Wu’s idea of a car-centric America is not just specific to a global impression of the United States, but is representative of the United States’ current transport culture. There were almost 256 million registered passenger vehicles in the US in 2013 and the use of passenger vehicles is the most popular transportation method in the country. Wu lives in New York City, which is known for its public transportation infrastructure, and New Yorkers are often the focus of the many analyses we’ve all seen showing that young Americans are less interested in cars, and less likely to own a car, than their parents were. However, in most American cities, there are still few, limited or no public transportation options. Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota, are mid-size Midwestern cities known as the Twin Cities, and a more typical example of American cities. Does this trend still hold?

The Twin Cities, with a city population of 700,000 and a metro area population of three million, is known for its extremely cold and snowy weather. The Blue Line, Minnesota’s Light Rail, is the transportation lifeline for social activities in Minneapolis. The line begins at Target Field, home to the MN Twins baseball team, and goes past First Avenue, a live music performance space, through the warehouse district with hip bars, the modern Guthrie Theater, and industrial architecture and eventually to the Mall of America and the International Airport both in Bloomington, a Minneapolis suburb at the end of the line.

“My impression of the United States was Route 66. I’ve seen so many photographs. And I had this idea that you can ride in the car and go wherever you want to, and there’s so much freedom to go wherever you want. But here I have a bicycle.” - Qingyun Wu, Chinese native who lives in Flushing, Queens, New York City [The New York Times]
winters, the Mall of America (largest shopping mall in the USA), the birthplace of Prince, the Twins baseball team, corn farming, and thousands of lakes, 11,8421 to be exact. There is also a lively art and music scene, beer breweries, artisanal food scene, ethnic diversity, and growing sustainable transportation options. The cultural landscape is both urban and American.

In 2014, the Minneapolis Star Tribune reported that the population of millennials in the Twin Cities rose 25 percent between 2007-2014, attributing this growth to an affordable cost of living, vast housing options, quality universities, and quality job availability. The study also stated that millennials in the area are, indeed, driving less. Car ownership is not the social marker it once was, and young people are open to using a variety of transportation options provided they are fast, easy, and efficient. Unfortunately, like many cities in the country and around the world, the Twin Cities’ infrastructure does offer enough of these necessities quite yet.

As a millennial who used to live in Minneapolis without a car, transport determined the decisions I made daily about my professional and personal life. I lived in Uptown Minneapolis, which played a large role in where I looked for work, which ended up being a 20-minute walk, a bus ride in the aforementioned winter. I was able to shape my life around being car free, while staying mobile. However, I was in the minority of my friends. Even though we lived in the city proper, getting around was still harder and slower for me than for them and I regularly felt the weight of not owning a car (especially in the winter). However, the decision to go carfree or car owner is hardly as simple as cultural norms, bitter winters, or as Wu suggests, a sense of freedom.

**Russell Smith, 23**
**UnitedHealth Group**
**Lives in:** St. Louis Park
**Uses:** Car, Rideshare

“The times I have visited Chicago, I really enjoyed using the city’s public transit. I didn’t have to travel more than 7-8 miles to my next destination and the transit there was always readily available. Now, though, I live in Saint Louis Park which is one the first cities that border Minneapolis. With my friends, family, and work being spaced throughout the Twin Cities, I find driving to be a more efficient use of my time.”

Russell was a heavy user of public transit during college, and told me that if personal and professional commitments don’t cause one to travel as much as he does, it is not necessary to have a car in the Twin Cities. In order to improve public transport, Russell thinks that having more train lines would be ideal, but in the meantime more express buses to surrounding cities would be helpful. Ultimately, Russell’s dream transport scenario involves moving to a denser, accessible city. At the moment, Russell relies solely on the car to move around but he feels that other influences could change that. “Changes in job locations and/or gas prices could be a driving factor to use metro transit. I have a car because it allows me more time to do the things I like but it would be great to live in a city that wasn’t too spread out where I could travel easily and efficiently by train.”
Michon Pagitt, 26
Realtor
Lives in: South Minneapolis
Uses: Car, Light Rail, Bus

Michon is a realtor and consultant for a real estate app developer. Her sources of income pull her to many different locations in the Twin Cities and suburbs. “I have a car because I have to drive to lots of different properties and be in back-to-back meetings. Taking public transportation is not possible to be in all those places on time,” she explains. However, her job with the app developer is located in downtown Minneapolis and she often commutes via the bus and/or light rail due to high parking rates downtown, even though she suffers from motion sickness. “I wish I could take the bus as I think the commute is relaxing, but the bus makes me really sick no matter what tricks I try. I do still take the rail since it’s close to my house, I don’t get sick, and I don’t have to pay for parking downtown.”

