

# Parking Lot Parks

Jeremy Fichter

## Parking Lot Parks



Typical Parking Lot  
[www.asphaltwa.com](http://www.asphaltwa.com)

*"The public sees parking lots as ugly. The surface parking lot has become a fact of life and an accepted eyesore."*

John A. Jakle and Keith A. Schule in *Lots of Parking*.

*"All too often parking was provided on the closest vacant lot, eliminating all possibility of retail activity there and usually making it devoid of any visual appeal or ameliorating landscaping, thereby creating a dead space adjacent to the downtown area undergoing revitalization."*

Catherine G. Miller in *Carscape: A Parking Handbook*

## Introduction and Definition

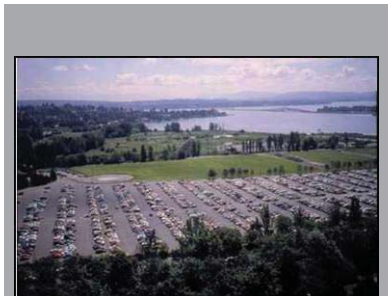
**P**arking lots present urban planners and designers an enormous opportunity to enhance the character and vibrancy of urban areas. Parking lots are nearly always designed for a single purpose: automobile storage. Thus, the focus of parking lot designers is on functionality, specifically how to fit the greatest number of vehicles into the smallest space at the lowest cost. To the extent that ecological, aesthetic and social considerations hamper the accomplishment of these narrow objectives, they tend not to be emphasized in parking lot designs.

In most cases, parking lots are large, open expanses of asphalt with minimal or non-existent landscaping. With such a high proportion of impervious surface, parking lots cause significant harm to ecosystems by contributing to heat island effects, storm water pollution and runoff and air and light pollution.

Aesthetically speaking, parking lots are anathema to urban designers. From within, they are illegible, disorienting and generally uninhabitable. From without, parking lots create voids in the urban fabric, thereby interrupting the continuity of urban form and diminishing the sense of place.

Because of their inhabitability, parking lot environments discourage the social interaction so important to maintaining vibrant urban spaces. Also, because parking lots are generally used only for automobile storage, they are mostly vacant during periods when parking demand is low. By and large, parking lots are lifeless places.

Parking lot parks seek to remedy the ills of traditional parking lot design. They are areas programmed to accommodate vehicle storage while also emphasizing ecological, aesthetic and social considerations. As suggested by Paul Groth, parking lots should be considered gardens in terms of their relationship to nature and to culture. Parking lots probably cannot be transformed into gardens in the traditional sense, but designers can greatly increase their utility by incorporating ecological, aesthetic and social factors.



E-1 Parking Lot, University of Washington.  
University of Washington Campus Master Plan.



Jackle, John A. and Keith A. Schule. 2004. *Lots of Parking: Land Use in a Car Culture*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia

*"The typical design of parking lots as simply mere functional expanse of cheap asphalt and net of white lines is wasteful and destructive." Mark Childs.*

*"The single use of large areas for parking creates dead space. It has made a number of American downtowns look half-developed even after redevelopment efforts."*

Catherine G. Miller in  
Carscape: A Parking Hand-  
book.

## Context

Parking lots are components of the larger transportation network. Because vehicles must be stored at either end of every vehicle trip, parking is essential to automobile travel. Thus, where the automobile is the primary mode of travel, parking is ubiquitous, and large aggregations of parking stalls (i.e. parking lots) tend to be located in or very near activity centers.

Like train stations, bus terminals or airports, parking lots are places where people transition from one travel mode to another. Parking lots, of course, are places where people transition from automobile travel to pedestrian travel. However, traditional parking lot design primarily focuses on accommodating the automobile mode, often to the detriment of the pedestrian mode.



