

# Book Review

Henry Grabar, *Paved Paradise: How Parking Explains the World*. New York: Penguin Press. 368 pp. ISBN 1984881132.

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DOI: 10.1177/08854122231226268

The first sentence in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, published in 1961, was “This book is an attack on current city planning and rebuilding.” It could also have served as the first sentence of *Paved Paradise: How Parking Explains the World*. Like Jane Jacobs, Henry Grabar is a journalist with a passion for cities, and *Paved Paradise* may influence city planning as much as *Death and Life* did.

Grabar’s title comes from Joni Mitchell’s song “Big Yellow Taxi.” Mitchell explained, “I wrote ‘Big Yellow Taxi’ on my first trip to Hawaii. I took a taxi to the hotel, and when I woke up the next morning, I threw back the curtains and saw these beautiful green mountains in the distance. Then, I looked down, and there was a parking lot as far as the eye could see and it broke my heart... this blight on paradise. That’s when I sat down and wrote the song.” One line of the song, “you don’t know what you’ve got ‘til it’s gone,” perfectly captures Grabar’s thesis that minimum parking requirements have blighted cities for decades.

Grabar uses captivating narratives rather than tables, graphs, and regression equations to explain how parking requirements subsidize cars, increase the cost and reduce the supply of housing, aggravate traffic congestion, pollute the air and water, reduce walkability, degrade urban design, hinder the economy, penalize everyone without a car, and accelerate global warming. People who cannot afford to own a car pay higher prices for food so richer drivers can park free at grocery stores.

City planning has been much better at housing cars than housing people. Ironically, by increasing the cost of housing, parking requirements force some people to live in their cars.

Grabar illustrates his narratives with telling examples, such as, “The country builds more three-car garages than one-bedroom apartments.” And referring to the 97% of curb parking spaces in New York City that are unmetered, Grabar says “This is some of the most expensive land in the world. And you can have it for free, provided you use it for just one thing: parking.”

In *Great Planning Disasters*, Sir Peter Hall (1982) defined a great planning disaster as a planning process that costs a lot of

money and has gone seriously wrong. Few people now recognize parking requirements as a disaster because the costs are hidden and the harm is diffused, but *Paved Paradise* reveals that minimum parking requirements have all the hallmarks of a great—perhaps the greatest—planning disaster.

Parking requirements are almost an established religion in city planning, but experience suggests that future planners will regret them. City planners had a habit in the 1950s and 1960s of hurling themselves with gusto into implementing some truly bad ideas. Highrise public housing projects were once state-of-the-art, but many cities have now demolished them. Urban renewal (which Jane Jacobs compared to bloodletting) was once considered the best hope for downtowns, but cities have abandoned it in favor of historic preservation. Similarly, some cities have shifted from minimum parking requirements to maximum parking limits, and others will surely follow.

What planning theory best explains parking requirements? A rapid succession of planning theories blossomed in the twentieth century. The names of some evoke images of how planners think cities should look (city beautiful, garden city, and radiant city). Others optimistically describe what planners do (communicative planning, comprehensive planning, participatory planning, rational planning, and strategic planning). Several reflect planners’ politics (advocacy planning, critical planning, equity planning, and radical planning). All these names suggest that planners do good things. When outsiders observe what planners do, their names for planning theories are more modest (incrementalism) and less flattering (muddling through).

The planning theories that best explain minimum parking requirements are advocacy planning (everyone wants to park free), incrementalism (parking requirements are assembled over decades, like barnacles that accumulate on a ship’s hull and slow it down), muddling through (poor information, limited consideration of alternatives, political pandering, and groupthink contribute to the muddle), and a thin veneer of rational planning (the requirements are camouflaged with many tables of precise numbers that wrongly suggest careful calculations). For future planning theorists, minimum parking requirements will be a planning disaster to remember. How could city planners have been so wrong for so long?

City planners sometimes mistake Pandora’s box for a toolkit, but we do eventually recognize our mistakes, and someday we may condemn off-street parking requirements just as strongly as we now condemn the urban renewal disasters of the twentieth

century. As Reyner Banham et al. (1969, 435–436) wrote, “Planning tends to lurch from one fashion to another, with sudden revulsion setting in after equally sudden acceptance ... planning is always in thrall to some outmoded rule of thumb.”

A sudden revulsion against parking requirements is now emerging across the political spectrum, as suggested by glowing reviews for *Paved Paradise* in *The Atlantic*, *Guardian*, *Financial Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *New Yorker*, *New York Times*, and *Wall Street Journal*. The Parking Reform Network and Strong Towns are activist groups that campaign against parking requirements. Presidents Obama and Trump both condemned parking requirements. Even the President of the Institute of Transportation Engineers, which provides most of the data city planners use to set parking requirements, has condemned parking requirements (Belmore, 2019).

So, what should city planners do now? The upside of the mess parking requirements have created is an accidental land

reserve available for conversion from asphalt for cars to cities for people. Once planners renounce parking requirements, America can reclaim land on a scale to rival the Netherlands, and humans will replace cars.

City planners cannot change the past, but we can change the future, and in *Paved Paradise* Henry Grabar shows the way.

## References

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