I’ve always wondered why we use the word parking to describe a place to leave a car. For me the word evokes images of my neighborhood park, playgrounds, or New York’s Central Park: lush green spaces, not places easily reconciled with a patch of asphalt. A few years ago while I was working at the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, I finally got my answer.

While exploring the history of street trees, I came upon a law passed by the United States Congress on April 6, 1870, authorizing the city
of Washington, D.C., to set aside up to 50 percent of the width of a street for the creation of “parks for trees and walks.” At that time, the Senate debated about the proper layout of the street, whether to have “the parking on either side of the street and the roadway in the center” or to have the “parking” in the center of the street. According to the 41st Congress, the proper way to park in cities was on the side of the streets with the roadway running down the center. Of course, in 1870 the members of the Senate were discussing the parking of trees and smaller plants, not automobiles. The first parking system was an early street tree system where parking defined the planting of trees, grasses, and flowers along the side of roadways and the creation of sidewalks for pedestrians.

Parking: From Trees to Cars

Pierre Charles L’Enfant, a French-born American architect and civil engineer, was tasked by President George Washington to design the layout of streets for the new “Federal City” (later named Washington City, District of Columbia). The L’Enfant plan of 1791 set up a gridded system of streets and diagonal avenues that were exceptionally wide—160 feet for avenues and 80 feet for streets—to live up to his grandiose vision of the new capital city. Having grown up in Paris, L’Enfant’s proposal for the improvement of the roadways was influenced by the boulevards of Paris. As a result of this upbringing, he suggested that a double allée of trees be planted on each side of the avenues. While L’Enfant had intended for his streets to be lined with trees, a very small number of avenues were actually planted under his supervision. Decades later, it was the passing of the 1870 law that provided the impetus to line all streets with parking.

Following the passing of the 1870 law, the Parking Commission of Washington, D.C. (founded in 1871) immediately embarked on a massive campaign to create parking on all roads within the city. More than 70,000 trees were planted on the streets of Washington in the first decade of the campaign under the expert supervision of Truman Lanham (the first Superintendent of the Parking Commission), William R. Smith (Superintendent of the United States Botanical Garden), William Saunders (Superintendent of the Grounds of the Department of Agriculture), and John Saul (owner of a local tree nursery).

From 1872 until 1915, the trees for the streets were grown in a nursery on the grounds of the Washington Asylum. This allowed the Parking Commission to control the quality and diversity of trees that were planted in parking places, which resulted in a 95 percent tree survival rate 12 years after the initial plantings. A 95 percent survival rate is impressive by today’s standards. Street trees today in New York City have a 73.8 percent survival rate 9 years after planting, despite enhanced maintenance and monitoring through the MillionTreesNYC program. In smaller cities today, street trees fare even worse. Through the Sacramento Shade Tree program, only 68.9 percent of street trees survived in the 5 years after planting.

The extraordinarily high survival rate for street trees in Washington, D.C., in the late 1800s led to a plethora of mature trees and an overall greening of the city. By the mid-1880s, after almost two decades of tree growth, The Century Magazine reported that “in this matter of trees, Washington is unrivaled among all the cities of the world.” During the first plantings of the parking trees, citizens would
place wooden boxes around the trees to protect them, but with the passage of another congressional law placing the jurisdiction of parking places squarely in the hands of the Commissioners of Washington, D.C., this practice was soon discarded. The new law had unintended consequences: the removal of the protective boxes allowed people to wedge their way into the parking system. How? Because during the hot summers in Washington, trees provided shade for horses while their owners were off in a shop or visiting a friend. Owners would tie their horses (and carriages) up to the street trees, effectively decreasing a two-lane road to one active lane and one stopped lane. Although it became illegal in 1882 to trespass on parking, or to cut, injure, or maim parking trees in any way, the convenience and shade provided by the trees for the waiting carriages and horses outweighed the fine levied.

**Automobiles Arrive**

The world was changing rapidly as the twentieth century arrived. The number of automobiles in the United States increased from 8,000 in 1900 to over 8 million in 1920 and marked a major shift in the meaning of the term parking. Just as people would tie their horses to the parking trees, automobiles began to stop next to the parking strips lining each road. The increase in the number of automobiles on the road, the enhancements made to the National Mall, and the See America First tourist campaign, which began in 1910, led to a huge increase in the number of cars in Washington, D.C., from both locals and tourists.

