



Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

Paved Paradise: How Parking Explains the World

By Henry Grabar

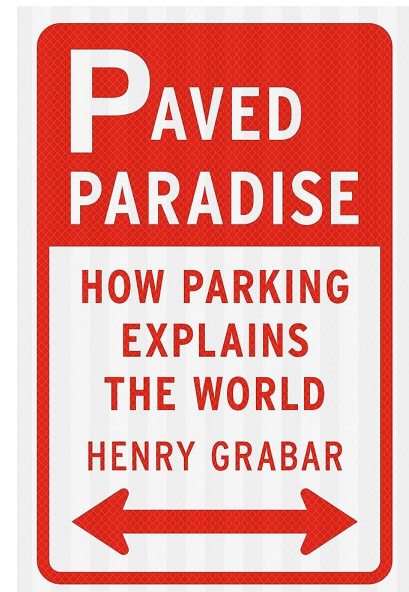
The Atlanta Urbanist Book Group met Jan. 3, 2024 to discuss *Paved Paradise: How Parking Explains the World* by Henry Grabar. Grabar is a staff writer at *Slate* who writes about housing, transportation and public policy.

The book is about parking's impact on city life and urban design, how it came to have such a large influence, and the prospects for change. The book asks two questions: Why have we devoted so much valuable real estate—publicly and privately owned—to the exclusive use of idle vehicles? And are there ways of putting this land to better uses?

Two things shine through in Grabar's reporting. One is that we have, for a number of reasons, mandated that a huge amount of urban and suburban land be reserved for parked cars. By some estimates, he writes, there are six parking spaces for every automobile in America. This means, at any given time, 83 percent of parking spots are vacant. Bottom line: We don't need this much parking.

The other is that this wasteful use of land has consequences. One is the impact on housing costs. Local governments' parking mandates increase apartment rents by \$1,700 a year, whether renters have cars or not.

Other consequences: Parking mandates destroyed a common form of affordable housing from the early 20th century: townhouses, brownstones and triple-deckers. And they made some of America's most beloved neighborhoods—like Inman Park or Virginia Highland in Atlanta—impossible to create today.



Four Big Ideas

The Atlanta Urbanist Book Group highlights ideas from books that we think could make Urban Atlanta better. Here are four “big ideas” drawn from *Paved Paradise* that we think Urban Atlanta could benefit from:

1. Urban Atlanta has too much land devoted to parking. There are better uses for this “sea of parking,” uses that would improve cities and neighborhoods and benefit nearly everyone.
2. We need local governments to end parking mandates and let developers of office, retail and housing decide how to provide parking for tenants and visitors. Two possibilities: Have joint uses of parking that workers use during the day and residents use in evenings. And encourage tenants to use transit.
3. At the same time, we need local governments to actively manage their own parking, which includes curbside spaces and city-owned parking decks. The aim should be to price parking so that the most convenient spots cost more than less convenient ones and prices respond to demand. This would make drivers aware of the true cost of parking and may encourage some to try alternatives, such as transit, walking or cycling.
4. We should undo some of the damage done in the past. One way is for local governments to make it easier for homeowners to build accessory dwelling units (basically, small apartments) on their property. This would allow homeowners to turn underused spaces, such as garages, into rental property that can benefit them as it creates more affordable housing in Urban Atlanta.

Why Do These Things?

Grabar’s book helps us see the problems caused by a sea of parking in cities and better ways of using this wasted space. But should Urban Atlanta take on this issue? We think so. Here’s why:

- Too much parking harms cities. It hollows out downtowns, spreads out neighborhoods, narrows sidewalks and robs shopping areas of their vitality. We need more Virginia Highlands in Urban Atlanta, and we cannot have them with this mandated, subsidized glut of parking.
- Motorists could calculate the true costs of automobiles. As it is, cities subsidize parking by offering free parking on streets and requiring developers to build parking they and their tenants don’t need. End the subsidies and mandates, and the cost of driving and parking would become clearer.
- An immediate beneficiary of better parking policies would be transit. But there would be others, including cyclists and pedestrians.
- Cities, too, would benefit from less parking. It would allow cities to expand sidewalks and allow more productive land uses on underused parking lots. These things boost urban vitality and expand the tax base.
- Better pricing of parking would create revenue streams that could be used for numerous needs, from transit expansion and affordable housing construction to bike lanes and parks.
- If less parking and more appropriate pricing led to fewer people driving and parking, that would have its own set of benefits. As mentioned above, transit, cycling and pedestrian mobility would benefit. And these things would be good for the environment and public health, particularly if cities invested more in transit, cycling and pedestrian infrastructure.

What Are the Obstacles?

Even the most worthwhile changes create opposition. That’s true even for something as desirable as parking reforms that lead to better land use and healthier cities. So our members discussed some of the obstacles or barriers the big ideas might face in Urban Atlanta. Here are some:

- Ending parking mandates for new developments and free parking on streets would undo 70 years of public policy and citizens’ expectations. As it is, NIMBY opposition to additional housing, retail or offices is often based on claims that these developments would make it harder for existing residents to

park (although this is rarely the case). These reforms would likely cause the NIMBY opposition to increase..