Conceptual drawing.  
<http://www.depotmarket.org/>

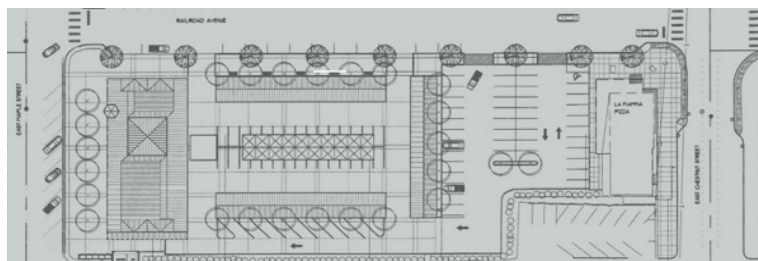
## Case: Depot Market Square, Bellingham, WA

The city-owned surface parking lot located on the site of the historic Bellingham Railroad Depot is the home of the Bellingham Farmer's Market. In 1994, a broad-based group of local citizens and city officials came together to develop a plan for the city-owned site which would include a permanent covered venue for the farmer's market. After more than a decade of planning and public and private fundraising, construction of the new Depot Market Square commenced in January of 2006.

The site plan includes a 7,000 square foot building to house the farmer's market and other community functions and events. In addition to the main depot building, the plan includes an additional three additional covered shelters located around the edges of the parking area for vendor stalls, along with a covered walking area for customers. The depot building and vendor shelters will be open on all sides and will be used as covered parking for the adjoining businesses during the work week. The City of Bellingham will maintain ownership of the land.

The Depot Market Square is an excellent example of a site that incorporates parking with other uses.

Site Plan.  
<http://www.depotmarket.org/>



## Essential Elements

### Ecological

Canopy cover

- More trees, placed strategically to shade specific areas

- Preserve existing trees

Use semi-pervious surfaces

Use appropriate vegetation

- Species tolerant of harsh conditions (compacted soil, pollution, exposure, etc.)

### Aesthetic

Divide large lots into smaller units

- Incorporate screens, fences or other landscaping elements

- Decrease sight lines

Provide aesthetic and functional buffers or transitional areas

- Green space with benches

Incorporate connections with pedestrian realm

Increase legibility

- Landmarks

- Signage

Clear pathways integrated with the pedestrian realm

### Social

Provide places to linger

Incorporate vendors

Encourage multi-use

- Carnivals, weekend markets, rummage sales, outdoor theatre, etc.

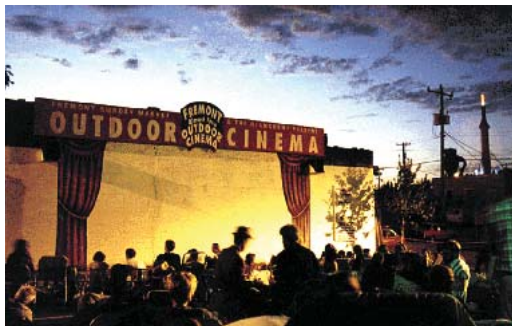
## Parking Lot Parks



Pervious Surface.  
[www.ext.vt.edu](http://www.ext.vt.edu)

### Case: Fremont Outdoor Movies

The Fremont Outdoor Movies uses a quarter-acre surface parking lot in the Fremont neighborhood to show movies on Saturday nights during the summer months. The privately-owned parking lot is used by the adjoining business during the work week. Movies are shown on the side of an adjoining building, painted white to function as a screen. Aside from the painted wall, the site is otherwise unimproved. Patrons bring their own seating. A variety of local vendors provide concessions on movie nights.



Fremont Outdoor Movies.  
<http://www.fremontoutdoormovies.com/>

*"If we become more conscious of parking lots as gardens, perhaps we will design them to be more like gardens, rather than yards, lots, or leftover spaces." Paul Groth.*

*"The extent and character of outdoor activities are greatly influenced by physical planning. Just as it is possible through choice of materials and colors to create a certain palette in a city, it is equally possible through planning decisions to influence patterns of activities, to create better or worse conditions for outdoor events, and to create lively or lifeless cities."*

Jan Gehl in *Life Between Buildings*.

## Aquisition / Implementation Mechanisms

Parking lot parks can be located on public or private land. Depot Market Square and the Columbus Carscape Competition site are examples of publicly-owned parking lot parks. In the case of the Depot Market Square, implementation involved the formation of a public/private partnership which derived funding from both public and private sources.

Experience suggests that on private sites, developers are unlikely to incorporate ecological, aesthetic and social considerations unless required to do so. Cities can encourage better design through landscaping ordinances or through design review processes. The City of Seattle Department of Planning and Development recently authored a "Green Parking Lots" memo to assist developers in meeting a number of regulations pertaining to parking lots (see Resources section below).

