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Light Rail, Heavy Toll: Cost Politics in the Planning, Construction, and Operation of Manila's LRT-1, 1977–1987

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ABSTRACT

Contrary to what observers see as a deficiency nowadays, there was a time when critics viewed the prospect of introducing rail-based mass transit in Metro Manila as a luxury. This was during the introduction of Line 1 of the Metro Manila's Light Rail Transit System, popularly referred to as LRT-1, Southeast Asia's first rapid transit line. While there are already works that discuss the history of Metro Manila's rail-based mass transit during the Marcos Sr. years, absent among extant works were the voices critical of the introduction of a new, costly transport mode, and how such views clashed with the perspective of its proponents in an authoritarian context wherein voicing out against regime-sponsored megaprojects is often constrained. Through an analysis of sources produced when the LRT-1 was still being planned, constructed, and newly opened, this paper seeks to explain the proponents' enthusiasm and the opponents' criticism of the new rapid transit line. LRT-1 proponents justified the project as a worthy investment to address Metro Manila's dire traffic congestion; for them to earn financial and political capital. On the other hand, LRT-1 opponents flagged the project's opaque planning process and its costs, which they saw as unreasonable especially given the economic crisis that gripped the country in the 1980s.

KEY WORDS

light rail · Metro Manila · Marcos dictatorship · transport history · railway history · cost politics

INTRODUCTION

Critics blame the sorry state of transportation in Metro Manila, the Philippines' capital region, on its lack of an extensive efficient railway network (Jose et al. 2015; Napalang and Regidor 2015; Aloc and Regidor 2016; Ariate 2017; Daguio 2016; Regidor et al 2017; Regidor and Aloc 2017; IBON Foundation 2023, 13–14, 26–27, 29–30; Guda 2024; Reyes 2024; Jose 2024). Yet, there was a time when

the prospect of introducing rail-based mass transit in Metro Manila became a contentious issue—what observers see as a deficiency nowadays, critics used to view as a luxury that had no social utility. This was the context that surrounded the introduction of Line 1 of Metro Manila's Light Rail Transit System, popularly referred to as LRT-1, which is considered as Southeast Asia's first rapid transit line.

While there are already works that discuss the history of Metro Manila's rail-based mass transit during the Marcos Sr. years (see Satre 1998; Jose et al. 2015; Aloc and Regidor 2016; Ariate 2017; Daguio 2016; Regidor et al. 2017; Regidor and Aloc 2017; Flaviano 2018; Rosette and Reyes 2022), there remain avenues to enrich this particular research area. Notably absent among extant works is the matter of critical voices on the introduction of a new, costly transport mode, and how such views clash with the perspective of railway proponents, even in an authoritarian context wherein voicing out against regime-sponsored megaprojects is difficult.

Through an analysis of sources produced when the LRT-1 was still being planned, constructed, and newly opened, this paper seeks to explain the proponents' enthusiasm and opponents' criticism toward the new rapid transit line. LRT-1 proponents justified the project as a worthy investment to address Metro Manila's dire traffic congestion; for them to earn financial and political capital. Notwithstanding the proponents' pronouncements, the LRT-1 attracted significant opposition during its incipient years. Central to opponents' arguments was the LRT-1's costs to build. In this context, costs are not limited to strictly financial ones, but also matters such as the effects of construction to everyday traffic flow and even to livelihoods. LRT-1 opponents flagged the project's opaque planning process and its costs, which they saw as unreasonable as the country was in the grip of an economic crisis in the 1980s.

RUSHING A RAPID TRANSIT, 1977–1981

Throughout much of its twenty-one-year rule, the Marcos Sr. regime ignored rail-based transport interventions to fix Metro Manila's traffic congestion that had begun to worsen by the 1960s. It did not support plans for a monorail and a heavy rail system (Rosette and Reyes 2022; Napalang and Regidor 2015; Regidor and Aloc 2017, 207, 213), and the existing government-owned Philippine National Railways suffered from neglect and mismanagement (Park and Bradfield 1976, 6, 30–1; JICA 1976, S-6, 2-2–2-4, 2-9; GRP and FFA 1977, 3/12, 10/6, T8/4; I. Marcos 1978, 28).

