

Halting the vicious circle

Wolfgang Köhler, text | dpa, photos

Bogotá has made transport history. The Colombian metropolis has got public bus transport moving, cutting down on traffic jams and reducing noise, pollution and the risk of accidents. Other city administrations are now turning to the manual that lays out these innovative ideas.

Manfred Breithaupt has spent 30 years pondering the problems of transport, particularly in inner cities. As an economist he has worked on numerous projects and programmes, managing many of them. Whether in Bangkok or Beijing, Cairo or

Lagos, Bogotá or São Paulo, the same problems recur again and again. The city streets are often clogged with traffic around the clock, the air is polluted, the traffic noise is infernal, and accident rates rise relentlessly. It came as no surprise that in workshops and seminars the

same problems were repeatedly being aired and similar – but usually inadequate – technical solutions were repeatedly proposed. “In the long run that not only got boring; at the end of the day it didn’t lead to any proper progress either,” says Breithaupt.

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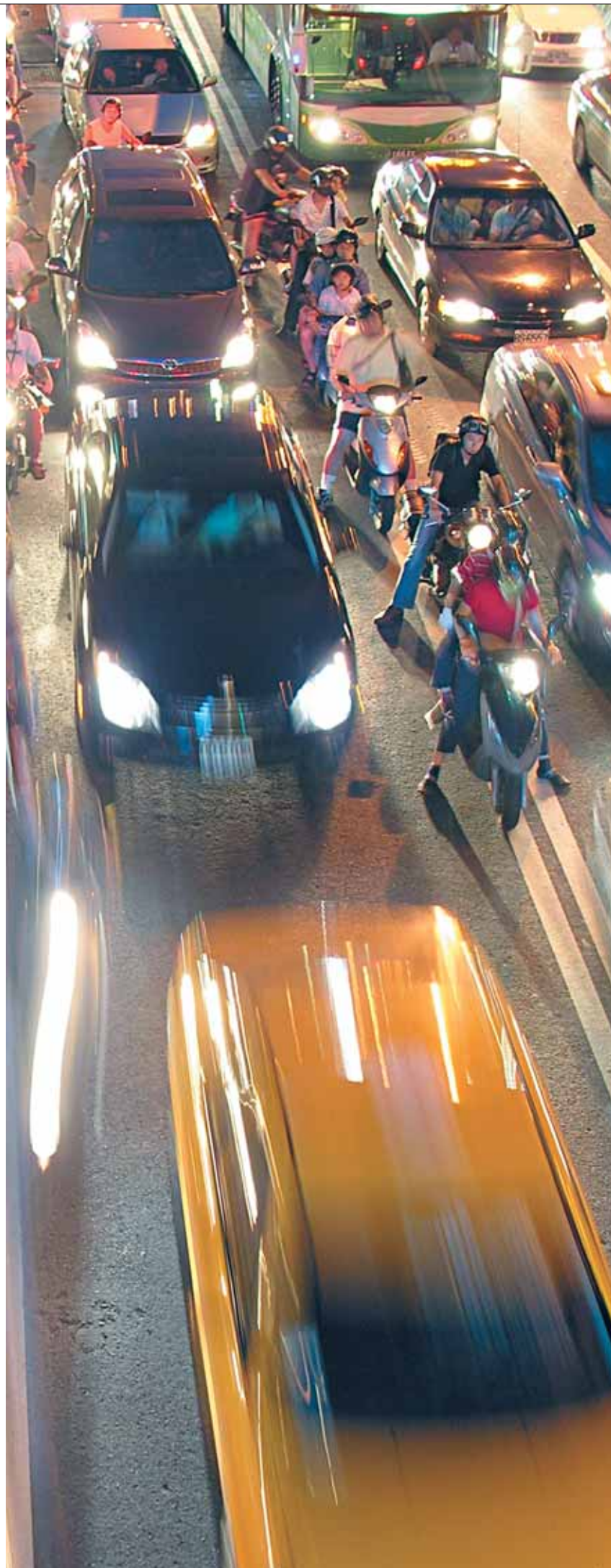
Chaos in Cairo: The Egyptian capital would like to repeat the “miracle of Bogotá”. The Colombian city of seven million inhabitants has banished cars from the city centre and laid out dedicated pedestrian zones. The Bus Rapid Transit in Bogotá runs on a separate track.

Local public transport is inadequately developed in many places and facilities are often sub-standard. So anyone who can afford it prefers to travel in their own car. In Bangkok 400 additional vehicles are registered every day; in Beijing the figure is 1000. In China, whose economy is growing by up to 10 percent per year, the number of newly registered private vehicles is rising by 20 percent per year, which means that it doubles in just under four years. No city in the world can double the size of its road network and the number of its parking places within four years.

