Putting Parking in Its Place

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A classic science fiction story tells of the discovery of a planet on which an admirable but somewhat primitive life form has evolved.

Industrious and intelligent, protect-ed by strong glossy carapaces, these beings spend most of their time moving about on well-defined paths. At night many rest in handsome, elabo-rate domiciles. They vary tremendously in size, color, shape and mode of locomotion, but without exception all share the same affliction. They are infested by small, soft parasites that swarm nauseatingly about whenever the noble creatures come to rest.

The explorers who discover the planet have a policy of not intervening in other creatures' affairs, but these parasites are so pervasive and awful an exception seems justified. They concoct a spray that kills the parasites but not the hosts. But as the parasites die the great creatures become inert.

This planet, of course, is not some sphere way out deep in space. It is Earth. The splendid life form is the automobile and the parasite is none other than ourselves.

The point is that automobiles are so ubiquitous and have had such a profound effect on our cities and landscape that an intelligent alien being might well assume they are the domi-nant inhabitants of the planet.

It’s not just a matter of the roads we have built. It’s not just a matter of con-stant traffic. Most automobiles spend most of their time at rest, parked somewhere. Outside of dense, urban areas, parking is the single most salient landscape feature wherever groups of people congregate.

Parking, like any important facet of our life, has long been standardized, and in several ways.

There are pragmatic parking stan-dards, which belong to the world of the traffic engineer and parking con-sultant. These involve someone’s interpretation of the physical capabilities of cars and drivers. They have to do with the widths of parking spaces and aisles in parking lots, maximum slopes on ramps and the radii of turns. They tend to be perpetually out of date as cars become smaller and more agile.

There are political parking stan-dards, which are driven by local atti-tudes toward growth, traffic congestion and availability or desirabil-ity of on-street parking. They con-cern the ratio of parking to project size, who can park where and the visu-al appearance of parking areas.

There are economic parking stan-dards, which are rules of thumb based on the cost of land versus the cost of structures. When land values reach a certain point, surface parking is more expensive than structure parking.

When land values reach another point, crazy mechanized solutions such as structures with vertically moving slots become cost effective. These standards are not codified, not mandated by any code or group. They’re just what you do if you read the bottom line.

Finally, there are market standards, which are based on the innocent sounding premise of giving people what they want. Sadly, like wishes granted by a genie, they produce envi-ronments nobody wants. Market stan-dards are neither official nor codified, but they are an integral part of devel-opers’ and marketing consultants’ lore and they are believed in very deeply.

In contemporary residential develop-ments—from large, expensive, detached houses to humble two-bed-room starter condominiums—the fol-lowig standards are typical:

“Drive-in-the-Kitchen. The very best thing is to be able to unload your groceries and your family inside the house, at the most relevant room.”
garage, the more rich and powerful you appear.
This is all very well for your own
house. But this emphsisis on private
convenience has produced streets that
are nothing more than service drives
and streetscapes whose most promi-
nent feature is garage doors. Entrances
for people are secondary, minimal,
uncelebrated and often unobtrusive.
The standards that produced and
preserve this situation evolved slowly
out of other standards connected to
earlier forms of convenience. When
something new, like the automobile, is
introduced, it tends to offer new func-
tionaliry within old forms. Standards
that are applied to it tend to be those
that were applied to its predecessors.
Keeping a carriage, the automo-
bile’s predecessor was costly and com-
plicated. One needed stables, a car-
rriage house and special stuff. Stables
were malodorous and tended to be
located close enough for convenience
but far enough away that smells did
not reach the house.
When cars first appeared, they
were garaged, naturally enough, in
carriage houses, barns, or stables. As
they became more popular and less of
a rich man’s toy, ordinary houses were
adapted to accommodate them. This
usually meant clearing out the shed in
the back or constructing a free-standing
garage. These structures had some of
the properties of stables and car-
rriage houses. Charming they might be,
but they were definitely secondary to
the house and usually located as far
away from it as possible.
The pattern of the free-standing
garage in a rear corner of the lot was
wonderful and long lived. It produced
the kind of suburb that I and most
people of my generation think of as
archetypal. Rows of big trees meet
overhead to form a tunnel. Front
lawns are broad and carefully land-
New suburban parking:
the street as service drive.

New suburban parking:
A Pasadena "six pack."

In Pasadena, all parking must be built on the rear 60 percent of the lot or underground. Facades and gardens face the street.

scaped. Porches and gracious entries face the street, even on the humblest houses, and driveways slip unobtrusively up the side of the lot. In this world, pedestrians feel comfortable.

But cars are not carriages. Unlike horses, they don’t require daily care, don’t smell (that much) and aren’t unsanitary to have in the house. They do emit poisonous gases but that, in and of itself, is no reason to isolate them in the farthest corner of the lot.

Furthermore, it is cheaper to build a garage as part of a house than to build it free-standing. Putting it directly on the street saves paving costs and makes the back yard bigger, which is important when rising land costs dictate smaller lots. Besides, with an automatic garage door opener and a door directly into the house, you hardly have to go outside at all. The full possibilities of automotive convenience are at last being realized. The only thing lost is the quality of the street.

There are solutions. Sadly enough for this over-regulated world, they involve more standards. But the standards can really be quite simple. Our office has written zoning ordinances and design guidelines for areas where new construction threatens to ruin established neighborhoods and for areas which are all new Planned Unit Developments. The approach to each is necessarily different.

In traditional neighborhoods, prevailing parking patterns can be analyzed and rules written so that new construction is consistent with traditional norms. In Pasadena, where we worked with Christopher Alexander and Phoebe Wall to write a new zoning ordinance, parking at the rear of the lot in mews-like garage structures was the standard pattern for multi-family dwellings. This pattern allowed landscaped interior courtyards and dignified street elevations.
Citizens, however, were concerned that a new pattern, known as the six-pack, threatened to change the nature of these multi-family neighborhoods. The six-pack has many flaws. One is how it parks its cars—behind a row of double garage doors (usually six, hence the six pack) along a 24-foot-wide asphalt drive sunk five feet below grade and running the depth of the lot. The units are above the garages. Since the units face the side property lines, street facades are often blank.

Six packs can no longer be built in Pasadena, largely because of some simple new parking rules. All parking in new construction must be either in the rear 40 percent of the lot (based on the traditional pattern) or completely underground (more and more cost effective as land prices escalate).

In new PUDs, lots tend to be shallow even in low-density developments. Parking in the rear is not a viable option. Parking in the front, however, does not mean that the garage doors must necessarily be the most prominent feature of a residence.

One factor is simple placement relative to the street. If garage doors are the closest thing to the street, they will dominate it. If a living space or some element, such as an entrance, is the closest thing to the street, garage doors cease to dominate, or at least their dominance is somewhat more benign. Our design guidelines for San Jose contain specific rules based on this principle. Now that the guidelines have been in place for several years, new development seems to be able to meet market-driven standards and to produce streets that speak of people as well as cars.

A word of caution: Standards are tricky things. I dislike them and would like to see them kept to a minimum. They can discriminate against the poor, and they can discriminate against creative and innovative design.

The solutions I have described so far are aimed at reducing the visual impact of parking. In our own work in San Francisco, some of our most successful parking solutions do the opposite: Cars are parked from exaggerated and oversized entrances into mid-block open space.

True, these openings also accommodate people. True, they provide an amenity to the public in the glimpses they afford of interior gardens. True, one can argue the parking entrance has been turned into Something Else. However, it is still true that parking dominates these facades. I’d hate to see these designs ruled out.