



By **Tom Oliver Payne**,  
Place Strategy Director, Hoyne.

*With cities reclaiming the land used by cars, car parks are ripe for clever adaptive reuse ideas.*

# Rethinking the urban car park

From the 1950s onwards, car ownership exploded across the Western world as mass production rocketed and prices fell. The car became both a symbol of freedom and a form of personal identity, and dramatically changed how people lived. Cars gave people the freedom to travel where and when they wanted – all in the comfort of their own private vehicle. They quickly became synonymous with urban life, and extensive road building programs transformed the form and function of cities, and brought with them petrol stations, traffic lights and car parking. Unlike other methods of transport, the infrastructure needed to support cars began to dominate cities entirely.

Unlike urban sprawl and air pollution, the negative impact of car parks are not as regularly discussed as other problems caused by the dominance of cars. However, it's worth thinking about the vast amount of space needed for cars, and what this means for cities. On average, a car is only used by its owner five per cent of the time.<sup>1</sup> During the other 95 per cent, it sits idle and needs to be stored. Unlike a train that drops a passenger off and keeps going, a car must be parked by a driver, before *they* keep going. Space given to store vehicles comprises a major portion of cities, sometimes as much as 60 per cent of their land.<sup>2</sup>

In her renowned 1961 book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, author, activist and urbanist Jane Jacobs referred to parking lots as “urban scars” that destroy the city elements around them.<sup>3</sup> ↗

1 <https://www.reinventingparking.org/2013/02/cars-are-parked-95-of-time-lets-check>

2 <https://oldurbanist.blogspot.com/2011/12/we-are-25-looking-at-street-area>

3 *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs, 1961





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IN DENMARK,  
COPENHAGEN'S  
PARK 'N' PLAY IS A  
NEW, SUSTAINABLE  
DEVELOPMENT WITH  
AN OLD MULTI-  
STOREY CAR PARK AT  
ITS HEART.

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LEVELS COMPRISSES  
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AND BAR, ART  
INSTALLATIONS,  
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PECKHAM LEVELS.

Her point was that car parking and active, walkable neighbourhoods don't mix. More space for parked cars makes cities less walkable and less interesting, and attacks the core of their civic nature. Walking around any city dominated by parking, it is hard to argue with her point.

From a spatial point of view, consider the possibilities if cities could reclaim even a fraction of the land used by cars. More parks, homes, offices or shops could be built. Economically, the gains could be significant with research suggesting the average parking space in the US costs around US\$4000 a year to operate<sup>4</sup>. To put that into context, Los Angeles, alone, has six million car spaces.<sup>5</sup>

Today, we are well aware of the downsides of too many private cars in urban areas, and policy makers are investing in alternative forms of mobility to reduce car dependence. Slowly but surely tougher measures are being taken to reduce the amount of parking in cities as well. It is

increasingly commonplace for European city centres to limit the number of parking spaces in new developments and we are now also seeing cities actively try to eliminate existing parking. Policy makers in Paris, for example, have taken an aggressive approach with the aim to

that as the amount of parking decreases, the appeal of driving gives way to more environmentally-friendly transport modes such as walking, cycling and using public transport. These, of course, are top-down policies. Will the technology see parking reduced of its own accord? Well, that's also very likely. The rise of ride-share services such as Uber use cars much more efficiently, with each vehicle replacing up to 13 privately owned cars on the roads.<sup>6</sup> And much like a train, rideshare services drop the passenger off and keep going, reducing the need for car storage. A future of self-driving cars is likely to perpetuate this ride-share trend.

Transforming car parks to include

destination tenants (such as retail,

hospitality and fitness providers)

can also improve lighting and landscaping,

enhance the streetscape by engaging the

ground plane, and provide community

access to rooftops that so often include

beautiful city views. Rethinking car

park use is also an opportunity for car

parks to become design exemplars,

positively contributing to the city's

aesthetic through upgrades to the

building's facade, or by commissioning

a high profile artwork. In other cases,

innovative design solutions are re-

considering the structure and layout

of car parks entirely.

As policy, technology and economies evolve, we're likely to see

mass parking slowly disappear from cities. In the shorter term, landowners are reconsidering these assets as multifunctional spaces that work beyond the traditional 9-to-5, five days a week spectrum. This has the potential to not only create more value for land owners, but also to boost the city's economy, safety and amenity more broadly.

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There's also an economic trend impacting the availability of parking in cities: land prices. The last few decades have seen the price of land soar in inner cities across the world, which is raising the question: are parking lots viable in the long term?