Nevertheless, traffic expert Manfred Breithaupt has repeatedly encountered signs of hope. One such was in Bogotá. In the Colombian metropolis with its seven million inhabitants, the former mayor Enrique Peñalosa had managed in the space of only three years to transform hopeless confusion into a system of sustainable transport that is a model for cities all over the world. Cars were banished from the inner city in large numbers. The city laid out pedestrian zones, separate and safe cycleways and wide pavements; it expanded the bus network, created separate routes for many bus lines – the Bus Rapid Transit system – and purchased modern buses. Ex-mayor Peñalosa expressed the bold hope that no inhabitant of Bogotá should live more than three blocks away from a park, and had many parks created. There was a lot of opposition to be overcome. Today the inhabitants are proud of the transformation of their capital city into a people-friendly rather than a car-friendly metropolis.

Such splendid examples made Manfred Breithaupt not only confident but also thoughtful. How was it that the effect of such examples wasn't more pervasive? Hadn't the mayors of Jakarta or Chongqing, Johannesburg or Khartoum heard of the "miracle of Bogotá"? How about collecting examples of model

Practical manual:
With the aid of the
Sourcebook on
Sustainable Urban
Transport city politi-
cians and transport
experts can halt the
vicious circle of jams,
noise, pollution and
traffic accidents.



solutions and the underlying principles and theories of sustainably regulated urban transport and publishing them in an easily understandable series of booklets?

It didn't take Manfred Breithaupt long to find help. BMZ and GTZ supported his idea. Knowledgeable authors, including ex-mayor Peñalosa and experts from the World Bank and the German Federal Environment Agency were rapidly identified. Many provided their texts free of charge in the service of the cause. Soon the GTZ Sourcebook on Sustainable Urban Transport (SUT) had grown to 23 volumes. "It was snatched out of our hands," rejoices the initiator. Translations into Spanish, Chinese and other languages had to be rapidly produced, financed by many interested parties. In many countries the pamphlets were brought together in book form and reprinted. "A colleague recently found the Chinese edition in an out-of-the-way bookshop in China," says Breithaupt.

From bestseller to project

The high level of interest encouraged GTZ to take things further. With a number of public and private partners it set up the SUT project. From its offices in Bangkok and Bogotá the project now helps cities in Asia and Latin America to attain their public transport sustainability goals. The Bangkok partners are the Metropolitan Administration, CITY-NET and the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific; in Bogotá the partners are the Corporación Andina de Fomento, ARPEL and Trans-Milenio. The project's main aim is to raise awareness among politicians and urban transport experts and to increase understanding in these quarters of the enormous social, ecological and economic problems caused by inner city traffic in most large cities.

Inhabitants of the world's cities are suffering increasingly

from health problems caused by pollution from vehicles. Three million people worldwide die annually from the health-related consequences of air pollution. Around 1.4 billion people are exposed to air pollution that exceeds the limits laid down by the World Health Organization (WHO). According to WHO figures, in 1999 alone around 18 million people were injured in traffic accidents, and nearly one million people died. The cumulative time lost to traffic jams is huge, at high cost to business and local and national government.

Traditional approaches to dealing with urban traffic often begin with an expansion of the road network. But transport experts all over the world are now unanimously of the view that this simply increases the number of private cars on the roads. Within a few years the traffic jams return and air pollution and accident rates continue to rise again. Where increasingly affluent societies follow the trend of adopting western values, which see the possession of a private car as a symbol of success and modernity, public transport systems are neglected. Investment in buses, trams and railways is half-hearted. City politicians and transport experts educated by the SUT project should be able to halt the vicious circle of jams, noise, pollution and traffic accidents as well as the trend towards more and bigger roads. It is an upward spiral that simply leads to more pollution, noise and accidents and soon lets traffic jams build up again. GTZ has therefore already developed a series of training courses on different topics: on faster bus transport, non-motorised transport, the regulation and planning of inner-city bus transport, the development of traffic-calmed zones and public awareness-raising.

The initial results of these workshops are impressive. More than 90 percent of participants in workshops in Bangkok and Montevideo rated their overall

impression of the content and method of the sessions as good or very good. A dedicated website has also been set up. Interested users who register at www.sutp.org can access the whole range of materials relating to urban transport problems and the concept of sustainable urban transport. By September 2006 the number of visitors using the SUTP Internet portal each day had risen to 5,650.

If the signs are to be believed, the initial outcomes of the SUTP initiative should soon be visible in the altered appearance of one or other of the world's great conurbations. The World Bank, too, is increasingly basing its urban transport projects on the SUTP concepts of sustainable urban transport. ◀

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