The Marcos dictatorship's indifference towards making substantial investment in rail transportation for Metro Manila would change in 1977 when Freeman Fox and Associates and the Philippine government accomplished a World Bank-funded fourteen-month study entitled Metro Manila Transport, Land Use and Development Planning Project (MMETROPLAN). Rather than a heavy rail system, which it thought as too expensive, MMETROPLAN instead recommended

a cheaper and smaller-scale light rail transit (LRT) system,[1] with its technical characteristics such as sharing the road space with other vehicular traffic largely like the prewar Manila tranvía. This LRT system would have been composed of four radial lines traveling along the following major thoroughfares: Rizal Avenue, España Boulevard and Quezon Avenue, Shaw Boulevard, and Taft Avenue. The four radial lines would have converged in a central area loop in Manila's downtown districts. Among the four lines, MMETROPLAN advocated that the government immediately build the Rizal Avenue line (GRP and FFA 1977, 46, 48–49, 8/24–8/27, 9/9–9/15, 10/12–10/77, 11/10–11/13, T24/3–T24/25, T25/29–T25/34).

MMETROPLAN's high regard for LRT came at a time when European countries were innovating tram technologies and when North American transport planners increasingly saw LRT as a more economical and flexible transport solution as compared to building new but more expensive heavy rail lines or rehabilitating old yet impractical ones (GRP and FFA 1977, 49, 8/25, 10/44; Santiago 1988, 36; Boorse, Tennyson, and Schumann 2000, 2–4, 7). MMETROPLAN even claimed that its proposed street-level LRT was bound "to capture the flair of the people," using public nostalgia for the former tranvía and public support for the eco-friendlier "Love Buses" of the Metro Manila Transit Corporation as evidence that Manileños would welcome "an exciting new image for public transportation in Manila" (GRP and FFA 1977, 10/45).

It maybe apt to say that, rather than the Metro Manila commuters, the Marcos Sr. regime, its rent-seeking cronies, and the foreign technological and financial firms, were the ones most excited to implement and profit from MMETROPLAN's recommended LRT project. The immobilism in implementing rail-based solutions that characterized previous years would be reversed by the haphazard haste to construct the first LRT line. Even before the Philippine government could evaluate the LRT project on its own, it had already made up its mind "to go ahead with Line No. 1 along Rizal and Taft" (Santiago 1988, 36), thus initially conforming with MMETROPLAN's recommendations. Furthermore, First Lady and Metro Manila Governor Imelda Marcos hinted that "a light rail mass transit system appears to be quite feasible within the next 10 years" (I. Marcos 1978, 28). The regime further bared its purported collusion with LRT proponents by effectively echoing their dismissal of Japan's proposed heavy rail system in spite of earlier supporting it (see NMPC 1976, 57), saying that "subways have been ruled out because of Manila's flood problems" (I. Marcos 1978, 28).

The government organized an interagency "LRT committee" to evaluate and implement MMETROPLAN's recommendations. The government then invited international firms to bid for the construction and operation of the street-level LRT system. On January 12, 1979, firms from Europe and Japan

1. MMETROPLAN projected that its proposed four-line LRT system would cost PHP 648 million. In contrast, the first line in Japan's proposed heavy rail network was estimated to cost PHP 6.5 billion (NMPC 1976, 57).

submitted their respective bids (*We Forum* 1979a; Querol 1980; Dans 1987, 12). In spite of "persuasive pressure" from the international firms, the LRT committee found the proposals financially and technically unviable (Dans 1987, 12), not least because of its own doing—"the absence of a Terms of Reference, or standard bid documents, led to technical differences among the bids so wide as to preclude direct comparison" (Santiago 1988, 36). Consequently, when the Ministry of Transportation and Communications (MOTC) was organized in July 1979 and took a leading role in the LRT committee, it reviewed the LRT project.

The MOTC enlisted the Australian firm P. G. Pak-Poy and Associates to help draft the LRT-1's feasibility study, and the ministry endorsed the study to President Ferdinand Marcos Sr. in November 1979. The study deviated from MMETROPLAN's proposed street-level LRT system by recommending that the first line be elevated to avoid coming into conflict with Rizal and Taft Avenues' busy intersections to speed up travel time (Dans 1987, 12–13; Santiago 1988, 37). As a result of the LRT-1's newly prescribed grade separation, the estimated project cost shot up from PHP 600 million when bids were first called (*We Forum* 1979b) to PHP 2 billion when the project was awarded in July 1980 to a joint venture between crony corporation Construction and Development Corporation of the Philippines (CDCP) and a Belgian consortium which boasted of interest-free soft loans (*Sydney Morning Herald* 1980; *Pacific Stars and Stripes* 1980). Even before the contract signing in July 1980, the Belgians had already won the regime's favor to build the LRT-1. In 1978, First Lady Imelda Marcos was in Brussels to sign a loan agreement "to partially finance the Metro Manila light rail system" (*Bulletin Today* 1981b, 8).

