

Detroit's People Mover

The train to nowhere

Mary Wildwood

1985

For all those world-weary visionaries fed up with ever doleful tones and anxious to hear something concrete and uplifting—didja hear the one about the Detroit People Mover?

It's this big snakey rail on cement poles that winds around downtown Detroit and looks sort of like MGM's yellow brick road except it's not yellow (except in rusty streaks down the sides) and it won't take you to Kansas. It only trails in a series of question marks back to the Renaissance Center (a maze-like fortress of glass and poured concrete, barricading the river) to which you may have come from Kansas, or to the new "Millender Center Luxury Hotel and Apartments" across the street (which, and this is the truth, prides itself on being "the Tallest Prefab Building in the World" and during construction had signs hanging off each floor, boasting for instance, "13th floor—completed in 1-1/2 days!"). As things stand now, however, the People Mover won't take you or anybody else anywhere and possibly, hopefully for everybody's sake, never will.

The history of the People Mover venture is a pathetic lesson in the grotesque waste of urban america, incited by desire for magic profits and hi-tech hocus pocus, and effected by mindless management—Brave New World planning and 1984 production. Detroit Mayor Coleman Young's scheme to attract money to downtown Detroit is the latest in the line of patchwork solutions to the apparent benefit and ultimate detriment of this tortured city.

And superficial it is—an attempt to literally tie together a fragmented and disintegrating downtown with a cement rope.

The April 14 *Detroit Free Press* gives an historical rundown with the central revelation being that the Urban Transportation Development Corporation (UTDC), building the People Mover, doesn't know how to do it. This is because the German company that originally developed the engineering for it, and was contracted to build the first one in Toronto, pulled out of the deal, due to loss of funding, due in turn, to the realization that the project was turning out to be unfeasible, inefficient, and wasteful.

So the UTDC went ahead and took over the construction in Detroit (as well as Toronto and other cities), never having built one, and with only the insufficient engineering knowledge gained before the pullout. That is why the building process has been one of literal trial and error and error, and why the whole project is \$176 million over budget, which according to a federal audit, could reach \$221 million or more. That is why 31 huge transverse beams were so defective they had to be destroyed, which is why savvy Detroiters know well enough to step lively when passing beneath a stretch and are particularly sensitive to the old, looking-up-in-the-air trick.

But the question on the lips of everybody waiting at the stops for busses that never come, or pass by overcrowded, or conk out en-route is "who the hell is the People Mover for?" And, as one man stopped and insisted of me, "How the hell are they going to get up there?" He was really mad, too, knowing well the answer, as did every-one else in line. It being that the whole disaster is a useless farce, that city people left to depend on a decrepit bus system aren't and never have been the concern of the planners—while huge amounts of money are poured into a system that loops a few miles of easily-walkable distance downtown, which was only ever intended to lure tourists and high-rent apartment dwellers leery of touching ground here. The few stops are strategically, if unevenly, placed

at the “safe” locations, frequented primarily by tourists, executives and the upcoming yuppie population, such as the Ren Cen, Cobo Hall, Greektown, and the Millender Center (which swallows and disgorges the P.M. so that occupants wouldn’t even have to see light or ground level to board).

But though Detroiters seem to take the situation for granted, not many realize or acknowledge the absurd promotional lengths to which the mayor or others have gone, hoping to comfort and entertain prospective out-of-town riders. Nearly empty and abandoned buildings along, and only along, the PM route have been renovated on and only on their facades—like mine, far from code for decades inside, where the windows were replaced, the bricks and masonry cleaned and painted, while the fire escape remains dangling perilously on the alley side. Buildings adjacent, completely abandoned in their upper stories, have had their fronts cleaned, and painted up San Francisco-style and outfitted with new awnings around fool-the-eye windows boarded up and painted black. It might be appropriate to head off into a discourse about how all this is a pathetic emblem of our mediatised culture of illusion, except in this case the illusion doesn’t work. To anyone that happens to look up, it’s only pathetic.

