Rethinking a Parking Lot
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Next time you drive into a parking lot, consider exercising your imagination about how the parking lot could be a more meaningful space within the city. While parking lot planning has occupied thoughtful consideration for over forty years, parking lot design is again grasping the attention of savvy designers. Aran Ben-Joseph, professor of urban design and landscape architecture at MIT has recently published the book ReThinking a Lot: The Design and Culture of Parking.

Ben-Joseph, like many other critics before him, wonders how we may choose to view parking lot design through the lens of functionalism and aesthetics simultaneously. How can a parking lot be more than a dusty babysitter for our cars during the day and a wasteland by night? The author’s favorite parking lot is Renzo Piano’s Fiat Lingotto factory in Turin, Italy where the entire lot is shaded by a canopy of soft shaded trees.

Tackling functionalism, many people have suggested the parking lots double their identity. Floating ideas include allowing the lots to become basketball courts in the evening, flea and farmers markets on the weekends, and even the idea of adding entertainment such as Shakespeare in the Parking Lot. Other clever tech ideas include solar panel canopies. Commercial buildings, churches, and even educational buildings can offset a significant portion of their electricity with large arrays set up over the cars in parking areas.

Equally as important is the attention to aesthetics and design. In many cases, your first impression to a building is presented through the windshield of your vehicle. How can a parking lot be transformed into a poetic entrance? We need to think about the relationship between the individual and the building from where the two first meet, outside in the middle of its concrete sea.

Ben-Joseph also contemplates code revisions that again many communities throughout the U.S. are beginning to transform. Charlottesville has a no parking zone in their revitalized downtown. Some communities and owners such as UCLA are burying all their parking. Yet others, like Pasadena, are designing parking garages with shops on the first floor and parking levels above.

Anyway we look at it, there are as many as two billion parking spaces in the U.S. For each car, it is estimated there are eight available spaces. Houston’s data reveals an alarming 30 spaces per resident (not car). Parking lots, such as those in our Columbus for example, are clearly a beastly issue and one that is often ignored at best by the majority of our owners, designers, and planners in the U.S.

A concept as old as that of our first recordings of architecture history, the built environment consists both of purpose and beauty - which together engender meaning. It is time to think (or rethink) about how a parking lot can become not only a memorable part of the urban landscape, but one that counterbalances its now heavy emphasis on function with aesthetics. Designers, owners, and planners together may take heed to Lewis Mumford's criticism written over a half century ago, "The right to have access to every building in the city by private motor car in an age when everyone possesses such a vehicle is the right to destroy the city."