Concurrent with the contract signing between the Philippine government and the Belgian consortium was President Marcos's establishment of the Light Rail Transit Authority (LRTA) on July 12, 1980 through Executive Order No. 603 (F. E. Marcos 1980), and he appointed his wife, Imelda, as LRTA Chair (*Sydney Morning Herald* 1980). The LRTA, however, was more of a regulatory, planning, and policymaking body, with operations and maintenance being contracted to MERALCO Transit Organization, Inc. (METRO, Inc.)—a subsidiary of crony-controlled Manila Electric Company (MERALCO) (Electrowatt 1980, A-1; Manapat 2020, 346–50). The government also enlisted a Swiss firm, Electrowatt Engineering Services, as project manager and technical consultant, with Electrowatt fulfilling the latter role by producing studies on expanding the LRT throughout the metropolis (Santiago 1988, 38; see Electrowatt 1980).

The proponents' enthusiasm for building the LRT-1 reflected not just with the pace of institutional arrangements to accommodate the new railway line, but also in their pronouncements. The Belgian ambassador, Wilfred de Pauw, was unsurprisingly optimistic of his country's capability to revolutionize transportation in the metropolis.

> The projected light rail transport (LRT) may eventually solve the traffic congestion problem in Metro Manila, according to Dr. Wilfred de Pauw, ambassador of Belgium . . .

> De Pauw said this could happen anytime during the three phases in the 80's when the LRT system is expected to be completed . . .
>
> De Pauw said the LRT is capable of transporting 28,000 persons, at speeds of 30 to 40 kilometers per hour in one direction, every hour, so that in an average of ten hours at operation every day, the system can move more than five million passengers. (Mapile 1981, 1, 12)

De Pauw took the opportunity to mention the jeepneys' inability to efficiently ferry masses of passengers and advocated that they be relegated to a less significant transportation role as feeders to the LRT-1.

> He said the jeepneys are now transporting less than this number of people in the Grace Park-Rizal avenue-Taft avenue-Baclaran route.
>
> The jeepneys, however, may still be necessary to feed the LRT system with passengers from other areas in the city so that a re-routing of their lines may subsequently be implemented by the government traffic control authorities, De Pauw said. (Mapile 1981, 12)

One would surmise that there would be universal support for the LRT-1 because of the prospect of faster travel time. But as the plan for the LRT-1 became known to many, not everyone shared the proponents' excitement. Abby Tan, Manila correspondent for the Singaporean newspaper *The Straits Times*, sowed doubt on whether the LRT-1 would live up to its expectations of ushering change to the state of Metro Manila's transportation, given that the Marcos regime could not coherently and decisively organize a mass transit system for the metropolis.

> After studies galore by teams of consultants, Metro Manila is still not clear about its overall concept for mass transit . . .
>
> Costs and an urgent need have prodded Manila to go ahead with a one-line light rail transit system.
>
> Admittedly, this sprawling metropolis of seven million people does not have a comprehensive plan to lick its chaotic situation.
>
> Team after team of consultants and experts have been brought in to study Metro Manila's traffic system. Yet no real plan for a mass rapid trasit [*sic*] system has surfaced.
>
> With the need for such a plan increasing daily, the government's decision to build a 15-km Light Rail Transist [sic] system is seen as a first step towards a solution (not quite clearly mapped out yet) for the monumental problem.
>
> The Swiss consultants, Electrowatt Engineering Services Ltd., think the solution has to be a step-by-step process. "There will be a lot of guesswork," admits the firm's English resident project manager, Mr. John Gourley, on the future overall plans. (Tan 1980, 11)

In July 1981, three articles from *Bulletin Today* derided the LRT-1's hefty PHP 2 billion cost. To back their anti-elevated LRT arguments, the *Bulletin* articles regularly cited MMETROPLAN's original recommendation of a cheaper street-level LRT (Panaligan 1981a, 1981b; *Bulletin Today* 1981a) and even interviewed public utility vehicle (PUV) operators who held similarly unfavorable views towards the LRT-1.

