



# The elephant in the scheme: Planning for and around car parking in Melbourne, 1929–2016



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## ABSTRACT

A relatively recent body of literature has looked critically at the role of car parking in urban areas, showing that a significant determinant of the extent of parking space is the planning system. Of particular importance are statutory minimum off-street parking requirements for new developments. If parking and parking policies are significant to urban outcomes, one question that follows is – how active a role (if any) has strategic urban planning had in car parking? In this paper we ask if, and in what ways, car parking has been a stated strategic planning interest over the course of nearly a century of planning for one city – Melbourne, Australia. Our approach has three parts: a content analysis of strategic planning documents over time; a corresponding analysis of statutory policies on the ground; and reflection on what this means for the relationships between strategy and policy.

We find that extensive car parking, treated as a public good, was once specifically planned as a critical component of facilitating a car-based city. We show that car parking has receded as a strategic policy issue over time, but that statutory minimum parking requirements introduced in the 1950s continue to be entrenched. Even with more recent strategic plans seeking to curtail car use and increase urban densities, minimum parking policies originally introduced to achieve the opposite effects have remained largely intact. We argue that parking has a significant role in urban form but is, in our case study city, illustrative of gaps between strategic and statutory planning, and between planning practice and research. Whereas post-war planning instigated policy approaches to car parking as a means of planning for car use, strategic planning in Melbourne now plans around parking – the elephant in the scheme. The findings have implications for other intensifying cities with a history of minimum parking policies; as well as for cities now undergoing rapid motorisation.

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## 1. Car parking as ubiquitous but unnoticed land use

A relatively recent body of literature has looked critically at the role of car parking in urban areas, particularly in North American cities, and has suggested that car parking is an expected but unnoticed land use (Ben-Joseph, 2012; Jakle and Sculle, 2004; Shoup 2005). Parking space tends to be noticed only when it is sought, and is forgotten or unseen thereafter. Nonetheless, it sometimes accounts for surprisingly large proportions of urban space. Ben-Joseph suggests that we “demand convenient parking everywhere we go, and then learn not to see the vast, unsightly spaces that result” (2012, p.135). Mapping exercises have shown surface car parking to be as much as half of the ground space of central com-

mercial areas, as in Albuquerque New Mexico and Buffalo New York (Shoup, 2005, p 131). Across a broader area, Chester et al. (2015) showed car parking accounting for 15% of the total Los Angeles County area. Davis et al. (2010) found parking accounted for 6.7% of the area of an Indiana County.

Several studies have argued that a significant determinant of the extent of car parking space is the planning system (Barter 2011, 2012; Chester et al., 2015; Guo and Ren 2013; Manville, 2013; Manville et al., 2013; McCahill and Garrick 2010; McDonnell et al., 2011; Shoup, 2005). Of particular interest are the minimum off-street car parking policies that require private off-street parking for new developments. Over the course of the 20th century, planning systems in several countries have come to specify these ratios as standard practice. Parking ratios are common in for example the USA (Shoup 2005; Manville, 2013; McDonnell et al., 2011), Australia, and in parts of Asia (Barter 2011, 2012); while they vary in use in Europe (Mingardo et al., 2015) and are being taken up heterogeneously in rapidly motorizing Chinese cities (Wang and Yuan,

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2013). Shoup (2005) refers to minimum car parking ratios as precise but inaccurate; arguing minimum parking ratios are based on spurious data, rules of thumb and a “pseudo-science of planning for parking” (p. 75). Even the more empirically based sources of parking ratios, Shoup argues, are inherently flawed in that their main goal is to meet maximum demand for free parking and reduce pressure on free on-street parking – the demand for which, if it is free, is limitless. The ‘predict and provide’ policy approach disguises the real demand for parking and has been one instrument in shaping new landscapes for the car, both mobile or – as cars are over 95% of the time – parked (Vanderbilt, 2008).

The effects of minimum parking policies have recently attracted scrutiny in planning and transport literature, associated with substantial portions of land dedicated to car parking and with higher mode shares for private car use. Critical accounts of the role of parking in housing, transport, and urban design suggest minimum parking ratios oversupply parking through lack of open pricing (Millard-Ball et al., 2014; Pierce and Shoup 2013; Shoup 2005; Willson 2013; McCahil and Garrick 2010). The extent and low price of car parking is also identified as a significant factor in transport mode choice, increasing car use and congestion even when there is access to other modes (Guo 2013a, 2013b; Hagman 2006; McCahill and Garrick 2010; Pandhe and March 2012; Weinberger 2012). Minimum residential parking policies are also associated with reduced housing choice (Guo and Ren 2013; Li and Guo 2014; Manville, 2013; Manville et al., 2013; McDonnell et al., 2011; Shoup 2005). Extensive car parking spaces are linked to worsened urban design and urban heat islands, runoff, and reduced efficiency. For example Davis et al. (2010) found environmental impacts from large amounts of surface parking, including pollution runoff; and Litman (2006) argues that parking requirements impose car-oriented patterns even on more accessible areas.

