

“We Don’t Have Enough Parking”

by Roberta Brandes Gratz

Two issues are immediately raised in every downtown I visit wrestling with revitalization issues. “We don’t have enough parking” comes forth like the chorus in the opening of a Greek play. “What we need is The Gap” is the next most common refrain in this mall-envy era.

These assumptions are so pervasive that they can be roadblocks to confronting more substantive issues of downtown rejuvenation. They can also interfere with thinking about the genuinely, innovative solutions necessary to either jumpstart downtown revitalization or give a boost to an ongoing rebirth momentum.

Amazingly, in many of the downtowns where these assumptions prevail, the actual number of existing parking spaces and how well they are used is often unknown. Worse, downtown merchants and their employees often park in front of their stores or in other choice parking spaces and then complain they lose business because parking space is insufficient. The least-

desirable, often-inconvenient spaces are left for the customers everyone pines for.

The more fundamental question is rarely asked: *What do we need to do to make downtown worth coming to?* When a downtown’s appeal is strong, people find a way to come. That leads to “the Gap” issue which will be covered in Part II of this article in the Winter PCJ.

So much about parking is psychological. Isn’t it interesting the long distance – often the equivalent of several blocks – people will walk across a mall parking lot to get to a destination. Yet in downtowns they want to be able to park at their destination’s front door.

Experts say plenty of downtown parking exists, if you are willing to pay or walk – two activities that seem to be an anathema to many Americans. As Marie Witmer, editor of *Parking Professional*, told *Wall Street Journal* reporter, Heidi Evans, a few years ago: “People want to park within 17 feet of their destination and are frequently unwilling to either pay for the privilege or use a free, vacant space several blocks away. It’s not that there is a shortage of spaces, just a shortage of free spaces where people want them to be.”



Some of these buildings along Catskill’s main street will be demolished for parking.

The obsessive desire for adjacent parking results in tragic consequences in too many downtowns. In Catskill, New York, for example, a new county office building is scheduled to be built on Main Street, an important activity-generating use to bring downtown. Catskill is an historic 19th century Hudson River town about two hours north of New York City and 40 minutes from the state capital in Albany. Catskill was designated a National Landmark District in 1982. This is one of many down-at-the-heels towns with a partially torn but still intact downtown core surrounded by compact, walkable neighborhoods with a great variety of

housing, from 19th century mansions to small-scale multi-family houses. Evidence of an organic rejuvenation process is already visible.

An early approved plan for the new county office building required demolition of three existing buildings with most parking scattered within a three to four minute walk. But then in order to add 17 parking spaces adjacent to the new county building, an additional ten historic buildings (seven listed as contributing structures to Catskill’s national register historic district) were scheduled for demolition. What makes this untenable is that ample parking spaces exist in both a public parking site two blocks away and on the street.¹

In St. Louis, the same kind of situation prevails. The state Court of Appeals is seeking to move into the glorious Old Post Office Building, slated to be renovated. Across the street from the Old Post Office Building is the historic Century Building, one of

downtown St. Louis’ last 19th century office blocks – a building which developers have considered for renovation as apartments with street level retail. But here’s the catch. The judges are demanding that this building be torn down and a 1,050 space parking garage be built in its place, so they can have parking directly across the street.

¹ The Preservation League of New York and Scenic Hudson, Inc., have supported a group of citizens in seeking to block demolition of these structures. While the outcome is still uncertain (as this issue of the PCJ went to press), compromise efforts are being tried, including resurrecting an earlier plan that had required less demolition.



St. Louis citizens protesting the planned demolition of the historic Century Building (right).

Not surprisingly, given the vast amount of underutilized space in downtown St. Louis, just a short distance from the Old Post Office Building is a large parcel currently used as a surface parking lot. This could provide a perfectly good site for a parking garage. But alas, it is not directly across the street from the Old Post Office Building. Anxious for the Old Post Office Building project to proceed, the Mayor and Board of Aldermen have supported the demolition of the Century Building.²

What adds to the questionable nature of the demolition plan is that the renovation proposal for the marble-clad Century Building included 700 parking spaces which would be directly across the street from the court's new home. This kind of redevelopment would do more for downtown St. Louis than yet another parking-only structure. St. Louis is a city that has already torn down so much over time and built so many enormous parking garages that it is unimaginable that this pattern could be repeated again and again. This pattern just erodes the urban fabric more and more.