> Representatives of the country's transportation industry said the government should come up with a short-term plan that can be implemented immediately, without heavy infrastructure expense.
>
> They said the alternative solutions should be at a more reasonable cost and with a wider impact on the overall traffic flows and needs.
>
> Proposing the scrapping of the P2 billion overhead LRT, the representatives said another look should be taken at previous recommendations that offer low-cost, quick impact schemes to keep Metro Manila's congested traffic moving preparatory to laying the groundwork for a genuine long-term solutions at reasonable cost. (Panaligan 1981b, 10)

The last of the three articles even mentioned that the World Bank had earlier recommended to cancel a proposed mass transit project in Bangkok in the hope that the World Bank would do the same for Metro Manila's PHP 2 billion LRT-1, and that the Philippine government would acquiesce (*Bulletin Today* 1981a).

But the project pushed through. After a six-month delay owing to design changes to ensure the line's structural integrity given the route's susceptibility to earthquakes (Dans 1987, 85), construction on the LRT-1 commenced on September 10, 1981 at the segment of Taft Avenue between Epifanio de los Santos Avenue (EDSA) and Libertad Street (LRTA n.d.-a). The next day, on September 11, 1981, which was also the birthday of President Marcos, a two-page advertisement promoting the LRT-1 was printed in the *Business Day* newspaper, branding the project as "the New Republic's Gift to the City of Man" (*Business Day* 1981, 4).

However, even as the LRT-1's structure would gradually change the appearance of the Taft-Rizal corridor in the next few years, the project's controversies would continue.

DEBT AND DELAYS, 1981–1987

In October 1981, just one month into construction, the LRT-1 project found itself embroiled in a right-of-way issue with the newly constructed Isetann Department Store. The PHP 30 million Isetann building located in the bustling downtown Manila districts of Santa Cruz and Quiapo had to be demolished so that the LRT-1's viaduct could eventually make its way into the narrow Rizal

Avenue. What made the Isetann case significant was the opponents' vocal opposition to the LRT-1 highlighted the repercussions of the nontransparent decision-making process behind the railway line. As it became clear that the Isetann building had to be demolished, its owners explicitly voiced their dismay as LRT-1 proponents made them virtually powerless to save their business.

> The owners said the letter [from the LRTA] caused them not mere "some [*sic*] surprise but extreme concern since the issue contained meant basic business survival," one Isetann official said.
>
> "What the government agency was asking us was to agree to the inevitability of the construction work hitting the building without prior consultation from our board of directors, nor giving any inkling of the whole matter on the project and why it will hit us without alternative recourse," he said.
>
> The Isetann owners did not affix their signatures to the LRTA to confirm the "understanding." They wrote to the LRTA, there indicating their "extreme concern." (Yu 1981c)

Other downtown store owners in Rizal Avenue also pessimistically expected that their businesses would never recover even after the LRT-1 had already begun operations because of the blight that would result from the railway line's elevated structure.

> In a recent meeting, Chamber of Philippine Department Store [*sic*], Inc. (CPDSI) held a dialogue with members situated along the affected route discussed the problems facing them, particularly regarding the construction of the LRT. They felt that business would likely be affected not only by construction work which may close the street to public commuters who compise [sic] the stores' market—but also by post-construction work which might deter people from shopping in the area.
>
> Many also believe that the value of properties, which had been rented or sold at a premium—will likely plunge and might never recover. (Yu 1981b, 6)

In the face of fierce criticism, LRT-1 proponents parroted the MOTC's 1979 feasibility study. They rigidly held as sacrosanct the timelines set, the projections computed, and the conclusions made in their studies. Yet in only then revealing that they had made such studies without involving affected entities such as downtown businesses, they ironically opened themselves more to criticism.

> Another question is when the Taft/Rizal Ave. route was chosen. Officials in the ministry have said the route had been chosen as far back as 1979. In this case, the point is raised on why the construction of Isetann Department Store was never taken into account and stopped before it was completed. Isetann owners wondered why the Metro Manila

> Commission had granted them permits to operate when it knew the LRT would eventually affect their building. (Yu 1981b, 6)

Proponents such as LRT-1 Project Manager Jose Valdecañas also invalidated the affected store owners' concerns by urging them to put aside their supposedly myopic worries.

> He [Valdecañas] dismissed the notion that with the LRT, the business along Rizal Ave. will cease. Ministry officials believe that business will likely be enhanced because of the volume of passengers moving in and out of Rizal Ave. (Yu 1981c)

CPDSI submitted a position paper to the Batasang Pambansa regarding its stance on the LRT-1 (Yu 1981b). LRT-1 proponents would reportedly meet with affected property owners along the LRT-1 route so that all parties involved could come up with a proper agreement moving forward (Yu 1981a, 1981c). After October 1981, nothing more was heard from the Isetann issue. The Isetann building was rebuilt (Dans 1987, 87), and until today, it still stands beside the LRT-1 Carriedo station.

