

**Zeitschrift:** Swiss express : the Swiss Railways Society journal  
**Herausgeber:** Swiss Railways Society  
**Band:** - (2015)  
**Heft:** 124

**Artikel:** Zürich : Martin Fisher describes how its public transport network evolved up to around 1970  
**Autor:** Fisher, Martin  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-853995>

#### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

#### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

#### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 09.01.2026

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

# Zürich



A 2004 view of preserved TEE unit 1053 looking towards the original train hall which can just be made out in the distance. *Photos: Martin Fisher*

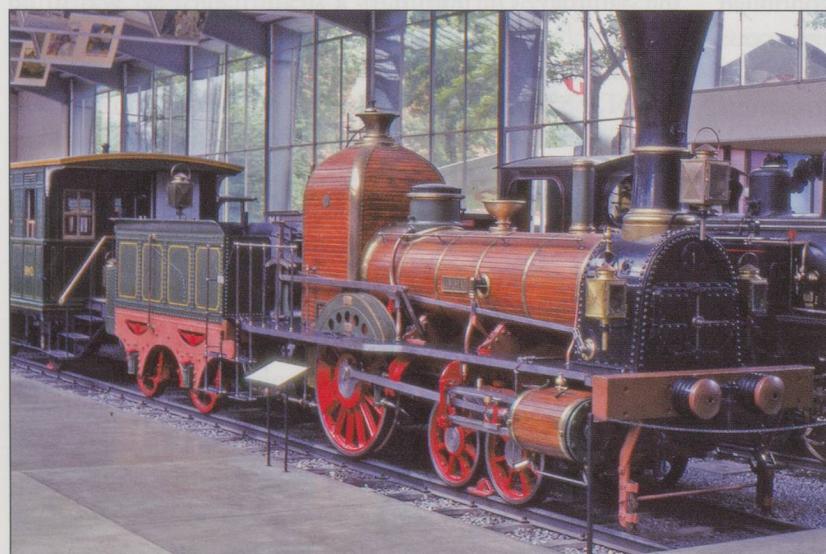
## Martin Fisher describes how its public transport network evolved up to around 1970

Lake-dwellers had established a settlement in the area of today's city by about 3,000 BC, then the Helvetians settled here around 400 BC and in due course the Romans followed suit, calling the place Turicum. By medieval times there was a small cramped city of about 6,000 people. Pigs were in the habit of devouring waste food thrown out into the alleyways and in an early form of highway engineering or traffic management, city fathers decreed that the roads had to be wide enough for pigs to turn round (which suggests streets were still very narrow). The city was protected by a series of walls and ditches, the latter probably being little more than open sewers. One such was known as Fröschengraben, or "ditch of frogs", until it was covered over in the 19th century and ultimately became the very respectable Bahnhofstrasse.

By the mid 14th century the city fathers were collaborating

with the private sector of the day, i.e. the powerful guilds of merchants, bakers, butchers, etc, in an early form of city government and the city joined the relatively new Swiss Confederation. Zürich went from strength to strength; by the 1890s the City had a population of 28,000 and the Canton 120,000. Nowadays, the equivalent figures are 390,000 and 1.4m (out of a total Swiss population of 7.9m). Today the city offers many places of interest, but it is perhaps worth highlighting one facility which can be enjoyed free of charge. In the 1880s the city engineer Arnold Bürkli advocated reclamation of waste land around the city shore of Lake Zürich and this became the very pleasant lakeside public park and garden available today.

The first moves to put Zürich on the railway map were made in 1836 when a committee was established with the aim of building a line to the Bodensee. Two years later the Schweizerische Nordbahngesellschaft proposed construction of a line to Basel but this was dropped in 1841, partly due to lack of co-operation in Basel. However, the pioneering "Spanisch Brödli Bahn", officially the Schweizerische Nordbahn, did succeed in providing the first stage of this initiative, opening on 9th August 1847. Gradually other lines followed. The Schweizerische Nordostbahn, which had absorbed the Nordbahn in 1853, extended to Winterthur and Romanshorn in 1855/56 and Schaffhausen in 1857. In 1858 it was finally possible to travel by train from Zürich to Basel, albeit via Olten and



A replica of the 'Spanisch Brödli Bahn's' loco that started it all. 'Limmat' is in the Verkehrshaus (Swiss Transport Museum) in Luzern.

the original Hauenstein Tunnel – the direct Bötzberg route not opening until 1875. In 1864 the ZZL opened its route to Zug and Luzern; this became part of the Nordostbahn in 1892 and had been promoted in anticipation of the Gotthardbahn, which opened in 1882. Amongst other routes, the line to Ziegelbrücke along the south side of Lake Zürich opened in 1875, while the one along the northern shore to Rapperswil did so in 1894.

