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Europe Imagines Its Suburbs Without the Car

By [ELISABETH ROSENTHAL](#)

VAUBAN, [Germany](#) — Residents of this upscale community are suburban pioneers, going where few soccer moms or commuting executives have ever gone before: they have given up their cars.

Street parking, driveways and home garages are generally forbidden in this experimental new district on the outskirts of Freiburg, near the Swiss border. Vauban's streets are completely "car-free" — except the main thoroughfare, where the tram to downtown Freiburg runs, and a few streets on one edge of the community. Car ownership is allowed, but there are only two places to park — large garages at the edge of the development, where a car-owner buys a space, for \$40,000, along with a home.

As a result, 70 percent of Vauban's families do not own cars, and 57 percent sold a car to move here. "When I had a car I was always tense. I'm much happier this way," said Heidrun Walter, a media trainer and mother of two, as she walked verdant streets where the swish of bicycles and the chatter of wandering children drown out the occasional distant motor.

Vauban, completed in 2006, is an example of a growing trend in Europe, the United States and elsewhere to separate suburban life from auto use, as a component of a movement called "smart planning."

Automobiles are the linchpin of suburbs, where middle-class families from Chicago to Shanghai tend to make their homes. And that, experts say, is a huge impediment to current efforts to drastically reduce greenhouse gas emissions from tailpipes, and thus to reduce [global warming](#). Passenger cars are responsible for 12 percent of [greenhouse gas emissions in Europe](#) — a proportion that is growing, according to the European Environment Agency — and up to 50 percent in some car-intensive areas in the United States.

While there have been efforts in the past two decades to make cities denser, and better for walking, planners are now taking the concept to the suburbs and focusing specifically on environmental benefits like reducing emissions. Vauban, home to 5,500 residents within a rectangular square mile, may be the most advanced experiment in low-car suburban life. But its basic precepts are being adopted around the world in attempts to make suburbs more compact

and more accessible to public transportation, with less space for parking. In this new approach, stores are placed a walk away, on a main street, rather than in malls along some distant highway.

“All of our development since World War II has been centered on the car, and that will have to change,” said David Goldberg, an official of [Transportation for America](#), a fast-growing coalition of hundreds of groups in the United States — including environmental groups, mayors’ offices and the American Association of Retired People — who are promoting new communities that are less dependent on cars. Mr. Goldberg added: “How much you drive is as important as whether you have a hybrid.”

Levittown and Scarsdale, New York suburbs with spread-out homes and private garages, were the dream towns of the 1950s and still exert a strong appeal. But some new suburbs may well look more Vauban-like, not only in developed countries but also in the developing world, where emissions from an increasing number of private cars owned by the burgeoning middle class are choking cities.

In the United States, the [Environmental Protection Agency](#) is promoting “car reduced” communities, and legislators are starting to act, if cautiously. Many experts expect public transport serving suburbs to play a much larger role in a new six-year federal transportation bill to be approved this year, Mr. Goldberg said. In previous bills, 80 percent of appropriations have by law gone to highways and only 20 percent to other transport.

In California, the [Hayward Area Planning Association](#) is developing a Vauban-like community called Quarry Village on the outskirts of Oakland, accessible without a car to the Bay Area Rapid Transit system and to the [California State University](#)’s campus in Hayward.

Sherman Lewis, a professor emeritus at Cal State and a leader of the association, says he “can’t wait to move in” and hopes that Quarry Village will allow his family to reduce its car ownership from two to one, and potentially to zero. But the current system is still stacked against the project, he said, noting that mortgage lenders worry about resale value of half-million-dollar homes that have no place for cars, and most zoning laws in the United States still require two parking spaces per residential unit. Quarry Village has obtained an exception from Hayward.

Besides, convincing people to give up their cars is often an uphill run. “People in the U.S. are incredibly suspicious of any idea where people are not going to own cars, or are going to own fewer,” said David Ceaser, [co-founder of CarFree City USA](#), who said no car-free suburban project the size of Vauban had been successful in the United States.

In Europe, some governments are thinking on a national scale. In 2000, Great Britain began a comprehensive effort to reform planning, to discourage car use by requiring that new development be accessible by public transit.

“Development comprising jobs, shopping, leisure and services should not be designed and located on the assumption that the car will represent the only realistic means of access for the vast majority of people,” said PPG 13, the British government’s [revolutionary 2001 planning document](#). Dozens of shopping malls, fast-food restaurants and housing compounds have been refused planning permits based on the new British regulations.

In Germany, a country that is home to Mercedes-Benz and the autobahn, life in a car-reduced place like Vauban has its own unusual gestalt. It is long and relatively narrow, so that the tram into Freiburg is an easy walk from every home. Stores, restaurants, banks and schools are more interspersed among homes than they are in a typical suburb. Most residents, like Ms. Walter, have carts that they haul behind bicycles for shopping trips or children’s play dates.

For trips to stores like [IKEA](#) or the ski slopes, families buy cars together or use communal cars rented out by Vauban’s car-sharing club. Ms. Walter had previously lived — with a private car — in Freiburg as well as the United States.

“If you have one, you tend to use it,” she said. “Some people move in here and move out rather quickly — they miss the car next door.”

Vauban, the site of a former Nazi army base, was occupied by the French Army from the end of World War II until the reunification of Germany two decades ago. Because it was planned as a base, the grid was never meant to accommodate private car use: the “roads” were narrow passageways between barracks.

The original buildings have long since been torn down. The stylish row houses that replaced them are buildings of four or five stories, designed to reduce heat loss and maximize energy efficiency, and trimmed with exotic woods and elaborate balconies; free-standing homes are forbidden.

By nature, people who buy homes in Vauban are inclined to be green guinea pigs — indeed, more than half vote for the German Green Party. Still, many say it is the quality of life that keeps them here.

Henk Schulz, a scientist who on one afternoon last month was watching his three young children wander around Vauban, remembers his excitement at buying his first car. Now, he said, he is glad to be [raising his children away from cars](#); he does not worry much about their safety in the street.

In the past few years, Vauban has become a well-known niche community, even if it has spawned few imitators in Germany. But whether the concept will work in California is an open question.

More than 100 would-be owners have signed up to buy in the Bay Area’s “car-reduced” Quarry

Village, and Mr. Lewis is still looking for about \$2 million in seed financing to get the project off the ground.

But if it doesn't work, his backup proposal is to build a development on the same plot that permits unfettered car use. It would be called Village d'Italia.

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