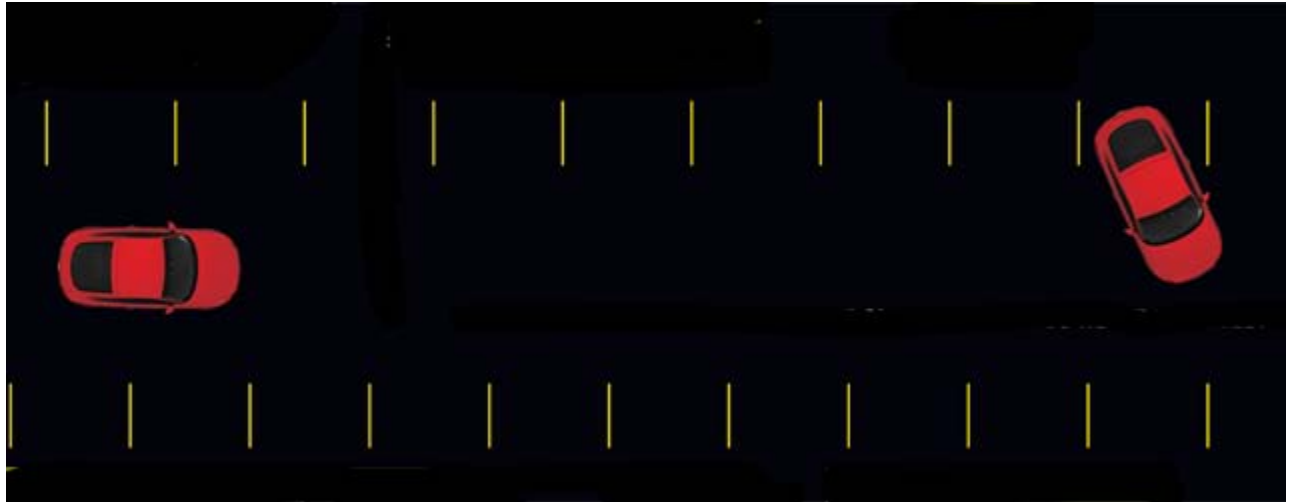


FEATURES

Between the Lines

That prized garage space or curbside spot you've been yearning for may be costing you—and the city—in ways you never realized. A journey into the world of parking, where meter maids are under siege, everybody's on the take, and the tickets keep on coming

By Dave Gardetta
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Anyone scanning Disney Hall's debut calendar in the fall of 2003 would have noticed the size of that first season's schedule, 128 shows in all. That's a weighty number for a new hall—one might have assumed it was chosen by venue management wanting the gravitas of a world-class chamber's arrival or perhaps seeking a broad spectrum of music that could reflect the diverse city. Those guesses would have been wrong. Disney Hall had been built atop Parcel K, a county-owned square of land on Bunker Hill that long had sat empty, awaiting development. For decades Parcel K served a prosaic function: It was a parking lot. Commercial landowners like parking lots; they generate cash until better economic conditions arrive, and blank space can be converted into a more profitable moneymaking device—typically a building. The practice is called “land banking.”

- **Feeling Fined**

The city's most common ticket? Parking during street cleaning, which resulted in 700,000 citations between 2010 and 2011 (the fine: \$68); in the same period more than 555,000 were issued for meter violations, the second-most-common parking ticket in the city.

- **Hot Property**

According to a July 2011 survey by Colliers International, Midtown Manhattan is the country's most expensive place to leave your car, averaging \$41 a day, or more than \$540 for monthly parking. Boston and Honolulu both edged out L.A., where the average parking downtown is \$30 a day. San Francisco and Seattle came in at \$26 and \$24, respectively.

- **Irresistible Force**

There are currently 565 parking enforcement officers in the City of L.A. Annual salary ranges from \$34,000 to

\$45,000. While it is not illegal to swear at the person giving you a parking ticket, assaulting one could land you in county jail for up to six months or a \$2,000 fine or both.

