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Putting Parking in Its Place

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Old Suburban Parking: garage in the rear. Palo Alto.
Photos and graphics courtesy Susan Haviland.



A classic science fiction story tells of the discovery of a planet on which an admirable but somewhat primitive life form has evolved.

Industrious and intelligent, protected by strong glossy carapaces, these beings spend most of their time moving about on well defined paths. At night many rest in handsome, elaborate domiciles. They vary tremendously in size, color, shape and mode of locomotion, but without exception all share the same affliction: They are infested by small, soft parasites that swarm nauseatingly about whenever the noble creatures come to rest.

The explorers who discover the planet have a policy of not intervening in other creatures' affairs, but these parasites are so pervasive and awful an exception seems justified. They concoct a spray that kills the parasites but not the hosts. But as the parasites dies the great creatures become inert.

This planet, of course, is not some sphere way out deep in space. It is Earth. The splendid life form is the automobile and the parasite is none other than ourselves.

The point is that automobiles are so ubiquitous and have had such a profound effect on our cities and landscape that an intelligent alien being might well assume they are the dominant inhabitants of the planet.

It's not just a matter of the roads we have built. It's not just a matter of constant traffic. Most automobiles spend most of their time at rest, parked somewhere. Outside of dense, urban areas, parking is the single most salient landscape feature wherever groups of people congregate.

Parking, like any important facet of our life, has long been standardized, and in several ways.

There are pragmatic parking standards, which belong to the world of the traffic engineer and parking con-

sultant. These involve someone's interpretation of the physical capabilities of cars and drivers. They have to do with the widths of parking spaces and aisles in parking lots, maximum slopes on ramps and the radii of turns. They tend to be perpetually out of date as cars become smaller and more agile.

There are political parking standards, which are driven by local attitudes toward growth, traffic congestion and availability or desirability of on-street parking. They concern the ratio of parking to project size, who can park where and the visual appearance of parking areas.

There are economic parking standards, which are rules of thumb based on the cost of land versus the cost of structures. When land values reach a certain point, surface parking is more expensive than structure parking. When land values reach another point, crazy mechanized solutions such as structures with vertically moving slots become cost effective. These standards are not codified, not mandated by any code or group. They're just what you do if you read the bottom line.

Finally, there are market standards, which are based on the innocent sounding premise of giving people what they want. Sadly, like wishes granted by a genie, they produce environments nobody wants. Market standards are neither official nor codified, but they are an integral part of developers' and marketing consultants' lore and they are believed in very deeply. In contemporary residential developments—from large, expensive, detached houses to humble two-bedroom starter condominiums—the following standards are typical:

Drive-to-the-Kitchen. The very best thing is to be able to unload your groceries and your family inside the house, at the most relevant room.

Old suburban parking: garage
in the rear. Palo Alto.



Old suburban parking:
mews in Pasadena.

Contiguity. Even if you can't drive to the kitchen, at the very least parking should be immediately adjacent to it. You should be able to go from your car to your house without going outside and getting rained on, or worse.

Security. Even if parking is not contiguous to your unit, once your car is parked, you must be in a locked secure area with secure access to your domicile. This standard tends to reinforce the other two and gives them a more serious, less indulgent aspect.

Number. Two garage spaces sell better than one. Three sell better than two. The automobile is an icon. The more you have, the more rich and powerful you are. The bigger your

garage, the more rich and powerful you appear.

This is all very well for your own house. But this emphasis on private convenience has produced streets that are nothing more than service drives and streetscapes whose most prominent feature is garage doors. Entrances for people are secondary, minimal, uncelebrated and often undetectable.

