Book Review: Parking Management for Smart Growth


Gregory Pierce

University of California, Los Angeles

Urban planners in the United States have historically invested in and required developers to provide parking spaces to ensure that the demand for car storage space never exceeded the supply. This supply-side strategy has in turn profoundly influenced urban land use and development patterns. Until recently, planners focused on maintaining existing capacity regardless of demand, and adding parking supply by rule as the urban footprint expanded. However, recent evidence-based thinking has changed this perspective dramatically. Cities are changing parking management practices to minimize the economic, social, and environmental costs of the previously mandated oversupply of spaces. Public sector parking management includes, but is not limited to, the tasks of adding new spaces or repurposing old spaces, creating and enforcing use policies for existing on-street and off-street spaces, and crafting policies that affect private sector parking provision and use. Richard Willson’s book Parking Management for Smart Growth shows how cities can remedy past planning mistakes with respect to parking management and places a new emphasis on the benefits of sharing existing parking space.

Parking Management for Smart Growth discusses how planners, local officials, business groups, parking operators, and community members can actively and effectively manage parking in light of a new understanding of collective goals. Moreover, Willson emphasizes a relatively novel aspect of resource management, only feasible with the ubiquity of mobile technologies: parking space sharing and re-use. The book does not attempt to make a theoretical contribution to the literature on parking reform or broader urban management policies. Rather, Willson writes as “both academic and practitioner” with a broad audience of public sector planners, private sector managers, and applied researchers in mind (54).

Unsurprisingly as one of Donald Shoup’s former students (full disclosure: so am I), Willson’s contribution Parking Reform Made Easy (2013) largely made the case against minimum parking requirements and detailed how cities could right past management wrongs, despite entrenched resistance to maintain the status quo. Consequently, in Parking Management for Smart Growth, Willson does not reiterate in great detail the narrative of how cities have mismanaged parking and caused social, economic, and environmental ills, although he does cite the requisite seminal pieces of scholarship providing this evidence base in the opening of the book. The heart of the study, however, focuses on the mechanics of creating and sustaining an active parking management strategy. Willson explains how active management can be planned in a financially sustainable way (the key to a potentially popular public management reform), how it can be implemented, and how to incorporate ever-evolving best practices while respecting those who preferred the way things were. Since institutional inertia remains high, the most difficult planning work lies in creating new governance arrangements for community-responsive management. One example of accountable governance in action is the neighborhood-scale parking benefit district, which returns any revenue stemming from parking reform measures to local area improvements, and has found great success in several cities.
Willson stresses that actively managing parking is not as simple as applying the tools of a single academic discipline. His distaste of thinking and working in academic silos is particularly clear in his opposition to the pure pricing (economics) strategy to reform parking management, which has gained the most traction in the scholarly parking field. Rather than focusing on lowering the number of parking spaces per vehicle or narrow efficiency strategies for public parking supply, the book takes a comprehensive approach to local policies and practices which can increase sharing and intensity of use of all available parking spaces in a given area. Willson situates the sharing of parking spaces in the context of a larger urban reform movement, Smart Growth, which emphasizes mixed uses and sharing (rather than ownership) of many goods and services. Shared parking is defined as a “situation in which different land uses use the same parking spaces at different times of day” (185). The scope of potential sharing in Willson’s view can be expanded to every space except for private garages in single-family homes.

In addition to the novel focus on sharing of existing space capacity, one of the book’s strengths is that it provides a complete picture of “community asset” management of parking supply in a given area (1). It has become a cliché to call for including the full range of stakeholders and their incentives in any planning assessment and ongoing management framework. However, it is much harder to actually identify and incorporate the incentives of the relevant stakeholders in parking while including the on-street and (the relatively neglected) off-street context. Nevertheless, Willson has the experience and expertise as a transportation scholar and consultant to provide the tools to perform this kind of stakeholder assessment well. More astoundingly, he estimates that a typical city can carry out such an assessment at an average cost of $100,000 to $200,000. When the average contemporary cost of a single-use parking space in an urban garage built by a public agency is at least $30,000 (Shoup 2014), this multiuse parking planning process seems like an unquestionable bargain.

The wide-ranging ambition of Parking Management for Smart Growth is supported by a host of data-rich tables, which provide condensed, clarifying guidance for planners. At their best, the tables show how a single parking policy, such as reducing parking space size in new lots, fits into the bigger picture of the parking management sector. The ordering function of the tables also supports Willson’s argument to not just apply a “random series of ‘best practice’ tools” for parking (138). At times, however, his attempt at comprehensiveness does not make for easily readable prose, as several tables are placed in succession on the same page (for instance, see the tables on pages 46 and 47).

Extensive sharing of parking space simply would not have been possible without mobile information technologies which have now become ubiquitous in the past ten years or so. Willson unequivocally argues that transportation policies should support sharing economic functions such as short-term shopping, door-to-door deliveries and car-sharing drop-off and pick-up traffic. One of the weaknesses of sharing not addressed in the book, however, is that parking turnover can add to congestion. For instance, large delivery vehicles servicing the door-to-door shopping economy are difficult to park without blocking roadways, especially given that their timing may not be predictable. Moreover, Willson’s active parking management framework does not directly account for the role of transportation network companies (i.e., car-sharing) in sharing parking space. Even more forward-looking sharing technologies, such as driverless cars, also do not receive a thorough treatment. The feasibility of parking space sharing could be strengthened by a more detailed discussion of the implications of other sharing sectors.

Tackling a more conventional problem, the book also highlights the potential for increasing the use of multifamily-unit parking spaces by unbundling the price of car space from the price of household dwelling space. The mandatory inclusion of parking spaces in most multifamily housing development has led to the effective cost bundling of parking with rental housing. Bundling has only added to the crises of urban rental housing affordability experienced by low-income households in many cities. It also represents a societal deadweight loss if households do not use cars and do not resell or repurpose their parking spaces. As Willson notes, some cities (including Cleveland) have realized the added affordability burden imposed by bundling, and are now encouraging landlords to charge for parking and housing separately. Unbundling gives prospective residents or movers greater choice over cost and lifestyle and may even increase revenue for landlords in cities where the demand for parking space is high. To make unbundling more common, however, more research must be conducted to assess how secondary markets for parking spaces would function most efficiently, what the potential regulatory barriers to such markets might be, and landlord or building tenant resistance to unbundling because of legitimate security concerns.

Finally, Willson devotes only about two pages to active parking management in international contexts. In many low- and middle-income countries, the need to practice smart parking planning is even more pressing than in the US context given the more
rapid growth of urbanization, vehicle ownership, and transport-related pollution. Accordingly, the opportunity to guide cities away from car dependence and parking oversupply is as substantial as the opportunity to reform US parking policies. Not much rigorous scholarship has been undertaken, however, to match smart parking management strategies to broader urban management practices in these contexts. Instead, most scholars have generically prescribed Shoup’s principles of lowering minimum requirements and charging a market price for on-street space for cities that are unlikely to maintain sufficient regulatory capacity to carry out these policies.

These missed opportunities for reform guidance notwithstanding, *Parking Management for Smart Growth* shows the potential and demonstrates the means for planners to implement active parking management. While much has been accomplished in the past twenty years or so, the potential for parking reform is still vastly underrealized by city planners. The book outlines a flexible roadmap for reform implementation and adaptation from which cities of all sizes can and should benefit. Truly smart growth will require that more city planners embrace this ample opportunity for improving urban quality of life at the same pace as the sharing economy gains influence.

References

[Google Scholar](https://scholar.google.com/scholar?q=Shoup+D+2014+The+High+Cost+of+Free+Parking+)