Evidence suggests these strategies pay off: in cities that have implemented these kinds of measures, driving has declined and public transport use has increased.<sup>8</sup> In addition to the direct benefit of reduced parking on the physicality of the city, the theory behind many of these policy interventions is

### THE KEY INGREDIENTS FOR SUCCESSFUL CAR PARK REINVENTION:

- Define the neighbourhood users and their needs
- Curate a mix of uses and activities that offer a commercial point of difference
- Deliver an engaging ground plane with retail and/or food and beverage
- Provide open access to rooftop space
- Deliver exemplary designs that positively contribute to the aesthetic of the city
- Create day and night-time amenity through lighting, landscaping and public art

Transition from a single use – a place to store cars – to a place that engages people at all times of day and across the week requires research and deep thought. A city's users must be carefully considered to create a solution that complements and supports the broader evolution of the area. Astute

planning and curation of the development should create a clear point of difference, and a reason for a diversity of people to be drawn to it.

### PECKHAM LEVELS LONDON, UK

*Affordable space for local businesses*

After successfully converting a car park into Pop Brixton, a temporary retail, food, design and social enterprise destination in South London, architect Carl Turner established Makeshift, a 'conscious developer' and community space manager, to operate the space.

Makeshift soon turned its attention to a multi-storey car park in central Peckham – a suburb notorious for high levels of crime, drugs and prostitution – with Carl Turner Architects (now Turner Works) as the architects of the project.

Make Shift worked with Southwark Council to develop a strategy for new retail and work spaces, with a focus on local job creation. The agreement

included a commitment that 70 per cent of businesses in the building would be leased by locals, with the majority of jobs reserved exclusively for residents of the suburb. In addition, at least 70 per cent of the floorspace would be provided at 50 per cent of the market rate.

The spaces in the car park were curated and leased through a steering group who assessed applications based on business need, with a core objective to help bridge the 'space gap' between businesses with no physical space, and those that could sustain market rents.



Over time, the car park evolved to become what is now known as Peckham Levels, comprising a rooftop cafe and bar, art installations, dozens of businesses, and event spaces. With views across the city (often hard to find in publicly accessible places in London), the highly successful project quickly became a popular destination for Londoners and visitors to the city.



While Makeshift is no longer involved with the project, Peckham

<sup>4</sup> [www.vtpi.org/tca/tca0504.pdf](http://www.vtpi.org/tca/tca0504.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> <https://lat.ms/3xSLRM>

<sup>6</sup> [www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/12/paris-parking-spaces-green-cities](http://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/12/paris-parking-spaces-green-cities)

<sup>7</sup> [www.architectureanddesign.com.au/features/comment/cities-scrap-car-parking](http://www.architectureanddesign.com.au/features/comment/cities-scrap-car-parking)

<sup>8</sup> [www.bbc.com/future/article/20200429-are-we-witnessing-the-death-of-the-car](http://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200429-are-we-witnessing-the-death-of-the-car)

<sup>9</sup> [https://bit.ly/impact\\_of\\_car\\_sharing](https://bit.ly/impact_of_car_sharing)

*Rather than just a place to store a car, the car park has become a destination in its own right.*

**1111 LINCOLN ROAD  
MIAMI, US**  
*A new car park with swagger*

South Beach Miami's Lincoln Road is a 1.6 kilometre-long boulevard that is home to beautiful art deco architecture, brand-name stores, independent boutiques, and a bustling street life that offers great people-watching.

For real estate developer Robert Wrenn, the boulevard's reputation translated to big expectations. He knew he would need to tick a lot of boxes. Respecting existing heritage was important – the new building would be attached to an existing structure, the brutalist former Suntrust Bank building, and adding new convenience and social vibrancy to the existing neighbourhood. But he also wanted to create a place that would be distinct and iconic – a place that was undeniably Miami by being undeniably bold.

Wrenn commissioned Swiss architectural practice Herzog & de Meuron, and the design for 1111 Lincoln Road includes 300 parking spots, 11 shops and three restaurants at ground level, with further shopping on the fifth floor, another restaurant on the roof, and luxury residences. The open air structure is remarkable, mixing cantilevers and buttresses in a style described as a 'house of cards'. A firm favourite with architects and photographers, it offers extraordinary architecture as well as panoramic views along the iconic South Beach.

