



SHOULD PLANNERS UNDER-PROVIDE CAR PARKING ?

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SUMMARY: Planners enforce the minimum provision of car parking in new developments believing they are involved in city-building. Once the need for parking is balanced against its negative impacts, enforcement of minimum standards, leading to over-provision, could be seen as an act of city destruction.

Car parking can be destructive because it: promotes car use; creates ugly, anti-social spaces; creates barriers to pedestrians and cyclists; increases the extent of paved area; removes green spaces; and reduces the viability of business and affordability of housing.

In the interests of stemming these destructive impacts, planners should consider: preventing the spread of car dependent suburbs and providing alternatives to the car; encouraging a positive attitude to alternatives to the car; enforcing flexible, not minimum, parking rates; cessation of collection of parking contributions; and taxing of parking and redirection of funds to alternative modes and to streetscape improvements.

Before action of this kind can be taken, a number of barriers must be overcome. These include: cultural momentum; political perceptions; institutional vested interests; commercial vested interests; management barriers; and design perceptions.

Restriction of parking must become part of the changing agenda for planning concerned with the creation of livable, ecologically sustainable and economically viable cities.

WHY PARKING CAN BE DESTRUCTIVE

Promotion of car use

A motorist's decision to drive is influenced by the availability of parking at the destination and availability of alternative transport modes. Restriction of parking, in concert with promotion of other modes, will sway a potential motorist away from

using the car in favour of alternatives. This is particularly appropriate in higher density areas well-served by public transport where impacts of car use are high and alternatives to the car are available. Restriction of parking is a form of demand management that can reduce car use and reduce its inherent negative impacts across the city.

Creation of ugly, anti-social spaces

One of the most attractive features of a city is its intense human activity, which brings many benefits. Examples of these benefits are: a strong sense of community, visually interesting streetscapes, surveillance of streets into the night from houses and shops, the opportunity to observe, interact with and learn from others and the convenience of having many services close at hand.

Wherever buildings that once accommodated human activity are replaced by car parks, the intensity of human activity is reduced and its associated benefits lost. Neighbourhoods fragmented by car parks begin to lose their vitality and become less secure as there are fewer eyes on the streets. Street-level car parks beneath residential buildings can diminish the visual and heritage value of streetscapes. Car parks can become venues for anti-social activities like rubbish dumping and car theft. The typical response to the night-time security problem, the installation of floodlights, is visually intrusive and further contributes to the degradation of the neighbourhood.

Creation of barriers to pedestrians and cyclists

Every facility designed to improve access by motorists diminishes access by pedestrians and cyclists. Driveways into car parks, and car parks themselves, create barriers to the free movement of pedestrians and cyclists. This increases the stress and danger associated with walking and cycling.

A vicious cycle can be created where people choose to drive because roads offer the most direct route and cars offer protection from the stresses and dangers of walking and cycling. Parents who once allowed their children to walk or ride to school find themselves chauffeuring their children about in the car. The streets become less secure as pedestrian activity diminishes and car use increases, further necessitating use of the car as a protective device.

Increase in extent of paved area

As front and back yards are sealed to make way for car parking, the extent of paved area of the city increases. Rainwater that once percolated through the soil now runs into stormwater channels. Flooding and erosion problems are exacerbated.

Water pollution problems are also exacerbated. Atmospheric pollutants contained in the rainwater (largely derived from motor vehicle emissions) and oil and other pollutants on the surface of the car park are discharged into streams instead of being partially filtered by the soil. Streams, rivers, estuaries and oceans are further polluted.

Removal of green space

Insertion of on-site parking into established urban areas results in the piecemeal conversion of private gardens into paved parking areas. Construction of community parking areas consumes land that could be devoted to public parkland. Loss of private and public parkland diminishes residential amenity.

Construction of parking areas in outer urban and fringe areas often involves the clearing of valuable urban bushland. Alternatively, it involves the loss of open space that could be devoted to the creation of urban bushland. This further diminishes residential amenity and contributes to the loss of native flora and fauna.

Reduction of viability of business and affordability of housing

The cost of providing parking on-site inevitably adds to the cost of setting up a business or constructing housing. These added costs are passed onto business customers and homebuyers. The added cost increment can determine whether or not a business is viable, or whether or not housing is affordable to low and middle income earners.