- **Going Rogue**

You can't be arrested for delinquent parking fines, but you will have to pay penalty fees (with the first late fee, a \$58 ticket goes to \$116; with the second, it's \$141) and a hold will be placed on your registration. Fail to pay five tickets, and your car is eligible to be impounded or to have a metal boot placed on one wheel, costing you \$150 to have it removed.

- **Territorial**

A study by a Penn State University researcher in the 1990s found that people take longer to vacate a space when there is another car waiting for them to leave. However, men left "significantly sooner" when an expensive car was waiting.

- **Fraud Magnet**

A disabled placard or license plate brings with it the right to park free at meters and in preferential parking areas (such as neighborhoods where permits are required)—an attractive perk for fraudsters. Being caught with a fake placard could earn you a \$1,000 fine. Parking illegally in a disabled space, like Laker Andrew Bynum was photographed doing earlier this year, can result in a \$353 ticket.

Yet before an auditorium could be raised on K, a six-floor subterranean garage capable of holding 2,188 cars needed to be sunk below it at a cost of \$110 million—money raised from county bonds. Parking spaces can be amazingly expensive to fabricate. In aboveground structures they cost as much as \$40,000 apiece. Belowground, all that excavating and shoring may run a developer \$140,000 per space. The debt on Disney Hall's garage would have to be paid off for decades to come, and as it turned out, a minimum schedule of 128 annual shows would be enough to cover the bill. The figure "128" was even written into the L.A. Philharmonic's lease. In 2003, Esa-Pekka Salonen opened Frank Gehry's masterpiece to a packed house with Mahler's *Resurrection*, and in the years since, concertgoers—who lay out \$9 to enter the garage—have steadily funded performances that exist to cover the true price of their parking.

Donald Shoup, a Yale-trained economist and former chair of UCLA's Department of Urban Planning, loves telling this story. Gehry's auditorium may be wonderful, says Shoup, but it is also a fine example of poor planning. The garage—designed to serve the public good—instantly made the Metro immaterial to concertgoers, placed several thousand cars on the road every week, and pumped a few hundred tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere each year. Like any parking lot entrance, the one on Bunker Hill sucked air from street life. "L.A.," says Shoup, "required 50 times more parking under Disney Hall than San Francisco would *allow* at their own hall." Downtown already had an oversupply of garages and lots where music fans could leave their cars. "After a concert in San Francisco," says Shoup, "the streets are full of people walking to their cars, eating in restaurants, stopping into bars and bookstores. In L.A.? The bar next door at Patina is a ghost town." Receipts that should have gone to the philharmonic's endowment instead are funding enough parking for nearly every ticket holder to park a car every night downtown.

L.A. has been a wellspring for a parking guru like Shoup to become self-realized. Our downtown contains more parking spaces per acre than any other city in the world and has been adding them at a rate of about 1,000 a year for a century. If you grew up here, the earliest and most essential phrase drilled into you by adults—"Remember, we're in blue Mickey"—was uttered in a parking lot bigger than Disneyland itself. Angelenos can immediately recognize outsiders, lost souls seen

wandering through parking garages with no memory of where the Corolla sits. We valet at Macy's and at the dentist, at Christmas parties and Oscar shindigs: When Bob Shaye, head of New Line Cinema, threw a party to celebrate *The Lord of the Rings* in 2004, 900 cars showed up on his cul-de-sac. Shaye had the chaparral lot across the street paved to park them all. L.A. can claim the nation's first LEED-certified parking garage (Santa Monica Civic Center), and we depend on other prized garages to plan our day's pilgrimage—Santa Monica (2nd and Colorado, of course), Beverly Hills (Canon and Beverly), Pasadena (Fair Oaks and Green). We dream up complicated strategies to clinch the choicest spot at the curb, and we rely on parking reservations to get on the studio lot, parking passes when returning to our jobs, parking permits to grab a street spot on our streets, and an app to find a space when we go to court to pay a parking ticket.

In the United States hundreds of engineers make careers out of studying traffic. Entire freeway systems like L.A.'s have been hardwired with sensors connecting to computer banks that aggregate vehicle flow, monitor bottlenecks, explain congestion in complicated algorithms. Yet cars spend just 5 percent of their lives in motion, and until recently there was only one individual in the country devoting his academic career to studying parking lots and street meters: Donald Shoup.

