



## BERNE: OLD BUT EVOLVING URBANISM

FAST FACTS		Similar To
Metropolitan (Labor Market) Population	450,000	Saskatoon, Antofagasta, Fanling/Shueng Shui (HKSAR)
Urbanized Area* Population	215,000	
Urbanized Land Area: Square Miles	15	Tsuen Wan (HKSAR), Temuco (Chile)
Urbanized Land Area: Square Kilometers	39	
Population per Square Mile	14,300	Berlin, Hiroshima, Cordoba (Arg.)
Population per Square Kilometer	5,500	
*Continuously built up area		

17 January 2004

The TGV trip from Paris Gare de Lyon to Berne is not the best example of the French national railway's (SNCF) high speed rail system. The train runs at top speeds for nearly 150 miles to the first stop, Dijon. From there the fabled speedster assumes the role of the "slow mail," as it continues on toward the Jurassic Alps and over the Swiss border to Berne. It may well be that the world record for slow operation of a high-speed rail train occurs in the less than 25 miles traversed in 38 minutes between Mouchard and Frasné on the French side of the border. But of course, the problem is the roadbed, not the train. It is now possible to ride TGV's all over France, and to Milan, into Switzerland and Spain, over both high speed alignments and conventional roadbeds.

Berne is one of the world's least known, yet most powerful national capitals. What makes it powerful is the comparative strength of the Swiss economy. Per capita income trails only that of Luxembourg (with a population smaller than Colorado Springs) and the United States.

The wealth is obvious from the streets of Berne. Here is the European capital of the sport utility vehicle. There are the expected American sized BMWs and Mercedes, along with Range Rovers and the large Toyotas. This is in addition to the smaller monospace vehicles produced by Renault, Citroen and other European manufacturers. All over Europe one gets the impression that the average size of European cars is increasing rapidly. Some of the newer saloons (sedans) are nearly as large as full-sized American cars.

It was a brisk February day --- good for walking with a winter coat. The temperature was 20 degrees Fahrenheit (-7 Celsius), it was overcast and there were some light snow flurries. But my trip to Berne did not involve a rental car. While a car would be ideal, it really is not necessary for an urban area of such limited expanse. With an urbanized area population of only 215,000, little geography is consumed. Public transport and walking do just fine.

The central business district of Berne is compact, and surprisingly devoid of the international style box towers one would expect in such an important place. The architecture is largely out of a tourist guide. It simply looks like Switzerland is supposed to look.

The central business district is located on a peninsula jutting toward the east, formed by a sharp “u-shaped” bend in the Aare River. This helps to concentrate commercial and government activity and to make the public transport system more efficient. The national parliament building is located on the south side of the peninsula, and overlooks the river perhaps 200 feet below.

Somewhat to the north of the parliament is the impressive Berne Cathedral. In this country of Catholic and Protestant, this particular part is more Protestant, and so is the cathedral. The seating is arranged in such a way that suggests congregations are not as large today as they were in the past, as is typical of Europe. One can still encounter a full church regularly at the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris, but Europe seems devoid of the tilt-up megachurch phenomenon that has swept Canada and the United States. The Cathedral has a tower that can be climbed for what is the best view of the city.

Because the river is in a gorge, the city has a number of attractive bridges. Right across one of them is a residential district no more than 10 minutes from the parliament and other parts of the central business district. Berne is a walkable urban area, testimony to what can be accomplished when there is not much population. One of the most walkable elements of the city is the enclosed shopping center is integrated into the railroad station.

But, in this place where it is surely possible to walk to work, average work trip travel distance is nearly seven miles, according to the International Union of Public Transport Millenium Cities Database. So much for the “jobs-housing balance.”

Public transport has a strong 28 percent market share, higher than the Paris urban area. At the same time, the traffic is more intense, at nearly double the average for US urban areas over 1,000,000 and 2.5 times that of similar sized urban areas (200,000 to 250,000). This is to be expected with the combination of comparatively high density and affluence. Indeed, the city itself used to be considerably more dense. In the 1960s, the central city population peaked at approximately 170,000 and has since fallen to less than 130,000. Berne, like virtually all other major high-income fully developed world cities that have not expanded their boundaries, has lost population.

From the viaduct behind the railway station, one obtains a somewhat unusual perspective. Below are the sprawling tracks as they approach the station, widening for nearly one-half mile enough to rival a 25-lane freeway. But, of course, there is no such thing, as the upper limit seems to be 18 lanes in Cobb County outside Atlanta. The same phenomenon can be observed behind King’s Cross, St. Pancras, St. Lazare, Gare du Nord, Gare de l’ Est or any number of railway stations in London, Paris or other European cities. But it is much more obvious in Berne, where the right-of-way is nearly one-half the width of the peninsula just beyond the Parliament and the business district. It is no wonder that municipal authorities in a number of European cities did not allow the railroads to penetrate the core, which they would have destroyed. Before the freeway revolts came the railway revolts.

But in many ways, Berne seems to be the livable city that American new urbanists are trying to emulate with their designs. The precondition, however, is an urban form containing a population no larger than will be found in Asheville, Fort Collins or Springfield, Missouri. With 60 percent

of the nation's population already living in larger urbanized areas, the "I remember yesterday" crowd will have to be satisfied with small enclaves in an urban fabric that has long since said "goodbye" to their reminiscences, however faulty. But, of course, Berne is not new urbanism at all, nor was it conceived on an architect's drawing board. It just happened as a product of its times and economics. That's why today it is less urban and more suburban than it was only a few decades ago.



Central Public Transport Plaza



Parliament



Parking Lot in Front of Parliament



Aare River





Aare River



Near the Cathedral



River from the Cathedral Tower



From the Cathedral Tower



Toward Parliament and CBD from the Cathedral Tower



Street Near Cathedral





Cathedral from Bridge



Parliament from Bridge





Street Scene, East of CBD



Residential District to the West



Commercial Building, West of CBD



Residences, North Peninsula





Monospace Vehicle



BMW SUV





Tracks Approaching Railway Station from the West

By Wendell Cox

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