ARCHITECTURAL VIEW: HELP IS ON THE WAY FOR DISCOURAGED TAXI RIDERS ARCHITECTURAL VIEW
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ARCHITECTURAL VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Help Is on the Way For Discouraged Taxi Riders

The first response of a taxi-riding New Yorker to the Museum of Modern Art show called "The Taxi Project: Realistic Solutions for Today" is that it couldn't possibly lose. There was nowhere to go but up. Anyone who has endured the purgatory of most New York cab rides knows that this is not transportation; it is sado-masochism.

The average New York taxi is a combination of dilapidation, filth, inefficiency and acute Rube Goldbergian discomforts designed to torture, humilate and frustrate, for a price. The passenger has a Hobson's choice. There is the Checker, which gives head and legroom but is usually in a sprung-suspension, tattered plastic, pothole-banging state of decay, with the most terminal cases driven by counterculture followers of Emerson Fittipaldi, ignorant of the city's geography and uncaring of the rider's destination. Or there is the modified Detroit motorcar, in which one crouches, crippled, in coffin-like gloom on broken seats, straddling the driveshaft or plunged into pools of muddy water among the cigarette butts, while admiring the ad hoc design of hand-cobbled partitions and paste-on signs giving clues to hidden door handles. (Lucky you, if you get an independent who has decorated with plastic flowers and chartreuse shag rugs.)

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The second response to the four shiny yellow taxi prototypes on display at the Museum is Eureka, they've got it. Help is here, at last. And then you know that the fleet owners, who have already shown hostility to a better product because it costs more, in spite of savings in car life, maintenance and gas mileage, will fight to the last drop of their wretched meters. And that Detroit manufacturers (who refused to take part in the project) will resist as long as they can profitably palm off their ordinary, assembly-line cars instead of building an appropriate vehicle.

That does not make the solutions any less "realistic" than represented. The Museum is showing exemplary, practical designs for a number of kinds of taxi use, aimed at much more than a better way to cruise the city streets. The "taxi project" is an in-depth study of both the specific design criteria needed for a cab to serve the needs of riders and drivers, and of an extended role for the taxi as something called "para-transit"—more flexible services than fixed rail and subway lines and bus routes—in the total picture of public transportation. (This picture needs radical reinterpretation, as revealed by recent research and analysis.)

The prototypes on view, shown against an evocative night skyline that suggests glamorous transportation to glamorous places, are two American designs from American Machine and Foundry and Steam Power Systems, both in California, and two European designs, from Volvo and Volkswagen. The European manufacturers were selected because they are building American production facilities, and they were interested and the Detroit carmakers were not. (I'll bet Henry Ford doesn't ride in taxis.)

There is also, for genuine nostalgia and as an example of a taxi that works, a London cab (which unfortunately did not work for New York in a test during the Lindsay administration) and an Alfa-Romeo that uses the museum's standards and is being produced for the European market. There are adequate diagrams on display for the technically minded and enough photographs showing the models in comfortable and convenient use to make New Yorkers stand there and cry.

What is most realistic about the project, which was conceived and directed by Emilio Ambasz, Curator of Design, is the Museum's insistence that it would only undertake it with the collaboration of the United States Department of Transportation and specific manufacturers. This is no design-school dream. DOT's Urban Mass Transportation Administration funded the Museum's part of the program with $60,000, a figure that was matched by Mobil Oil. Volvo has probably invested about $2 million in the design development of a totally new vehicle, carrying the project as far as working drawings, and Volkswagen has spent about $1.5 million adapting its camper to public transport and a dual-engine system. This involves substantial money and commitment. DOT gave $1 million grants to each of the two American companies for the development of the prototypes.

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All of the entries followed the Museum's carefully worked-out specifications in part or in whole. They are incorporated in a half-inch-thick design manual of extremely detailed measurements and mechanical, functional and environmental requirements, developed with the help of the New York City Taxi and Limousine Commission, engineering consultants and taxi owner representatives. Features of the models range from driver-controlled sliding doors to wheelchair access. Volvo even gives the driver a small refrigerator. The passenger never had it so good.

The aim, according to Mr. Ambasz, has been the creation of "realistic cabs which are economical to operate and maintain, comfortable and safe, and capable of reducing both pollution and traffic congestion." They are generally shorter, higher and roomier than existing taxis. The Volvo and the AMF manage also to be quite handsome. The AMF, designed for experimental steam propulsion, could be converted to a Diesel tomorrow. (The Alfa-Romeo, unfortunately out of the running because of its foreign manufacture, is the handsomest of all. You'll have to go to Europe to ride in this one.)

But a good part of the significance of this show is that Mr. Ambasz has gone into the taxi problem even more deeply and challengingly. In an excellent book accompanying the exhibition that includes critical and historical essays, the matter of the role of taxis as a supplement to mass transportation and as an alternative to the private automobile is treated in scholarly detail.

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Martin Wohl's piece on "The Present Role of Taxis in Urban America" turns the conventional wisdom about cars and public transportation inside out. The American people are not having a "love affair with the automobile"; they have simply found it the best way to get around and will endure traffic and pollution and parking problems for its directness and flexibility. It is this basic fact that accounts for drops in mass transit use more than cost or other conditions, and it is this function that public transport must try to fill.

What is envisioned are small, lightweight conveyances with a fair capacity and flexibility of use, route and purpose. Some of these services—links to mass transit, student-to-school and housewife-to-shopping-center trips, mobility for the elderly and handicapped—can be handled by the same vehicle in the same day, over different routes. In selected

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Prototype taxis (clockwise, starting upper left) designed by Volkswagen, Volvo, Steam Power Systems and American Machine and Foundry

Top left, 1909 Parisian hansom; top right, an 1887 hansom; and stretched-out Model T

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Taxi Riders

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areas, these services are already being aided experimentally by DOT grants.

In the end, it seems that the only unrealistic thing about this realistic taxi project is the premise that both passenger and driver are entitled to a decent ride and that taxis should fulfill stated tasks reasonably and well, with the least possible environmental damage. Right now, easy corporate profits and handy tax depreciation count more. Considering that taxis in this country transport more passengers than all rapid transit systems combined, the consumer-passenger is getting a monumental bum deal.

Another reality is that para-transit is cheap, while the investment for fixed rail facilities has become insupportably high and unresponsive to today's traffic patterns. What is called for, in addition to taxi redesign, is a restudy of Federal subsidies and local controls in the light of our growing understanding of the transit picture. Only this approach would make the new kind of taxi fleet possible.

Accustomed as we have become in recent years to a certain Olympian detachment in the Museum's programs, the taxi project's emphasis on practical, innovative design is welcome. Thirty years ago a Museum furniture design competition, tied to production and sale, which included the early Eames and Saarinen chairs among the winners, helped change the course of American seating and interiors. This show could radically alter American transportation.

If we get the new cabs, there should probably be a picture of Mr. Ambasz on every medallion. Next: a taxi-driver project.