

Walkable City Rules: 101 Steps to Making Better Places

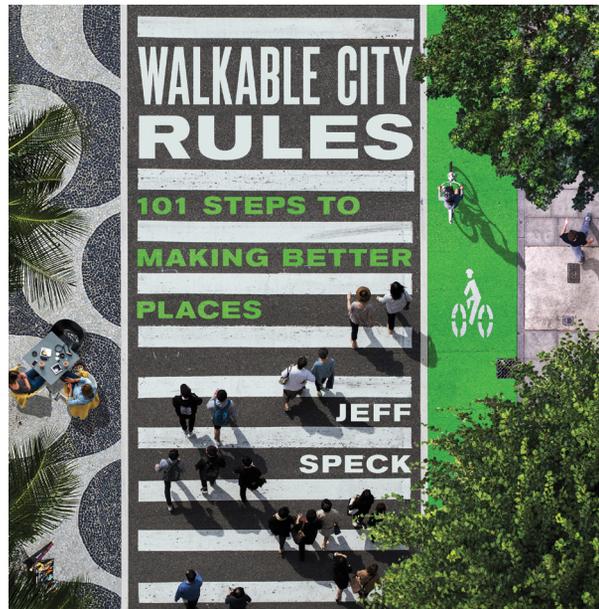
By Jeff Speck

NORTH AMERICA, ALONG WITH MUCH OF THE WORLD, has been building and rebuilding its cities and towns quite badly for more than half a century. To do it properly would have been easy; we used to be great at it. But, like voting for president, just because something is easy to do does not mean that it will be done, or done well.

To rectify the sporadic spread of city planning best practices, I published “Walkable City” in 2012. The timing was fortunate: while the term was not often used before 2010, *walkability* now seems to be the special sauce that every community wants. It took a while, but many of our leaders have realized that establishing walkability as a central goal can be an expeditious path to making our cities better in a whole host of ways.

Packaged as “literary non-fiction” and “current affairs,” *Walkable City* was effective at finding readers, armchair urbanists curious about what makes cities tick. It made its way into mayors’ offices, council chambers, and town meetings, held aloft by people demanding change. Sometimes, change was begun, and that’s when the problems started. While the book does a decent job of inspiring change, it doesn’t exactly tell you how to create it.

Hence this new book, “Walkable City Rules,” an effort to weaponize *Walkable City* for deployment in the field. A brief excerpt follows.



Rule 17: Make Downtown Parking a Public Utility

Provide parking in consolidated facilities.

ELIMINATING THE ON-SITE PARKING requirement is the clear best choice for every main street and downtown. Eliminating parking is not. Many American downtowns need to provide new parking as they grow, especially as ugly surface parking lots become building sites. The typical way to densify an unwalkable urban area into a walkable one is to turn surface parking lots into structured

decks with a smaller footprint. How that parking is built and managed can be key to a place’s success or failure.

Most of the parking for a new performing arts center, for example, should be located at least a block away.

In most places, the best and easiest way to transition away from on-site parking to something better is through in-lieu fees. Instead of being required to build parking, new developments are required to pay a similar amount into a fund that is then used to build large, collective parking facilities. This effort can be managed by the city, by a parking authority, or even by a master developer, but the outcome is the same: parking that serves an entire district, located and designed to help that district thrive.

How much in-lieu fees to pay should be based loosely on how much that parking costs to provide, minus anticipated net revenue from users. Fees per space across the United States range from \$2,000 in Northampton, MA, (too low) to \$27,520 in Carmel, CA, (too high?). As of 1999, Donald Shoup had identified thirty-one different North American cities with in-lieu fee programs, including Chapel Hill, NC (\$7,200), Lake Forest, IL (\$9,000), and Vancouver, BC (\$9,708).⁷⁰ Keep in mind that, since municipal spaces are shared among many users, fees can typically be based on a parking requirement that has been adjusted well downward.

However you pay for it, municipal

parking lots should be carefully located, with an understanding of the important role that they play in downtown. Effectively, they are anchors: receivers and disgorgers of large quantities of pedestrians. Like in a shopping mall, they should be located at some distance from the other anchors, to give business to the shops in between. In this way, downtowns need to be organized cunningly, with a strategic separation of origins and destinations.⁷¹ Most of the parking for a new performing arts center, for example, should be located at least a block away.

This is the opposite of what usually happens in US cities. Frank Gehry's Walt Disney Concert Hall sits directly atop its six-level, \$110-million parking garage, built at a cost of \$50,000 per space⁷²—about twice what it would have cost to build it on the empty lot one block east. This nonsense needs to stop.

The downtown parking discussion is given a new twist by car-sharing, ride-sharing and ride-hailing services, and the anticipation of driverless cars. Futurists tell us that it is folly to build any new parking facilities, since they will be obsolete in a decade or two. Whether or not these predictions are accurate, the fact remains that some downtowns need more parking now. In utterly car-dependent cities like Las Vegas and Tampa, getting new growth financed means a commitment to more parking.

