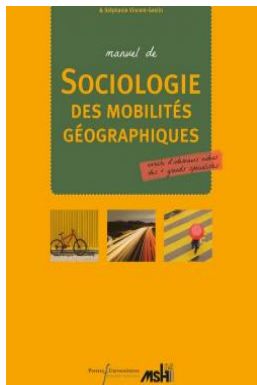


## 1. Essential reading



# Manuel de sociologie des mobilités géographiques, by Leslie Belton-Chevalier, Nicolas Oppenchaim and Stéphanie Vincent

By Sylvie Fol (Urban planner)  
18 March 2021

While mobility in all its forms has been the subject of an increasing amount of research over the past twenty years, this handbook provides a synthetic overview of the work devoted to spatial mobilities and offers a sociological definition of geographical mobility. At a time when studies in this field are proliferating, it responds to the glaring need for a handbook that critically evaluates this research.

---

While mobility in all its forms has been the subject of an increasing amount of research over the past twenty years, this handbook provides a synthetic overview of the work devoted to spatial mobilities and offers a sociological definition of geographical mobility. At a time when studies in this field are proliferating, it responds to the glaring need for a handbook that critically evaluates this research. By differentiating mobilities according to their degree of reversibility, the three authors aim to re-evaluate how different categories (daily mobilities, residential mobilities, migrations, trips) are approached, given that their borders are often rather vague and sometimes artificial. Their starting point is to claim that geographical mobilities constitute both an analytical lens of our society and a cross-disciplinary object of sociology that interrogates the different fields of the discipline. This handbook combines the contributions of various theoretical currents in sociology and highlights the contributions of other disciplines to the analysis of an object which, despite being widely studied, often remains poorly understood. It is intended for students, teachers, researchers and all readers interested in this topic. In the context of the current pandemic, which has exacerbated and highlighted the challenges of spatial mobility, such a handbook is essential.

## Review

The book, published in 2019, is authored by Leslie Belton-Chevalier, Nicolas Oppenchaim and Stéphanie Vincent, three researchers who have contributed to the sociology of mobilities with their work in the areas of the mobility of women, young people and forms of altermobility. The handbook begins with the observation that, since the 2000s, the word “mobility” is everywhere. It’s a concept that

is widely used by the media, but also the subject of a growing number of scientific studies. The authors highlight an initial difficulty relating to the very definition of spatial mobility, which covers different types of movements in geographical space, generally classified according to their amplitude and temporality: daily mobility, residential mobility, travel and migrations. The analysis of these various forms of mobility has led research to become segmented into often watertight fields of analysis which often neglect the interdependencies between different kinds of mobilities. To overcome this limitation, the authors suggest distinguishing mobilities according to their degree of reversibility, that is to say according to the temporalities of presence in a space. Reversible mobilities are thus defined as taking place on a daily timescale, such as commuting between home and work, while irreversible mobilities are those that take place over a longer timescale, such as relocating or migrating. This approach avoids opposing the different types of mobility and makes it possible to analyze them along a continuum, highlighting their interrelationships. While the handbook is based on contributions from different disciplines such as geography or socioeconomics, it highlights the particularities of mobility as a sociological object, as a “source of the change, transformation and evolution of the practices, representations and identities of individuals or social groups” (p. 11). It’s therefore a question of examining the social effects of movements in space while apprehending mobilities as social practices based on unequally distributed dispositions and resources. Accordingly, the authors wish to leverage geographical mobilities as a tool for analyzing society and view them as a cross-disciplinary object of sociology capable of informing its various fields.