Inconveniences became a staple of daily life for the masses of people who passed through Taft Avenue, which essentially became a lengthy construction zone. On December 17, 1981, traffic management authorities rerouted traffic flow on the segment of Taft Avenue from Vito Cruz to Baclaran to give way for the LRT-1's construction (*Bulletin Today* 1981c), giving a foretaste on the planned permanent relegation of jeepneys to feeder roles for the LRT-1 (Santiago 1988, 37). Jeepney drivers, however, were not willing to sacrifice their livelihoods. On June 7, 1982, some 1,000 jeepney drivers belonging to the Pagkakaisa ng Samahang Tsuper at Operators Nationwide (PISTON) launched a strike. One of PISTON's demands was "to be assured that jeepneys or PUJs plying the Taft-Rizal route will not be displaced or rerouted when the Light Rail Transit becomes operational" (DCP 1982, 1, 6). With the government "unable to muster the political will to implement the rerouting plans" (Santiago 1988, 37), jeepneys have, to this day, continued to serve the Taft Avenue-Rizal Avenue corridor in parallel with the LRT-1 (figure 1).

Construction-related problems hounded the LRT-1, thus aggravating traffic congestion. While CDCP exhorted motorists to "be one with us in changing Metro Manila for the better" by exercising patience with traffic rerouting schemes (CDCP 1982), its inefficient construction practices irked even government officials (*Bulletin Today* 1982).[2] Ultimately, construction-related

2. The CDCP encountered construction problems because, as a crony corporation, it was involved in so many government projects. For a fuller discussion, see Manapat 2020, 246–52, 255–61.

FIGURE 1. *A*, the Isetann Department Store, rebuilt to give way for the LRT-1. The LRT-1 Carriedo station is situated to the right of the image. *B*, the LRT-1 tracks looking south from Carriedo station. Note the narrow clearance between the buildings and the viaduct. Images taken by the author on May 2, 2025.

TABLE 1 Top ten most expensive infrastructure projects in the Philippines in 1984.

Rank	Project	Cost (in millions of Philippine peso)
1	Philippine Nuclear Power Project	16,161,994
2	Rural Electrification Project	7,997,000
3	Manila Water Supply Project III	7,656,400
4	Mini-Hydro Development Program	3,509,600
5	Manila Water Supply Project II	3,503,750
6	Magat River Multi-Purpose Project, Dam Aspect	3,466,440
7	Dendro-Thermal Power Program	3,010,300
8	Batangas Coal-Fired Thermal Projects	2,807,934
9	Manila Light Rail Transit System	2,738,998
10	Fourth IBRD Highway Package	2,688,076

Source: IBON Databank Philippines, 1984, 4.

delays derailed the LRT-1's original July 1984 completion date. Electrowatt Resident Manager John Gourley blamed utility relocation for the periodic slowdowns (*Business Day* 1984c), while LRT-1 Project Manager Jose Valdecañas attributed the delay to the "economic situation," with the project facing "money problems" (*Business Day* 1984a, 10). Consequently, the project's financial cost further shot up to PHP 3 billion, a billion pesos more than the initial projected cost. The LRT-1 eventually landed in the top ten most expensive infrastructure projects for 1984 (table 1).

The LRTA and the MOTC held an inauguration ceremony on September 11, 1984 (again, the birthday of President Ferdinand E. Marcos) and a subsequent three-day public demonstration run wherein commuters could ride the LRT-1 point-to-point between Baclaran and Central Terminal station in Arroceros for free (*Business Day* 1984a).

On inauguration day, the people were generally enthusiastic of the metropolis's new (albeit still unfinished) railway line.

> "I found it very fast, quiet and clean," said Art Cunanan, a financial consultant who woke up early to take the sleek, beige-and-orange train.
>
> Student Miguel Navarro was also impressed, saying he planned to use the system when it opens for regular service.
>
> People queued at terminals for a ride, and some passengers were all grins as they peered out of train windows, pointing to landmarks and tops of low buildings. (*Business Day* 1984b)

In his speech at the inauguration, President Marcos proudly extolled the LRT-1's benefits as justifying the hefty costs involved in the project and took a swipe at LRT-1 opponents.