In recent years we have become used to Zürich's Hauptbahnhof (HB) station being under seemingly constant reconstruction, however this is not a recent phenomenon. The present-day old concourse beyond the terminal platforms was once the actual station, with the station throat immediately beyond. Down the centre line of the old train hall, at least until the mid 1860s, was the platform, which had provided the Spanisch Brödli Bahn's city terminus. In the 1920s the now-familiar process of lowering some approach tracks began with the lines for Thalwil and beyond. The main station underwent major rebuilding in 1936. Not everything went to plan and a proposal in 1949 to build an underground railway network totalling some 70 miles was rejected.

Within the city, the first horse-drawn tramway (standard gauge) opened on 5th September 1882. This plied the 2.7 miles from Seefeld to Paradeplatz. Zürich's first electric tramway (metre gauge) covered 2.9 miles between Bellevue and Burgweis via Kreuzplatz and opened in 1894. Perhaps not surprisingly, this was operated by the Elektrische Strassenbahn Zürich whose evolving network was 'municipalised' in 1896 (apparently the first such in Europe). The last horse tram ran in 1900, and at intervals up to 1931 the Städtischen Strassenbahn Zürich (StStZ but known as the VBZ from 1950), acquired the various other tramway undertakings in the city.

Zürich's first city bus service began on 8 August 1927 and ran between Utobrücke and Rigiplatz via Schmiede Wiedikon, Albisriederplatz and Nordbrücke. The first suburban bus route plied between Schlieren and Dietikon from 1931. The StStZ made Zürich the third Swiss city to run trolleybuses when, on 27th May 1939, it began a trolley line between Bezirksgebäude and Bucheggplatz, a journey of 2.1 miles. The trolleybus was seen as a means of complementing the

**TOP:** The SZU used to have its own terminus at Zürich Selna, at the side of which railcar no. 71 was recorded in 1978.

**MIDDLE:** Most main line local services were loco-hauled; the Re4/41s were often used on this work. Preserved No. 10001 in Zürich HB in 2004.

**BOTTOM:** An early attempt at a specialist EMU for the Zürich suburban network was the RABDe12/12 (later class 510) of 1965. No. 1108 was recorded at Rapperswil in 1978.

city's tram network, rather than replacing it. Indeed, early routes replaced motor bus operations before tram route 1 became trolleybus route 31 in the mid fifties. Subsequently Zürich has remained faithful to trams. At the beginning of the 1970s it had 75.5 miles of tramway on 15 routes and only 16.4 miles of trolleybus operation on four routes. The 23 city bus routes totalled 67 miles with 13 suburban





**TOP:** The provision of high capacity EMUs for regular-interval suburban work began in earnest with the 450s. No. 450040 in Zürich HB in 2002 before suburban services were put underground.

**MIDDLE:** By the end of the 1960s a sizeable proportion of Zurich's tram services were still run by Be4/4s dating from the 40s/early 50s. No. 1538 was recorded on line 4 in 1976.

**BOTTOM:** Trolleybus No. 28 on line 31 in 2007; this route had been provided at the expense of tram route 1.

ones adding a further 56 miles.

Congestion continued to escalate after the 1949 set-back. Inevitably there were different schools of thought about how the problem should be dealt with. The car lobby naturally wanted trams and the like removed. Tram-subways were proposed for the city centre in 1962 but this idea also failed to get popular support. In the mid sixties a concerted effort was made to devise a general traffic plan in association with other land uses – akin to similar comprehensive planning processes in the UK. In Zürich it was realised that a high-level co-ordinated approach was required, effectively “to knock heads together” for the common good. Transport providers were included, along with the Canton and the various “Gemeinde” (local councils). By the end of the 1960s the wish-list included:

- A motorway ring road, some 5-8 miles from the city centre;
- Three radial motorways meeting near Zürich HB. Tunnelled routes would be best environmentally, but the cost would be huge and it was realised that improvements to public transport would still be needed even if the motorways were provided;
- Completion of a programme begun in 1963 to convert all VBZ's services to one-man (now one-person) operation based on pre-purchase of tickets from road-side machines;
- Subsidies paid to VBZ to compensate for deliberately low fares designed to maximise use of public transport;
- Investment in new trams (effectively the “Tram 2000s”);
- Provision of an underground through station beneath Zürich HB to permit cross-city suburban services and free-up track capacity in the “old” station for long-distance services;
- Upgrade suburban services to a proper regular interval pattern;
- Separate as much freight and passenger traffic as possible through provision of new freight facilities;
- A new rail route and underground station to serve Zürich Airport;
- An “underground rail system for Zürich”. Actually what was proposed was a new cross-city line from the Airport to Dietikon with a branch to Schwamendingen (between Oerlikon and Wallisellen). 46% of the 16.3 mile line would be on the surface or in open cuttings.

The reader will be able to judge how much of this has been achieved. 