

Parking and its costs

Free Public Parking – What Cost to Place



Parking in public spaces always costs something to drivers in one way or another – even if they do not throw money in the pay machines.

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We know there is no such thing as “free” public parking but do we really understand the cost that such policies have on local centres? Free or subsidised, on and off street, public parking can be a significant barrier to a great place and access experience and damaging to the local economy.

The notion of “free” parking in centres has evolved from the idea that we can freely access roads and therefore the parking space on Main Streets. That idea has extended to the use of “redundant” land sites in traditional centres for free (or subsidised) public parking - many land uses in the centre be-

came redundant as car ownership increased, especially around stations. Free public parking is an idea closely related to the idea that urban parking is a transport rather than a land use planning issue. It’s entrenched because it’s often a pain to pay, and, well, we do love free stuff.

Car parks create a range of issues in the centre that need to be managed. These include parking related traffic congestion, parking access/egress conflicts with other modes, reduced place and visual amenity and onsite runoff/environmental problems. Safe and easy access beyond the car park also requires investment in local transit, cycling and walking. When we fund free public parking, with no financial return to the community, we miss the opportunity to invest to improve the qual-

ity of access and fund attractive, place making improvements. Free parking also distorts the parking market and deters private investment. The end point is the generous provision of free parking in places that may not be worth visiting or spending quality time or money in.

Traditional centres now face new social, environmental and economic challenges, including Amazon and on-line shopping. Some centres are struggling in the face of these challenges but others are surviving, even thriving by investing in a higher quality place, access and shopping experience.

Rethinking urban parking and access is central to this improved experience. Real time way finding, easy parking access, traffic calming and safer walking in and around the car park are features of this approach. Pricing

and Access Quality?

technologies enable equitable and flexible price setting based on demand and the spreading of parking demand throughout the centre. Related investments include easy, remote payment and top up options. Traders and locals can be better engaged with the prospect of easier payment and better investment of new parking revenues for place and access improvements.

A critical investment in local access is real time way-finding signage to minimise cruising, local congestion and associated conflicts for other vehicles, pedestrians and cyclists. Static signage for parking is highly problematic, directing traffic into full car parks, worsening peak congestion and adding to driver anxiety. Real time signage minimises cruising and related conflicts as vehicles come into the centre, approach the car park entry and within the car park with easy space location in the car park.

These technologies may also improve our understanding of parking costs and benefits with improved data on assets in council budgets. It is all too common to not state 'free' public car park assets in Council budgets with their real financial value and the unrealised income. Time/place parking data improves transparency and enables council and the community to make better informed and effective decisions about local access and place needs.

These investments and technologies raise the possibility of improved environmental, place and access outcomes for parking with better, easier walk/cycle and transit access and the critical 'Main Street' place experience. We might rethink walk access to and from parking. We have to walk from the car park to the destination and the first few minutes walking through the carpark and adjoining streets can be a disappointing and disheartening experience. Many off street car parks are ringed with back of house uses and roads busy with car park traffic. The poor quality of these places may discourage walking and parking after hours with poor lighting and perceptions of safety. Even in the day time inadequate foot-

paths, a lack of weather protection and way-finding make the walk trip from the car to local destinations an unsatisfactory and unattractive experience.

Off street parking is often accessed via side streets or laneways connecting from the Main Street. Convenience, activity and line of sight can make these streets ideal for pedestrians accessing parking or adjoining stations. By closing or limiting these streets to traffic to prioritise walking we then have the opportunity to create an attractive, vibrant place experience, places for people to stop, relax, eat and drink, places for people young and old. These can become highly animated places that are a pleasure to walk and stay in and they provide the critical walk connection between parking, transit and Main Street shopping. Alternative access for vehicles into car parks is better provided via major cross streets rather than the Main Street to minimise right of way conflicts with pedestrians.

These side street places can be complemented with improvements to the Main Street. One of the benefits of demand responsive pricing, used with real time wayfinding, is

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the freeing up of Main Street parking spaces. There is then the opportunity for build outs to accommodate footpath dining, landscaping, larger trees/shade and public seating. Mid-block crossings are also improved with build outs to improve pedestrian visibility, calm traffic and shorten the crossing distance over the road.

'Free' public parking has real costs and impacts on place attractiveness. It leads to poor parking outcomes at the expense of attractive place and access outcomes such as walking, cycling and transit and a stronger local economy. Great places invite people to come, stay and spend – they are great for everyone and good parking is a critical part of this experience. ■



Efficient parking space management in inner cities is a way to give them new uses for the future. Traditional signage is just one possible way.