**1234 LIBRARY STREET  
DETROIT, US**  
*An iconic cultural destination*

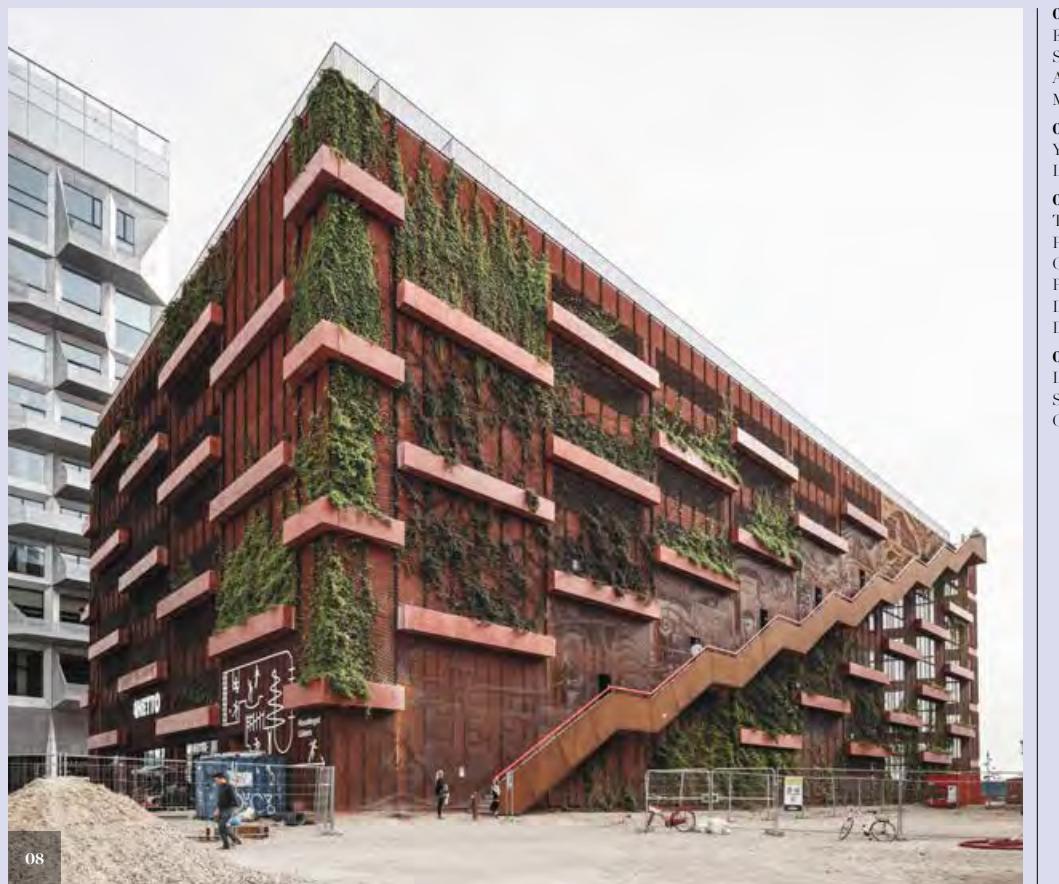
The story of Detroit has become a well-known tale of 'boom to bust and back again' (see TPE Volume Two). Only a few years ago, the downtown was notorious for vacant and abandoned buildings. Today, a significant amount of business and investment continues to transform the centre, and Detroit's reputation as a place of culture, art and entrepreneurship has continued to grow.

Within the context of a quickly changing city, local real estate firm Bedrock set out to build a new car park at 1234 Library Street, with the aim to create a place that could evolve with the times. Rather than just a place to store a car, the car park has become a destination in its own right. Teaming up with Library Street Collective and 27 world-renowned street artists, the car park's three-dimensional facades feature astonishing murals that wrap around its bold, geometric design.

The Library Street car park has won multiple awards including AIA Detroit Building Honor Award, and a 2014 Architizer A+ Awards People's Choice gong. With a growing complement of adjacent creative projects, 1234 Library Street has transformed the way people think about car parking in Detroit.



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**PARK 'N' PLAY  
COPENHAGEN, DENMARK**  
*An active rooftop public space with impressive harbour views*

Copenhagen's Nordhavn is often referred to as the 'Red Neighbourhood' thanks to its historic harbourside, where many buildings are made with red brick. Århusgadekvarteret, in the east of the district, is a new, sustainable development with an old multi-storey car park at its heart.

When faced with the question of retain or redevelop, the developers opted for something in between. As the car park still performed a functional purpose, the brief to the architect was to beautify the existing building and create a new public space on the rooftop. The results are astonishing.