Shoup is 73 years old. He drives a 1994 Infiniti but for the last three decades has steered a 1975 Raleigh bike two miles uphill daily in fair weather, from his home near the Mormon temple to the wooded highlands of UCLA's north campus. He was born near one shore (Long Beach), grew up on a far shore (Hawaii), and resembles a 19th-century figure sketched by Melville. He has a mildly hectic complexion, a halo of silver hair that breaks over his small ears into a white froth of a beard, and brimstone eyes. This year Shoup's 765-page book, *The High Cost of Free Parking*, was rereleased to zero acclaim outside of the transportation monthlies, parking blogs, and corridor beyond his office door in UCLA's School of Public Affairs building. He wasn't surprised—"There's not even a name for what I do," he says. Shoup, however, does not lack for acolytes. His followers call themselves Shoupistas, like Sandinistas, and on a Facebook page they leave posts suggesting parking meters for prostitutes and equations that quantify the contradiction between time spent cruising for free parking versus the "assumed time-value" cited to justify expanding roadways. (The hooker stuff is more interesting.)

After 36 years, Shoup's writings—usually found in obscure journals—can be reduced to a single question: What if the free and abundant parking drivers crave is about the worst thing for the life of cities? That sounds like a prescription for having the door slammed in your face; Shoup knows this too well. Parking makes people nuts. "I truly believe that when men and women think about parking, their mental capacity reverts to the reptilian cortex of the brain," he says. "How to get food, ritual display, territorial dominance—all these things are part of parking, and we've assigned it to the most primitive part of the brain that makes snap fight-or-flight decisions. Our mental capacities just bottom out when we talk about parking."

In 1930, Oklahoma City had a half-million cars on its streets and seemingly no place to park them. Automobiles were choking commerce: Drivers who worked downtown were monopolizing the parking, keeping away others who wished to conduct business there. Someone needed to invent a machine that could regulate street parking. Carlton Magee was an editor of the *Albuquerque Morning Journal* when in 1920 he helped uncover what would become the Teapot Dome Scandal. A few years later, in a hotel lobby, a judge whom Magee once accused of corruption walked up and knocked him to the floor. The editor drew his pistol and shot wide, killing a bystander. Acquitted of manslaughter, Magee moved to Oklahoma City to run the *Oklahoma News*, where parking, not

vindictive judges, was the big story. Magee invented the Dual Park-O-Meter, filed for its patent, and on July 16, 1935, 174 parking meters were slotted into Oklahoma City.

For businessmen and courts around the country, the invention of the parking meter was on par with shooting at a judge. In Alabama in 1937, the state supreme court declared Birmingham's parking meters unconstitutional and ordered them removed. In Los Angeles the *Times* editorial staff went full steam. Three city attempts to install meters during the 1940s were beat back by stories that described parking meters as "illegal," "immoral," and "a perversion." Nonetheless, in 1949 in North Hollywood the first 400 meters were installed on Lankershim and Magnolia.

Today there are 39,440 parking meters positioned along L.A. streets, each one earning on average about a thousand dollars a year. Some 2,537,521 citations were handed out to motorists by the city's parking enforcement bureau last year. The most expensive ticket—"Parking hazardous waste carrier in residential area"—is almost never written and costs \$378. The most common ticket, for parking on a street cleaning day, will set you back \$68. Last year fines to drivers totaled \$166,700,840—money that was used to pay for parking operations; surplus revenue is handed over to the city council. The L.A. Department of Transportation, which oversees the city's parking enforcement program, does not keep tabs on the streets with the most violations. But of its five enforcement areas—which include Central, Southern, Valley, and Western—Hollywood has the highest issuance rate. Not that everybody pays. In May City Controller Wendy Greuel publicized the existence of the DOT's Gold Card program, which had regularly dismissed tickets issued to city politicians and their staffs. (The report made everyone but Greuel look bad, until the mayor's office shot back with proof that a top aide of Greuel's had used the service.) According to an audit by Greuel's office, \$132 million in outstanding fines were collected last year, with 28 percent of citations still unpaid. The DOT monitors the license numbers of some 18,000 scofflaws whose collective tally adds up to around \$17 million. As of mid-September the honor for most citations went to a gentleman living on 36th Street. His trailer had received 124 tickets, all unpaid and totaling \$13,028.