- Parking regulations and standards—such as how many spaces must be provided by new developments—are embedded in city ordinances, development regulations, design guidelines or manuals. They’ll be hard to root out.
- If local governments let developers decide how much parking to provide, it might not change things right away. That’s because most developers are unwilling to try new approaches like shared parking or offering tenants free transit passes in return for giving up parking spaces. And if a developer *is* willing to experiment, her lender may not be as willing. So changes may take longer than you think.
- Likewise, owners of independent parking lots and parking decks may not be in a hurry to offer their mostly empty spaces for new developments. These parcels were usually bought at a discount years ago, are assessed for property taxes very cheaply, and owners are often willing to wait years—even decades—before selling. Once again, ending parking mandates may open the door to new things, but we’ll need private owners willing to walk through the door.

Ways Around the Obstacles

These are difficult obstacles. Here are some ideas our members offered for overcoming these barriers:

- We need advocates for parking reform. The advocates should make the case to citizens and public officials that less parking and parking that is intelligently managed will benefit everyone. They need to give local governments a step-by-step plan for ending mandates and managing parking. Finally, they need to offer a set of metrics local governments can use to determine how much parking is truly needed and what it should cost, based on the value of the land..
- Visualization could help local governments, citizens and developers see the benefits of less parking. After all, it’s hard to appreciate something that doesn’t yet exist. Plans and images could help people see what fewer parking spaces and wider sidewalks would look like, and how bringing apartments and stores to a parking lot could improve a block.
- Another way of seeing the value of less parking is to study places like Inman Park and Virginia Highland, which were built before parking mandates. Three questions: How do these places manage parking today? How has having less parking affected housing and retail property values there? And if these walkable urban places are thriving with fewer parking spaces, what does it tell us?
- Yet another step forward would be a study of parking supply and demand in several parts of Atlanta—say, Buckhead, South Downtown and Alpharetta. The idea would be to learn how much parking inventory is needed, how it is used today, and what it costs. This would help cities move toward active management of parking.
- We need to tie parking reform to affordable housing. The average parking space in an apartment complex adds \$1,700 a year to rent, or nearly \$142 a month. For struggling families, especially those that depend on MARTA for transportation, being forced to pay for parking they do not need is unfair.

A Synopsis of *Paved Parking*

Paved Paradise is 284 pages, not including acknowledgements, notes and index. It is divided into three sections and a conclusion. There are 15 chapters.

Grabar is a staff writer at *Slate* who writes about housing, transportation and public policy. He has been a Richard Rogers Fellow at Harvard University’s Graduate School of Design.

In reporting on the impact parking has on cities—and how it came to have such influence—Grabar offers some eye-opening facts. Among them:

- The average car spends 95 percent of its lifespan parked.

- By some estimates there are six parking spaces in America for every car, meaning at any given time 83 percent of parking spots are vacant.
- Because of local parking mandates, nearly all housing, offices and stores built today must include parking spaces in lots or garages.
- These requirements killed a form of compact housing that was popular in the first half of the 20th century—townhouses, brownstones and triple-deckers—laying the groundwork for our current housing shortage.
- Some cities, like Little Rock, Arkansas, Buffalo, New York and Topeka, Kansas have more acreage devoted to parking than to buildings.
- Most of America’s most beloved neighborhoods (think of Inman Park in Atlanta) could not be built today because of parking mandates.
- Cities often do not know how many curb parking spaces they have, especially in neighborhoods without meters. New York, for instance, is estimated to have between 1.3 million and 3 million curb parking spots, “a staggering degree of uncertainty” in a city where every square foot of real estate is dear.
- Those curb parking spots in New York cover six percent of the city’s land mass. And 97 percent are unmetered. That is, anyone can park in them for free for long periods.

These things help describe the problem that Grabar wants us to understand. We have so welcomed cars into our cities that we’ve laid aside huge swaths for their exclusive use. And not even in the way we usually think about, in the form of streets and roads. This is land reserved for cars that are idle, land that could be used for more economically or socially productive uses.

This might not be so damaging if it were done well. But as Grabar and other authors have made clear, it isn’t. We allow cars to park at most neighborhood curbs, which are publicly owned rights of way, for free. And when we do charge for street parking, the meters often cost less than a parking deck charges a few blocks away. Grabar points out the irony: The most prized commodity—parking at a business’ doorstep—is cheaper than the less convenient (but more economically efficient) alternative down the street.

Even this, Grabar goes on, does not describe the toll that parking has taken on cities. For the worst impacts, you have to learn about parking minimums set by local governments. These were land-use requirements imposed in the 1940s and 1950s to answer a question: If cities had to build huge amounts of parking, who should build it?