> While the investment for the LRT may at first glance seem staggering, we should not lose sight of the fact that in the long term the project will more than pay for itself. If we go by the savings from increased energy efficiency and human productivity which the system makes possible, it becomes obvious that our funds for this project are wisely spent. We are not simply concerned with the convenience, comfort and safety of commuters although these have and will always be important considerations. More important are the economic benefits we will realize from cutting down on the man-hours lost to needlessly lengthy commuting time as well as on the costly fuel squandered in other, energy-profligate means of mass transport.
>
> These, of course, are the kind of data that some of our political opponents ignore, or, worse, choose to distort. During the past few years, they have been exploiting the understandable anxiety of certain quarters despite the fact that programs are already underway to safeguard their livelihood.
>
> The final verdict on the LRT, however, will come not from our short-sighted and mean-spirited adversaries but from the millions of people who stand to benefit from this improvement in Metro Manila's transport system and I do not doubt for a moment what that verdict will be. (F. E. Marcos 1984)

But amidst the voices of praise for the LRT-1, there was concern on the significant strain that it was bound to put on government funds and commuters' out-of-pocket expenses in the years to come. The Philippine government, as the owner of the new railway line through the LRTA, had to service LRT-1 construction-related debts as well as help shoulder operating costs through subsidies. On the same day that the LRT-1 first offered free rides from Baclaran to Central Terminal, the MOTC projected that the LRT-1 would be beset by financial losses until as late as 2002, the projected year when the government "would have wiped out all [its] debts" (Militante 1984, 14). And with the LRT-1 charging higher fares, Geselle J. Militante of *Business Day* pessimistically predicted that commuters would eventually drift back to the traditional buses and jeepneys.

> Comparing this with current fare levels, a P2.50 flat fare is definitely expensive. It is more than the P1 minimum fare for buses and jeepneys for the first four kilometers and equivalent to a P9.5-kilometer [sic] ride on the same ordinary modes.
>
> It will be helpful to take note that the average trip length of Metro Manila passengers is 3.8 kilometers which currently costs P1. Once Metro Manila commuters get over the novelty of the LRT, only a few of them will want to part with P2.50 if they can travel the same length at P1. (Militante 1984, 14)

After three days of free rides, the LRT-1's Taft Avenue segment was again closed to resume construction activities. On December 1, 1984, it opened for revenue service, and some months later, on May 13, 1985, full-line operations

from Baclaran to Monumento commenced (Dans 1987, 87). Metro Manila finally had a realized rapid transit line.

After the Marcos dictatorship had been ousted in February 1986, LRT-1 proponents were keen on letting people know that it was the one responsible for the transport megaproject. In early 1987, former Transport Minister Jose P. Dans, Jr. penned an apologia for the LRT-1.

> People just could not understand why existing buildings had to be demolished, roads closed, pavements dug up and the already confused traffic further obfuscated. And all these carried on for over three long years! Businesses and stores along the corridor threatened to close up. . . . many actually did. The people and the press howled. And the prophets of doom gleefully cackled that they had foretold (hadn't they?) how disastrous the entire project would be, and that Manila would never be the same again.
>
> Hammering on the inconvenience became a regular newspaper feature during those years with, now and then, some sensational and not very accurate stories, to maintain newspaper interest and sales. It must be said that there were, indeed, difficulties imposed on the general public during the entire project period, that could not have been easily dismissed. The construction certainly could have been performed in a much more orderly manner. On the other hand, it must be recognized that there were so many interrelated items and aspects of the project that had to be integrated into a total program. Any small omission or oversight was cue enough for a public outcry. (Dans 1987, 85)

While acknowledging the project's construction problems, its proponents nevertheless amplified the point that the LRT-1 was worth all the costs involved. Responding to allegations that the project was overpriced, John Gourley was quoted as saying:

> It's about the cheapest project per kilometer in the world. I don't think you'll find any project so cheap. It's a very economic design—no frills, no luxury, no airconditioning, no escalators, no competition as the most beautiful in the world. We just have something ordinary . . . (*Business Day* 1984c)

If the Marcos regime proudly credited itself in providing commuters a faster mode of transportation through the LRT-1, critics, on the other hand, saw the regime as responsible for putting jeepney drivers and operators' livelihoods at risk, and for burdening Filipino taxpayers with debts (IBON Databank Philippines 1985).

