

Understanding mobility: DLR transport and traffic researcher Barbara Lenz

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Barbara Lenz is the only woman to head one of the 32 research institutes and facilities of the German Aerospace Center (Deutsches Zentrum für Luft- und Raumfahrt; DLR). She is also the only female professor of Transport Geography in Germany, holding a special DLR professorship at the Humboldt University in Berlin. Since 1 January 2007, Barbara Lenz has been in charge of the DLR Institute of Transport Research in Adlershof, located to the south of Berlin

From Stuttgart to Berlin

In 2002, Barbara Lenz moved from her hometown of Stuttgart to DLR in Berlin. "Back then, I was in my mid-forties and thought this was a one time opportunity," recalls Lenz, now 56 years of age. This university professor of geography joined the team of DLR transport researchers in Berlin as head of the working group 'Space and Transport'. As a student she worked on questions associated with traffic, transport and mobility. "In particular, we worked extensively on the subject of production site development in the age of globalisation as well as at the role to be played by transport and logistics. It is exciting to see the way that different markets are interconnected and the functions played by innovations in the transport and logistics sector – they not only facilitate international production but are, to an increasing extent, the catalyst." It therefore seemed appropriate for Barbara Lenz to start her time with DLR in Berlin by examining the relationship between the topology and the resultant transport requirements and traffic trends.

From newspaper publisher to university

This transport and traffic researcher, who graduated from the University of Stuttgart in Geography and German for Teaching, actually gained her early work experience in journalism. After obtaining her high school leaving certificate – the German Abitur – she completed a two-year voluntary placement at a newspaper-publishing house in the Stuttgart region. On completion of her studies, Barbara Lenz spent the requisite probation period in the educational sector, working as a teacher in a private school before having the opportunity to return to university to complete her doctorate and qualify as a professor.

Making intelligent use of car, bus and rail

And what does 'mobility' mean for you personally? "When our children were young, we lived in a village outside Stuttgart and only one bus passed every hour. So I simply had to use my car, though driving a car in a congested city eventually began to annoy me," she recalls. Things are a lot better in Berlin; here she makes regular use of bus and rail to get around and leaves her car at home. Of course, she would not like to live without a car entirely: "every mode of transport has its place, but we need to be prepared to consider alternatives and think about the mode of transport most appropriate for each type of journey. Sometimes, walking is the most flexible way of getting around," she says with a laugh. For Barbara Lenz, even this conscious decision makes a contribution towards achieving the goal of sustainable mobility. And that is a significant objective: "understanding transport is not enough. Instead, it is more important to research ways – be it through the use of technology or through changing behaviour – of reducing the negative environmental impact of transport."

This scientist and scientific manager is convinced that sustainability is about more than just protecting the environment. When she leaves work in the evening, she enjoys a 15 to 20 minute

bicycle ride home, instead of driving. "Since I am in no hurry, I can relax a bit, just as I do on Sundays when my husband and I stroll in and around Berlin," she comments.

Mobility behaviour and transport demand

Technical questions do of course have a central role to play. Barbara Lenz is involved in more than simply developing new technologies such as electrically powered vehicles. For her, it is much more important to consider the implications that these technologies have on people's mobility, and therefore on the demand for and provision of transport. The scientist particularly values the way that the DLR institutes collaborate with one another. "We are all investigating similar research subjects, but we are tackling them from different perspectives."

Barbara Lenz has now been a transport researcher at DLR for almost ten years. Will she be putting in another ten? She nods in agreement: "yes, I can certainly imagine that happening. There is still a great deal to do. For example, we are currently working on 'DLR Transport Scenarios 2030'. We want to examine all modes of transport in detail – from walking and cycling through to motorised transport by car, truck, bus and rail – with their implications for the environment, economy and society, and to clearly show where the 'control levers' are located within this system. I can only plan this; if my colleagues don't bring their commitment and intelligence to bear on these issues, none of it will come through. But that is precisely what they do!"

A 'boss' with team spirit

Barbara Lenz views her 'boss' role as a team-oriented one: "I take decisions that I stand by, but which I have lengthily discussed with people that have an important role to play in that particular context. For me, employee motivation means establishing a flat hierarchy with a high level of transparency, and creating an comfortable atmosphere in which one can work creatively."

Once a year, she discovers an entirely new kind of mobility: "I take three weeks of vacation at one time, without a mobile phone, laptop or appointments calendar – and when I return, even though the world has not stopped, nothing has really changed," she adds.

Contacts

Elisabeth Mittelbach
German Aerospace Center (DLR)
Communications, Space Administration
Tel.: +49 228 447-385
Fax: +49 228 447-386
Elisabeth.Mittelbach@dlr.de

Institute Director Barbara Lenz mainly studied the socio-economic issues of transport research



Institute director Professor Barbara Lenz and her staff conduct transport research focussing on the economy and society. How will our mobility be in the future, and what role will the different modes of transport play in 20 years? Barbara Lenz tackles questions like these.

Credit: DLR.

Barbara Lenz in her Berlin office



Barbara Lenz's office at the DLR Institute of Transport Research in Berlin is her 'home base'.

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