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The Evolution of the Jeepney and Transit in Metro Iloilo

By Ian Malczewski

Early every morning, after the roosters' shrill call, a creature rises in Metro Iloilo, snarling, burping, and chewing the earth as its crawls. With a skeleton of steel and a heart that pumps oil, it carries people in its belly, shaking them from side to side. This creature is the jeepney, a mode of public transportation, and at times it seems to outnumber all the other creatures in the region, even the people.

Public transportation is a key feature of the public realm. It not only transports people across the region, but it also ties them together within it, forging a sense of shared identity. Transit is a mobile architecture, a moving landmark that defines a sense of place, like London's Underground, Toronto's Red Rocket streetcars, or Thailand's countless tuk-tuks.

Metro Iloilo boasts its own iconic transit in the jeepney. Originating from salvaged World War II American jeeps, jeepneys are symbols of Filipino ingenuity, maximizing productivity out of what others considered scrap. Their presence reminds us that public transit here originated with the spirit of re-use, an important environmental principle.

Because of this origin, the jeepney is an enduring and important cultural icon. As a means of efficient mass transportation, however, it leaves much to be desired. Jeepneys are too small to accommodate high capacities, and their sheer numbers make streets congested and hostile for people. As the Metro Iloilo Guimaras region grows, the jeepney and the transit network must evolve to meet the needs of its populace. Here are a few ways this evolution might occur:

Maxi-Jeepneys:

Recently, Iloilo City enacted a Provincial Boundary Ordinance, banning jeepneys from Oton, Santa Barbara, Leganes, Pavia, and San Miguel from entering the city. While this stops one problem – that of vehicle congestion in the city – it creates another by making the commute from these municipalities into Iloilo City difficult, fragmenting what should be a unified whole.



“Maxi-jeeps” (as in “maximum”) would be new, higher capacity vehicles that would carry as much as three times the capacity of a regular jeep. An amendment to the Ordinance could allow higher-capacity jeeps to travel into each municipality, effectively removing two vehicles for every maxi-jeep on the road.

Of course, they would have to be extravagantly decorated as well. Public utility vehicles would not feel right if they did not have names like “Sweet Express” or “Glory of God!”

E-jeepneys:

Decreasing air quality means more of us are placing handkerchiefs over our mouths and noses as we walk down the street. After traffic congestion, air pollution is the most noticeable output of the current fleet of jeepneys.

In Manila and a handful of other cities, new vehicles have been tested as a sustainable replacement for the older, more polluting fleet. These new “e-jeepneys” (The “e” stands for “electric”) run on a battery charged by plugging it into the wall, so they do not require air-polluting fuel. They are also quieter than conventional jeeps.

If service between municipalities were provided by maxi-jeeps, transit within the municipality would be provided by e-jeeps. As older jeeps reach the end of their life, e-jeeps could replace them, meaning the reduction would only occur in pollution, not service.

These evolutions are by no means the only (or even the best) solutions for transit in Metro Iloilo, but they are the kind of transition we need to think about as environmental and economic realities require us to shift the way we think about transportation. By implementing such ideas, Metro Iloilo would reproduce the symbolic cultural and environmental principles associated with the jeepney, honouring the past while taking steps to ensure the sustainability of the future.

In morning of that future, after the call of the rooster, the only sound will be that of people moving and breathing more easily in the city, all with the help of the newly evolved jeep.

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