

Parking Is Sexy Now. Thank Donald Shoup.

In an interview, the guru of progressive parking policy reflects on his decades of research and writing, which transformed how cities look at the curb.



Ah, efficiency. *Courtesy UCLA/Luskin School of Public Affairs*

By [Laura Bliss](#)

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What’s the most emotional topic in transportation? According to Donald Shoup, it’s parking.

“Thinking about parking seems to take place in the reptilian cortex, the most primitive part of the brain responsible for making snap judgments about flight-or-flight issues, such as how to avoid being eaten,” Shoup writes in the introduction to his new book, *Parking and the City* (Planner’s Press, Routledge, 2018). “The reptilian cortex is said to govern instinctive behavior involved in aggression, territoriality, and ritual display—all important issues in parking.” Those screaming matches outside Trader Joe’s and tire-slashing episodes in Boston’s winter curb wars make slightly more sense in that

frame: The threat of *extra walking* may be developed society's most common, adrenaline-triggering equivalent to a charging fanged animal.

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If only we could apply that instinctive fury to the real threat, which is the ruinous overabundance of parking, not the absence of it. It's estimated that there are as many as two billion parking spots in the United States for a scant 200 million cars. Shoup, a research professor of urban planning at UCLA and the preeminent guru of parking policy, has devoted his 40-plus-year career to understanding the profound economic, geographic, and environmental consequences of that overallocation.

Thanks to Shoup and his many students, we know that cars cruising for on-street parking in American downtowns account for roughly 1,825 vehicle-miles traveled, for each curb space, every year—two-thirds the length of the country. We know that parking covers an astonishing percentage of urban land area (14 percent in housing-crunched Los Angeles county); that parking inflates the cost of housing and goods because developers fold it into property costs; and that when the city foots the bill for “free” parking, it's a public subsidy to the affluent—non-car owning people are gifted no such real estate.

The High Cost of Free Parking, Shoup's 2005 book, is often called “revolutionary” for turning an otherwise dry academic topic into a high-stakes urban issue. In the 500-page follow-up, *Parking and the City*, Shoup compiles and reviews the newest research on parking's oft-invisible effects. He also shows the way to rein them in. Through real-world case studies and research projects, Shoup makes three central recommendations for cities:

eliminate planning codes that require developers to build off-street parking, charge the correct prices for on-street parking throughout the day, and spend parking meter revenue to make visible improvements on metered streets.

He also writes with frankness and humor about the most difficult part of parking reform: feelings. Earlier this month, I spoke with Shoup about what it takes to move hearts and minds when it comes to asphalt's blight. Our interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

You write that when you started to research parking as a Ph.D student in the 1960s, it was a fairly boring topic. You call yourself an academic “bottom feeder” for taking it up. What interested you initially?

I think the thing that triggered my interest was employer-paid parking. I was writing on equity and transportation, and thought it was so unfair that employers offer parking to drivers but nothing to everyone else. If you walked, you got nothing. And it's inefficient. This was 1976, when the government was trying to cut down on congestion, but these employers were increasing driving. So I did a lot of work on that, which led to my research showing that employers who offer free parking should have to offer the cash value, too. [*This became law for certain employers in California.*] That early success should lead to more interest in parking, academically, but I still had sort of a monopoly on it for many years. It was boring and low status. By no means am I the smartest urban planner, but I had the luck to look at something people had neglected and now agree is very important.

Your new book is full of recent success stories about cities enacting parking reforms—like parking benefit districts, maximum parking requirements, and dynamic pricing—from Houston to London to Beijing to Pasadena. Do you take pleasure in seeing policies born of all your years of under-the-radar labor finally taking hold?

It's been 13 years since my first book, and I think people are surprised by how many cities have been persuaded to follow the recommendations. I'm

very happy people are beginning to see the huge benefits of getting parking right.

Your work has often been praised for demonstrating the nexus between parking and all manner of urban ills: congestion, pollution, affordability, sprawl. Why is it important to illuminate these connections?

I have a second life in going around the world, giving talks to people about parking. It might be city governments; it might be global warming people. I go and talk, and usually people are enthusiastic but nothing happens. But in other cases people are convinced.

“Not many people are interested in parking reforms unless I can show a direct connection to something else.”

I think where I have been successful is in showing how parking is connected to whatever someone thinks is important. If they're interested in housing or global warming or urban design or whatever, I can show them that parking reforms will help to solve the problem. It took a while for me to realize that not many people are interested in parking reforms unless I can show a direct connection to something else.

Could you give an example?

