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City of Ulm and Daimler-Benz co-operate in a unique transport project

A flotilla of 200 Smart cars is being made available in a unique project in Ulm, based on co-operation between the city and the car-maker Daimler-Benz, which has a research and development facility in the city.

The concept is based on a registration of users who receive a seal with an electronic chip on their driving licence, which functions as key to any one of the cars which are distributed within the city area. There is no further membership or deposit required – the only requirement is a valid driving licence. Costs are calculated similar to mobile phone charge by the minute, one minute costs 19 cent. One hour is capped at 9.90 Euro, and a whole day at 49 Euros. It is possible to pick up a car just spontaneously, but booking ahead by telephone or internet is also possible. After unlocking the car with the chip, users enter their own personal identification number, and they are ready to leave.

Daimler-Benz provided the car and the technology, the city of Ulm made sure that certain parking spaces – near stations for example – are reserved for those cars. Currently there are 130 such reserved parking spaces, but there is demand from users for more, and negotiations with private businesses such as cinemas and department stores are ongoing.

Cars are serviced at regular intervals and filled up – but drivers can take this duty over and earn free minutes by doing so. There are some general rules – no smoking, not pets, any excessive soiling has to be reported, and only registered drivers can drive – but overall the system is very easy to use.

It started first as an in-house project with 50 cars and proved very popular with Daimler employees. In April 2009, it was then extended to all residents of the city of Ulm, but now even visitors to the city register and go on to use cars while in the city. Originally, it was estimated that about 5000 users would register until the end of 2009, however within the first two months the figure already hit the 7000 mark.

One concern was that the cars would end up in clusters in certain areas and would have to be re-distributed by staff at regular intervals. However practice has shown that many people use the car for one-way journeys, and they get redistributed regularly without any need for further management. Cars are

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used on average 10 to 15 times a day, and only rarely are cars not used for longer than 24 hours. However it does happen that users take the car on longer journeys – for example as far as Leipzig.

This project, which has features of both the car clubs which have been popular in German cities for a long time and public cycle hire schemes – due to the ease with which cars can be picked up and dropped somewhere else – has elicited a lot of interest all over the world, and the Mayor of Ulm, Ivo Gönner, is hosting many international delegations. He says: “This kind of project is exactly right for Ulm as a knowledge and academic city; here new ways of mobility can be trialled.” Ulm has ca. 120.000 residents and indeed it seems that expectations about acceptance of this new system were exceeded. The only concern that springs to mind is that through this system a shift of short journeys away from public transport or walking and cycling might happen – if cars are so easily available, perhaps people will be tempted to make even short journeys by car? This might warrant some further study.

The next step will be the introduction of such a project on a larger scale in the city of Austin in Texas, USA in this autumn. Austin has 750.000 residents, but here it will also be based on 200 Smart cars, the same number as in Ulm.

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