Whilst many businesses depend on the availability of parking, some do not. The viability of the latter category of businesses may be jeopardised by the need to pay for unnecessary parking. Such businesses (e.g. low-price cafes) may serve a valuable community function, so should be encouraged. Similarly, the affordability of housing is diminished by the provision of any unnecessary on-site parking. This is particularly the case in inner-city areas within reach of public transport, where the demand for parking is likely to be low and its provision costly due to the need for excavation.

WHAT PLANNERS CAN DO

Prevent the spread of car dependent suburbs and provide alternatives to the car

Demand for parking will naturally be greatest in suburbs without any public transport where there is no way to reach a destination without a car. Planners should discourage the spread of car dependent suburbs if car use, and its associated need for parking, is to be kept under control. Construction of large shopping malls, accessible only by car, should also be discouraged.

New suburbs must be serviced with alternatives to the car. At the very least, this means a reasonable bus connection to the nearest railway station and provision for cyclists. Car use and demand for parking in older suburbs having access to public transport can be further reduced by improving existing public transport services.

Encourage a positive attitude to alternatives to the car

The status attached to car ownership and consequent lack of status attached to alternative modes makes it all the more difficult for people to give up their cars or leave them at home more often. Governments and other organisations can help reverse this trend through education campaigns. The NRMA, for example, is currently encouraging people to walk or cycle for shorter journeys.

Discouragement of car use must be backed by a consequent encouragement of alternative modes. Whilst education plays an important role here, by far the biggest gains can be made by actually providing facilities for these alternatives in the first place.

Enforce flexible parking rates

Currently most councils enforce minimum parking rates based on state standards. State standards are based on estimates of peak parking demand for a variety of land uses. Councils have generally adopted these minimum rates in their parking codes without considering whether minimum rates are in fact desirable. Once the negative impacts of car parking are considered and the need to limit parking established, it is apparent that parking rates should be flexible.

In setting parking standards, planners should weigh state standards and the developer's demands to provide on-site parking against:

- the need to limit parking due to the cumulative negative impacts - environmental, social and economic impacts as outlined above;
- the degree to which supply induces demand - as mentioned above, the availability of parking at the destination influences the decision whether to drive or take an alternative mode;
- the availability of alternative modes - on-site parking should be severely restricted or even banned in areas well served by public transport, and less restricted away from public transport; and
- the efficiency gains in providing for something less than peak demand - an empty car park is a waste of resources.

Flexible parking standards would allow for appropriate levels of provision based on a hierarchy of provision rates rather than a blanket standard across the city. It would follow that parking provision standards would be lowest inner areas well-served by public transport, moderate in middle ring suburbs with reasonable access and highest in the outer car-dependent suburbs.

Cease collecting parking contributions

It may be appropriate in areas well served by public transport that collection of contributions for non-provision of on-site parking be deleted from plans made under Section 94 of the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act. This would signal to developers that councils wish to discourage on-site parking in these areas. It also signals a commitment to encouraging certain small business by reducing establishment costs, and a commitment to encouraging the provision of affordable housing in some areas.

Existing parking contributions could be redirected to fund improvements to street design, public transport, walking and cycling. This could be justified according to Section 94 as it may be argued that new development, in attracting additional customers or residents, creates the need for more of these facilities, particularly in areas well-served by public transport.

Tax parking and direct funds to alternative modes

In inner areas well served by public transport, car use could be further discouraged and alternative transport encouraged by the imposition of a tax on each on-site space provided. Funds could be directed into improvements to public transport, walking and cycling, further reducing the need for parking.

Similarly, a tax could also be levied for use of street space for parking and the funds directed toward improving public transport, walking and cycling. It could also be used to fund streetscape improvements that allow an increase in street parking through conversion of parallel to angle parking. Again, it would be appropriate to apply the tax to inner-city areas well served by public transport.

BARRIERS TO CHANGE AND SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR OVERCOMING THEM

Cultural momentum

The 'great Australian dream' of suburban home, family and car now appears to be ecologically unsustainable and financially unaffordable to many in Sydney. However, car ownership is still viewed as typically Australian and those without cars are seen to be low status citizens. Public transport users are often treated poorly by providers and pedestrians and cyclists intimidated by motorists. An attitude shift toward a more positive view of non-car travel is needed if car use and demand for parking is to be controlled.

A motorists' ability to feel empathy with those without access to a car may be hampered by a lack of direct experience of the problems associated with non-car travel. Many planners and decision-makers influencing urban change are themselves motorists, commuting to and from work in cars provided by their organisations. Some key urban planning decisions are thus likely be made without empathy to the plight of non car users.

