

Miami's Parking Addiction

Written by Adam Schachner, BT Contributor
June 2018

It's time to admit it, and address the problem



spent the past month traversing the maelstrom of Miami's parking ordinances. The process started simple: The *BT* sent me to a panel on development and parking regulations hosted by the Urban Land Institute (ULI), a nonprofit creating forums for envisioning efficient cities.

As someone with a nerdy fixation on transit and parking concerns, my experience was rapturous. While Miami's parking codes may not radiate sexiness, I can confirm the ULI forum was mind-blowing.

My takeaway is that Miami suffers from an over-reliance on cars that hinders progress and development. Miami has a deeply entrenched attachment to cars as extensions of personal space. They are more than objects of material love and pride; they are dependencies in a region with few convenient alternatives.

The need to accommodate our vehicular attachment has influenced municipal design, dictated the terms of zoning for new development, and essentially set the conditions for our growth. Specific parking accommodations are mandated in construction layout, leaving the potential for charming, meandering, pedestrian-friendly boulevards on the cutting-room floor. Now that downtown is once again booming with high-density projects, we find ourselves challenged to maximize our limited infill while adhering to car-centric ordinances.

Miamians make a sport of complaining about parking. While the topics are usually limited

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availability or inconvenient locations, panel speakers at the ULI's forum, "Can Miami Develop Now with Less Parking?" extended the scope of the issue. The panel's coverage acknowledged Miami's new season of the construction crane, then drew connections to the impact of car culture on the latest downtown growth spurt.

Some may wish Miami aspired to the cosmopolitan charm of urban centers such as Manhattan -- where commercial and residential elements are integrated -- but this vision will remain distant, owing to zoning crafted for our automotive society.

Jill Seiner, a University of Florida professor of urban and regional planning and a panelist on the ULI forum, diagnosed Miami's parking blight. Despite a downtown setting, Miami's urban core was built using suburban ideals and designs, particularly those that embrace a car in every driveway. These standards encourage development around parking, "as if cars generated economic activity, instead of people."

Seiner explained that municipalities looking to solve these issues tend to create excessive parking in the form of garages and open lots. This works against mom-and-pops and independent establishments relying on their storefront for advertising (because the storefronts are so far removed from the street that the chances they will catch the eye of a passerby are virtually nonexistent). Instead, we get big boxes and supermarkets.

This is a familiar story in the Brickell area, which hosts three Publix supermarkets with ample parking, all located between SW 7th and 13th streets.

Limited options for independent businesses are only one facet of parking's economic influence. A staggering correlation exists between space allocation and income disparity. This was addressed by panelist Bernardo Fort-Brescia, a fellow of the American Institute of Architects and co-founder of Arquitectonica.

Under the "Miami 21" zoning code, Fort-Brescia explained, developers must provide one-and-a-half parking spaces per occupied residential unit, regardless of that household's size. The result is that "a studio apartment has as much of a parking burden as a three-bedroom apartment. We have a problem here. We are creating a city of second-home wealthy users, but in the end, the cost transfers to the consumer." One example: Well-heeled condo owners who

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live here part-time leave their cars parked in the off-season. Meanwhile, larger households of full-time residents struggle with their building's jammed parking garage.

In a city reliant on cars, this leaves little room for households with multiple income-earners who must drive separate cars to work. I frequently see this at my own building: fierce competition for spaces, forcing some to hunt for street parking blocks away. Guest parking is virtually nonexistent. In short, residents with less money are fighting for fewer parking spaces.

Fort-Brescia challenged this bureaucratic adherence: "The real question is whether there should be a parking code to begin with." The current system, he said, does not give most developers leeway to take risks in designing projects with limited parking. (One downtown condo project, Centro Lofts, will be the first with no parking garage.)

One consensus among panelists, it seemed, was a focus on small-scale developments. Zoning outside of downtown Miami generally limits the size and height of building projects to prevent the spread of high-rises. Areas that must adhere to these restrictions can maximize walkability and unique businesses -- if they can get beyond the parking requirements.

A reasonable standard for space-conscious growth is Wynwood, with its streetside galleries. A once-industrial neighborhood devoid of pedestrian action is now known for its walking culture, its consumer traffic, and happenstance encounters among individuals -- all a product, in part, of limited parking.

Joseph Furst of Goldman Properties, a pioneer in the area's revitalization, explains that, with the exception of quickly filled street parking, many properties have no parking lots, therefore "people are forced to park away from their destination, and they have to walk and engage."

Andrew Frey, the ULI panel host and founder of Townhouse Center, a nonprofit organization advocating conditions for small-scale urban growth, sat with me recently and summarized the potential for thriving communities beyond downtown's urban core. In his estimation, downtown will continue to scrape the sky as a financial district, while peripheral neighborhoods such as Little Havana, Overtown, and Wynwood will become emblematic of compact and efficient residential and commercial urban growth.

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One of his views resonates: A fully developed locale will have a harder time building back *down* from its towers than constructing moderately upward. The resurgence of construction cranes downtown may indicate that our urban core is permanently beyond small scale, but municipal centers throughout Miami are primed to embrace designs that build to the sidewalk and show off their city's compelling attributes, rather than create parking gaps between people and their destinations.

A parting thought that stuck with me, following the ULI panel, was how often I must compete for parking around town. Maybe we need to ask ourselves if the convenience of arriving by car is worth each stress-inducing contest for parking we endure.

This column originally appeared in September 2013.

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