What is often overlooked is the fact that many downtowns have more space devoted to parking than to buildings in active use. As much as half of some downtowns is given over to parking. Yet the more space dedicated to parking, the less "place" exists, and the fewer buildings there can be containing economic uses worth coming downtown for. As Denver Mayor Wellington Webb has observed, "Once a downtown is more

² The St. Louis Board of Aldermen voted in March to allow the demolition. But a state board has yet to approve a bond issue and other aid necessary for the proposed demolition/new garage plan.



than one-third parking lots, it loses its character and sense of place."³

The continuous ripping apart of the already torn urban fabric in downtowns of all sizes continues in the name of the need for more parking. Each case diminishes the potential of increased and improved downtown life.

Plenty of opportunities exist to improve parking in downtowns. Traffic engineers and traffic management policies, however, are often the biggest impediment to implementing proven solutions that enhance the appeal of downtown while providing enough space for parking. Too many downtown main streets are treated as traffic thoroughfares for vehicles moving *through* town, not for inviting drivers *into* town to stay for awhile.

For decades, everything has been done to speed cars through. First and foremost, that thinking must be reversed. The priority must be to accommodate the pedestrian, not the passing car. Traffic commissioners, for example, often resist curbside parking that adds so many spaces without losing economically pro-

³ "What Cities Can Do: Revitalizing Denver's Downtown," by Wellington E. Webb, *The Brookings Review*, Summer 2000

ductive buildings to construction of expensive parking garages or open lots.

Traffic calming techniques have become increasingly well-known in recent years and many of them assist in solving parking problems. Angled parking, for example, slows traffic, creates even more spaces than curbside parallel spaces, pro-

vides more pedestrian comfort as a buffer between sidewalk and vehicles, and even allows for sidewalk projections for tree plantings, benches or tables, and chairs.



Holland, Michigan. Almost everything is done right here, including angled parking and a wide tree-lined sidewalk.

One of the most pleasant and economically successful downtown main streets is in Holland, Michigan. Almost everything is done right here, including the emphasis on locally-owned businesses. ... an important feature we'll get back to in Part II of the article this Winter. Sidewalks are sufficiently wide. Corners neck out to make pedestrian crossing more comfortable. No curbcuts or setback drive-in businesses interfere with the continuous street-wall of buildings. Extra parking can be found behind the main street stores. Store windows capture the interest of the passerby and don't have dark glass or closed shades.

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Even a charming small park fills a corner site. This is a street that makes the shopper, visitor, or stroller of any age feel more important than the passing car.

Holland, Michigan, is not unique. Towns and small cities across the country – from Corning, New York, and Great Barrington, Massachusetts to Mansfield, Ohio – have used similar features to



Downtown Housing

Upper floors of downtown buildings are the most readily available and underused existing resource for increased residential opportunities, and are the quickest and easiest way to stimulate new residential spaces. It should be easy but isn't. Too many institutional lenders will not finance a “mixed-use” project (retail on ground floor, residence above), let alone one that is in a downtown. These impediments need to be overcome. Many downtown zoning codes and master plans explicitly rule out the creation of upstairs residential uses, even though this was one of the pillars of downtown strength when downtowns were still strong. Building and fire codes, as well, often make conversions difficult with provisions unnecessarily restrictive and expensive. Revival of downtown living is key today to downtown rejuvenation. Clearly, the current market reveals a strong demand for downtown residential opportunities. Live/work spaces are among the most sought after downtown spaces.

New construction – mid-rise, multi-family, rental and/or condo – takes longer than conversions and should be encouraged, as well. However, any new residential construction should not be gated or encircled by walls to look like a fortress. In fact, new residential buildings should have prominent and friendly street level entrances. The car entry for underground parking should not be on a primary street. Where possible, at least the corner store should be included in any new residential building. The more ground floor retail or professional offices, the better.

make their downtowns appealing, economically successful, and enriched by the predominance of local businesses.

“People first” infrastructure essentials go a long way towards solving parking problems. With that in mind, here are a few “people first” rules:

1. *Wherever possible, restore or repair the downtown street grid.* Almost every downtown had a grid in its heyday and before so many streets were closed, built over, erased for superblocks, or converted into highways. A grid provides more opportunity for economically-productive buildings and pedestrian activity, in other words, street life. On-street parking is increased. And, as traffic engineer Walter Kulash has shown, even traffic can be managed better with a traditional grid.⁴

2. *Undo one-way traffic, as much as possible.* Two-way traffic makes getting around in town easier. Yes, traffic is sometimes slowed. But this can be a benefit for downtown merchants. Slower, two-way traffic gives motorists a chance to notice the local businesses they are passing. Conversion to a two-way system also provides easier access to destinations for drivers, cyclists, and delivery vehicles – and creates a more comfortable pedestrian environment. All this works to promote a more vibrant downtown district.⁵

3. *Banish suburban, especially mall, parking standards from downtown.* Mall parking facilities are built to accommodate the needs of a once-a-year

⁴ Kulash is a principal with the Orlando-based planning firm of Glatting Jackson. In a number of projects he has demonstrated the benefits grid street networks can bring. A grid pattern typically improves traffic flow by providing more numerous intersections that disperse congestion.