The first chapter of the handbook is devoted to spatial mobilities as a sociological object. It reviews how the different disciplines have approached mobilities and how the analysis of different types of mobility has been distributed among disciplinary fields (daily mobilities for socio-economy and geography; residential mobilities for demography; travel for anthropology; migrations for sociology). Daily mobilities initially attracted little interest from French sociologists. The authors attribute this to the low importance given to the spatial dimension of social phenomena, particularly in the Durkheimian tradition. In contrast, American sociology, from its origins, did pay due attention to the analysis of spatial mobilities, with the work of the Chicago school. However, the very rich approaches of the Chicago sociologists were subsequently supplanted by analyzes that were increasingly centered on travel flows, and then later on the science of traffic, dominated by engineers. Sociologists, for their part, following in the footsteps of Pitirim Sorokin (Gallez and Kaufmann, 2009), focused their work on social mobility or on residential mobilities and migrations, which, unlike daily mobilities, involve movements through social space. From the 1980s, however, sociological research on spatial mobilities became well defined and gradually integrated the question of daily mobilities. In the French-speaking world, sociologists from Belgium, like Jean Rémy and Liliane Voyé (1992), and Switzerland, such as Michel Bassand and Marie-Claude Brülhardt (1980), began to explore the links between mobilities, cities and societies. In France, the works of Antoine Haumont<sup>1</sup> in 1980 were pioneering in this field because it wasn’t until the late 1990s that this line of research really took off. In the 2000s, mobility became a central object of sociology. The authors attribute this reversal “to social, economic and technological developments that placed the question of mobilities at the heart of contemporary issues” (p. 22). The focus on mobilities reached its climax with John Urry’s book, published in 2000: *Sociology Beyond Societies: Mobilities for the Twenty-First Century*. In this widely-cited book, Urry suggests replacing the study of societies - a concept he views as outdated - with the study of mobilities. He established himself as the leader of the mobility turn approach. According to the authors of this handbook, Urry’s work represents “a dramatic shift in the history of social sciences.” But it’s worth pointing out that these works remain relatively unknown and unrecognized outside the boundaries of mobility research. Among the works that have studied the central place of mobility in the evolution of contemporary societies, Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello’s book *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (1999) has probably had a greater influence, if we consider the disciplinary and thematic diversity of works it has since inspired.

In the second chapter, the authors critically assess the observation that we are witnessing a boom in mobilities. While the concept of a “mobility turn” defended by Urry is based on this observation, the increase in mobilities appears to be part of a long-term evolution, which began as early as the Industrial Revolution, or even before. This chapter recounts, through the work of historians among others, the major stages in the evolution of mobilities, whether reversible (daily mobilities) or irreversible

(residential mobilities and migrations). It shows that since the 1980s, although the use of the concept of mobility has spread rapidly, spatial mobilities themselves have experienced uneven growth depending on the type of mobility. Indeed, the authors show that while residential mobility has fluctuated significantly since the 1970s, it has declined steadily since the 2000s. Furthermore, as the works of T. Sigaud (2014) and those of the CGET (Haran and Garnier, 2018) have shown, residential mobilities, which designate relocations from one dwelling to another, are often limited in scope, especially for less privileged social groups. Conversely, the other forms of spatial mobilities, whether they are "irreversible" (according to the authors' distinction) such as international migrations<sup>2</sup>, or "reversible" such as travel and daily commuting, have experienced tremendous growth since the 1980s. The number of international migrants has increased enormously<sup>3</sup>, as has tourist travel. Above all, the evolution of daily trips is characterized by a substantial lengthening of distances traveled, by more than 71% between 1974 and 2008. Considering that travel times have increased by only 11% over the same period, this development reflects the increasing dominance of cars, which are synonymous with greater speeds. The authors indicate, however, that the growth of different types of mobilities (daily mobilities, travel and migrations) has taken place over a long period and that reversible mobilities have even experienced a slowdown since the 2000s. This observation leads them to "temper the radical vision of the mobility turn" which, from their point of view, relates more to the circulation of objects than to the movements of people. They emphasize the proliferation of flows carrying goods, as well as the growing role of movements linked to information and communication technologies. Finally, the most recent period is characterized by a broadening of the term's use and of the very concept of mobility, which encompasses an increasing number of notions and allows for different types of movements to be connected.

The third chapter discusses the effects of the development of mobilities and highlights their ambivalence. Whether in terms of health or the international movement of people, mobility can alternately be seen as a positive, for how it empowers and liberates people, or as a negative, for the problems it poses and the inequalities it creates. The authors show that this ambivalence was already present in the work of the Chicago school. In contemporary works, there are two opposing visions: a positive view carried in part by the work of Jean Rémy (1996) or John Urry (2000)<sup>4</sup> and a much more critical view from authors like Zygmunt Bauman (2002) and Hartmut Rosa (2012). The question of how forms of urbanization and increased mobilities are connected is obviously essential. Metropolization and peri-urbanization appear to be two features of cities that evolve according to the development of mobilities. The authors of this handbook clearly show how the growth of such spatial forms is inseparable from an increase in territorial and social inequalities, as shown in particular by the yellow vests movement. They also insist on the need to play down the assumption of a generalized mobility that would lead to reduced inequalities. Indeed, travel surveys<sup>5</sup>, despite their limitations, highlight mobility gaps linked to gender, social affiliation and income, whether in terms of the number of trips, modes of transport, automobile possession or driving license ownership. The authors then question the desirability of mobility, which, depending on people's social position and territorial context, can refer successively to "a desirable imaginary" (p. 64), to a constraint, or even to an injunction. According to them, this multiplicity of values attached to mobility compels us to use the term in the plural.