*"... landscaping, screens, circulation patterns, and monuments can be used to transform today's parking lots into positive spaces that enhance the human scale of a community."*

Catherine G. Miller in *Carscape: A Parking Handbook*

## Case: Columbus Carscape Competition, Columbus Ohio

In the mid-1980s, the City of Columbus, Ohio hosted a parking lot design competition. Entrants developed and submitted designs for an existing publicly-owned surface parking lot in downtown Columbus. Designs were to conform to established objectives and regulatory and financial constraints. For purposes of illustration, design entries were categorized into five groups based on the predominant theme of the design solution: 1) multiple uses, 2) landscaping, 3) screens/trellises, 4) parking patterns and 5) sculptures/monuments .

The design entries provide innovative ideas for integrating parking lots into the urban environment. Three exemplary entries are shown herein.



Design by Land Studio and Martin Poirier.

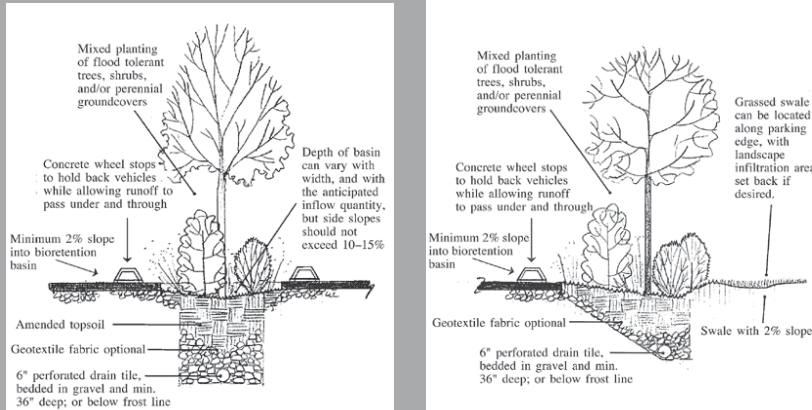


Example designs to increase infiltration.

[www.urbanext.uiuc.edu](http://www.urbanext.uiuc.edu)

### Pattern

Where parking lots are to be developed in urban settings, design should focus on integrating the parking facility into the urban fabric by incorporating ecological, aesthetic and social dimensions. Where possible, publicly-owned parking lots in urban settings should be redesigned to incorporate these elements. Municipalities should develop ordinances or design review processes to require that these elements be incorporated into design of new parking facilities.

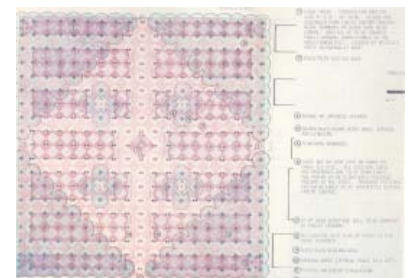


### Resources

- Childs, Mark. 1999. *Parking Spaces*. Washington D.C., McGraw Hill.
- McShane, Clay. 1994. *Down the Asphalt Path: The Automobile and the American City*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Jackle, John A. and Keith A. Schule. 2004. *Lots of Parking: Land Use in a Car Culture*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- Weant, Robert A. and Herbert S. Levinson. 1990. *Parking*. Westport: Eno Foundation for Transportation.
- Urban Land Institute. *Dimensions of Parking*. 2000. Washington D.C.: Urban Land Institute.
- During, Alan Thein. 1996. *The Car and the City*. Seattle: Northwest Environment Watch.
- Gehl, Jan. 1987. *Life Between Buildings: Using Public Space*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold.
- Hanson, Susan, ed. 1995. *The Geography of Urban Transportation*. New York: The Guildford Press.
- Miller, Catherine G. 1988. *Carscape: A Parking Handbook*. Columbus, IN: Washington Street Press.
- Pfeiffer, Christina Ann. 1986. *Analyses of Landscape Design and Maintenance Requirements in Urban Parking Lots*. Thesis, Master of Science, University of Washington.
- Whyte, William H. 1980. *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*. Washington D.C.: The Conservation Foundation.
- City of Seattle Department of Planning and Development. "Green Parking Lots." Client Assistance Memo 515. <http://www.ci.seattle.wa.us/dclu/Publications/cam/CAM515.pdf>



Design by Secundidno Fernandez with Helmut Kern and Stanley Suski



Design by Odell Associates Inc.