Not surprisingly, local governments decided it shouldn’t be them. Yes, parking should be built, but by others. Which others? Anyone building anything, from retail developers and homebuilders to apartment complex owners and office developers. Cities did this by changing land-use regulations so that parking had to be built according to a set of formulas. For every studio apartment, build one parking space. For every two-bedroom apartment, two parking spaces. Stores had to provide spaces according to their functions and size.

If it sounds scientific, Grabar writes, it wasn’t. In fact, none of these formulas was based on actual research on usage and needs. (The group that came up with them, the Institute of Transportation Engineers, admitted as much in 2019 and said cities should stop mandating parking minimums.)

But the damage had been done. We eliminated some good land uses (compact, small-scale apartments and stores) because they couldn’t afford the required parking. And we had cemented parking minimums into city regulations. The predictable result: We have too little housing and too many parking spaces.

As obvious as the problem may seem, it might have escaped attention had a professor at the University of California at Los Angeles, Donald Shoup, not gotten interested in parking in the 1990s. An economist, Shoup did what city governments had not. He and his students counted parking spaces, measured their use, calculated land values, estimated revenues and came to a startling discovery: “There is too much parking, and it’s too cheap.”

Shoup's 2005 book *The High Cost of Free Parking* laid out the case for charging much more for parking and freeing up the land for other uses. And do what with the parking revenues? Shoup offered one vision in an op-ed article in the New York Times. If New York charged \$5.50 a day for parking in just half of its three million parking spaces, it could raise \$3 billion a year, which could be used to build new transit lines and expand bus services. Why \$5.50? Because that was the price of a round-trip subway fare.

As Grabar makes clear, though, curbside parking is one problem. Parking minimums are another. On that he and Shoup are clear: There should be none. Developers should decide how many spaces to build. If they build fewer and guess right about demand, rents will be cheaper. If they guess wrong, their buildings will be empty and they will pay the consequences. There's another option: They could get creative and rent some of the 83 percent of parking spots that are empty, leasing them to tenants who want to park. In any case, less parking, better use of land.

So how did we get such misguided parking policy, with curbside parking way underpriced (or not priced at all), downtown parking lots and decks that sit mostly empty, and local regulations that require yet more parking be built, whether needed or not?

It began shortly after World War II with a real problem and a bad set of solutions. As the movement to the suburbs and the building of large shopping centers and malls began, Grabar writes, downtown retailers panicked. They saw the shopping centers, with their acres of free parking, as a major threat—which they were. Their answer: Have local governments make downtowns more like malls, with parking easily available outside stores.

Unfortunately, cities followed the advice of the merchants. They expanded roads and made streets one-way to ease the trip to downtown. They allowed old buildings to be torn down for parking lots. They required any new construction to have parking for everyone visiting or working there.

In the end, it did not work. Suburbanites did not choose to drive past suburban malls to shop at similar stores downtown. And with all that parking, cities had destroyed their downtown fabric. It was, Grabar writes, quoting one urban designer, like “moths devouring a lace wedding gown,” as parking lots replaced older buildings and then . . . sat mostly empty. In the end, cities did not save their downtown stores, but they did make it easier and cheaper to drive and park, which damaged public transit.

Near the end of his book, Grabar offers several ways out of the mess that parking has created. One is obvious: Stop mandating parking in new developments. Let developers, their lenders and tenants decide how much parking is needed and how it can be provided.

Shared parking is one way of providing it, especially for developments that have housing as well as stores and offices. After all, if a parking spot is filled in the middle of the day, it's because a worker has driven there. That driver and her car will leave in the evening, as residents get home. It's a self-balancing system.

But the real answer is to build “car-light” cities, where you no longer need two or three cars; you can get by with one because you can walk or cycle to many destinations or take transit.

The pandemic of 2020-21 gave us a small preview of this car-light future, Grabar writes. That was when the ideas that Donald Shoup had preached for 15 years about the wasteful surplus of parking met a period when people drove less and restaurants desperately needed outdoor dining options. The result: For the first time in anyone's memory, valuable parking spaces were taken back by cities and leased out to restaurants for dining sheds.

Did cities suffer from the loss of parking? Not that anyone could tell. In fact, cities gained economic value from things they had given away. Restaurants and their customers liked the outdoor dining

options. Streets were a bit more lively. In other words, it was a little more paradise and a little less pavement.

About the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

Our mission at the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group is to introduce new ideas to Urban Atlanta by reading recent books about cities, identifying the ideas we think would work in Atlanta, and offering civic leaders a guide to these ideas.

We define “urbanism” broadly. We are reading books about transportation, land use, housing, public safety, government reform, neighborhoods, social infrastructure, education, economic development, regionalism, diversity, politics, arts and culture, volunteerism, and more.

Our aim isn't to review books but to **show how their ideas apply to Atlanta today** and suggest ways of moving from good ideas to good actions.

You can learn more about the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group at atlantaurbanist.com.