The See America First campaign was designed and implemented by America’s railroad companies and advertised America’s first National Parks. Advertising for the National Parks, the majority of which were located in the western United States in the early 1900s, benefited the railroads immensely: more tourists journeying out west meant more money. However, the railroads did not foresee the rapid growth of the automobile and an unintended consequence of the See America First campaign was regional tourism (as opposed to national tourism). With all the positive press Washington, D.C., received from the greening of their streets through parking, the city received more tourists than any other city in America in the 1920s and 1930s.

Of course, the Washington, D.C., Parking Commission had not planned for the automobile when setting out their parking system. By the mid-1920s city officials began cutting down street trees and widening streets to accommodate the volume of cars, thereby replacing the original meaning of parking as a place for trees and greenery with parking as a place for automobiles to stop. Some of the earliest instances of this shift appear in Washington Post articles from the 1920s, where the term “parking” was used to explain where cars were parked rather than to where trees were planted.
Washington, D.C., was the first city to implement a parking system in the United States, but the concept of parking was picked up and modified by New York City in 1916 with the publication of landscape architect Laurie Davidson Cox's *A Street Tree System for New York City, Borough of Manhattan*. Cox's street sections give weight to both tree parking and car parking, exemplifying the early twentieth century shift in the meaning of the term “parking.” For example, his section through Broadway from 59th Street to 122nd Street shows plant parking in the center of the street and tree parking along the sidewalk, with enough space on each side of the street for car parking. Again, his section of 5th Avenue below 59th Street shows a 55-foot wide street with space for car or carriage parking on either side of the street (see top right).

The public expects amenities on the street such as shade provided by trees, places to leave their carriages (or cars), and safe places to walk. These expectations shifted significantly in the first few decades of the twentieth century as needs changed. Throughout the remainder of the twentieth century, these needs evolved and the relationships in the streets between trees, people, transit, businesses, and vehicles continued to shift. The arrival of the car as the main mode of transportation necessitated a shift in the amenities of the public right of way, favoring car parking over tree parking in the 1910s and 1920s. The results of this early twentieth century shift is still prevalent on our streets today, with car parking occupying a large portion of the street.

**Bringing Back Tree Parking**

However, car parking may not always have a place of utility along roadways. In today’s streets, a shift away from car parking towards other modes of transportation and use of the streets is occurring. For San Francisco’s 6th Street Improvement Project, the city conducted direct interviews with local low-income resi-
dents to determine what they wanted on their street. Since car parking spaces are useless to many low-income San Franciscans, the neighborhood ranked street amenities (from highest priority to lowest priority) as: walking, street trees, public transit, biking, and car parking. These rankings have guided the redesign of the street away from parking towards a multimodal street with a significant increase in the number of planned street trees.

In another shift, Seattle has prioritized the creation of Green Streets throughout the city. Seattle Department of Transportation’s U District Green Streets Concept Plan emphasizes the planting of healthy, consistently placed street trees, calling street trees crucial to the character and livability of the city. Their plan prioritizes street trees, perennial and shrub plantings, bike parking, and pedestrian movement over car parking along the Green Streets.

The City of Toronto has set a goal of increasing their overall tree canopy of 10.2 million trees by approximately 13 percent over the next few decades. The city recognizes the wide range of environmental, ecological, social, cultural, and economic benefits their urban forest provides for residents and has developed multiple strategies to increase their overall tree canopy. At the street level, the city has worked diligently to increase street tree planting and survival rate in conjunction with better public transit and ease of walking. One strategy they have implemented is the use of below pavement soil structural systems (such as Silva Cells) that allow soil to receive air and water without being compacted by people, bikes, and buses moving above them. The strategy has been so successful that Silva Cells are now being deployed across the city to allow large shade trees to grow successfully in congested urban conditions.

The story of parking over the past 140 years exemplifies changing social norms, ways in which city planners absorb technological advancements such as the birth of the automo-
bile, and the renewed appreciation of the importance of the natural landscape to the well-being and quality of life of city residents. As we shift rapidly towards better public transit infrastructure, complete streets, and walkable cities, it is time to rethink what the “parking” amenity is. Cities like San Francisco, Seattle, and Toronto have realized the importance of natural landscapes and the benefits that the urban canopy brings to cities, and no doubt other cities will start or continue efforts to reorient streets toward green infrastructure, public transit, and people. Instead of parking meaning either the parking of trees or the parking of cars, perhaps this new shift will reinvent parking and assume a definition that incorporates a broader set of ideas that coexist together: the importance of street trees and the urban canopy, the expansion of green and public transit, the walkability of streets, new modes of transportation, and the livability of cities.

References


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