John Van Horn, a Shoupista who edits the country's only independent parking magazine, *Parking Today*, was attending an Australian parking conference five years ago when a local enforcement officer shared a piece of information with him: "Let's face it, only 10 percent of parking citations ever get written." Stateside, Van Horn spoke to enforcement managers around the country, who confirmed the Aussie's remark—drivers with expired meters typically get away 90 percent of the time. Van Horn decided to conduct an experiment. "Once a month," he says, "I visited a friend who lives by the Grove on a street with permit-only parking." Van Horn parked without a city pass on each visit and by year's end had received just two tickets; he escaped without citation about 83 percent of the time. Next, Van Horn parked once a week in a Beverly Hills metered space without paying. His odds improved dramatically. In the span of a year he was cited only twice, a ticket-dodging rate of about 96 percent.

"If you received a ticket for every violation," says Van Horn, "you'd be yelling *Parking Nazi!* and *Selective enforcement!* Elected governments aren't ready for that outcry, so cities hold back on tickets." Yet if we evade enforcement as often as Van Horn claims, why does the sight of a ticket on the windshield unhinge our natures? "We break the law often and get away with it," he says. "Deep down inside we know that. What makes us mad is getting caught the few times we do. *Ninety percent of drivers on this street got away scot-free today, but I get the ticket?* That makes us crazy."

Upon receiving citations, frustrated L.A. drivers have spit on parking officers, slashed their tires, attacked their cars with baseball bats, pulled them from their vehicles to beat them, and even fired handguns at officers. It's like Kabul out there. LAPD commander Michael Williams, the mayor's

recent appointment to take charge of the DOT's Parking Enforcement Division, might be better equipped to deal with the assaults. His background? Counterterrorism.

Shoup can often be found dallying around parking meters and brings a camera to photograph illegally parked cars. Not long ago you could have spotted Shoup clicking on the corner of Pico and Fairfax, where the city had quadrupled its meter rates. ("Rates had gone too high there—sometimes there wasn't a car on the street.") In Westwood Village Shoup once rode the Raleigh back and forth for weeks tailing cars. He discovered that the average driver had to circle the block two and a half times before locating an open metered space. Westwood became a model for Shoup; the "cruising" he observed there occurs wherever drivers seek out inexpensive metered space to avoid pricier garages and lots. (A similar study in Manhattan in 1995 revealed that New Yorkers spent 11 minutes on average searching for a space.) In a year's time in Westwood, space hunting by drivers consumed an extra 47,000 gallons of gas. It stalled traffic, increased accidents, and required 950,000 extra vehicle miles, about four trips to the moon and back.

The problem, according to Shoupistas, is that meters are priced equally. "Imagine what would happen at Dodger Stadium if every seat cost the same and went on sale game day," says Dan Mitchell, an engineer at DOT. "Everyone would run for that seat behind home plate—it would be insanity. But that's what we have now with parking—equal pricing." This spring the DOT plans to introduce an \$18.5 million smart wireless meter system based on Shoup's theories. Called ExpressPark, the 6,000-meter array will be installed on downtown streets and lots, along with sensors buried in the pavement of every parking spot to detect the presence of cars and price accordingly, from as little as 50 cents an hour to \$6. Street parking, like pork bellies, will be open to market forces. As blocks fill, prices will rise; when occupancy drops, so will rates. In an area like downtown, ideal for Shoup's progressive pricing, people will park based on how much they're willing to pay versus how far they are willing to walk to a destination. In a trendy area like Melrose Avenue's shopping district, where parking on side streets is forbidden to visitors, Shoup would open those residential blocks to market-priced meters, wooing home owners by guaranteeing that meter profits would be turned over to them in the form of property tax deductions. (That benefit could add up to thousands of dollars a year per household.)