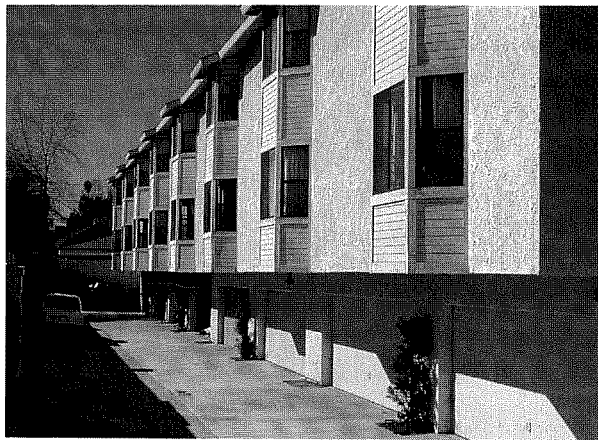
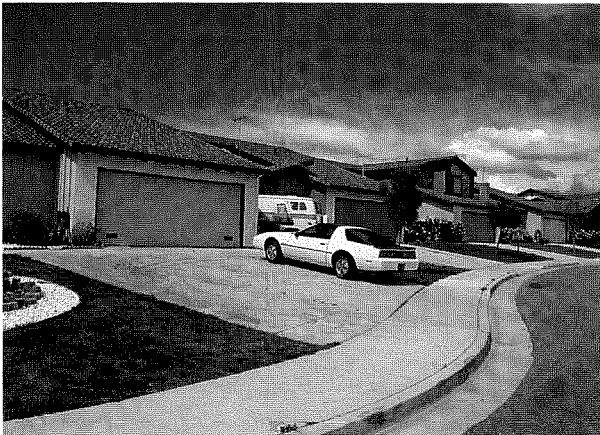
The standards that produced and preserve this situation evolved slowly out of other standards connected to earlier forms of conveyance. When something new, like the automobile, is introduced, it tends to offer new functionality within old forms. Standards that are applied to it tend to be those that were applied to its predecessors.

Keeping a carriage, the automobile's predecessor, was costly and complicated. One needed stables, a carriage house and special staff. Stables were malodorous and tended to be located close enough for convenience but far enough away that smells did not reach the house.

When cars first appeared, they were garaged, naturally enough, in carriage houses, barns, or stables. As they became more popular and less of a rich man's toy, ordinary houses were adapted to accommodate them. This usually meant clearing out the shed in the back or constructing a free-standing garage. These structures had some of the properties of stables and carriage houses. Charming they might be, but they were definitely secondary to the house and usually located as far away from it as possible.

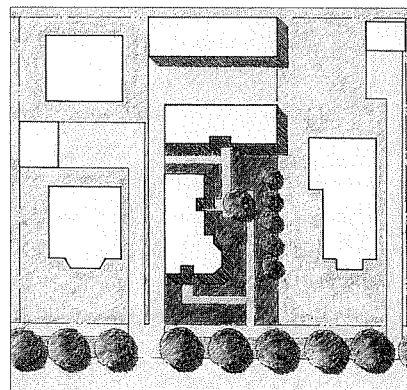
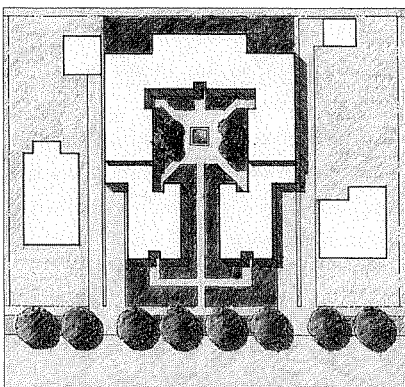
The pattern of the free-standing garage in a rear corner of the lot was wonderful and long lived. It produced the kind of suburb that I and most people of my generation think of as archetypal. Rows of big trees meet overhead to form a tunnel. Front lawns are broad and carefully land-

**New suburban parking:
the street as service drive.**



**New suburban parking:
A Pasadena "six pack."**

**In Pasadena, all parking
must be built on the rear
40 percent of the lot or
underground. Facades and
gardens face the street.**



scaped. Porches and gracious entries face the street, even on the humblest houses, and driveways slip unobtrusively up the side of the lot. In this world, pedestrians feel comfortable.

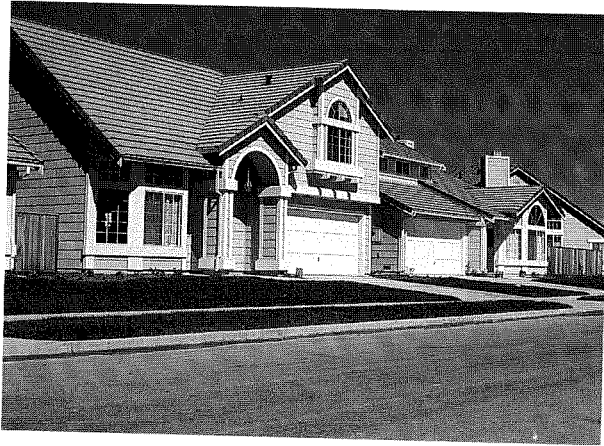
But cars are not carriages. Unlike horses, they don't require daily care, don't smell (that much) and aren't unsanitary to have in the house. They do emit poisonous gasses but that, in and of itself, is no reason to isolate them in the farthest corner of the lot.

