

Swiss people may be ready to live car-free under certain conditions

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Fast moving walkways. Credit: Ecole Polytechnique Federale de Lausanne

The findings of PostCarWorld, a cross-disciplinary study into Swiss people's contradictory relationship with cars, will be presented at EPFL on 3 October. An honorary lecture will then be given by Professor Jacques Lévy, the study's director, followed by the opening of an exhibition showcasing his laboratory's research and the results of the PostCarWorld initiative.

The place that cars occupy in Swiss people's hearts has evolved considerably in recent years. Their conflicting views in this regard may even anticipate a shift from a car-centered society to a service-oriented society. Swiss people could well be ready to move past cars, which would entail leaving behind a means of transport that has long been synonymous with modernity. What's more, this shift may even be economically viable. These are the main conclusions of a major research project entitled "PostCarWorld". The detailed results of this study will be presented at a symposium to be held on 3 October at EPFL and attended by Olivier Français, a former EPFL student who is now a member of the Swiss Council of States representing Vaud.

Can you imagine getting around in a world without cars? That was the initial question put to a thousand of Swiss people, including experts in [urban planning](#) and mobility, as well as members of the general public. They were asked to imagine their life in a society that had opted to live without cars, not for environmental reasons or due to a fuel shortage but simply out of choice. The idea for this study had been brewing for several years within the research institutes of EPFL's School of Architecture, Civil and Environmental Engineering before finally seeing the light of day. Jacques Lévy, a geographer and head of EPFL's Chôros Laboratory, directed the study, which was conducted over a four-year period. A cross-disciplinary approach was adopted in order to enhance the study's scope. The PostCarWorld [research project](#) was funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation's Sinergia program, which supports pioneering, cross-disciplinary research projects. Geographers, architects, urban planners, economists, transport and mobility engineers, political experts and sociologists from EPFL, ETH Zurich and the Università della Svizzera italiana (USI) all worked together, giving rise to several theses and scientific publications and numerous cross- and multi-disciplinary collaborations.

Shedding light on the current situation

What did they find? "The advantage of this type of prospective study is that it sheds light on the current situation. In asking Swiss people to imagine a car-free future, we were really aiming to find out more about what's happening right now and about people's complex relationship with cars," explains Lévy. This relationship has been complicated by the rapidly shifting and highly contradictory status of cars in Switzerland. While most Swiss people are prepared to consider alternatives to buying a car, they are slow to change, and people still enjoy driving. As leasing, car sharing, carpooling, public transport and telecommuting gain ground, people no longer need to own their own car to have that sense of freedom. "We're shifting from an object-centered world, in which cars are an extension of our private property, a myth, a dream, to a service-oriented world, which is based on a whole new approach to mobility," explains Lévy.

Another change that they observed was a renewed focus on public spaces within cities. The era of the automobile transformed our cities and landscapes for almost a century. The terrain was divided between cars and pedestrians – and until recently, cars were given priority. "There was a consensus among the urban planners we interviewed: they all want to rethink our streets and place more importance on shared spaces. Cars will have to adapt to this multimodal world in which pedestrians are reclaiming their rights and public spaces are no longer taken over by cars."

Their final observation was that cars are responsible for the urban sprawl around us that, once it reaches a certain size, hinders a city's growth. Here's why: "The outer suburbs don't have the same access to services as city centers do. But when those outer areas are developed, they make city centers less attractive. In Switzerland, we've seen how, paradoxically, railways are responsible for some of this urban sprawl, as they clear the roads rather than replacing them. We met many families that used both the train and the car to get into town. So cars are not just

an environmental problem – they are a problem when it comes to urban planning and living together as well," explains Lévy.

As part of the study, researchers looked into whether a car-free Switzerland was economically viable. The answer is surprisingly positive, provided, of course, that part of the budget allocated to roads is transferred to the development of public transport and new infrastructure. "Based on our geographic models, which incorporate various criteria, we concluded that it wouldn't be technically difficult to develop a car-free society, but the current infrastructure would have to be adapted."

Fast moving walkways, telecommuting and anthropology

As part of the study, EPFL's TRACE Laboratory came up with the idea of building fast moving walkways that allow people to get around town quickly without a car. This invention has already caught the eye of the European Commission. Also at EPFL, a study was conducted into the mobility of those living in the Lake Geneva region. It showed that building strategic [public transport](#) links could influence the means of transport chosen by people over the long term. The disruptive influence of driverless cars was also analyzed. According to the researchers, these cars will play a unique role in how we get around since they are not designed to replace human-driven cars. At ETH Zurich, researchers looked into how people's timetables could be reorganized in a car-free society, especially by making greater use of telecommunications and telecommunicating. At USI, a difference was observed between German-speaking Switzerland and the French- and Italian-speaking parts of the country, with private cars slightly more popular in the latter regions.

Kindling an in-depth debate

For the PostCarWorld researchers, a car-free world is much more likely now than it was 20 years ago. While the individual interviews revealed that Swiss people are contradictory in their approach to mobility, they also showed that people were increasingly aware of the issue and open-minded, and that their expectations were evolving. According to Lévy, "The balance is shifting. People living in downtown areas are aware that the cars polluting the air around them and creating noise come from outside the town, and that the fine particles they produce are deadly. Certain public policies have changed, but the Swiss Constitution sends a mixed signal: it sets sustainable development as an objective but also stipulates that people must be free to choose their means of transport. But does this right to mobility conflict with other rights, such as the right to health?"

According to the researchers, these contradictions are a product of the paradoxes of our time – and a sign that we are transitioning to a post-car society. "That picture-perfect image still used in car ads of a lone driver surrounded by the Grand Canyon resonates less these days: we spend more time stuck in traffic jams and our cars are equipped with such things as cameras and drowsiness and speed detectors. Drivers are expected to have the same reflexes as a machine and be able to absorb a lot of information at the same time. That's far removed from the pleasure of driving fast and conquering open spaces."

Provided by Ecole Polytechnique Federale de Lausanne

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