Brooklyn's Park Slope neighborhood is already experimenting with a version of the system, and so are San Francisco, Seattle, and Washington, D.C. If adopted by more cities, the system would hopefully stop a Westwood scenario from ever occurring again, guaranteeing one open space of parking at any time of day on every metered block by pricing out drivers who are more willing to park on cheaper blocks. Should a block remain empty, its meters will drop their hourly rates over the course of a month. Nobody, of course, really knows what will happen once L.A.'s system powers up. After Seattle conducted its own study on performance-based parking, engineers noticed an oddity: When prices dropped on certain blocks, drivers actually parked less. No one can explain this.

"In San Francisco we've seen prices go up on one block, down on the next, then up again," says Shoup. "Why that's happening, we don't know." The DOT and Shoup expect ExpressPark to illuminate the static lives of automobiles. "All we need is to move one car off each block for the system to work and get rid of all cruising," says Shoup. "It's not like we're talking about a problem as big as the Reformation or Prohibition."

Parking is an emotionally hot issue. When the City of Ventura began playing around with Shoup's ideas last summer, Tea Party activists responded by vowing to vote out three city council members before year's end. Progressives also adore free parking: San Jose, the hub of enlightened capitalism, has more vacant garage space than it can handle. "Everyone believes parking should be free," says Van Horn. "We want that in the Constitution. But it's too expensive, and there's too much

of it. Today there are garages all over L.A. with top floors that have never seen a car.” Whereas a skyscraper of a million square feet in New York may be required to have 100 parking spaces, an equal-size structure in L.A., like the U.S. Bank Tower, is compelled by the city to provide closer to 1,300 spaces. The maxim is wrong: L.A. wasn’t built around the car. It was built around the parking lot. And the individuals who knew this best were the original lot men of downtown L.A.

As a boy working in an Italian-shoe concession, Andrew Pansini had fitted a tiny bell into the heel of a ladies’ shoe, figuring women enjoyed being noticed when they walk. After he arrived in L.A. in 1916, a wooden leg caught his attention: Its owner spent his days flagging down cars, collecting change from drivers who parked on his block and then patrolling their cars. Pansini realized you could move those cars into vacant lots and do better. He found a square of land at 4th and Olive, charged five cents, and waited six days for his first customer to drive in.

By 1920, there were 40 parking lots downtown and by 1926, more than 100, but still there were not enough. Pansini began leveling buildings, looking for more parking. He erased 83 addresses in his career. Jobs disappeared, businesses vanished, neighborhoods faded out, all to make room for more parking lots. Pansini’s most famous fight was his attempt to raze the old City Hall on Broadway. His opponent was Simon Lazarus, who ran the Million Dollar Theater and wanted the land Pansini was after. Eventually the two men squared off in city council chambers. Bidding and counterbidding on the property’s lease escalated until the price was near \$3,000, whereupon the proceedings collapsed and neither won. Years later Pansini left Los Angeles for San Francisco, where he reckoned that parking could be found in the ground, not on it. At Union Square in 1942, he built the world’s first underground garage.

By the 1950s, almost a thousand people were licensed to manage parking lots in L.A. New York was a big parking lot town (lots were at a minimum there; profits were high), and so was Chicago. But L.A. had more than 1,300 lots—the largest game of all. Only a handful of L.A. operators could claim more than a few lots. There was Walter Briggs; thin lipped and gangly, he wore his pants too short, strutted like a cowboy from Kansas, cheated on his wives and landlords, and ended up running the LAX concession along with a hundred other sites. There was Chic Wolk, an air force vet who in 1954 was pulling a night shift at Lockheed when he leased his first lot on Bunker Hill, where Angels Flight let out. Wolk had forearms like pistons and fair skin that would soon frizzle in the California sun, and from that original lot—which charged 45 cents a day—Wolk built an empire that would include 163 lots. There was also Mushy Greenstein, an ex-con and illiterate who spent his days at the track with a bodyguard and burned through his leases as fast as he won them, always seeking more gambling cash. But Mushy had talent. He could tell you the monthly income of any city lot at a glance just by driving past it. He was that good.

