Parking and Pedestrians:
Balancing Two Key Elements in Downtown Development

by
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Two important transportation goals of most American downtowns are to provide sufficient parking spaces to meet the demand of motorists and an attractive pedestrian-friendly environment. Yet, when planned for separately, these two goals frequently contradict each other. This article discusses the characteristics, problems, and strategies associated with downtown pedestrians and motorists and advocates an integrated approach wherein the needs of both are balanced.

The Downtown Pedestrian

Pedestrians have always been an indispensable part of downtown life. Despite the widespread dependence on the car and the spatial expansion of downtown districts, pedestrians continue to constitute a critical ingredient to a successful downtown. First, the prevalence of people on foot helps to maintain the higher densities intrinsic to downtowns from the outset. Second, pedestrians are essential to the economic survival of many downtown businesses, especially street-level shops, services and restaurants that depend on walk-by customers. Third, attracting pedestrians to use downtown enhances downtown's role as a primary gathering place for the community. Finally, the level of pedestrian activity defines the image and vitality projected by a downtown.

Despite the importance of pedestrians to a healthy downtown, today's pedestrians face many deterrents that discourage walking. There are increased distances that people must walk, sidewalks that are too narrow and in poor condition, and pedestrian corridors that are uninteresting, uninviting, and unsafe. A cause of these problems is the tendency for many transportation planners to ignore the needs of pedestrians in favor of motorized forms of transportation.

Downtowns still have tremendous potential to take advantage of their compactness and become a desirable place for pedestrians. The right conditions include:

- Well-maintained and easily negotiable (sometimes widened) sidewalks
- Routes that are convenient in terms of location and traffic delays
- Distances are deemed reasonably walkable (including pedestrian way finding signage)
- People feel confident in terms of personal security and traffic safely (making intersections easier to cross and separating vehicles from pedestrians)
- The pedestrian experience is viewed as enjoyable and interesting (adding amenities such as benches, street trees, brick pavers, etc.)

Downtown Parking

Given the high value that most American's place on mobility, time, and convenience, it should not be surprising that the availability of parking is important to downtowns large and small. To address the demand, up to 40% of downtown land is devoted to parking in many cities. The challenge facing cities is how to ret-

rofit a compact district with the needed parking facilities without harming the downtown's fabric and qualities.

Attitudinal surveys of downtown shoppers and business owners almost always place parking as one of the most pressing downtown issues. On the other hand, many public officials and downtown development professionals see parking as a far less severe problem.

Nevertheless, real parking related problems do confront downtowns. Ubiquitous national parking standards are often applied to downtowns that overestimate how much parking is required. High prices are often charged for parking. Planning constraints exist in small cities that makes parking management and enhancement challenging. Business owners and downtown workers sometimes park all day in on-street spaces intended for shoppers. Poorly located and designed parking facilities negatively impact a downtown's attractiveness, uniqueness, pedestrian-friendly qualities and sense of place. Finally, the public often perceives that parking is difficult to find.

The general concensus from the literature is that parking should compliment and support downtown development, instead of being the driving force. Strategies include:

- Making more efficient use of existing spaces. The promotion of shared parking is one way to achieve this. Mixed uses in a downtown may have heavy parking demands at different times of the day or week, thereby enabling parking facilities to be shared.

- Price incentives to entice people downtown. Widespread use has been made of parking validation programs, wherein parking is free or reduced if a downtown business validates that the individual has purchased goods or services downtown.

- Modify existing zoning ordinances to address downtown parking issues. Some cities have established maximum parking caps for downtown development to reduce the amount of land devoted to parking.

Balancing Parking with Pedestrians

The importance of both parking and pedestrians to a healthy downtown clearly points to the need to balance these two transportation elements. Two key considerations underscore any successful effort at achieving this balance: the location of parking facilities and their design.

Finding a good location for parking is a challenging proposition due to the oftentimes-conflicting goals of driver convenience versus the potential damage to the downtown fabric and character. Where possible, parking should mini-mize walking distances by offering on-street spaces with clear visibility of the desired destination. Other location factors include a safe setting, feasible land and improvement costs, street access and traffic circulation, coordination with the downtown plan, and historic preservation. Several locations should be avoided including parking facilities in the middle of a row of businesses or a pedestrian circulation corridor. Better locations are found behind buildings or on the edges of downtown as long as clear signage for motorists is available.

Good design can facilitate an easy transition from motorist to pedestrian. Upon leaving their vehicle, the pedestrian should be presented with an inviting setting and route that is clearly marked, safe, attractive, and direct as possible. Several techniques include:

- Provide pathways in and through parking lots with minimal interfaces with moving vehicles.
- Increase pedestrian safety within lots by protecting paths from stalls
- Control the microclimate by including good drainage, slip-resistant surfaces, planting strips to prevent splashing and ample space to pile snow.
- Include amenities in or next to the lot such as shade, landscaping, benches and restrooms.
- Make it clear to drivers that pedestrians have the right-of-way within the parking facility

Downtowns also need to provide provide clear connections between parking and the primary streets. A pocket park that doubles as a pedestrian connection can provide a direct and attractive walking route. Long banks of walls that characterize many parking garages are imposing and uninteresting, often damaging the volume of street activity.

Conclusion

One of the keys to achieving a health balance between pedestrians and parking is to overcome the current tendency for these issues to be addressed separately. Before any new parking facility is constructed, its impact on and relationship to the pedestrian experience should be thoroughly examined and planned. For a downtown to be both pedestrian and parking friendly, these two transportation elements should constitute an integrated component of an overall plan and vision for downtown.