

OPINION

# Car parks to people parks: transforming urban areas as part of a smarter transport package

Does ease of parking encourage car travel? It would seem the answer is 'yes'. Now more planners are considering other uses for the land, says **Lisa Hopkinson**

In 2017, Hackney resident Brenda Puech was refused permission by the council to turn a parking space outside her home into a car-free 'people parking bay'. The council said permits could only be granted for parking vehicles. In response, Brenda took direct action, installing benches, plants and cycle stands, and launched a campaign which proved immensely popular.

In an area where 70% of residents don't own a car, the council eventually saw sense, and now offers 'parklet' permits to Hackney residents 'to improve the urban realm'.

Puech was rightly crowned 'Walking Champion 2019' by the charity Living Streets.

Other cities have gone further, banning new parking and transforming entire car parks into parks for people. For example, Zurich has converted surface parking to public squares. Leicester City Council created a new public park, Jubilee Square, out of what was formerly a car park.

It is now an attractive space used by thousands and has variously hosted an outdoor cinema, a big wheel, and an ice rink.

Car parking in Britain is a hugely wasteful and inefficient use of land.

It is estimated regulated parking alone takes up a land area at least the size of Birmingham, which does not include private parking at residences, workplaces, supermarkets, train stations, universities or hospitals.

And a lot of this space is empty for much of the time. Our valuable land assets could be

used for housing, growing food or trees, or as parks for people and habitat for wildlife. All of which would be more productive and appropriate in the light of the climate and ecological emergency.

No one has estimated the true cost of parking in Britain, much of it in prime urban areas, including the opportunity costs of alternative and better use of this land.

Annual maintenance costs alone for surface car parks are estimated at £500-£1,000 a space. Add to this the unquantified environmental costs including increased flood risk and heat island effect from tarmacking surfaces and paving over front gardens. And, most importantly, the carbon and air pollution costs since the availability of car parking space, much of it free, is a strong factor in the decision to drive instead of using smarter transport choices.

Instead of making it easier and cheaper to drive, we should be making it easier to get around without a car.

Providing better alternatives is essential but old habits die hard and most people will continue to drive if parking is free making driving much cheaper than public transport. Restricting the space for parking and charging to reflect the full societal costs should be part of a package of measures to improve car-free access.

National planning policy is unhelpful in this regard. Maximum parking limits and reference to use of parking charges to encourage alternative modes were removed

in amendments to the 2011 Planning Policy Guidance. The 2018 revision to national planning policy also requires councils to have "clear and compelling justification" if they wish to limit parking in new developments.

The dismal results of this shift in policy are now seen up and down the country, in the proliferation of car-based developments, with disproportionate amounts of space devoted to parking. We need to reintroduce maximum parking limits and encourage car-free developments, making these mandatory in areas of poor air quality.

Some innovative developers are bucking the trend, despite national policy. Leeds developer CITU is developing 800 low-carbon homes, the first housing to be built in Leeds city centre for 90 years.

The Climate Innovation District is designed as a car-free environment with underground, centralised car parking and spaces allocated



**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Lisa Hopkinson** is an environmental researcher with more than 30 years' experience in Hong Kong and the UK in the charitable, educational and private sectors. She has variously worked as a consultant, campaigner, political aide and researcher.

She has worked on numerous sustainable transport projects, most recently a series of reports on carbon and urban transport (with acknowledgement to the tireless work of Professor Donald Shoup, Professor of urban planning at UCLA).



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for a car club. Although required by planning policy to provide a minimum number of parking spaces, CITU does not expect them all to be used and is already looking for ways to repurpose some of them.

It is also seeking planning permission for England's first car-free school which has no busy roads for children to cross, no parking spaces for visitors or staff and discourages drop-offs by car.

We also need to limit car parking space at workplaces while ensuring there are good options for car-free travel.

In 2012, Nottingham City Council bravely pioneered a Workplace Parking Levy (WPL), where employers are required to licence any workplace parking place and are charged if they have 11 or more parking places for staff (excluding blue badge places).

The scheme has so far raised £61 million which has helped to fund extensions to the existing tram system, the redevelopment of Nottingham Station and the popular Link bus network.

Other cities, such as Leicester, are considering introducing a WPL and new Scottish legislation will allow Scottish cities to implement similar schemes there.

Rather than subsidising employees that drive to work, perhaps we need to take a leaf out of California's book and introduce a policy of 'parking cash out', the idea of parking guru Professor Donald Shoup.

California enacted a law in 1992 which required many companies offering free or

subsidised parking to provide workers the option of taking cash of the same value instead. Case studies of eight employers found that this resulted in a 64% increase in car sharing, 50% increase in public transport, and 33% increase in walking and cycling to work.

Evidence from numerous studies show that car commuters are much more likely to walk, cycle or use public transport if their workplace restricts parking or charges for it.

For example, in central Cambridge work by researchers from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine found that 90% of people drove to work if there were free workplace parking compared with 65% if they were charged and 20% if there was no parking.

Similarly, a review by Sally Cairns and colleagues of 20 (mainly private) UK organisations who had undertaken travel behaviour change programmes found those who had restricted parking in some way achieved more than twice the reduction in car use compared with those who had not.

The lesson is that simply providing good

**The London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine found that 90% of people drove to work if there were free workplace parking compared with 65% if they were charged and 20% if there was no parking**

**▲ Park yourself here a while ... London resident Brenda Puech won the right to turn a parking space for a car into one for people**

alternatives to car travel, while essential, is not sufficient to get us out of our cars. Generous subsidies for public transport can help, but evidence shows these are undermined by free parking. Restricting parking should be part of a comprehensive and smart approach to reducing miles driven.

Tackling parking is seen as politically difficult. Yet Nottingham has shown a ring-fenced levy on parking can provide funding for politically popular trams and buses. And, provided there are car-free travel alternatives, we can give communities an appealing vision of space for people, plants and wildlife instead of acres of unlovely and ruinous tarmac.

More than 11,000 local residents supported a 'Trees Not Cars' campaign to turn a former retail park in Ancoats, Manchester into a park rather than a car park (sadly not supported by Manchester City Council's Planning Committee).

Politicians could find, as Hackney Council did, that turning car parks into parks is something people really like and want.