



Parking Lots as Public Space

(Photo Credit: Truus, Bob & Jan/Flickr, 2012)

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Since the time of the ancient Greeks and Romans, public spaces have always been an important piece of urban settings. Public spaces are often meant as places for people to meet, places to gather, and places where communities can come together in a safe and accessible environment. Despite their varying designs and intents, all public spaces share the same overall theme of social interaction and community development (Madanipour, 2010).

Public Space for Older Adults

Outdoor public spaces have a major impact on the mobility, independence, and quality of life for older adults. Proper seating, cleanliness, and aesthetic appeal are often sought by older adults when considering the availability and quality of an outdoor public space (WHO, 2007). **For older adults who choose to age in place, the desire for accessible and programmable public space often goes unfulfilled.**

A common urban space often considered 'leftover' or derelict (Ben-Joseph, 2012) is the parking lot. Parking lots are almost always single-use spaces that create unusable voids in the urban fabric. However, at some point nearly every driver and passenger becomes a pedestrian within a parking lot—including older adults—making them places for both vehicles and pedestrians. Perhaps the absence of accessible and safe outdoor space for older adults can be filled by simply looking at parking lots in a different way.

Parking Lots as Public Space

Can you name a great parking lot? Despite their unsightly appearance and complete opposition to nature, it can be hard to imagine a possible alternative to parking lots so long as we choose to travel by car, electric or not (Ben-Joseph, 2012). But perhaps there is more to these seemingly vacant spaces than meets the eye. For what is a parking lot if not simply an under-utilized public square?

Fundamentally, parking should be distributed and designed to support the pedestrian life of the town (Childs, 2004). The vehicle often brings people from the suburbs or the country and concentrates them in urban places for a variety of reasons (*ibid.* 2004). Currently, parking lots are often designed to be hidden, sitting underutilized until they can be cleared and made into something



Figure 1: 1111 Lincoln Road,
Miami Beach, Florida.
(Photo Credit: Ideasgn, 2012)



Figure 2: A wedding event taking place in 1111 Lincoln Road.
(Photo Credit: Ideasgn, 2012)

else (Saitta, 2012). In truth, parking lots are some of the only places that both vehicles and pedestrians coexist in one place. However it can be said that current designs place the vehicle at the forefront of design.

Design Precedents

One of the most important facets of a good public space is availability and level of programming for citizens. There must be something to do there, be it a farmers market, a festival, a car wash, or simply to indulge in food and drink in a sunny locale. **The following precedents highlight intriguing and innovative ways that parking lots can remedy the ills of traditional parking lot design for the benefit of all citizens who use it.**

1111 Lincoln Road, Miami Beach, Florida (Herzog & de Meuron)

The architects at Herzog & de Meuron believe that “a car park is a public facility, like a train station or an airport, where people change from one mode of transportation to another.” The design (Figure 1) features a mixed-use structure for parking, retail and event space, and even a private residence. The 300 space garage uses floors of varying heights, in an effort to accommodate temporary or permanent programs (Figure 2).

The structure was made in accordance with several site and building code requirements in an effort to both integrate and begin the Lincoln Road Mall. A minimal but effective design has created a new space for both vehicles and the public, in one setting.

Post Office Square, Boston, Massachusetts

Located in the heart of Boston’s downtown financial district, Post Office Square is a unique design built in 1990 to replace a 950-car garage above ground garage with a 1,400-car underground garage with a 1.7 acre public park above. Named after its designer, the Norman B. Leventhal Park (Figure 3) is complete with extensive landscaping and greenery, a shoe shine station, pavilion, trellised walkway, and walk-through fountain and continues to gain awards year after year.

The park complex exhibits an interesting public/private partnership

Good public space must accomodate programming for citizens.

Figure 3: Norman B. Leventhal Park, Post Office Square in Boston, Massachusetts.
(Photo Credit: Sultry/Sulky/Silly/Flickr, 2011)



Figure 4:
Depot Market
Square main
pavillion
space.
(Photo Credit:
Western Washing-
ton University/
Flickr, 2009)



Figure 5:
Shelters
double as
covered
parking
structures.
(Photo Credit:
Puget Sound
Energy/Flickr,
2011)



**Public spaces
can function as
cultural hubs,
bringing tourists
in from outlying
areas.**

where profits from the car park go directly to maintaining and supporting the public park which has become a hot spot for office workers in the downtown Boston core.

Depot Market Square, Bellingham, Washington

The Bellingham Farmers Market (Figure 4) is situated on a city-owned parking lot on the former site of the historic Bellingham Railroad Depot. The site contains a permanent 7,000 square foot covered pavillion, which houses a year round farmers market, as well as 3 additional covered shelters which surround the open parking area. The site functions as a cultural hub providing ample space for a market, community performances, and various events. When the market is no longer in season the remaining outdoor space and covered shelters convert back into parking spaces for the adjoining businesses that surround the square.



Figure 6: Dia art museum parking
lot in Beacon, New York.
(Photo Credit: Sodapop/Flickr, 2008)

Fiat Lingotto, Turin, Italy (Renzo Piano) and DIA Art Museum, Beacon, New York (Open Office with Robert Irwin)

In Eran Ben-Joseph's latest book, *Rethinking A Lot*, he highlights two specific parking lots that are striving to be something different. Renzo Piano redesigned the Fiat Lingotto factory in Turin Italy and showcases a parking lot with no curbs or islands but a dense grid of trees. The idea is to welcome pedestrians as much as vehicles to this newly redesigned multi-use complex. The second is the Dia art museum in Beacon, New York (Figure 6). This parking lot, designed by Open Office and artist Robert Irwin, follows similar lines with an emphasis on each individual's arrival experience to the museum.

Both instances highlight ecological and social opportunities for the parking lot as a public space.

Final Thoughts

Public spaces play a large part in the livelihood and usage of urban areas. By operating for the enjoyment and function of all those within the city, including older adults, these spaces can serve a much grander purpose in today's urban landscape. When considering how often parking lots are used, they should receive much more attention than is currently given.

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Image Sources:

Cover Image - Truus, Bob & Jan too! (Flickr, 2012)

Fig.1 and 2 - Ideasgn (2014)

Fig.3 - Sultry/Sulky/Silly (Flickr, 2011)

Fig.4 - Western Washington University (Flickr, 2009)

Fig.5 - Puget Sound Energy (Flickr, 2011)

Fig.6 - S o d a p o p (Flickr, 2008)