

**Smart Downtown Parking:
 Core Principles to Support Downtown
 Development**

By Kent Robertson, Ph.D.*

Whether considered a scapegoat or a savior, parking is usually at the center of most discussions of how best to strengthen the downtowns of American cities. Because downtowns present a special mix of land uses, place-making amenities, and densities not found elsewhere, they require a special approach to the provision of parking. This approach is called Smart Downtown Parking (SDP).

Smart Downtown Parking strives to meet the increasing demands of motorists needing a place to park in downtown while sustaining and enhancing the hallmarks of a healthy downtown, namely high density, a pedestrian-friendly environment, and a strong sense of place. Moreover, SDP recognizes that parking, while important, should not detract from the intrinsic hallmark features that make downtowns lively places to visit, work, shop, and live.

The majority of downtown visitors arrive by automobile making it essential to balance a pedestrian-friendly setting with the continuously increasing public demand for convenient parking. SDP fully comprehends the valuable role parking plays in a strong downtown economy, but advocates that parking be planned, designed, and located intelligently, keeping the pedestrian in mind. After all, every driver becomes a pedestrian once the car is parked.

Seven core principles contribute to the essence of Smart Downtown Parking. These include the following:

Principle #1: Understand the Proper Role of Parking in Downtowns.

As important as parking is, it must always be viewed as subservient to the needs of the functions that draw people downtown. People do not venture downtown because there is ample parking, but for the wide variety of functions located close together including stores, restaurants, sports and entertainment, tourist attractions, services, housing, government functions, hotels, and offices. These functions all add to the demand for parking, of course, but simply increasing the supply of parking spaces, especially if poorly designed or located, can serve to decrease their demand, damaging the collective sense of place that distinguishes downtown from other built environments.

Principle #2: Strategically Locate Parking Facilities.

The location of parking structures and lots is a critical component of SDP. Avoid placing parking directly on major commercial streets, along corridors with high pedestrian flow, in the middle of clusters of core functions (i.e. storefronts), and at peak land-value intersections.

Instead, look to place parking lots or structures behind Main Street buildings (especially in smaller cities) providing parking that is close to many destinations while not disrupting Main Street itself. Keys to the success of this location are well-marked signage allowing drivers to be aware that parking exists, the provision of attractive rear entrances to businesses, and clearly visible routes to Main Street between or within buildings. Another good place is alongside streets with lower pedestrian volumes. Parking at the edge of downtown has been widely used in cities of all sizes. In larger cities, some sort of a shuttle system may be necessary to transport drivers to the core from their parked cars at the periphery.



Principle #3: Value the Utility of On-Street Parking.

Off-street parking dominates most downtowns, usually occupying between 60%-80% of total spaces. This is also true in smaller cities and towns. But SDP also recognizes the valuable contributions of on-street parking. Drivers prefer on-street angled and parallel parking spaces, particularly if their stay is less than two hours. They appreciate the greater visibility of these parking spots, the ability to see their destination from their parked vehicle, the ready accessibility of their vehicle and the heightened sense of personal safety. On-street parking also benefits pedestrians because it buffers them from moving street traffic while slowing down vehicles as well. SDP

encourages as much on-street parking as possible rather than removing it to try and accommodate higher traffic flow on downtown streets.

One innovative strategy that serves the needs of both pedestrians and parking is a pedestrian boulevard placed in the center of a street. In River Falls, WI (pop. 12,000), a five-block boulevard on the Main Street was erected with parking spaces along its sides. This doubled the number of on-street spaces, while allowing pedestrians a safe mid-point refuge. The additional parking spaces also slowed down traffic speeds, another clear benefit to pedestrians.

Principle #4: Emphasize Quality Design.

Nowhere is it written that parking structures must look stark and utilitarian. Blank walls should be avoided as they create dead zones that lead to gaps in the downtown fabric and interrupt pedestrian flows. SDP encourages cities to adopt design guidelines that encourage or require: 1) quality design standards for the exteriors of parking structures; and 2) placement of commercial establishments on the street-level of all new downtown parking structures, thereby avoiding the blank-wall syndrome. For lots that already exist or are unavoidable, good design should, at a minimum, ensure that they are attractively landscaped on the outer edges to act as a soft attractive visual buffer along the sidewalk.

SDP also recommends that quality design facilitate an easy transition from driver to pedestrian, a critical transition point. Mark Childs, author of *Parking Spaces*, suggests: 1) provide clearly designated pedestrian pathways through parking lots and structures; 2) increase pedestrian safety by protecting paths from stalls; 3) include landscaping, rumble strips, special paving, small curb radii, etc., to slow down vehicles and make sure drivers understand that pedestrians have the right-of-way; 4) provide clear directional signage to downtown streets and attractions; and 5) supply pedestrian amenities such as benches, good lighting, and restrooms.

Principle #5: Make Better Use of Existing Spaces.

Many downtown development experts firmly believe that parking shortages are often a function of perception and people's unawareness of where parking exists. Before adding spaces, a detailed inventory of the use and location of existing parking should be conducted. These inventories often reveal unoccupied spots, even at the busiest times of day. Increasing the public's awareness of these open spaces should be given high priority. Better directional signage can be helpful, as is publicizing the whereabouts of parking on Web sites, in newspaper ads, and through businesses. Another option is to promote shared parking arrangements wherein two downtown activities that people

use at different times of week/day (e.g. a church and a government building) can share one lot or structure.

Principle #6: Control the Total Volume of Parking Spaces in Downtown.

Many cities possess minimum off-street parking requirements for new buildings constructed downtown. These requirements oftentimes decrease downtown densities and increase parking coverage rates (PCR)—the ratio of parking area to total land area in a downtown. Research conducted by Michael Manville and Donald Shoup of UCLA demonstrated that the PCR in high-density downtowns that limit off-street parking is relatively low. For example, the downtown PCR is 18% in New York City and 31% in San Francisco, in stark contrast, to 81% in downtown Los Angeles. Manville and Shoup sum up by declaring, "parking requirements go a long way toward making downtown LA little more than a group of buildings, each a destination in its own right, to be parked at and departed from, and not part of some larger whole." Cities could require maximum, rather than minimum, parking requirements on new downtown construction.

Principle #7: Plan for Parking Comprehensively.

Downtown parking should never be planned in a vacuum. Smart Downtown Parking advocates that parking always be planned in its downtown context, factoring in its contribution to and impact on traffic patterns and flow, the pedestrian experience, density levels, parking coverage rates, activity patterns, aesthetic and historic qualities, and sense of place. When additional parking is merited, it should conform to a comprehensive plan for downtown and design guidelines that reflect the principles that support Smart Downtown Parking.

Source

Summarized from "Smart Downtown Parking: Core Principles to Support Downtown Development" by Kent Robertson, Ph.D. appearing in the April 2005 issue of *Parking*.

References and Recommended Reading

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