And herein lies the beauty of the entire People Mover Phenomenon. It’s so blatantly, utterly and completely wrong on all counts that even some local officials are publicly calling for the whole huge structure to be dismantled altogether. I heard that on the radio, but I couldn’t find it in the papers afterward, so I can’t remember the specifics. And according to a report made to me by my brother, a construction company has already made a bid to take it down, which would probably cost as much as it would to finish. I couldn’t find that in the papers either, but I believe my brother more than I believe the papers, so that’s the best I can do. It doesn’t matter much anyway, since the argument against the People Mover is so pervasive that what seems like a preposterous idea starts looking like a pretty good and necessary solution when you scrutinize the situation.

Since the proposal for a regional transportation system which the P.M. was supposed to feed into is now kaput (as are and have been all transit plans in Detroit since the auto companies filled in the streetcar tracks and the ex-ways cut up and took over), it would be useless as real transportation and nothing more than a superfluous oddity. And the concept of the People Mover counters the effect and real value of the city—direct interaction with the spectrum of humanity.

The image that all vacuum-packed elevated walkways and hi-tech transit systems lately in vogue are designed to promote is one of isolation, sterility, and safety from the riffraff. Ironically it is common knowledge that the presence of lots of people on its streets is what makes a city safe. Luring people into the P.M. would do nothing to solve, but would rather compound the city’s crime problems. (As it is now, downtown is one of the safest places in the city.) And the tax-paying citizens generally not riding the P.M. (many of whom no doubt qualify as riffraff) will most likely be the ones paying for the outrageously accumulating cost overruns and a chunk of the unforeseen operating costs.

It’s going to be awfully noisy too, because though the original plans called for the cars to be propelled by air, this, too, was found unfeasible and now they would run on lots and lots of wheels.

But most important of all, having watched the shoddy patchwork construction from the street all these months, and having seen how many columns are perilously too high for the weight, speed and tension they are expected to support, it’s clear that if the People Mover ever does move, it will probably kill a lot of people in and underneath it. Finding out how little the builders themselves know about the engineering from the start only confirms the observation.

So, though it may be dismantled purely due to financial unfeasibility, the admission of defeat would have popular support because the entire argument against the People Mover is sensible and humane without being “radical” or ideological. It could be profound in its effect though, when you imagine the various people on the street daily witnessing the humble deconstruction.

“What a waste,” they would say. “It should never have happened in the first place.” Or if it’s too wasteful to take the thing down—I do worry about where they would dump that inconceivable amount of concrete and iron—it might be left intact (that is, if it can support its own weight) as a daily embarrassment to urban folly. And then, with good instincts verified, and vision altered, we might turn a critical and responsive eye to other useless and destructive agents in our surroundings (the Millender Center! the expressways! The Bomb!). The whole occurrence would provide one useful precedent, anyway.

I don't know if its citizens can survive a city like Detroit. Its disease is deep-rooted and begins with its own inception, dependent as it was on a ravenous auto industry—a paradigm of consumptive modern America. Its fate is not decided by that of the People Mover. Its only good potential doesn't lie in its complexes and institutions. It lies in its people.

And everybody knows that Detroiters are among the friendliest people in the Western world. But when an outgrowth so concrete, cumbersome and disastrous imposes itself on people's lives, it exposes the structure and motivation of the system that produced it and forces a response from those people it feeds off. And the best response for this time of terrible cancerous excess is rejection.

And here, if you're still with me, is the concrete and uplifting part. The only good and profound change in this world is going to be scrappy. It is so simple it is almost inconceivable, though it will be long and hard. It will have a lot more to do with paring down and dismantling than with persistent production of ever new problem solving inventions.

It will have less to do with finding new ways to fulfill needs than with seeing what we have and don't need. We can think of getting rid of the People Mover as a significant initiation in that long hard process.

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