In chapter 4, the authors analyze work-related mobilities, an area in which the ambivalences highlighted in the previous chapter are most pronounced. This comprehensive chapter insists on the central role of mobilities in accessing the labour market, whether in education, recruitment processes or professional experience. At all stages of professional life (and even before it begins), mobility is valued, attached to the image of the executive or manager championed by "the new spirit of capitalism" (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999), even though it is in fact "an instrument in the service of domination" (p. 74). While mobilities are valued by the dominant classes, they are carried out invisibly by very diverse professions, whether in the context of their employment or for commuting between home and work. Often constraining and viewed negatively, these mobilities are also all the more controlled and burdensome for unskilled professions. In some cases, long home-to-work mobilities can be chosen, resulting from a trade-off between residential mobility, daily mobility and professional mobility. The use of ICTs, whether during travel time or within the framework of teleworking, has widened the field of

possibilities. This phenomenon has only been reinforced by the travel restrictions linked to the health crisis.

Chapter 5, however, puts the scope of these developments into perspective, by showing to what extent mobilities are structured by social inequalities. In this chapter, the emphasis is on mobility potentials, which are unevenly distributed according to social and spatial determinants. The notion of motility proposed by V. Kaufmann (2004) thus allows for a distinction between effective movements and the ability to be mobile, which depends on the skills and resources available to each individual. The authors of the handbook note that the issue of gender inequalities in mobility, which refers to specific issues particularly in terms of access to public spaces, remains poorly addressed by those in charge of mobility policies. They highlight the combined effect of gender, social class and area of residence through two very telling examples: the use of cars and the risk of road mortality, both of which reveal how inequalities can be cumulative. This chapter briefly discusses the effects of territorial organization - in particular in terms of access to equipment and transport systems - on mobility potentials. Differentiated access to urban resources is examined through employment, at the heart of Sandrine Wenglenski's work (2004), and health services. At the end of this well-documented chapter, the authors of the handbook discuss the utility of the concept of mobility capital, from which they distance themselves. To them, this concept presents three kinds of limitations: it isn't sufficiently related to the concepts of "field" and "habitus" and therefore doesn't allow an identification of the type of social space in which the mobility capital would be efficient; its given definition is rather poor and often limited to the idea of competence or aptitude for mobility; and the way in which the concept is used often disregards the arrangements made by individuals to leverage this capital.

The last chapter deals with mobility as a "socialized and socializing practice" (p. 105) and explores a dimension that is rarely dealt with in research. For the authors, if mobilities are a function of people's economic capital, they are also "influenced by a series of dispositions incorporated within various spheres of socialization" (p. 106), and conversely, travel can also constitute a socializing experience. While this double link between mobilities and socialization has been the subject of various studies on travel or residential mobilities, it has been poorly explored with regards to daily mobilities. The authors show that the modes of socialization to mobility, understood as the conscious or unconscious modes of learning the skills required to move and travel, depend greatly on the social properties of parents and residential contexts. They also vary greatly according to gender, so much so that the authors speak of a "gendered socialization to mobility" (p. 112). In addition, beyond the family, such modes are at work in places such as the neighborhood or schools. The chapter also deals with forms of socialization through daily mobility. Less obvious than in the case of travel or residential mobilities, the socializing experiences linked to daily mobility are nonetheless worth analyzing: the authors point out the different "obstacles" that individuals face when they are on the move. Daily mobilities allow for unexpected situations and confrontations with social alterity which can modify representations, but also create new social skills. In this regard, the study of adolescent mobilities by Nicolas Oppenheim (2016) is particularly enlightening.