Lot men were intensely secretive. They never shared their properties’ incomes (a poorly performing lot might lease for \$500 a month and could earn an operator a dollar a day for every car), the names of their brokers, or the latest intelligence. Each time a building went up, the parking map shifted and the values of lots rose or fell. Knowing what developers had in mind was key. Wolk won two lots from Walter Briggs that proved to be lucrative. Where were these lots? Wolk won’t say. He retired long ago, sold off his interests, and still he won’t reveal their locations. That’s how secretive lot men were. “Why would you want to know?” Wolk asked recently with suspicion. “Let’s just say they were downtown.”

Briggs and a handful of others had sewn up the parking lot market by the time Ray Liesegang left New York for L.A. in 1966. “Those five men would have breakfast every Saturday at the old Hilton downtown, exchange information, trade leases, and massage the market for themselves,” Liesegang recalls. They didn’t, however, control garages. “Psychologically people didn’t like driving into the

bowels of the earth back then," he says. "I wanted into that." Liesegang opened the garage at the new Union Bank building before his career really took off. Ventura Boulevard was booming in the 1970s, and at one point Liesegang ran almost every commercial garage along the Valley way. He eventually would manage more than 250 garages, including one on Grand Avenue that grossed \$12 million in a single year.

Garages and lots in L.A. take in about \$850 million each year, much of it in cash and without a great deal of oversight. Clyde Wilson, the president of an audit firm called the Parking Network, estimates that the city's garages lose as much as 28 percent of their earnings annually to poor management and theft. In 1980, when LAX lots were producing \$15 million in receipts, the airport's parking manager claimed that employee theft amounted to less than a half-million dollars. After the installation of a computerized system, it was revealed that LAX attendants were stealing close to \$4 million a year. "In L.A.," says Wilson, "just one-quarter of operations have some kind of automation. That means \$600 million a year is being processed with no mechanical controls. Loss rates are very high." They're also high for the city government, which claims that parking lot owners have cheated the city out of \$23 million in tax revenue since 2008. This past October, the city drew up a law requiring permitted parking lot operators to provide mechanical or digital monitoring to do business in L.A.

During the 1990s, Wall Street realized that, loss rates or not, there was money in parking, and a vast consolidation within the industry began. Lot men like Liesegang and Wolk sold out, and national companies moved in—Standard, Central, Ampco System. Lazarus wouldn't recognize the landscape today if he returned from the grave. No one meets for breakfast at the Hilton these days, no one walks their lots—those spaces are now run by offices in Nashville and Chicago. Very few private operators make real money, as less lucrative management fees long ago replaced lot leases, but Chic Wolk's daughter, Cari Wolk, is an operator who does. She owns a garage at 6th and Hope, which, after the Standard hotel opened for business, became one of the more profitable garages downtown—a 24-hour operation. How profitable? "Why would you want to know?" she asks.

When Rick Cole became a Pasadena councilman in 1983—he would later be mayor of the city—he noticed the town's historic bungalows were vanishing and quickly being displaced by ugly boxes. These new condo buildings had no doors and sometimes no windows facing the sidewalk. Instead they offered once-charming streetscapes a two-story wall. Whole blocks were being colonized and lost to these incognito squares. Cole wanted to know why.

"It turned out that Pasadena, which didn't mandate parking when its single-family bungalows were built in the 1920s, now required eight parking spots for a building where four people might live," says Cole, a Shoupista who is now the city manager of Ventura. "Subterranean parking was too expensive, so a thing called 'tuck-under'—or semisubterranean—parking was invented." With tuck-under buildings, residents park half a story below street level and enter their entombed front doors from the garage. Everything is hidden from the street, including the residents who call it home. "Parking requirements," says Cole, "had created whole communities of new blank walls that faced other blank walls. I hated it."

After Cole was elected mayor of Pasadena in 1992, he heard that the man who had been public works director for the city in the 1940s was buried in the basement beneath Cole's office. "I would actually spend time wandering alone down there," says Cole, "looking for the headstone. The parking meters this guy had ordered to be installed throughout the city were supposedly down there

with him.” Cole never found the grave site; it was the *career* of the public works director that lay dead in the basement. Unlike other cities, Pasadena hadn’t installed street meters. “When this guy suggested they do so,” says Cole, “and then ordered them, the citizenry revolted. That was the end of him.”