Political perceptions

Councils, the main managers of parking, are often compelled to provide for peak parking demand on-site to ensure that the community surrounding a new development does not react against parking spilling over into surrounding streets. The community's reaction may be justified as the impact of cars cruising the streets for a parking space can severely diminish residential amenity. Councils and state governments are also reluctant to impose additional taxes (e.g. taxes on street parking) from fear of a political backlash.

Whilst the continual provision of on-site parking may appear to be the solution on a site-by-site basis, it only serves to create a major cumulative impact from a multitude of car parks and entrenches the larger problem of car dependency.

In order to reduce the political backlash against the limitation of on-site parking and the taxing of street parking, Councils, in league with other levels of government, need to inform the community of the arguments in favour of restricting parking as a means of improving the environment and reducing car dependency. Communities generally understand the problems but need the support of governments to implement solutions. Once communities understand their roles in solving city-wide problems, they are likely to accept the need to restrict parking.

Institutional vested interests

It is difficult to alter the attitudes and practices of government and other institutions that have for some 50 years served the interests of car ownership. They will naturally view arguments for reducing car use through restricting parking as a threat to their existence.

A change in the policy direction of these institutions need not involve their disappearance. The change can be made from within. Planners who once enforced minimum parking requirements can readily enforce flexible requirements given a recognition of the need to do so.

Commercial vested interests

Chambers of commerce may resist on-site parking restrictions through a perception that clientele will be lost. Restriction of parking, in concert with improved access by other modes, can increase clientele as more customers can be brought into a commercial area. Customers will also be attracted to a shopping environment that has been improved by the absence of car parks and heavy traffic.

The housing industry may also resist parking restrictions from a perception that new medium density housing will not be saleable without a plentiful supply of on-site parking. Flexible parking standards should benefit developers as they will be able to tailor parking supply more closely to demand. With lower levels of parking, developers will be able to offer more attractive developments as open space can be devoted to gardens instead of parking. Development costs can also be reduced without the need for costly excavation for underground parking.

Management barriers

A major barrier to implementing parking restrictions in concert with improvements to alternative transport modes is the present division of responsibilities for funding and management of parking, streetscape improvements and public transport between the three tiers of government and between state agencies.

For example, redirection of existing car parking contributions to fund public transport improvements would involve a transfer between local and state government. Collection of street parking taxes would need to be carried out by state government at the car registration stage and be transferred either to a different state agency for public transport improvement, or to local government for streetscape improvement.

New financial management linkages between the three tiers of government and between state agencies are thus required in order to realise the benefits of parking restrictions.

Design perceptions

Planners have tended to view roadways as spaces for the passage of motor vehicles. This view needs to be widened to consider streets as spaces serving a multitude of important functions. Some of these functions are: the passage of motor vehicles, bicycles and pedestrians, the parking of motor vehicles, neighbourhood meeting space, children's play space and green space. With careful design, many of these functions can be accommodated with little loss of convenience for motorists.

In some instances, such design can increase the provision of street parking to partially compensate for the limitation of on-site parking. Using funds collected from street parking taxes, Councils could simultaneously improve streetscapes whilst providing additional street parking through replacement of parallel parking with angle parking.

RECENT PARKING POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS IN BRITAIN

The need for flexible parking standards is recognised overseas. For example, the British Department of Transport's *Draft Planning Policy Guideline No.6 on Town Centres and Retail Development, July 1995*, recommends that local councils:

- adopt reduced requirements for parking for locations with good access to other means of travel than the private car;
- be flexible in the requirements for off-street residential parking space and reduce or waive them where necessary in order to provide quality and affordable high density development in areas of good access to other means of travel;
- ensure parking requirements in general are kept to the operational minimum;
- not require developers to provide more spaces than they themselves wish unless there are significant road safety or traffic management implications;
- ensure that parking provision at peripheral office, retail and similar developments is not set at high levels which would have the effect of significantly disadvantaging more central areas;
- consider the overall availability of parking in the central area, on and off-street, public and private; and
- achieve better use of existing car parking, by adopting policies which favour short-term parking for visitors to the town centre, such as shoppers, at the expense of long-term parking for commuters.

REFERENCES

Ideas and inspiration for this paper are mainly derived from development control work experience, discussions, observations and the following texts:

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