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The problem is.... there's too much parking? - Thomas House

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There are so many dimensions to the problems that are created, rather than solved, by car culture that it's hard to know where to begin. The biggest problem has rapidly become parking, which even has atmospheric effects.

But we'll restrict ourselves to three dimensions - urban, suburban, meteorological.

Suburbs

Surely we don't mean those leafy green picket fence-y places far from the madding crowd (but not that far), but in fact we do.

The idyllic leafy suburbs concentrate their retail centers in shopping malls, which require enormous acreage to accommodate the number of cars that park there, especially for a certain shopping season.

And because all this parking is (for the moment) free, the suburban malls attract visitors from the supposed urban centers as well as the surrounding towns, compounding the problem.

This is land taken out of use, and worse, paved over thus creating major problems with water runoff, water that is polluted as it accumulates anything that has been dropped, spilled, or leaked onto the surface. Water that has to be treated at ratepayer expense - though this particular problem is created by 'free' parking.

(Obviously, it's not actually free; somebody is paying for this treatment.)

And because these suburbs are desirable places, but generally far from services, it has become standard for every adult to have their own personal vehicle, creating demand for more highways to get into a central city or to surrounding office parks (with the accent on park) and commercial districts.

Many of these are gateway cities - essentially urbanized suburbs - which usually require parking for every housing unit. These are communities with high density housing, and a four-over-one will typically require two 300 sf spaces for each unit, and though sometimes underground, usually the parking is on a lot...or on-street.

In New England, on-street parking blocks foot (or vehicular) access to commercial services, and makes for angry neighbors when the snow falls.

Some of us long for the one singular benefit of the COVID plague: on-street parking was relegated to nonexistence and sidewalk dining took its place.

Urban parking is a nightmare of its own

In referencing sidewalk dining, it has come to pass that Boston's North End storefront businesses and customers would like to see on-street parking disappear permanently for the very reason of maintaining its flavorful neighborhood character.

But in general, a city draws personal vehicles into its center in the reverse of Newtonian physics' 'inverse squares' effect. This is especially true of gateway cities with public transportation centers though these, of late, have suffered from...uh, under-performance.

The result is Boston is host to an unmanageable number of cars that need to be parked, and delivery vehicles that need to be double parked, and pedestrians desperately trying to avoid that rundown feeling.

Beside the eyesore parking garages and usurious surface parking lots - there is the matter of the Big Dig, and shall we call the 'throat' proposal in Bright the Even Bigger Dig? Billions of dollars spent to concentrate cars in a city with (temporarily) bad public transit and nowhere near enough places to park them.

All this parking makes Boston unaffordable because massive amounts of land are reserved for parking.

If instead we could build housing in these places, issues of housing affordability would be solved at market rates (see our previous article), cars would give way to walkers, e-bikes, and other light transport, and no doubt frustrated parkers...sorry, commuters, would demand and get functional public transportation. And many would be afforded desirable hybrid work requirements.

Getting hit by a meteorological bomb

The meteorology of a city is greatly impacted for the worse by all this parking.

We don't have to read you a chapter and verse of the heat island effect, but we often forget that parking in most cities is not a parking lot here and there, it's an archipelago of accumulating heat in summer, which requires increased use of air conditioning - a technology that pumps even more heat into the air. (Along with housing, may we suggest trees? Tree canopies love the sun.)

And in winter, parking areas are a tremendous burden on snow removal - some of which is piled into dirty, litter-caked salted mountains just waiting to melt into the storm drains and the wastewater treatment systems, unless you can get it to the ocean where it... no it actually doesn't belong there.

Our suggestion is that whether you think cars are the problem, or parking, making a modern society even more modern means we probably need less of both.

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