So Cole, an untested mayor, decided to commit career suicide—he would be the first to install meters. And not just anywhere but in the city’s seediest business district, its skid row, a stroll for prostitutes that would soon be renamed Old Pasadena. Cole had chosen the area to install parking meters because it was ideal for conducting his own experiment: He wanted to attract merchants to the area, where the rent on the decaying buildings was low and the potential for foot traffic was high. Could meter revenue clean and repair Old Pasadena, then help police its streets? “There was, putting it politely, *tremendous* opposition,” says Cole. Shop owners barely hanging on told Cole he was crazy. In a large meeting with merchants, Cole said something that swayed them: Rather than fill city coffers, meter collections would go back to businesses in the form of new alleyways, sidewalk improvement, more trees, and police. “The moment I said that, one of my staff members kicked me under the table,” says Cole.

The area took off. The Gap moved in a block away from the old Le Sex Shoppe. Cole pushed his project further: Unlike other cities, Pasadena would not require businesses to build parking lots or garages. Two city-owned parking structures would rent spaces to merchants for \$50 a month—a cost of \$600 a year per space instead of the tens of thousands of dollars to construct one. Soon the meters were earning more than \$1 million annually. Some \$415,000 covered the city’s garage debt, while \$700,000 went back to neighborhood improvement every year. People who once drove to Westwood on Saturday nights now visited Old Pasadena.

“If you had told people in 1990 that this switch would occur,” says Shoup, “you would have been considered insane.” There are many theories about why Westwood died, and Shoup has his own. “It’s a myth to say Westwood died because of one high-profile homicide in the 1980s,” he says, referring to the 1988 death of a Long Beach woman named Karen Toshima, killed in crossfire. “Westwood had an unbelievably high parking requirement—ten spaces for every 1,000 square feet of restaurant. Old Pasadena had none. Westwood had dangerous alleys, crumbling sidewalks. If you want to know why Old Pasadena succeeded Westwood, parking was a big part of the story.”

Cole had created the first Shoupista paradise: No parking requirements, parking meters where once there were none. His city grew rich off the notion—and nobody has tried it since. “For 5,000 years,” says Cole, “we built cities around people, and they worked well. For 50 years we’ve built them around the parking lot—a ridiculous use of land, of money, and an intrusion into the intimacy of human scale. Now we’ve painted ourselves into a corner. The saving grace is that the first 5,000 years might come back again.”

Parking had never crossed Shoup’s mind when he left Yale for L.A. in 1968—his focus was public finance and land-value theory. In 1975, he stumbled onto a master’s thesis by two USC students who had worked their way through school parking cars for a man named Rex Link. “Link,” says Shoup, “was annoyed that county workers were offered free parking downtown when federal workers had to pay.” Link’s student employees proposed a study. “They found that 72 percent of county workers drove to work alone,” says Shoup, “but *60 percent* of federal employees carpooled, took public transportation, or even walked. These were workers in the same professions, driving to the same location.” When forced to pay a practical value for their parking, drivers were twice as likely

to carpool—traffic congestion was halved, carbon emissions were halved. “The more I thought of that,” says Shoup, “the more I thought there was a perfect storm here. No one can tell you why parking prices are set as they are. But when people pay comparatively little for something that’s expensive to produce, the result is collective irrational behavior.”

Choosing to study parking in 1975, on the other hand, was singular irrational behavior. “People thought I was nuts,” says Shoup. “Parking was a blind spot in universities.” Like his subject, Shoup is caught between urban planning and traffic engineering—a no-man’s-land. “Because Don came out of Yale trained as an economist,” says Richard Willson, a professor of urban planning at Cal Poly Pomona, “and looked at parking issues as an economic problem, he was never really welcomed into urban planning circles.” Few people Shoup worked with at UCLA had heard of the *Parking Standards* report, published by the Institute of Transportation Engineers, or the parking index report of the American Planning Association. Taken together, Shoup discovered, the two publications shaped the look of modern cities. The APA’s index lists 662 business types, along with suggestions for the number of parking spaces each structure should include. Urban planners, says Shoup, have no theory, use no hard data, when choosing parking requirements; they consult the manuals to decide. Every business imaginable is found within: Funeral parlors? A basic formula is eight parking spaces plus one for each hearse. Convents? One-tenth of a space per nun is fine. Adult bookstores? One space for every prospective patron plus one for the cashier holding the longest shift (no mention of the flasher in the alley). Public swimming pools? One space for every 2,500 gallons of water on the premises, chlorine included.

