

The perilous politics of parking

By

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demand

market equilibrium

supply

IN IRELAND people ask St Anthony to help them find parking spaces. In Chicago, if you shovel the snow from a space, it belongs to you. In Shanghai people beg their parents to reserve spaces by sitting in them. Everywhere parking is a big reason law-abiding people pay fines to the government and a cause of screaming rows between strangers. More important, it profoundly shapes cities—usually for the worse.

Parking spaces seem innocuous, just a couple of lines painted on asphalt. Multiplied and mismanaged, though, they can create traffic jams, worsen air pollution and force cities to sprawl. The cost and availability of parking affects people's commuting habits more than the rapid buses and light-rail lines that cities are so keen to build (see [article](#)). Next to other worthy policies like congestion-charging and road-tolling, parking is also easy to change. The fast-growing metropolises of Africa and Asia, especially, need to get it right, before they repeat the West's debilitating mistakes.

In many cities people can park on the street for nothing, or a pittance. In Boston most parking meters charge just \$1.25 an hour; in Chennai the rate is 20 rupees (30 cents) a day. Because the number of people who would take advantage of such terrific deals, rather than pay a market rate to park in a garage, exceeds supply, drivers end up circling the block. Researchers have found that much traffic consists of drivers looking for spaces. The record is held by the German city of Freiburg—in one study 74% of cars were on the prowl.

Having concluded that the chaos on their streets is the result of a shortage of parking spaces, many cities have set about creating more. Countries including Australia, China, India and the Philippines require

developers to create parking spaces whenever they put up a new building. In America these schedules have become ludicrously exact. St Paul, in Minnesota, demands four spaces for every hole on a golf course and one space for every three nuns in a convent. It is because of these requirements that, in many office developments and shopping centres, more space is given over to cars than to people.

Europeans often take a different approach to scarce parking, by reserving many spaces for residents who pay almost nothing. Around the Economist tower in London, parking costs £4.90 (\$6.10) an hour—with the result that most of us cycle or join the public-transport crush. Locals, who are not obviously in need of charity, pay just £145 a year to park in the same streets. A public resource is being allocated highly inefficiently.

That everybody is used to these arrangements does not mean they make sense. Flooding cities with parking works, in that finding a space becomes easier. But the overall cost is enormous. Because parking is so plentiful, it is free, and because it is free, people invariably overuse it. One study of Washington, DC, found that the availability of free parking is associated with a 97% chance somebody will drive to work alone. Generous parking requirements create asphalt deserts, sapping cities of vigour and beauty. The money and land wasted on car parks make life costlier for everyone, even those who do not drive. Parking adds 67% to the cost of building a shopping centre in Los Angeles—and a lot more if the spaces are underground.

Cities should stop trying to increase the supply of parking and rigging the market in favour of homeowners. Instead, they should raise prices until the streets and the car parks are nearly, but not quite, full—and charge everybody. Residents will complain about the loss of their privileges. But if they live in an area of high demand, the revenues from the streets will be enormous. Local governments could spend the money on whatever they like, from beautiful gardens to security guards.

Lovely Rita, meter maid

Another reason to charge fully for parking is that it will speed a welcome transport revolution. If self-driving cars are eventually allowed to trundle around by themselves, picking up and dropping off person after person, they might render many car parks unnecessary. That would be wonderful. But this future will arrive more quickly if governments raise the price of parking. Autonomous vehicles will be nice for everyone, because they will let people get on with something worthwhile as they travel. But another big advantage is that they need not be parked—which is only a boon where parking costs money.

Many Western cities have already been bent out of shape by excessive, poorly priced parking. But it is not too late for the African and Asian cities that could be this century's great metropolises. In most, driving is not yet so widespread that motorists can dictate planning rules, and residents are not used to free parking. So roll out the meters and the wardens. Cities should be for people, not for stationary metal boxes.