities. The input of commuters during this displacement period were non-existent, therefore planning was not carried out with people's needs in mind.

The result of this is that the average able-bodied person in Cape Town experiences many hindrances with the current public transport system. With this in mind, it is important to comprehend the plight of Special Needs Passengers (SNP). They are at a great disadvantage because of their mobility limitations and the inefficient public transport system.

The term SNP represents a broad spectrum of commuters, all of whom have particular needs when it comes to commuting. This category of commuters includes people with disabilities, those who experience difficulty to move around due to accident, a congenital condition, people temporarily impaired due to a broken limb, a pregnant women, a person laden with bags, to mention a few. It should be noted that SNP's have the same desires as able-bodied persons, and to want to be integrated into society. The public transport system has the potential to achieve such integration. However, at present, they are disadvantaged due to a deficient public transport system.

In order to benefit properly from social activities and utilise health and welfare services, SNP's need to be mobile, bearing in mind the only difference between able-bodied persons and SNP's is the ease with which able-bodied persons can move around. According to the Integrated National Disability Strategy [South Africa, 1997], disabled people are capable individuals who contribute substantially to the development of society. Therefore it is only appropriate to ensure that they are given the opportunities able-bodied persons are awarded.

It might be argued that the problem is not all that significant. Statistics, however, prove otherwise, in that one in every twenty people in our country has some kind of disability. In the local context (Western Cape) there are estimated to be more than 145 000 people with disabilities. [South Africa, 2002]

With this in mind, it is crucial to understand the importance of an accessible public transport system to all members of society. The provision of this can be the first step in achieving independence for many SNP's.

It is therefore, important to view the rehabilitation of the public transport system to cater for SNP's as the foremost step in the 2020 vision of Moving South Africa. What is the point of making sure buildings are accessible when it is almost impossible for SNP's to reach these buildings?

2. THE EXCLUSION OF SPECIAL NEEDS PASSENGERS

Presently, it appears that Government, Transport Planners and mainstream Transport Operators are not properly considering the needs of SNP's. This is evident in the many barriers in our current public transport system.

The absence of a well-developed body of knowledge with reference to SNP's to guide upgrades and development is a major factor in isolating SNP's. As a consequence inappropriate measures are implemented and public money is wasted in the face of already severely constrained funds.

" … The lack of accessible transport is a serious barrier to the full integration into society of people with disabilities." [South Africa, 1997]. Government therefore acknowledges the barrier to integrating SNP's. The Cape Metropolitan Council has accordingly accepted a policy whereby accessible transport facilities are to be phased in over time according to the availability of resources and the actual demand for these facilities and services. How then is this acceptable when it is everyone's constitutional right not to be discriminated against. By the Council accepting this policy it is blatantly discriminating against disabled people. It is important to realise that there already exists a great need for accessible public transport and funds should therefore be made available, in order for this discrimination to stop. It is imperative that SNP's are made a priority in public transport policy.

With reference to the Integrated National Disability Strategy costs are often cited as the reason for the failure to provide a barrier free environment [South Africa, 1997]. Yet, when accessibility is incorporated in the original design, the additional cost does not generally exceed 0.2% of the overall costs of development [South Africa, 1997]. So are funds then the issue? Why is new upgrades been done without taking cognisance of SNP's?

Typical instances in the Cape Metropolitan context are the Mowbray Transport Interchange, or the Athlone Station area that has recently been upgraded. These areas, even after upgrading, appear to still have many hindrances to accessibility for SNP's. What follows is a few examples of problems at the Mowbray Transport Interchange, after it's upgrading.

Train station
- There are stairs leading to the ramp at the subway tunnel.
- Ramps leading to bridge over the railway line are too steep.
- Curbs are lowered on one side of road, but the other side of road has barriers (bollards) stopping free movement – although spaces between bollards might be wide enough for wheelchairs to fit through.
- Ticket office counters are too high to reach from a wheelchair
- The underground tunnel is closed most of the time, but when it is open and it rains, the water floods the area.

Bus/taxi
- Bus and taxi drivers drive fast through the interchange.
- Zebra crossings exist, but buses and taxis don't yield or slow down when approaching them.
- The islands in bus terminus are narrow
- Bricks are slippery when wet
- Oil slicks at bus and taxi standpoints.
- No proper drainage system in bus/taxi terminus, so the water collects on the oil, making it slippery
- There is no PA system announcing bus departures or arrivals, and there are no electronic arrival/departure boards.
- Bus drivers rob the deaf by giving them the incorrect change.

What is needed is for significant advances to improve access for people with mobility handicaps. Improvements in access for SNP's would benefit most people and also in turn meet certain objectives of government, such as reducing congestion, and more importantly lessening social exclusion [Oxley, 1999].

