

Dormant Vehicles: Rethinking Parking in Future Cities

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Why talk about parking space at an event on the future of travel demand? There are several reasons why. I think that parking space and parked cars are a massive and undesirable side-effect of automobility.

It's also a side-effect that was unforeseen – it wasn't considered in early visions of automobility, no one did those particular calculations – about the amount of time that cars would be stationary (some suggest 95% of the time), or the spatial implications of providing for them, or of what it would mean if the car happened on a mass scale.

There aren't actually any figures on the amount of space in cities and neighbourhoods that are allocated to parked cars, but we do know that in 2014 there were 28 million private cars in Great Britain. We also know that the standard size for a parking bay is 2.4 by 4.8 metres.

So even if we make the modest estimate that there is at least one space for every car, that comes to 336 million metres square. Nearly all the Isle of Wight, or if placed in a straight line, a third of the distance to the moon. Parking space is huge.

The point that's really important to consider here, today, is that how much parking space there is, where it is and when it is in use is directly related to travel demand – how, when, where and for what purpose people travel. If travel demand is changing – in all the ways outlined by the Commission on Travel Demand - then this has considerable spatial implications, in the near and long term. These implications can and should be thought about.

As part of my work for the Commission on Travel Demand I ran a symposium where we explored these issues. So we explored parking space – or to put it more broadly 'space for dormant vehicles' – in alternative travel demand futures.

From that Symposium there are three key points to make.

Firstly, Parking space is not just a response to demand, it is also a way of intervening in and shaping demand. Of course parking space is a very political issue. But at the symposium we heard about some interventions which used parking space alongside other initiatives to shape the present and near future of travel demand.

Example 1 was discussed at the symposium by Sue Flack (Campaign for Better Transport). She discussed an initiative in Nottingham where the Workplace Parking Levy has been used to reduce parking provision, whilst at the same time developing individual travel plans (via workplaces), and investing the money generated into public transportation improvements.

Example 2 was discussed by Neil McGonigle from Uber, who are working on initiatives related to homes, for example, partnering with Moda (in Manchester), to unbundle homes from parking space. In this partnership residents can choose a bundle of uber credits as part

of monthly rents instead of a parking space.

So that's the first point, that parking space is not just a response to demand, it is also a way of intervening in it, especially when combined with other initiatives to encourage transition.

The second point is that as travel demand changes, we might ultimately see parking space freed up. But we musn't be complacent about that.

What I mean is that currently several visions of longer term transitions are emerging, and these are presenting several assumptions about how space might be used in cities and neighbourhoods in a world without cars. For example, Neil McGonigle (Uber) presented one of Uber's visions which shows parking space transformed into green public space.

A similar vision is apparent in the work of activists and artists, trying out parklets (such as the PARK(ing) Day initiative). At the Symposium we heard from activist and London resident Brenda Puech, who applied for a parking permit for her street, and set it up as a community garden, and then focussed on the reactions to it, the way in which it was used, and the responses of the local council.

In more speculative futures, the focus on the reversion to greenery and nature is also often foregrounded. Work by colleague, Ferdinand Ludwig and students, at the Technical University of Munich speculates on the future transition of multi-storey car parks into vertical parks.

So there seems to be an emerging vision, and assumption, about possible uses of parking space once less of it is needed. But I think the notion that this is the future is naïve. I think it's possible and preferable, but the question that needs to be asked is 'is it plausible?', or how could it be made to be plausible. I think a lot of work and planning would be needed, beginning right now to make it happen. Otherwise the prime urban land freed up is unlikely to automatically lead to the kinds of places represented in these visions.

The final point to make is to draw out the broader lesson that can be learned from automobility. So instead of thinking about parked cars and parking space, we should actually be thinking more abstractly about the dormant vehicles of our transportation systems, and the spaces which they demand. Because dormant vehicles are a consequence, a necessary component of any transportation system.

So, understanding dormant vehicles, their quantities, times and places in which they are dormant, how they are managed and provided for should be a vital component of how we think about, and think through alternative futures of demand, evaluating the spatial and social implications of such demand futures in relation to the places – and non-places – which they create.

Phd student – Richard Morton – at Lancaster University is thinking through alternative futures of travel e.g. electric and automated, privately owned and shared ownership, and the forms of infrastructure that dormant vehicles would require – for parking, but also for waiting, charging etc. Working through these different scenarios is one way of considering

and evaluating the consequences for parking space, and place, that different futures of travel might lead to.

So to conclude, the future of parking space is a vital component of the future of travel demand, and it's an aspect which has direct implications for place. Firstly, as both an outcome of demand and as a way of intervening in and shaping the future of demand. Secondly, because as transport transitions happen and parking space is freed, it will take work and planning to make this into space which enhances and makes 'places'. Thirdly, because dormant vehicles, and how they are planned and provided for, have direct implications for place, and should therefore be made visible in the visions of the future which we work with today, and should be a key component of our evaluations about those alternatives.

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