The brief conclusion of the handbook summarizes its main contributions and ends with the observation that geographical mobilities are a complex object which can't be analyzed without a sociological approach, but which also need the perspective of other disciplines.

## Discussion

In the current context of the health crisis, this handbook is all the more welcome, in order to question the dominant values and paradigms which have hitherto guided mobility policies and driven some of the research devoted to spatial mobilities. While this crisis has highlighted the effects and risks of an unbridled growth of mobilities in a globalized world, it has also revealed the glaring social inequalities between so-called "front-line" workers, whose forced mobility is essential to the functioning of social life, and employees who can choose teleworking over commuting to work. The handbook by Leslie Belton-Chevalier, Nicolas Oppenheim and Stéphanie Vincent intends to place the social issues of mobilities at the heart of the analysis.

In terms of content, this handbook fulfills its promise as a manual or guide. It is fairly brief (151 pages, including bibliography) and its synthetic format doesn't prevent the authors from providing an in-depth assessment of the different dimensions of geographical mobilities. This handbook, while claiming to be a sociology manual, puts the contributions of different disciplines into perspective in an interesting and convincing way, especially when dealing with a research object that doesn't fit neatly into one single approach. Above all, the authors strive to present an overview of debates that even the most documented scientific works shy away from. Thus, John Urry's concept of the "mobility turn," which is often referred to without question, is here subject to a detailed criticism. Unlike works that highlight the aspirations or "experiential transformations" (p. 64) linked to mobility without questioning their determinants or social effects, this handbook takes a critical look at the effects of mobilities and points out the social and territorial inequalities that they carry. By challenging the values attached to mobilities, the authors explicitly question their desirability.

While the format of a handbook is restrictive, further developments on questions of data and methods would have been welcome, especially as the authors have all developed original and interesting methodological tools in their own work. Only a 2-page box (pp. 24-25) is dedicated to them. A critical analysis of existing quantitative data in France and in particular of travel surveys (in line with the work of Benjamin Motte-Baumvol) would have been useful. Likewise, an assessment of the possibilities offered by GPS data, often expected to enrich analyzes, would have been pertinent in this manual. Finally, the increasingly frequent use of photography or video tools in mobility research (Jarrigeon, 2019; Jarousseau, 2019) deserves to be mentioned.

Unfortunately, although this is a sociology handbook, we may regret the absence of a chapter on public mobility policies. While an interesting box is devoted to free public transport, this is obviously not enough to fully cover a particularly broad and contentious subject. The role of public policy in increasing spatial mobilities could have been brought to the fore, as could its effects on the evolution of how different modes of transport are distributed, on urbanization and territorial organization, or even on how the issue of reducing mobility-related greenhouse gas emissions is taken into account. In this matter, the tensions and contradictions are numerous and their analysis would have enriched the discussion. The effects of territorial and transport system organisation on mobility potentials are only briefly mentioned (in Chapter 5). It would have been worth developing this dimension of access to urban resources, given that it is central to the issues of social and territorial inequalities linked to mobility, as the yellow vests movement showed. Beyond access to employment and healthcare, which are rightly mentioned in the handbook, several studies (Gallez, 2015) show that accessibility isn't only a matter of transport, but also refers more broadly to urban and housing policies.

In terms of form and presentation, a real effort was made to design this handbook as an educational tool. Each chapter begins with a "key brief" summarizing its content very succinctly and effectively, and ends with a section called "To go further" including many useful resources for students. In addition to an "essential bibliography," this section offers a comprehensive list of well-chosen online resources. One interesting innovation is that each chapter provides a list of research dissertations and theses in sociology, geography or planning, related to its theme. They can be an interesting source of inspiration for students. Finally, each chapter offers one or more video discussions with a recognized specialist in the field of mobility. Eight videos of varying lengths (approximately 7 to 21 minutes) provide an update on important issues related to mobility, presented by researchers belonging to various disciplines: sociologists (Jean-Yves Authier, Pierre Lannoy, Vincent Kaufmann, Cécile Vignal, Anne-Catherine Wagner), geographers (Laurent Cailly, Michel Lussault), and a socio-economist (Jean-Pierre Orfeuill). Throughout the handbook, the most important concepts and expressions are highlighted in a different color and defined in a glossary at the end. Boxed texts, presented in a different color, are used sparingly but pertinently. They provide useful summaries on specific themes or issues. The handbook ends with an extremely extensive bibliography, integrating numerous references from international literature, which will undoubtedly constitute a valuable resource not only for students, but also for teachers wishing to bolster their reading lists and complete their own references.