The figures are as precise as their origins are incomprehensible. Willson, who was a student of Shoup’s in the 1980s, says, “For 30 years parking was a number you looked up in the book—it’s magical the way these numbers spread.” He became fascinated by the office parks that proliferate along L.A. and Orange county freeways. “Parking requirements are a primary shaper of these landscapes,” says Willson. “The golden rule for office buildings has been four spaces for every 1,000 square feet. But where did *that* number come from?” Nobody knew, so Willson plotted a case study to gauge whether parking requirements connected to reality. He chose ten office parks and discovered that their peak occupancy rate was around 56 percent. Twice as many parking lots had been mandated by cities than was actually needed. “I interviewed the planners and the developers,” says Willson. “The planners would say, ‘It’s not our fault—the developers want that much.’ The developers would say, ‘We thought the planners knew what they were doing.’ ”

Parking mandates had been shuffling the look of L.A. neighborhoods for some time. Among the ugliest—or most charming, depending on your perspective—of apartment profiles, the 1950s dingbat was conceived as an answer to parking requirements. The dingbat offered sidewalk strollers the bewitching view of a cement “front yard” and several car trunks. Single-car garages, hidden in backyards and alleyways in the early 20th century, doubled in size by the 1970s and moved onto the front lawn once cities began to require two residential spaces for every house. Shopping centers and malls assembled seas of asphalt around their retail islands, not because developers wanted them that size but because cities did. During the 1960s and ’70s—the epoch of Southern California’s shopping center build-out—malls had to offer enough parking for every car that might show up around 2 p.m. on the second Saturday before Christmas. Since planners didn’t know how many cars would arrive, an estimate was made: four or five cars for every 1,000 square feet of mall space. That would mean devoting 50 percent more land to cars than to people.

Shoup is not opposed to *all* parking lots; he’s against cities requiring parking lots. “Would you require every home to come with a pool or every office to include a dining room because someone might want it?” asks Shoup. “Why not let developers build parking where the market demands it and charge its true value?” It’s a market-based utopian wager: If you ask drivers to pay the actual price of

their parking at the Grove or Santa Monica Place or Disney Hall, what would they do? If the fair price of your parking space is \$60, would you view your car differently? In Manhattan a small portion of the population owns cars—it's too expensive to park them. L.A. has the highest density of parking spaces in the world. "You can't have the number of cars we have in L.A. without our parking lots," says Shoup. "And you can *never* create urban density with the parking lots we've built." They make driving too easy.

L.A. sits on a mountain-size surplus of parking it doesn't know what to do with. "For decades," says Willson, "cities have asked urban planners, 'How much parking do we need?' keeping in mind that it should be free for everyone who wants it and there's no mass transportation involved. Shoup is saying, 'How much parking do you *want* for the city you desire to live in?' " San Francisco or New York might have ten times the parking each has now if they had buildings like 1100 Wilshire, where the first 15 floors are all garage. But the downtown areas of those cities won't allow it.

L.A. mandates it. In Los Angeles we attend dinner parties and wish out loud for more pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods, increased urban density, more mass transportation, less congestion, less air pollution, less reliance on our cars—and cheap, abundant parking wherever we go. Shoup's theories sound counterintuitive, even *irrational*, to people over 40. But there is a parking generation gap. "For people in my generation," says Willson, who is 55, "people who grew up with free parking wherever they went, grasping what Shoup is saying can be really tough. But the young couples who live in my neighborhood on Mount Washington or my students who bike wherever they go? They get it instantly. They understand Shoup."

Writer-at-large Dave Gardetta wrote about [Trader Joe's](#) in the September 2011 issue.