⁵ The Hyannis, Massachusetts, Main Street Business Improvement District, in December 1999, surveyed 22 communities across the country which had converted downtown streets from 1-way to 2-way. The vast majority reported that the change had positive results, particularly for business development. None reported negative effects. For more information, contact Ted Brovitz [TBrovitz@dufresne-henry.com]

⁶ Typical shopping center parking standards require 4 to 5 spaces per 1,000 square feet of leasable area. Editor's Note: For more on parking standards, see Greg Dale's, “The Parking Conundrum” in *PCJ* #13 (Winter 1994), also reprinted in “Taking a Closer Look: Transportation Topics.”

Christmas season, and stand substantially empty the rest of the year.⁶ Downtowns cannot afford the luxury of all that empty blacktop for most of the year – and don't need it anyway. Everyone has to drive to the mall. Not true for downtown shoppers. Many are already downtown, working, living, and taking care of non-shopping business. Many walk to their destinations. Others arrive by car for another purpose and are already parked. Still others, if lucky, reach downtown by public transit.

4. *Increase downtown living opportunities in a diversified way.* Downtown dwellers were once a natural part of downtown social and economic life and must be again. They are a vital element to downtown rejuvenation and creating a critical mass of people who can walk to work, to stores, and to other downtown activities.  Downtown Housing.

5. *Suspend the absurd, space-consuming, and destructive parking requirements for new or expanded development or businesses.* A while back, a little bakery on the historic Main Street in Fairfax City, Virginia, sought to put one table and two chairs out front. Zoning defined this as an expansion of use, requiring the creation of two new parking spaces – easily achieved if the adjacent building was torn down and its economic potential replaced by blacktop.

Too many downtowns have holes in their street-wall like missing teeth because perfectly functional buildings have been demolished for parking. It doesn't have to be this way. A growing number of cities and towns are providing for more flexibility in downtown parking requirements. Providence, Rhode Island, for example, exempts restored properties from its current parking requirements. Similarly, Pasadena, California, exempts buildings within historic districts from current parking requirements when they are rehabilitated or placed in a different use, so long as the new use does not create a greater demand for parking.

6. *Permit parking for downtown residents is a privilege worth bestowing.* The greatest advantages in any downtown should be given to the resident

committed to it. Communities such as Cambridge, Massachusetts, Santa Barbara, California, and New Haven, Connecticut, have sought to encourage people to live in downtown neighborhoods by providing resident parking permits – eliminating one of the hassles downtown residents would otherwise face.

7. *Provide for on-street parking.* If a street is not wide enough for curbside parking on both sides and two lanes of traffic, restrict parking to one side. Angled parking is particularly appropriate for the wide downtown streets that often were the site of streetcar routes.

8. *Make downtown a destination worth walking around in.* If people look forward to being downtown, and to walking throughout the downtown area, few would complain about the couple of extra minutes it might take to find a parking space. As discussed earlier, by focusing efforts on providing the maximum amount of parking, and on

enabling cars to speed through downtown streets, we are actually destroying the very pedestrian-oriented environment that attracts people to downtown. We can also do more to make spending time downtown an enjoyable experience, not a chore. Urban design plans should concentrate on making the connections around downtown more exciting. This can be done through landscaping, trees, lighting, benches, historic markers, directional signage, public art, and other opportunities that reflect local character.

Many of the above “people first” rules are starting to find their way back into downtown governance. This is not easy, however. Resistance remains strong among those who worry most about providing more and more parking facilities. But cities and towns across the country are recognizing that downtown parking must be carefully considered so that it does not further damage the tight-knit fabric of downtown.

In Part II of this article, we will look more closely at other opportunities for increasing a downtown area’s appeal by nurturing the local economy. But between now and then, let us know of any interesting approaches your planning or community development department has taken to make your downtown or town center a place people will want to visit. ♦

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