It is unfortunate that the university presses, due to their limited resources, made some editorial errors. The graphs on pages 19 and 44 contain errors in the description of dates on the horizontal axis. And

some typos remain here and there. This is regrettable given how the handbook's general style shows a real effort in terms of presentation and formatting.

Beyond these minor flaws, this richly documented handbook constitutes a remarkable work of synthesis and critical reflection on geographical mobilities. Students and teachers, but also all those interested in mobility, will find precious resources gathered in this one-of-a-kind handbook that is both dense and very accessible.

## Bibliography

Bassand M., Brühlardt M.-C. (1980), *Mobilité spatiale* [Spatial mobility], Saint-Saphorin, Georgi.

Bauman Z. (2002), *La société assiégée* [The besiege society], Paris, Hachette Pluriel.

Belton-Chevallier L. (2015), « Prendre en compte les imaginaires de la mobilité : illustration à partir de femmes modestes périurbaines » [“Taking into account the imaginaries of mobility: illustration from modest peri-urban women”], *SociologieS*.

Boltansky L., Chiapello E. (1999), *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Paris, Gallimard.

Gallez C. (2015), *La mobilité quotidienne en politique. Des manières de voir et d'agir*. [Daily mobility in politics. Ways of seeing and acting], Accreditation to supervise research, Université Paris-Est, Marne-la-Vallée. Gallez C., Kaufmann V. (2009), « Aux racines de la mobilité en sciences sociales : contribution au cadre d'analyse socio-historique de la mobilité quotidienne » [“At the roots of mobility in social sciences: contribution to the framework of socio-historical analysis of daily mobility”], in Guigueno V, Flonneau M. (dir.), *De l'histoire des transports à l'histoire de la mobilité* [From the history of transport to history of mobility], Rennes, PUR, p. 41-55.

Haran L., Garnier M., (2018), *Les mobilités résidentielles en France* [Residential mobilities in France], Report by l'Observatoire des territoires.

Haumont A. (1980), *L'automobile et la mobilité des Français* [The car and mobility of French people], Paris, La documentation française.

Jarrigeon A. (2019), “The mobility of women: a constrained freedom”, <https://en.forumviesmobiles.org/video/2019/04/23/mobility-women-constrained-freedom-12941>

Jarousseau V. (2019), *Les racines de la colère. Deux ans d'enquête dans une France qui n'est pas en marche* [The Roots of Anger. A two-year investigation into a part of France that isn't moving], Paris, Les Arènes.

Kaufmann V., Bergmann M., Joye D. (2004), “Motility: mobility as capital”, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, N°28, p. 745-756.

Oppenchain N. (2016), *Adolescents de cité. L'épreuve de la mobilité* [Urban adolescents. The hardship of mobility], Tours, Presses universitaires François Rabelais.

Rémy J., Voyé L. (1992), *La ville, vers une nouvelle définition* [The city, towards a new definition], Paris, L'Harmattan.

Rémy J. (1996), « Mobilités et ancrages : vers une autre définition de la ville » [Mobilities and anchors: towards another definition of the city], in Hirschorn M. and Berthelot J.-M. (eds.), *Mobilités et ancrages. Vers un nouveau mode de spatialisation* [Mobilities and anchors. Towards a new mode of spatialization], Paris, L'Harmattan.

Rosa H. (2012), *Aliénation et accélération : vers une théorie critique de la modernité tardive* [Alienation and Acceleration: Towards a Critical Theory of Delayed Modernity], Paris, La Découverte.

Sigaud T. (2014), *Mobilités résidentielles et professionnelles des salariés en France : entreprises, marchés et territoires, une articulation en tension* [Residential and professional mobility of employees in France: companies, markets and territories - a tense articulation], PhD thesis in sociology, University Paris Dauphine.

Urry J. (2000), *Sociology beyond societies*, London, Routledge.

Vincent S. (2010), *Altermobilités, mode d'emploi. Déterminants et usages de mobilités alternatives au tout voiture* [Altermobilities, user handbook. Determinants and uses of alternative mobilities to the all-car system], Lyon, CERTU, Collection "Débats".