Furthermore, it is cheaper to build a garage as part of a house than to build it free-standing. Putting it directly on the street saves paving costs and makes the back yard bigger, which is important when rising land costs dictate smaller lots. Besides, with an automatic garage opener and a door directly into the house, you hardly have to go outside at all. The full possibilities of automotive convenience are at last being realized. The only thing lost is the quality of the street.

There are solutions. Sadly enough for this over-regulated world, they involve more standards. But the standards can really be quite simple. Our office has written zoning ordinances and design guidelines for areas where new construction threatens to ruin established neighborhoods and for areas which are all new Planned Unit Developments. The approach to each is necessarily different.

In traditional neighborhoods, prevailing parking patterns can be analyzed and rules written so that new construction is consistent with traditional norms. In Pasadena, where we worked with Christopher Alexander and Phoebe Wall to write a new zoning ordinance, parking at the rear of the lot in mews-like garage structures was the standard pattern for multi-family dwellings. This pattern allowed landscaped interior courtyards and dignified street elevations.

**Living space is projected,
garages are recessed.**



traditional pattern) or completely underground (more and more cost effective as land prices escalate).

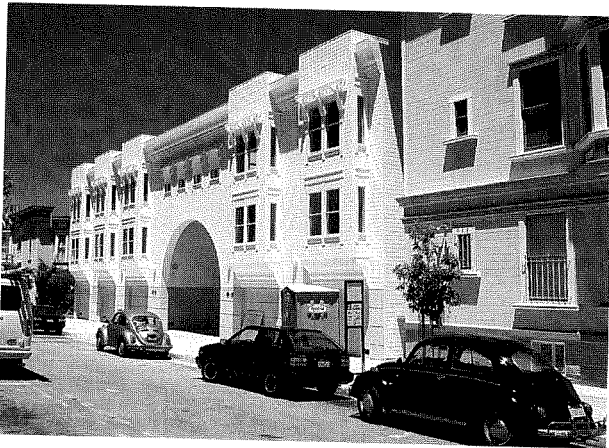
In new PUD's, lots tend to be shallow even in low-density developments. Parking in the rear is not a viable option. Parking in the front, however, does not mean that the garage doors must necessarily be the most prominent feature of a residence.

One factor is simple placement relative to the street. If garage doors are the closest thing to the street, they will dominate it. If a living space or some element, such as an entrance, is the closest thing to the street, garage doors cease to dominate, or at least their dominance is somewhat more benign. Our design guidelines for San Jose contain specific rules based on this principle. Now that the guidelines have been in place for several years, new development seems to be able to meet market-driven standards and to produce streets that speak of people as well as cars.

A word of caution: Standards are tricky things. I dislike them and would like to see them kept to a minimum. They can discriminate against the poor, and they can discriminate against creative and innovative design.

The solutions I have described so far are aimed at reducing the visual impact of parking. In our own work in San Francisco, some of our most successful parking solutions do the opposite: Cars are parked from exaggerated and overscaled entrances into mid-block open space.

True, these openings also accommodate people. True, they provide an amenity to the public in the glimpses they afford of interior gardens. True, one can argue the parking entrance has been turned into Something Else. However, it is still true that parking dominates these facades. I'd hate to see these designs ruled out.



**Cars enter through the
portal and park in a courtyard.**

Citizens, however, were concerned that a new pattern, known as the six pack, threatened to change the nature of these multi-family neighborhoods. The six pack has many flaws. One is how it parks its cars—behind a row of double garage doors (usually six, hence the six pack) along a 24-foot-wide asphalt drive sunk five feet below grade and running the depth of the lot. The units are above the garages. Since the units face the side property lines, street facades are often blank.

Six packs can no longer be built in Pasadena, largely because of some simple new parking rules. All parking in new construction must be either in the rear 40 percent of the lot (based on the