



## Living environments, lifestyles and leisure mobilities

### Finished research

The virtues of the compact city called into question?

The goal of this research was to identify the impact of the urban environments of Geneva and Zurich (city center, suburban and peri-urban) on leisure mobility and on occasional long-distance travel in particular. It will also be an opportunity to create a subjective sound map by recording several residents of these living environments for an entire day. This research also gave rise to an artistic project, led by acoustician Swann Thommen, which can be found in the Artistic Lab section. Geographer Sébastien Munafò's thesis is available for free access on this page (in french only).

### Research participants

Swann Thommen  
Sébastien Munafò

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## I. The research

The role of urban living contexts as determinants of constrained mobility (work, shopping, etc.) is well established and now widely accepted. Generally speaking, the scientific literature shows that living in sparsely populated urban peripheries means long and frequent travel by car. Meanwhile, there is evidence that high urban density is associated with greater use of public transportation, walking and cycling, compared to more scattered built forms. These findings have led to recommendations that the dense city is the most sustainable urban form from a mobility standpoint. Conversely, they also point the finger at sprawling urban forms.

Nonetheless, several authors highlight the fact that these studies thus far have largely ignored leisure practices and the mobility it generates. Yet, in many Western countries, leisure activity is the primary reason for travel, both in terms of the number of kilometers travelled and travel time. What is more, the means of transportation used for this travel – namely cars and planes – are mainly notorious generators of negative externalities (energy consumption, noise, pollution, etc.). Some authors have hypothesized a strong link between urban form and leisure mobility. Living in a densely-populated city center might, for instance, give rise to frequent long-distance, energy-intensive trips to compensate for an environment unfavorable to daily relaxation. This need would logically be much less strong among peri-urban residents, who enjoy more open space and access to balconies, pools and patios for outdoor activities and relaxation. Hence the term “barbecue effect,” coined by Jean-Pierre Orfeuil and Daniel Soleyret to describe this possible reversal of the relationship between urban form and mobility generated.

A double challenge – both cognitive and practical - thus emerges:

*Does taking leisure travel into account in a comprehensive assessment of mobility generated challenge the virtues attributed to the compact city?*

If so, how to design the city of tomorrow so that it offers both the known qualities of compactness as well as those of less dense areas, so as to generate less compensatory leisure travel?

This topic inevitably raises the question of imaginaries and representations of travel. For many, “vacation” is synonymous with going away – a strong association that seemingly transcends living environments. Is it therefore not vain to attempt to impact living environments to generate less leisure travel? Do not our lifestyles inherently involve change, consumption of places, diversity and thus mobility, regardless of the opportunities we have close to home?

Our study aims to answer such questions by focusing on the cases of Geneva and Zurich, where three living contexts with varying degrees of urban intensity were selected (center, suburban and peri-urban). The empirical method was based on a methodology combining a contextual, quantitative and qualitative approach for each area studied. The findings will then be put into perspective with those obtained for Paris and Rome in a similar study (Nessi, 2012).

Swann Thommen’s artistic project Toward subjective sound mapping will be carried out in parallel to this research, and will entail following several inhabitants of the different residential contexts in the two cities for an entire day. Using a variety of original sound capturing devices, the goal is to identify the different sound strata and environments that urban dwellers move through on a daily basis. From home and residential environments

to outdoor public spaces, work environments, leisure spaces and transportation modes, this sound mapping will provide a visual and sonic expression of travel time and actors' movements, take inventory of the different sounds encountered and more specifically identify the different attachments to the living environments of each person.

## **II. Results**

There is a negative correlation between density and kilometers traveled, but a positive correlation between density and kilometers traveled on an occasional basis (weekends and vacations). The denser the living environment, the greater the mobility.

In the case of Geneva, inner city dwellers display distances traveled yearly equivalent to those traveled by inhabitants of other living environments and, in the case of Zurich, city dwellers' yearly mobility is much more important than in other living environments. This questions the idea that compact city = short distances.

That being said, city dwellers' physical mobility is more sustainable on an environmental level than the mobility of those inhabiting the same region but in more peripheral living environments. This can be explained by extensive car use in less dense areas.

Lastly, to live in the city-center is correlated to more everyday leisure activities in the city itself while residing in the periphery is correlated to more nature oriented activities. However, there is no correlation between the everyday living environment and the preferred type of places (nature or city) traveled to, on an occasional basis, for the weekend or on vacation. This questions the idea that city-dwellers compensate for the hardship of living in a dense environment. It challenges the Barbecue Effect's interpretation of high occasional mobility in city centers.

In view of these results, the author reasserts the virtues of the compact city, certain that this urban form is in itself sustainable, including in regards to occasional mobility (weekends and vacations), and concludes by making corresponding recommendations.

## **III. One step further**

### **1. Download the thesis**

Sébastien Munafo's doctoral thesis (available in French only): "Cadres de vies, modes de vie et mobilités de loisirs. Les vertus de la ville compacte remises en cause?"



Thèse de doctorat

**Cadres de vies, modes de vie et  
mobilités de loisirs:  
Les vertus de la ville compacte remises  
en cause ?**



Sébastien Munafo

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## 2/ Find out about our art-science project

This research gave place to an artistic project, led by acoustician Swann Thommen, which can be found in the Artistic Lab section.

## 3/ A controversy over Sébastien's Munafo's results

A discussion also took place between Sébastien Munafo and the Mobile Lives Forum regarding the author's research findings and his recommendation to make the compact city the standard urban model. Available [here](#).

### Mobility

Broadly, the word mobility can be defined as the intention to move and the realization of this movement in geographical space, implying a social change.

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Disciplines : **Humanities, Social sciences, Urban studies**

Transport mode(s) : **All modes of transport**

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<sup>2</sup> <http://artisticlab.forumviesmobiles.org/en/towards-subjective-sound-mapping>

<sup>3</sup> <http://en.forumviesmobiles.org/arguing/2016/11/28/living-environments-and-leisure-mobility-challenging-compact-city-3374>

<sup>4</sup> <http://en.forumviesmobiles.org/marks/mobility-450>

<sup>5</sup> <http://en.forumviesmobiles.org/mots-cles/modes-vie>

<sup>6</sup> <http://en.forumviesmobiles.org/mots-cles/energie>

<sup>7</sup> <http://en.forumviesmobiles.org/mots-cles/urbanisme>

<sup>8</sup> <http://en.forumviesmobiles.org/mots-cles/grande-mobilite>

<sup>9</sup> <http://en.forumviesmobiles.org/disciplines/sciences-humaines>

<sup>10</sup> <http://en.forumviesmobiles.org/disciplines/sciences-sociales>

<sup>11</sup> <http://en.forumviesmobiles.org/disciplines/urbanisme-architecture-et-paysagisme>

<sup>12</sup> <http://en.forumviesmobiles.org/modes-transports/tous-modes-transport>