Wenglenski S. (2004), « Une mesure des disparités sociales d'accessibilité au marché de l'emploi en Île-de-France » [A measure of social disparities in accessibility to the labor market in Île-de-France], *Revue d'économie régionale et urbaine*, Vol. 4, p. 539-550.

## Notes

1 Antoine Haumont was a geographer, but he worked in close collaboration with the sociologists of his research team, the CRH.

2 The authors note, however, that international migrations have become less definitive than they used to be and are therefore now more "reversible."

3 Contrary to popular belief, the main flows take place between countries in the South.

4 Both authors, however, highlight the social inequalities generated by the growth in mobilities.

5 Most of the work mentioned is based on the results of France's 2008 National Transport and Travel Survey (ENTD, Enquête nationale transports et déplacements).

## Mobility

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

En savoir plus x

## Reversible Mobilities

Reversible mobilities are forms of specific movement made possible by rapid transport network systems. They are made over long distances, with outward and return journeys that are undertaken closely together in time. They are also limited in terms of social mobility and their relationship with otherness.

En savoir plus x

## Residential mobility

Broadly speaking, residential mobility refers to a household's change of residence within a life basin.

En savoir plus x

## **Movement**

Movement is the crossing of space by people, objects, capital, ideas and other information. It is either oriented, and therefore occurs between an origin and one or more destinations, or it is more akin to the idea of simply wandering, with no real origin or destination.

En savoir plus x

## **Teleworking**

The remote performance of a salaried activity outside of the company's premises, at home or in a third place during normal working hours and requiring access to telecommunication tools.

En savoir plus x

## **Motility**

En savoir plus x

## **Altermobilities**

Altermobilities represent all the alternative behaviours to an exclusive use of the private car for travel. They also imply a certain right to be slower, and pre-suppose that geographical and social spaces will be organised in ways that take into account a more limited use of cars.

En savoir plus x

---

### **Associated Thematics :**

#### **Lifestyles**

- Alternative mobilities
- Cars / motorcycles
- Living environments
- Change in practices
- Diversity of lifestyles
- Inequalities
- Leisure & tourism
- Digital technologies
- Work

#### **Theories**

- Concepts
  - Methods
- 
-





Sylvie Fol

Urban planner

Sylvie Fol is professor of urban planning and development at the University of Paris 1 Panthéon - Sorbonne and a member of the research lab Géographie-Cités (UMR CNRS 8504). She holds a PhD in urban studies from EHESS and an accreditation to supervise research at the University Paris 1 Panthéon - Sorbonne. Her research, which centers around the analysis of socio-spatial inequalities for the purpose of international comparison, focuses on: transformations of suburban territories; inequalities in mobility; segregation and social diversity policies; shrinking cities and the devitalization processes of small and mid-sized towns. She is a member of the Editorial Board of Géographie, Economie et Sociétés and Justice Spatiale / Spatial Justice. She serves on the Scientific Board of the Mobile Lives Forum and is a member of the Board of the Territorial Observatory (Observatoire des Territoires, Commissariat Général à l'Égalité des Territoires). Personal website: <http://www.parisgeo.cnrs.fr/spip.php?article115>.

---

To cite this publication :

Sylvie Fol (18 March 2021), « Manuel de sociologie des mobilités géographiques, by Leslie Belton-Chevalier, Nicolas Oppenchain and Stéphanie Vincent », Préparer la transition mobilitaire. Consulté le 01 April 2023, URL: <https://forumviesmobiles.org/en/essential-readings/13601/manuel-de-sociologie-des-mobilites-geographiques-leslie-belton-chevalier-nicolas-oppenchain-and>

---

Other publications



Cycling and walking: literature review – Bibliography

Renate Albrecher, Sonia Curnier, Vincent Kaufmann



Theme 8: Urban rhythms and the mobility of pedestrians and cyclists

Renate Albrecher, Sonia Curnier, Vincent Kaufmann



Theme 7: Walking and cycling as complementary to public transport

Renate Albrecher, Sonia Curnier, Vincent Kaufmann



Theme 6: User conflicts between active modes

Renate Albrecher, Sonia Curnier, Vincent Kaufmann