3. QUALITY OF PUBLIC TRANSPORT COMPONENTS

The public transport system comprises various components.

For the purpose of this paper the system will be divided into the four categories devised by the European Conference of Ministers of Transport, 1999; namely:
- Information
- Shared Road and Pedestrian Environment
- Infrastructure
- Vehicles

In essence, the function of a public transport system is to provide commuters with accessible, reliable, safe and convenient ways of moving from point A to point B. Unfortunately, there are basic requirements that are not being met in order to achieve the goal of an efficiently functioning public transport system. There appears to be problems with the overall system in terms of its quality and quantity of services.

The public transport system has been described as a chain with various links. Further, it has been said that until every link in the transport chain is accessible many disabled people will not achieve independent mobility [Oxley, 1999].

The components or links being described refers to the various public transport modes, the interchanges between them, the pedestrian environment and the information needed before and during a journey. [South Africa, 1997].

It is apparent when studying or just merely observing our current public transport system that there are many inadequacies at each point of the system. For further clarity each component will be

scrutinised in principle.

3.1 Information
Information is crucial for every commuter to utilise the existing public transport system efficiently.

The question one should ask with regards to information is whether or not the information being provided for our public transport journey is clear, simple and up to date.

Information thus needs to be clearly forthcoming about the various public transport services, in order that patronage by both able-bodied and disabled commuters can increase.

Figure 1. This photograph was taken at Cape Town Station. The interesting thing about this timetable board is that everything is written in capital letters, and according to Oxley 1999, people generally find it easier to comprehend text when it is written in lower case.

3.2 Shared Road and Pedestrian Environment
The public transport system remains compromised if the environment, within which the action of commuting is taking place, is subject to barriers and is not conducive to a safe journey. In essence, ones journey begins the moment you leave your home. And therefore there should be a barrier free movement channel to and from bus stops, taxi termini and stations. It is imperative for the road and pedestrian environment to be safe, convenient and shared in an optimal manner.

Figure 2. This photograph was taken in the Salt River/Woodstock areas in Cape Town. This photograph clearly represents the unsafe conditions that exist when pedestrians and vehicles share the same road infrastructure.

Preliminary findings show that at present, the road and pedestrian environment is not conducive to a safe journey. Vehicles and pedestrians share the road infrastructure, which creates an unsafe environment. What in essence happens is that there is competition between pedestrians, the various public transport modes and private vehicles for the same space.

3.3 Infrastructure

Bus and taxi termini and rail stations and their components need to be designed so as not to be a barrier to mobility.

What follows are a few examples of the various infrastructural components that need to have rigorous attention paid to them in order to achieve a barrier free, accessible public transport system:
- seating should be comfortable,
- ramps should have a shallow gradient.
- pavements should allow easy access for walking or using a wheelchair,
- dropped kerbs are essential at pedestrian crossings, and
- walking surfaces should not be slippery and should be well lit.

Figure 3. This photograph taken at Mowbray Transport Interchange in Cape Town shows the ramp available to SNP's. The problem with this ramp is that there is no landing and with the gradient used, a landing is needed.

3.4 Vehicles

At present the various public transport vehicles contain many barriers, which hinder accessibility.

The current public transport stock needs upgrading in order for SNP's to utilise the system effectively. Level access is something that does not exist in the public transport system in Cape Town. Buses, taxis and trains all have a change in level that creates an obstacle for boarding these vehicles.

Figure 4. These photographs depict the status quo of our mainstream public transport vehicles, i.e. the change in levels when entering and exiting these vehicles.

4. CONCLUSION

The public transport system has not responded satisfactory to meeting the needs of SNP's.

It is important to remember that public transport issues does not differ enormously for able-bodied people and disabled people, in that as a whole they need, for example, reliable and frequent public transport. This is reinforced with what was said in the Moving South Africa document, "… most SNP's – 11.6 million people – are passengers for whom the system must improve in general, without substantial additional requirements for infrastructure or vehicles" [South Africa, 1999].

There are legislative problems, which hinder the integration of SNP's as well, which is highlighted in the following quote. "There is, at present, no coherent, or comprehensive legislation pertaining to people with disabilities and their rights." [South Africa, 1997] The public transport system requires a standard set of objectives and aims when improving the system for SNP's, which presently appears to be absent. As a result of the lack of coherent goals and the lack of what one might perceive to be futile communication, services for disabled people are being duplicated.

5. REFERENCES

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BIOGRAPHY

Deidre Ribbonaar is aiming to register for her M.Tech in Town and Regional Planning by the end of this semester. Her field of study is the plight of Special Needs Passengers in the Public Transport System in the Cape Metropole. She received a bursary from the Provincial Department of Transport and Public Works for 2003, and a Technikon Seedfunding Bursary for 2004.