

## Rethinking Parking

Consider great cities like San Francisco, Chicago and New York, and great, smaller downtowns like Santa Monica and Pasadena. These are all fun and interesting places because there are lots of people to watch and places to go. What they don't have is something many think of as the hallmark of good planning - tons of free parking. Just coincidence? We don't think so.

Many people in Los Angeles would be happy to see their neighborhoods have the character and vitality of the Santa Monica Promenade or Old Town Pasadena. If we want to create this kind of vibrant district, we need a parking approach to support that vision.



Old Town Pasadena

### Where's the parking?

When you go to Old Town Pasadena you see lots of people and some cars. Most drivers don't find parking in front or back of each store or restaurant where it is only available while visiting that business. Instead, they find parking in multi-level structures located off the main streets. They are able to park once, then walk to the movie theater, restaurant, or shops without having to move

their cars. The parking in Old Town is "shared parking."

### How is this different from standard parking rules?

When someone opens a business, the city almost always makes them put all the parking for that business' patrons on the same lot as the building. This is done to prevent "spill over parking" into the neighborhood. The parking becomes private and can only be used while patronizing that business.

### Is parking free?

No. Just like lunch, parking is never really free. The question is who is paying for it. Is it the person parking the car? Or is it everyone, even people who don't drive, who are paying higher prices because the costs of building and maintaining parking are folded into the business' overhead?

In Old Town, the people who park are the people who pay. The parking on the street is metered and the garages charge, even in the evenings and on weekends when Old Town is really hopping. The \$5.4 million/year collected from the parking meters in Old Town Pasadena stays in the community - it is spent on keeping Old Town clean, keeping the sidewalks in good repair, planting, caring for street trees, etc.

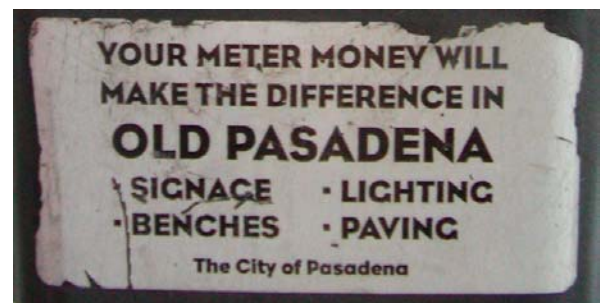


Image courtesy of Patrick Siegman

### **How much parking is enough?**

Although planners have long official looking lists of parking requirements for funeral homes to tennis courts, these numbers are complete fabrications. It's one of the dirty little secrets of the planning world. But since we have gotten into a situation where most parking is free, we've put planners in a tough spot --we ask them to calculate the demand for something that is free. While the demand for free parking is nearly unlimited, most of us require very little parking at the rate of say \$5/hour or \$25/day.

One approach to figuring out how much parking is enough is to vary the parking price so that most parking spaces are full but there is some turnover. This is done by raising the price of parking, including meters on the street, until some of the spaces are vacant. People who are willing to pay the higher price will be able to find parking without spending a lot of time cruising. People who aren't willing to pay find another way --walking, taking the bus or taxi, or getting dropped off, parking a couple of blocks away. In all the examples so far -- Santa Monica, Old Town Pasadena, and San Francisco -- plenty of people come, despite the cost of parking.



### **How does the amount of parking affect the feel of a place?**

Think about what it feels like to stand on the street facing: a shopping mall with a sea of cars and few people in sight; a strip mall with cars parked between the street and the

stores; a fast-food restaurant with a drive through lane. Compare those car-oriented places with Old Town Pasadena with lots of people on the sidewalks and most of the cars tucked away; UCLA and USC where most of the campuses are off-limits to cars; and downtown San Francisco where parking is tough to find but people abound.

### **A Symphony for the Cars**

UCLA Prof. Don Shoup tells a tale of two cities with radically different parking policies - San Francisco and Los Angeles. For years San Francisco has limited the amount of new parking it allows downtown in an effort to encourage people to use transit and to prevent gridlock in the streets. San Francisco has a bustling downtown and vibrant neighborhood shopping districts. On the other hand, downtown Los Angeles is just beginning to show new signs of life after a 15 year campaign to get people to live, work, and play downtown. Los Angeles assumes nearly everyone will drive and so requires lots of new parking.

Both cities have downtown symphony halls near their civic centers with subway stops. San Francisco's 2,700-seat Davies Symphony Hall was built in 1980 without a parking garage. In contrast, Los Angeles' 2,265-seat Disney Hall has 2,188 parking spaces -- a whopping 96% of concert goers can drive alone and park right at the concert hall. Los Angeles built 50 times more parking spaces than San Francisco would allow. At \$50,000/parking space, the 6-level subterranean garage cost an estimated \$110 million.

As if the financial cost of Los Angeles' huge garage is not bad enough, the impact on the surrounding streets is arguably worse. The streets around San Francisco's Davies Hall are vibrant and full of people walking before and after concerts. The sidewalks outside Disney Hall are empty even after a concert. Over 130 events are held at Disney Hall each year, but few people attending those events venture

beyond Disney Hall itself and the parking garage. Despite the huge expense and great architecture, Disney Hall's impact on making downtown a place with a vibrant street life, like San Francisco, may actually be negative because of the excessive amount of parking.



### **What are the unintended consequences of requiring on-site parking?**

There are at least three unintended consequences to requiring on-site parking in downtowns and neighborhood shopping districts. First, traffic increases as people have to move their cars from one establishment to the next.

Second, on-site parking rules prevent new businesses from opening in older buildings that don't already have parking. Cities typically want restaurants to have a lot of parking and buildings built in the 1920s or earlier are unlikely to have any parking. Too often, the building sits empty, and both vitality and tax revenue are lost.

Third, parking lots sit empty when businesses are closed, deadening the area. Think of people going to the theater in the evening not being allowed to park at the roped-off empty bank parking lot next door. By contrast, in Old Town Pasadena the parking that bank patrons need in the day is available to movie-goers in the evening.

### **But most people get around by driving. If we reduce parking will it create a problem?**

Contrary to popular opinion, on average Angelenos have only 1.4 cars per family – far below the two- or three-car family as our image suggests. It's clear that lots of people are getting around by walking, bicycling and taking the bus or train. If we reduce parking while increasing choices for getting around we can avoid many problems.



Broadway in downtown Los Angeles

### **How can parking policies support a vision for a vibrant, walkable area?**

A parking policy that supports the vision for a walkable, safe, vibrant, and fun district would encourage people to park once and walk; encourage shared parking; manage all on-street parking; let people who park pay the full cost of that parking; and use parking revenues to pay for street trees, sidewalks, trash pick up and upkeep in the immediate area. Conversely, parking policies will undermine the vision for a walkable area if they: allow many surface parking lots which are decidedly unvibrant; require each building to provide parking on-site which is restricted to current customers; or create parking for more cars than the streets are capable of handling.