Try as it may to control the LRT-1's historical narrative, the regime's sugarcoating could not deny that Southeast Asia's first operational rapid transit line was a controversial project during the years of its inception.

CONCLUDING ANALYSIS

From the foregoing narrative, it is clear that two views on the LRT-1 emerged; that of the project's proponents and its opponents. LRT-1 proponents pushed for the construction and operation of the new railway line because they stood to benefit the most. In the LRTA's website concise recounting of the LRT-1's "official" history, it said that "the system was designed as a public utility rather than a profit center," citing the losses that the railway line would incur in its first years of operation (LRTA n.d.-b). One could argue, however, that LRT-1 proponents actually had profits as their primary consideration, congruent with the argument that rent-seeking animates the building and operation of Metro Manila's railways (Ariate 2017). Writing retrospectively in 1988, Rene S. Santiago, a planner who contributed in drafting the feasibility study for the Manila LRT network's extension, points to the alignment of interests among private entities and the Marcos Sr. regime as being primarily responsible for the realization of the LRT-1.

> The LRT . . . could count on powerful supporters—from contractors, equipment suppliers, financial syndicators, and foreign consultants. It can be said, therefore, that commercial interests created the impetus for the early adoption and implementation of an LRT system for MetroManila [*sic*]. The then political leadership, predisposed as it was to visible edifices, was only too glad to oblige. (Santiago 1988, 36)

Amidst the rush to profit from building and operating the LRT-1, proponents were nonetheless aware that they were dealing with a public service. Thus, to prove the practicability and social utility of the new railway line, proponents crafted the necessary documentation such as the 1979 MOTC feasibility study, and they defended their work to the hilt. LRT-1 proponents hinged on the methodical nature of project development to show that they had been objective in weighing project costs and benefits, thus being illustrative of the tendency of megaproject proponents "to believe that they "know" best to do projects . . . [they] see themselves as being in a better position than others to minimise risks" (Gellert and Lynch 2003, 21–22). It thus follows that anyone who contradicted the LRT-1 proponents was not grounded on methodical rigor, and therefore such opposing views did not merit consideration. This elitist view is clearly seen in the pronouncements of Electrowatt Resident Manager John Gourley and LRT-1 Project Manager Jose Valdecañas. The many issues encountered before and during construction, however, belies any notion that the proponents undertook a judicious process of preparation (Santiago 1988, 37), with the rush to financially gain from the project a more important preoccupation.

Another potent factor that ensured that the costly LRT-1 would see completion is that its setting, Metro Manila, was tightly ruled by a dictatorial regime obsessed with externalizing its modernizing impulse, regardless of the costs. Indeed, the

Marcoses sought to project their power and legitimize their authoritarian rule through visually imposing architecture (Lico 2003). We can extend the notion of the Marcoses' "edifice complex" to the realm of rapid transit. The regime, as exemplified by President Marcos Sr. and Transport Minister Jose P. Dans, Jr., credited itself for modernizing Metro Manila's transportation through the LRT-1, never mind the expensive financial burden that such a megaproject entailed. One could say that the Marcos Sr. regime taking credit for the LRT-1's realization was an attempt to salvage its failing legitimacy, especially given the economic crisis that gripped the country during the early 1980s (see de Dios, Gochoco-Bautista, and Punongbayan 2023; Bello 2023; Encarnacion Tadem 2023), as well as the political upheaval following the assassination of opposition leader Benigno "Ninoy" Aquino Jr. on August 21, 1983. The regime tried to muster popular support by showing that it was responsive to the needs of the public; in this case, the pressing need for mass transport, in spite of being responsible for the non-implementation of previous railway proposals for Metro Manila (Rosette and Reyes 2022).

The regime was also aware that transport modernization was not without social costs. It nevertheless resorted to its typical rhetoric when undertaking socially costly ventures, imposing that the concerns of the minority must be subordinated to the good of the majority (see McCallus 1989). Appealing to notions of selflessness was not new to the regime when justifying its development aggression, as it also employed the same rhetorical strategy to persuade the Kalinga to acquiesce to the dictatorship's plan to build the Chico River Basin Development Project (Javar 2018). In the case of the LRT-1, Valdecañas tried to dismiss the concerns of adversely affected downtown store owners as short-sighted gripes. CDCP also encouraged motorists to selflessly bear with construction-related inconveniences despite its inefficient construction practices. Most saliently, the Marcos Sr. regime was willing to accelerate the phaseout of "unmodern" jeepneys with no regard for jeepney drivers' livelihoods, their dependents, and the repercussions to the wider commuting public—all for the sake of modernization.