Michon thinks that the Twin Cities could improve their transport infrastructure by offering more light rail lines and making the commute to the suburbs easier. When asked if she thinks it necessary for a millennial to have a car in the Twin Cities because owning a car is highly impractical considering the amount of resources it takes to produce and maintain one.” While Sean has used all types of public transport in the past, with the increase in availability and accessibility of car-sharing and on-demand taxi apps, he also does sometimes use Michon’s car. Looking to the future, Sean is more concerned with technological advances when it comes to transportation. “I believe that as technology continues to progress, our transportation systems will change dramatically. My hope for the future is fully automated, shared, self driving cars on demand.”

Channing James, 25
Medical Student
Lives in: Uptown Minneapolis
Uses: Car, Bus, Bicycle

Channing is a medical student at the University of Minnesota. When she first started school, she did not have a car and heavily relied on bus and bicycle, using the Midtown Greenway in the warmer months, to get to class. Now in her third year, most of her education comes from rotations in different fields of medicine in numerous medical institutions in the cities. “I have a car because it made it easier and more convenient to get to different rotation sites,” she says. Channing’s main issue with public transportation is with operation times and, like Michon and Russell, areas of reach. “It would be great if the train system reached further to the suburbs for commuters. There is also limited public transportation in the early AM, making travel for those who are working overnight or during non-typical work hours more difficult.” Channing does not believe it is necessary for young people to have a car in the Twin Cities provided that they do not go to the suburbs that often. “Public transportation can typically get you where you need to go if you know the city, and stay in the city.”
Tarkor Zehn, 25  
Journalist  
Lives in: Brooklyn Park  
Uses: Car

“My car is everything!” Tarkor exclaims. Similar to Russell, Tarkor’s professional and personal commitments are spread out within the Twin Cities. “Living in Brooklyn Park doesn’t allow me immediate access to the light rail or efficient public transport. On top of that, I have one job in Osseo, another in Blaine [both suburbs of the city 14 miles away from each other] and I spend a lot of time socially in Minneapolis. I have used a bike to get around, which is actually pretty easy to do in Minneapolis with all of the bike trails and the greenway. I relied on the metro system and used the bus a lot in college to get to work downtown every morning. I remember shopping at places on University Avenue (St. Paul) because it was easy to catch the 21 to the 16 [buses] from the University of St. Thomas.”

Looking towards the future, Tarkor spoke of plans to expand infrastructure in the Twin Cities and how that would change her transport behavior. “I know there are talks of expanding the light rail to neighboring suburbs such as Brooklyn Park and Burnsville [17 miles from Minneapolis]. I think this is an excellent idea. For me, I would definitely use that when going out in the city. I also think that having buses run more frequently from the suburbs to Minneapolis would be great. Sadly, my car is the only form of transportation I use currently, but if there was more access to public transportation, I would definitely use it more.” Tarkor generally loves having a car for the convenience, the alone time, efficiency and the opportunity to store things such as a change of clothes and yoga mat for trips to the gym or groceries. “[when I took the bus in college] I specifically didn’t run errands late for safety reasons and I always made sure I traveled light. Now that I have a car, I don’t worry about those things!” However, when I asked Tarkor what her ideal transportation situation would be in the city, she told a different story- “because I truly do care about the environment and hate the maintenance of having to keep a car, I would love to live in a city where I could get by on just walking, biking, and public transportation. It would probably be a lot cheaper and would make life so much easier. Until then, I guess I’ll dream about it!”

A few things stand out to me about these accounts, which I’ve found to be typical of young Americans’ attitudes toward cars. First, a car is still, for many, a practical necessity, but its not about status the way it has been for previous generations. Most young people in cities would be happy to take transit instead of driving, if it was available and efficient. While the Twin Cities does have a variety of sustainable transportation options, whether or not you can depend on them alone for mobility is about where you live, work, and play. And for most people, those answers are different than the routes that transit has been designed for – a single commuter going to and from the city center during rush hours.

If American cities are to make the kind of strides they need in sustainable mobility, they’ll need to increase frequency, options, speed, and reach of bus and trains that are the backbone of the system, and they’ll need to supplement fixed route transit to accommodate daily needs: car share, rideshare and bike share are all options that millennials are already using, cities could get a lot out of expanding and improving them. Restrictions on driving, such as high gas prices and parking regulations, also do quite a bit to move young people to alternative modes.

Americans are making huge cultural progress by moving beyond the car-as-status model, and if we want to take advantage of that, we must plan our cities and transport systems to meet this demand, and show the next generation that sustainable transport is the new status symbol.