Instead of concealing the existing parking structure, the project has enhanced the beauty of the structural grid by creating a staggered pattern of hanging greenery and planter boxes. Influenced by the late Sir Richard Rogers' iconic Pompidou Centre in Paris, the public staircases create a unique rise from the ground to the roof, where there are impressive views across the harbour. With leisure and play areas at the top of the huge structure performing a much needed role for the growing local community, the repurposed car park acts as both a piece of transport infrastructure and a community space. Swings, ball cages, and places for rest and relaxation are a truly unique take on what was once a plain slab of concrete.

Working in harmony with its surroundings, and Nordhavn's 'Red Neighbourhood' identity, the car park has been tinted a similar shade of red, adding to the existing character of the area, and providing a contrast to the neighbourhood's typically green, leafy facades. ➔

*The repurposed car park acts as both a piece of transport infrastructure and a community space.*



**CITIPONICS URBAN FARM, SINGAPORE**  
*Vegetable production in the heart of the city*

Singapore is renowned for its urban sustainability initiatives. From vertical greening to water management, it continually builds its environmental resilience. During the global pandemic in 2020, the Singapore Government announced new measures aimed at increasing local food production to decrease its vulnerability to global food chains. The bold initiative aimed to see 30 per cent of the country's food produced locally by 2030. Quick to take up a challenge, local agritech startup Citiponics piloted a multi-storey car park project in Ang Mo Kio, a neighbourhood in the north of the city, with the aim of converting 1800 square metres of rooftop space into an urban farm.

Using a vertical farming technology called Aqua-Organic System, an existing car park in Ang Mo Kio was selected for the pilot program and it quickly began to produce 3-4 tonnes (approx 2700 to 3600 kg) of vegetables per month, without the use of pesticides. So far, the project has been a success, with production supplying both nearby residents and consumers across Singapore. With local citizens also contributing to farming activities, the project has seen widespread community benefit. For example, senior citizens are contributing to the production of food.

Citiponics aims to scale the project by finding other underused vertical urban spaces to contribute to Singapore's bold harvesting targets.

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THE CITIPONICS URBAN FARM IN ANG MO KIO, SINGAPORE

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LOCALS HAVE BEEN ENTHUSIASTIC PARTICIPANTS IN THE URBAN FARM PROJECT.

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*The track has enhanced all the best features of this otherwise underused car park space.*

**HYPER KARTING SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA**  
*Rooftop racing gives an old precinct new buzz*

In the early 2000s, Moore Park in Sydney's southeast transitioned from being a theme park to a sports and entertainment precinct including stadiums, golf, markets, bars, cinemas, and restaurants.

Moore Park's 'Entertainment Quarter' is a family-friendly commercial zone, but since it was taken over by a new management consortium in 2014, the new owners have been looking for new and interesting ways to draw crowds from across the city.

In early 2021, a go-kart track was built on the roof of a multi-storey car park. The concept was simple – a 410-metre track snakes around the car park, with a balance of technical bends and cleverly engineered safety barriers. Zipping around the track are German-engineered electric go-karts that are faster, greener and more efficient than the fuel-powered alternative. The fumes and noise of traditional go-karts are gone, but skill and speed (up to 50km/hr) remain the focus on the sophisticated yet accessible Formula 1-inspired track. There is even a smaller side track at slower speeds for younger children, providing an experience for a wide range of ages and abilities.

The track has enhanced all the best features of this otherwise underused car park space: it is open air and under cover, and comes with an impressive view. Hyper Karting has opened up go-karting to a new audience of Sydneysiders, and has promoted the area by attracting people seeking a different type of fun in the city.

**THE FLORIDA BUILDING MONTEVIDEO, URUGUAY**  
*A hybrid response to the demands of a densely populated city*

Uruguay's capital Montevideo is home to the country's major government and financial institutions, and more than 1.7 million people. Space is scarce in its historical centre, and demand for specific site uses

fluctuates at different times of the day and week. With this challenge in mind, a unique response was developed by local architectural firm MAPA to create a building that would adapt to the commercial demands of the city during the working week. The Florida Building comprises offices and car parking on levels one to seven, with a top floor designed as a flexible space

that can be rented by a range of tenants including restaurants, gyms or co-working spaces. Above this space, a rooftop and patio with views across the city is used for both day- and night-time activities. MAPA's

unique design using prefabricated construction demonstrates an innovative response to growing pressures on city centres. — ●

## Image Credits



### CHAPTER 7 Creative returns

- Repurposing public car parks*
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