OVERVIEW: Faced with fewer skilled workers in the future and the need to reduce environmental impacts and life cycle costs, Hitachi developed the A-train, a futuristic next-generation aluminum railcar system based on a radical rethinking of railcar materials, construction, and manufacturing. Initially placed in service on commuter and suburban lines, the A-train has now also been deployed on some express routes. The A-train features (1) a precision, high-quality aluminum double-skin body constructed by FSW (friction-stir welding), (2) fully self-supporting interior modules, and (3) an integral hollow extruded mounting rail to which the modules are fastened. In addition to providing a quieter ride, better rigidity, and improved safety, the use of FSW technology results in sleek aluminum double-skin rail cars with virtually no distortion. Adoption of a modular approach for the interior has reduced the car production lead time, simplified the work involved in refurbishing railcars, and yielded other cost efficiencies. Finally, the combination of aluminum double-wall structure and module-mounting rail fastening was designed with recycling in mind to facilitate the dismantling of decommissioned cars and the sorting of materials.

INTRODUCTION
OVER the long course of railroad history, the development of railcars has reflected the needs of society at different periods as manifested in the materials, structures, and systems used. Particularly with the rapidly changing social environment and emergence of new technologies, the demands on railcars today are becoming more challenging than ever.
before with the need to satisfy such diverse requirements as improved safety, comfort, cost-effectiveness, and environmental considerations. Conventional structures and fabrication methods had reached the point of diminishing returns, and it really called for radical new approaches to address these modern needs. This was the challenge that Hitachi faced in developing the A-train, a next-generation railcar system based on innovative new concepts: a precision aluminum double-skin structure, and self-supporting interior modules with mounting rail fastening (see Fig. 1).

The A-train fully satisfied the initial design objectives in terms of comfort, economy, and environmental friendliness. More recently, demand emerged for better safety and crashworthiness in the event of collisions. While Japan’s railroads are supported by an advanced signaling system and a safety record second to none, accidents at railroad crossings and elsewhere nevertheless occur, and there was growing concern that design-for-safety measures be implemented to minimize the risk of injury if a collision were to occur. In addressing this concern, Hitachi not only improved the safety of the A-train when involved in collisions, but also incorporated innovations to simply the restoration and repair work after an accident.

This paper will present an overview of the development of the A-train next-generation aluminum railcar system, and highlight the safety features making the A-train cars more crashworthy than any railcars previously developed.

A-TRAIN NEXT-GENERATION ALUMINUM RAILCAR SYSTEM: CONCEPT AND FEATURES

Concept and Basic Configuration

The design, manufacture, and maintenance of railcars has always involved a fairly substantial number of skilled workers, but the demographic reality is such that this cannot be sustained. Faced with a declining birthrate, an aging population, and a diminishing pool of skilled workers, Hitachi has been working for some time on a railcar system that would permit design, manufacture, and maintenance (while of course maintaining the same high level of reliability) with fewer skilled workers.

The essential development concept was to unify the objective and means in achieving whatever it takes to satisfy the diverse needs of both passengers and society at large, and come up with a simple railcar structure that is modular and observes a pattern so it can be easily replicated.

The concept and basic configuration of the A-train are represented in Figs. 2 and 3, respectively.

Features

Comfort

The double-skin structure provides far better sound-insulation characteristics than a single-skin structure. In contrast to the small surface density of the external cladding of the single-skin, the surface density of the entire surface of the double-skin structure is practically uniform, and the entire mass acts effectively to insulate sound.
Latest A-Train Railcar Enhancements

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(1) Track conditions: clear open stretches
(2) Measurement position: 1.2–1.5 meters up from floor of upper bogie
: noise when running under power (50 km/h)
: noise when coasting (80 km/h).

Stainless steel single-skin car

Aluminum double-skin car

Interior noise level dB (A)

Cost-effectiveness

Looking at the cost of materials alone, aluminum

Environmental considerations

The fact noted in the previous section that the structure of the A-train is lighter has environmental implications, for this means that it takes less energy to operate the train and produces fewer CO₂ emissions in doing so. It was found based on the results of an LCA (life cycle assessment) comparing the aluminum double-skin cars with stainless steel cars that the energy needed to run the aluminum cars could be reduced by 98%.

IMPROVED SAFETY IN COLLISIONS

Basic Structure

Improving the safety of railcars involved in collisions essentially involves two things: minimizing the structural deformation and damage sustained by cars, and ensuring the safety of passengers and crew when a collision occurs. It is also necessary in a collision to absorb the kinetic energy of the railcar while suppressing the impact acceleration acting on the car.

Based on the modular structure of the A-train, each car is divided into three sections: a front-end module, a central passenger compartment, and an intermediate-end module. If an accident occurs, the collision energy is absorbed by plastic deformation capability of the front-end and intermediate-end modules. This sharply
In the commercial implementation of the crashable zone approach, a notch is formed at both ends of the aluminum double-skin railcars, so that the ends of the cars have lower compression strength than the mid section. Then if a collision occurs, just the ends of the car are susceptible to plastic deformation and absorb most of the impact energy. We are currently exploring a number of methods for increasing the absorption performance even more by developing frames of front-end and intermediate-end modules using high energy absorption members, and by developing a module incorporating external sheathing, interior, and all integral components (a crashable module) that can be easily bolt-fastened to the central section of the aluminum double-skin structure. With this modular approach, trains that had been damaged in accidents could be repaired and restored in a short period of time, by simply swapping out the damaged crashable module and replacing it with an identical standby module.

Hitachi is now using advanced elastic-plastic structural analysis techniques to develop lightweight, compact energy-absorption elements made of aluminum alloy for application to the crashable module that will be employed in A-train railcars. Fig. 6 shows an example of a front-end crashable module, and presents a comparison of mockup compression destruction test results and elastic-plastic structural analysis results.

**CONCLUSIONS**

In this paper we presented an overview of Hitachi’s recent work on the A-train aluminum railcar system,
representing the latest developments in aluminum railcar technology, and highlighted recent efforts to enhance the safety and crashworthiness of A-train railcars. Safety is a fundamental concern of all transportation companies. To meet the diverse needs of its corporate clients, Hitachi remains committed to providing passengers with transportation services that are not only fast, efficient, and comfortable, but also provide the highest degree of safety, and will continue work on technologies that improve the quality and safety of A-train aluminum railcars.

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