Car parking can fall within the scope of traffic engineering, or (less commonly) private markets. Car parking is also a land use, and planning systems are deeply involved in it – at least at the statutory level. Like parking spaces themselves, influential minimum car parking policies appear to have managed to be abundant but largely unnoticed – or at least, unquestioned. Only relatively recently has research on parking emerged, with associated criticism that minimum parking ratios are an embedded policy that should be re-examined. Also relatively recently, policy reforms particularly in high cost accessible areas, such as those across Greater London in 2004, have moved away from minimum parking standards (Guo and Ren, 2013). There are for example plans to significantly wind back parking requirements in New York City as part of zoning reforms for affordable housing (NYU Furman Centre, 2012). Mingardo et al. (2015) identify three sequential phases of parking policy in European cities – predict and provide; initial pricing; and a third phase of planning integration which – they argue – requires greater strategic coordination.

The extent to which removing or lowering parking minimums will directly influence parking quantities is arguable. The effects of policy change are likely to vary by location and context. Studies showing the removal of minimum residential parking requirements substituting housing for vehicular densities are typically of higher demand areas in world cities; including Los Angeles, London, and New York (Chester et al., 2015; Guo and Ren, 2013; Li and Guo, 2014; Manville, 2013; Manville et al., 2013; McDonnell et al., 2011; Willson, 2013). Stubbs (2002) found wide variation in the underlying demand for parking in the UK; and others (Guo and Ren, 2013; Li and Guo, 2014) found spatial differences in the effect of removing London’s residential parking requirements. Engel-Yan et al. (2007) suggested in a study of Toronto that likely changes in parking supply from lowered minimum requirements would vary widely by land use. Barter (2010) argued that removal of off-street requirements should be supported by the active fostering of commercial

parking markets. Established, as well as emerging, alternatives to parking minimums exist. In Asia, Barter (2011) noted that Tokyo, Singapore, and Hong Kong have extremely low or no minimum parking standards. Japan exempts small buildings; has essentially no free on-street parking; and has an active private market for parking in residential areas.

If car parking and car parking policies are significant to urban outcomes, one question that follows is – how active a role (if any) has strategic urban planning had in car parking? One context through which to consider this question is the planning goal of curbing the outward growth of cities through urban containment. Urban containment and increased densities are strategic goals underpinned by transport, efficiency, liveability and design arguments (Newman and Kenworthy 1999; Searle, 2004; Woodcock et al., 2011). Studies of Melbourne (McLoughlin 1992; Goodman et al., 2010) and North American cities (Downs, 2005) have found changes in strategic planning strategy toward containment have had little effect on construction patterns. Car parking seems to present something of a reverse conundrum – with large amounts of car parking seeming to be something planners have not necessarily been interested in strategically, but that planners have nonetheless continued to successfully implement on a grand scale. Given that car parking policy has significant effects on built form, and that parking is a focus of planning disputes over urban consolidation, it is relevant to explore to what extent parking policies have been integrated with top-down planning strategy. In this paper we explore the positioning of car parking in the strategic and statutory planning history of one city. We ask how the policy has changed, how the relationship between strategy and policy has shifted, and explore possible reasons behind changes in how parking is approached in policy. We then consider possible implications for parking policy in other cities and for the design of other land use planning policies.

## 2. Approach: identifying car parking and the logic of policies behind it

In this paper we ask if, and in what ways, car parking has been a stated strategic planning interest over the course of nearly a century of planning for one city – Melbourne, Australia. We explore the shifting role of car parking in strategic and statutory planning in one city, and ask whether the planning approach to car parking offers insights into land use planning systems more broadly.

Melbourne is presented as a case study. While having its specific policies and attributes, generalizable features of Melbourne include its history of colonial and industrial development in the 19th century; its core of older pre-car development; its fringe of suburbs developed rapidly in the post-car era; and its policy emphasis on urban containment since the 1980s. In Melbourne car parking can be seen in the context both of integrating cars into an existing built form; and of shaping the form of new development. Recent cases of conflict over infill housing developments without have bought parking issues to prominence (Taylor 2014, 2016). Similar tensions are likely to be experienced in other intensifying cities with a history of ‘predict and provide’ parking policies.

Our approach has three parts: a content analysis of strategic planning documents over time; a corresponding analysis of statutory policies on the ground; and reflection on the relationships between strategy and policy.

Our principle focus is strategic planning policies, referring in this context to metropolitan and comprehensive plans. We do not assume that strategic plans are implemented as stated – indeed McLoughlin (1992) analysing the intent and outcomes of a series of strategic plans for Melbourne, concluded that attempts to impose spatial order on Melbourne’s growth have consistently failed. Goodman et al. (2010) found similarly for more recent strate-

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