





## An MIT professor rethinks parking lots as the centers of their communities.

By Eran Ben-Joseph, Ph.D.



I had very big shoes to fill in the early 2000s. I was just starting my career at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and part of my teaching obligation included a course titled “Site Planning.” This is not just any other course at MIT: it is the oldest, continuously-taught course in the School of Architecture and Planning. Moreover, since its first offering more than 75 years ago, it has been taught by only a handful of instructors, many of whom have turned out to be luminaries of urban design and city planning.

In 1956, a newly-tenured professor named Kevin Lynch took what was seen as a mainstream course in site engineering and turned it into a whole-system approach to planning the built and natural environments. His soon-to-follow book, *Site Planning*, published in 1962, reflected this unique thinking and is still considered the field’s foremost textbook. The text, notes, and resources from the course’s collections are comprehensive and include topics such as earthwork and grading, utilities and infrastructure layouts, and the design of access and circulation systems.

One of the common topics covered by the course is the allocation, siting, and planning of surface parking lots. Although well-researched, thoroughly explained, and informatively detailed, one element was missing: there were no documented cases of well-designed surface lots. Over the years, many of my students pointed out this deficiency by asking, “Are there any good examples of notable or great parking lots?” I could barely think of one.

To some extent, the book I have written, *ReThinking a Lot: The Design and Culture of Parking*, is a partial attempt to answer this question. In the spirit of Lynch’s holistic approach to site planning, I have tried to look at parking lots as more than just utilitarian objects. Can parking have beauty and greatness in the less than obvious traits of aesthetics or form? Can the way people use lots—both planned and spontaneous—be a significant determinant of impor-



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tance? Are surface parking lots just transient, residual way-stations in our built world, or do they hold cultural and historical virtues?

The short answer to all of these questions is yes, yes, and yes.

Despite what some see as their prevailing dullness and mundane design, surface parking lots are a central part of our culture and social way of life. They should not be treated as residual space of our built world, but as an integral part of it. We must embrace the lot's utilitarian use, acknowledging its appropriateness, while uncovering ingredients for changes. I argue that molding everyday places through simple, generative interventions can transform the way we live and interact with our surroundings. The intent is not to champion the abolition of surface parking lots or advocate the creation of strict codes and standards that dictate their design, but rather to illustrate their ongoing contemporary effects on our life and their great potential for the future.

### **Lots and Society**

While we all recognize that parking lots are an important part of our transportation network, too often, little consideration is given to how they are designed and their effects on the land. Parking lots are a central part of our social and cultural life. They influence the way we drive, the destinations we choose, and the way we behave while looking for a parking space. They can breed both feelings of danger and dependability. They also provide a certain inherent flexibility that stimulates spontaneous (and sometimes planned) public activities such as hosting festivals and markets or events that celebrate the car and sport culture.

The lots' distinctive spatial and use characteristics offer unique opportunities for their use beyond the temporary storage of cars. Indeed, from organized farmer's markets to spontaneous games of street hockey, cultural and social public activities in parking lots are a common occurrence. Such a range of activities suggests that parking lots, although not by intention, do



Fiat's  
Lingotto  
factory in  
Turin, Italy

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form part of the public realm. Parking lots with their intended and unintended usages are a found place. They are the unplanned urban rooms that fill physical and mental gaps in our designed environment; places where counter interactions and social occurrences are happening on a daily basis.

The parking lot is the first—and the last—part of a space one visits or lives next to. It is the gateway through which all dwellers, customers, visitors, or employees pass before they enter a building. Architects and designers often discuss the importance of the approach as setting the tone for a place and as the setting for the architecture itself. Developers talk about the importance of first impression to the overall atmosphere conveyed to the user. Yet, parking lots are rarely, if ever, considered as an integral part of the spatial experience of development. With the prevailing ambivalence toward cars and the refusal to view them as possible design elements, cars and parking lots are often dealt with as a necessary evil.

Resorts are some of the few developments that do

place attention on the siting and design of parking lots as part of the overall sequential arrival and departure experience. Sensibly enough, scenic hotels focus on creating memorable experiences in their surroundings that offer beauty, relaxation, and mental transformation. Such places would not consider having their guests enter the premise through a bare, paved parking lot with a shimmering sea of cars.

### Impressions

Most see the parking area as a gateway, an entry by which a first and lasting impression is made. Whether employing ecological design principles or more common development practices, such destinations tend to carefully choose appropriate paving materials and often incorporate existing features such as mature trees. Integrated into the design, such resorts also place emphasis on the sequential movement of both drivers and pedestrians for walking to and from the parking lot, which is just as important as parking one's car in it.



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Enforcing codes and regulations that impose a particular design solution may not always be the best way to achieve desirable results. An alternative is to incentivize and promote change through encouraging voluntary initiatives rather than through rules. Parking lots provide a blank canvas that can accommodate many changes and uses within the built environment. We must not forget this aspect of these unique spaces, or all parking lots will look and function alike and be deprived of their potential ability to be spontaneously changed. Public officials, developers, and operators of parking lots should realize that mixing uses could be profitable. For example, allowing food trucks into a parking lot to create “lunch in the square” generates revenue to those vendors, the city through permitting fees, and other local businesses (non-competing) through increased foot traffic caused by the event.

Developers can also realize that parking lots are just as important to their development image and attractiveness as are glamorous lobbies or fancy facades. Developers of condominiums do not shy away from adding exercise and recreation facilities to lure people into buying their units. Most understand that investment in common spaces can have positive economic outcomes. The developer, as one of the sole deciders of how a city is ultimately shaped, needs to believe that improving

the parking facilities can be beneficial to both buyers and lessees of their buildings as well as to the long-term viability of the surrounding area.

In Los Angeles, the Mexican-American community's reverence and affection for Our Lady of Guadalupe (also known as the Virgin of Guadalupe) is expressed through hundreds of community icons, murals, and makeshift shrines. Few such improvised sanctuaries reside within parking lots, however.

When redesigning the old Fiat's Lingotto factory in Turin, Italy architect Renzo Piano was faced with the challenge of integrating the massive building into its surroundings. His solution was to turn the paved surfaces around the factory into parking lot gardens. By eliminating all regular parking islands and curbs and planting rows of trees in a dense grid, Piano created a checker box of tree trunks guiding parked cars and pedestrians all under a soft canopy of foliage.

Molding everyday places such as the surface parking lots though simple, generative interventions can transform the way we live and interact with our surroundings. Our intent should neither be to champion the abolition of the surface parking lot nor to advocate for the creation of strict codes that dictate their design, but rather to recognize that parking lots could be some of our great public spaces. **P**

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