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Breaking America's love affair with ultra-convenient parking (print & web)

A push to redevelop or reshape some parts of the Washington region to become more-bustling urban centers may end up dramatically reducing the surface parking lots in those areas, especially if transit options are available as a viable alternative to driving.

Ambitious makeover plans in the areas around Tysons Corner in Fairfax County and White Flint Mall in Montgomery County will no doubt wipe out many surface parking lots. The same can be said of the surface parking at Columbia Town Center in Howard County if it is revamped as planned.

Clearly, the thinking on how we accommodate parking is in transition.

But transition won't be easy. Not only do we love owning and driving cars but we are addicted to being able to park them as close as possible to building entrances, and at little or no cost. It will be at least a generation before Americans believe convenient parking isn't an entitlement.

Consider this: Following a recent column I wrote praising the architecture of the new Arena Stage, several theater patrons sent me e-mails complaining about Arena's lack of on-site parking. Don't architects know, they seemed to say, that in America having a convenient place to park is of paramount importance?



That attitude underscores how difficult it is to change the public's parking habits.

A Metro station on M Street SW is just a few hundred feet east of the Arena site, providing easy enough access to the theater without a car. The Southwest Waterfront across the street is about to be transformed from a suburban-style strip of parking lots and low-rise buildings into a dense, city-like neighborhood, with garages containing hundreds of parking spaces.

But this is little consolation for some of Arena's patrons.

With minimal on-site parking available, many Arena theater-goers complain that they must park in lots or garages a couple of blocks away or at curbside spaces on surrounding streets at meters that require payment even at night. Patrons undoubtedly miss the once-free on-street parking and the surface parking lot just a few steps from the old Arena and Kreeger theaters.

Because the urban form and character of Arena's neighborhood is destined to change dramatically, the new Arena was designed to exist and operate within this transformed future context, not in the context of the present or the past. By staying on its tight Maine Avenue property, Arena gained significant aesthetic and functional benefits. But unavoidable compromises had to be made, and minimal on-site parking was one of them.

The new Arena is designed to meet the needs of theater-goers beyond its loyal and aging audience, many of whom live in the suburbs. Rather it aims to address the needs and lifestyles of future patrons, including the children and grandchildren of today's theater patrons. More of the future patrons are likely to live in the city or close to it. They will probably use transit more frequently and depend less on driving and parking at downtown destinations.

This is excellent, but it is just half the equation.

*The other half is that where people are coming from
(i.e. where they live and where they work)
must also be within walking distance of a Metro station.*

*That is why the proposed Maryland state law —
HB 948 **SRSOD** State Rail Station Overlay Districts
is so important,
as it will facilitate and accelerate
making attractive, functional walking
available to many more people.*

*The mark of great management is
vision and courage.*

***Vision** — the ability to see where the future is and
to position long-term fixed-assets properly.*

***Courage** — managing the transition from the way
things were to the way they are going to be.*

Thus, the new Arena Stage is emblematic of how we are beginning to **assess and meet parking needs differently**. It exemplifies the challenges faced throughout the country by planners, architects, developers, transportation engineers and public officials who confront thorny questions for every project, such as:

- How much on-site parking will be enough, or too much?
- Can parking spaces be shared among different uses and buildings to reduce the overall quantity of parking spaces within a development or neighborhood?
- What percentage of commuters will carpool?
- How many people will choose transit instead of cars?
- Will people walk, and if so, how far?
- Will more people walk greater distances if walkways are safe and attractive?
- What incentives will be necessary to change people's attitudes and behavior concerning driving and parking?

and functional — i.e. the more storefronts you pass, the longer you will be willing to walk.

Perhaps one of the trickiest issues concerns parking spaces for the disabled, especially since the nation's elderly population is growing. How many such spaces, which are seldom occupied today, will we really need?

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