There's a chapter in the new book by Michael Manville, who was a student of mine, about what happened in downtown L.A. when it began to revive in the late 1990s. There were these beautiful Art Deco and Beaux Art office buildings that had been abandoned. So the city decided to enact an adaptive reuse ordinance so that they could be converted into housing. Developers could use different codes to do the projects faster and less expensively, and they were exempt from parking minimum requirements. That's a huge cost savings. Over the next eight years, 57 of these beautiful historic buildings were converted. It's hard to see what doesn't get built because of parking requirements, but [Manville] shows very dramatic proof that removing off-street parking requirements led to a big supply in housing.

So that is an example that shows that the benefits of parking reform are very real, and intersect with big-ticket issues people care about. It strikes me that in order to get residents to support new parking policies, perhaps you have to show very clearly what it is they're *gaining*. It seems like otherwise you get people reacting to higher parking rates and fewer spaces with the sense that they're fundamentally losing something. Cue "reptilian" cortex.

Old Pasadena is now the poster child for me for showing what can happen if you charge the right price and spend the money to benefit the neighborhood. I think they relied on, as you say, appealing to the self-interests of the stakeholders. It used to be a commercial skid row—beautiful buildings in terrible condition. People wondered how it would come back. They argued for years. But then the city said [in the 1990s], OK, we'll put in parking meters, and we'll spend all the revenue to rebuild the sidewalks, clean out the alleys, and put utility wires underground. Because, yeah, forget traffic congestion or global warming—most merchants are worried about surviving to the next month.

"Uber and Lyft are very interested in the link between what they do and parking policy. They're very rational about the curb."

So the city borrowed some money to buy the meters, paid it off with the revenue, and then put in all the highest quality infrastructure. Then property owners followed suit and restored the buildings.

There are many other examples. I think that if parking meters were identified with, say, free wifi access, which isn't expensive to provide, I think everyone will understand that they want meters. Mexico City has abandoned their minimum parking requirements and have parking maximums instead. They use fees from their meters to subsidize transit. Urban planners tend to focus on policy goals; people care to see the results.

The arrival of on-demand transportation services such as Uber and Lyft has created a lot of discussion in the transportation world about a future with fewer parking spaces and higher demand for curb space. That seems right in line with the policies you've been

advocating for years, particularly in terms of dynamic pricing. What do you make of these forecasts?



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Personally, I think Uber and Lyft have done most of what they're going to do to cities. But it just makes sense to cut back on how much space we're devoting to parked cars and think more in terms of loading zones. You just have to observe. What is the productivity of this particular 20-foot length of curb, in terms of people being delivered by cars that park there versus the same space devoted to having a loading zone? You know what the market price for parked cars is; you might say that this space will be more productive as a loading zone. Plus, an Uber stopped in the middle of the street to drop someone off is the same as a double-parked car in terms of traffic. More loading areas will make traffic flow better and more safely. Cities are realizing this, and more developers are realizing that when they build something new, they have to make more room for unloading and offloading.

Uber and Lyft seem to be increasingly hanging their social and environmental credibilities on their potential to reduce the amount of parking in cities. That sounds like straight Shoup. Have you ever been asked to come in to speak with these companies?

Yes, I got a call a few years back from Bob Gurley—he was the biggest shareholder at Uber at the time. [*Gurley was the venture capitalist who led Benchmark Capital's early investment into Uber. He resigned from the company's board in 2017 out of frustration with ex-CEO Travis Kalanick.*] I didn't know who he was, but I said, sure. He came to see me at 2 o'clock on a weekday. Like always, I asked him where he parked. He said, "I didn't—I took an Uber." He'd picked it up from Santa Monica Airport. He stayed for four hours. And I now understand that, having talked to a number of people at

Uber and Lyft since, that a lot of their traffic goes to places where parking is expensive. That is one reason that people use their services. They understand that requirements that build in too much parking are their enemy. They're very interested in the link between what they do and parking policy. They're very rational about the curb.

There's also evidence that Uber and Lyft are contributing to the increase in vehicle-miles traveled in cities and pulling riders off of buses and trains. What's the parking connection for cities that want to encourage people to ride transit, apart from jacking up curb prices?

I believe that, in San Jose, developers can offer everyone in the building free transit if they don't include as many parking spots. That works. Or some developers with little parking will have shared cars on site and pay for one shared space, which reduces minimum parking requirement by several spaces. Those are very expensive spaces for developers. And they're offering an amenity for all who live there: free membership to a Zipcar in the basement. Those are real alternatives to privately owned cars. It doesn't seem so unthinkable now that these alternatives are available.