But no amount of justification of costs could stifle opposition to the LRT-1 project. It has been underscored that megaproject opposition is not just a simplistic question of social acceptability, but also "that of alternative development paths, legitimacy of the process of project development, and fundamental ethical principles" (Lehtonen 2014, 100). Lehtonen's ideas are relevant for the LRT-1's case. Before construction began, critics were skeptical at the viability of an elevated LRT that was planned with no transparency and consultation. In their anti-elevated LRT arguments, opponents attempted to persuade the government to change its mind and to instead look at what they thought were cheaper and less disruptive alternatives such as the at-grade LRT system originally recommended in MMETROPLAN, or in the perspective of public utility vehicle operators—anything that did not involve heavy infrastructure expense.

With the regime turning a deaf ear to opponents' concerns and eventually greenlighting construction for the LRT-1, opponents turned to holding the government accountable for the project's daily inconveniences such as traffic rerouting and congestion, threat to the livelihoods of downtown businesses and jeepney drivers, and above all, for the government's irreversible decision to make an unreasonable transport investment. Opponents warned that even after the LRT-1 began operations, it was bound to be a continuous burden in public funds, and they feared that commuters were going to be averse to riding due to the higher fares. Thus, the LRT-1 was seen as another white elephant of the regime[3]—unnecessary, overpriced, and ill-suited to the context of Metro Manila.

How was voicing opposition to the LRT-1 possible given that the Marcos Sr. regime silenced dissent during its dictatorial rule? Developments in the early 1980s—the last years of the regime—made amplifying critical voices possible. As mentioned, an economic crisis and eventually a political crisis gripped the country during the early 1980s. Resistance against the dictatorship broadened as more people did not just feel the brunt of the regime's failed economic policies, but in increasingly realizing that the regime's continued rule was illegitimate. In fact, an anti-Marcos protest occurred simultaneously with the LRT-1's inauguration ceremony (Briscoe 1984, A14).

The role of the press also deserves mention. Throughout the time that the LRT-1 was being planned and constructed, newspaper reporters did not just regurgitate what proponents said, but they also gave space to opponents' voices in reports—so much so that Transport Minister Dans considered the press as the project's bane. Indeed, reporters who covered the LRT-1 were part of a new generation of journalists of the 1980s who valiantly challenged the regime's suppressive tendencies (Doyo 2019).

In the end, the LRT-1 changed Metro Manila's cityscape. Opponents' fears that it would be underutilized ultimately did not happen; in fact, it has made commuting faster and a little more convenient for hundreds of thousands of commuters—if there are no service disruptions. Furthermore, the line had already been extended and is still in the process of extension,[4] with President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., the son and namesake of the late dictator, expressing

3. For a discussion devoted to the Bataan Nuclear Power Plant, another white elephant project of the dictatorship, see Mendoza, Bertulfo, and Cruz 2016.

4. As of this writing, the LRT-1's northern end had already been extended from Monumento in Caloocan City to Fernando Poe Jr. Avenue in Quezon City. The LRT-1 is poised to connect with the Metro Rail Transit-Line 3 (MRT-3), the MRT-7, and the Metro Manila Subway in the long-delayed common station situated at the corner of EDSA and North Avenue. On the other end of the line, the LRT-1 is also being extended further southward. The Cavite Extension Project, another long-delayed extension, aims to extend LRT-1 services all the way to Niog in Bacoor City, Cavite. At present, Baclaran has ceased to be the southern terminus, with LRT-1 services now reaching as far south as Dr. Arcadio Santos Avenue in Parañaque City.

elation "that his father's foresight is being validated by another work that expands the mass transit that he had built for the people that he loved" (F. R. Marcos 2024). It thus seems that the proponents were vindicated. But it would be wrong to downright ignore the views of a concerned citizenry. While it cannot be denied that the public was the primary beneficiary of the LRT-1, the public bore the brunt of the project's many costs. The relevance of the LRT-1's story remains today. At a time when there is clamor for systematic and impactful solutions to traffic congestion problems in the cities such as railway megaprojects, it is necessary to be reminded that such ambitious ventures are not without costs. As in the case of the LRT-1, proponents will justify project costs, but it is, eventually, the government and the riding public that will shoulder the burden of paying it off. Hence, it is only fitting that one must be critically involved in the development process in pursuit of accountability and equitable development for all, not just for a select few.

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