Or does it? In a plan for the River District, an expansion of downtown Elkhart, IN, the City had determined that a 600-car parking structure was needed to serve a new aquatic center, and funded it at \$10 million. With careful analysis



In Northampton, MA, a municipal lot anchors shopping and offices downtown.

and a healthy dose of skepticism, it was determined that—with shared parking, satellite parking, and high-tech demand management—all parking needs could be met using existing facilities. The \$10 million has been rededicated to squares and parks within the District.

RULE 17: If on-site parking minimums cannot be eliminated entirely, replace them with in-lieu fees supporting shared parking lots. Regardless of how they are funded, locate large parking structures strategically as downtown anchors. And don't build them unless no other option exists.

FOOTNOTES

70 Donald Shoup, "Instead of Free Parking," Access, no. 15 (Fall 1999), <http://shoup.bol.ucla.edu/InsteadOfFreeParking.pdf>.

71 Andres Duany, *Suburban Nation*, 167.

72 Michael Manville and Donald Shoup, "People, Parking, and Cities," Access, no. 25 (Fall 2004), <https://web.archive.org/web/20141026062915/>

<http://www.uctc.net/access/25/Access%2025%20-%2002%20-%20People,%20Parking,%20and%20Cities.pdf>.

Rule 19: Price Parking Based on Its Value

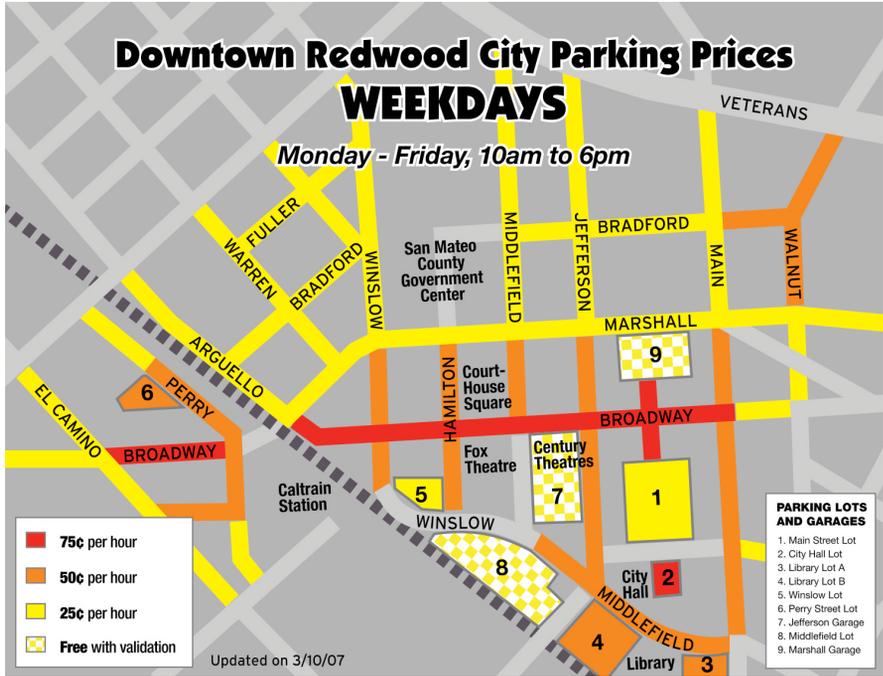
If the curbs are full, the parking is underpriced.

WHEN DRIVING is too cheap, roads get too crowded. When parking is too cheap, parking gets too crowded. And when people park too much, a bunch of bad things happen: people circle in search of spots; they double park; or they get frustrated and drive back home without shopping. Next time, they drive to the mall instead.

Since most places currently price their parking so arbitrarily, a switch to an unsophisticated system that merely tries to respond to demand can have a profound impact.

For a downtown area to function rationally, its parking must be priced rationally. This means that price must reflect value, with the most desirable spots getting the highest price. In many places, this price should vary around the clock to reflect changing demand.

What's the right price? Donald Shoup



One of the earliest plans of its type, the 2007 Redwood City, CA, parking plan priced different spaces based upon their desirability, to allocate demand efficiently. Streets closest to the action cost the most, and underutilized parking structures were free.

suggests that parking be priced at the amount that results in 85% occupancy, which means that there is one empty spot on each curb face. This outcome can be achieved in high-tech ways, such as San Francisco’s sophisticated SF park system, which constantly changes prices based on occupancy measured by in-road sensors. Or it can be achieved, with slightly less accuracy, by setting a price that changes once or twice a day based on a little bit of testing. Since most places currently price their parking so arbitrarily, a switch to an unsophisticated system that merely tries to respond to demand can have a profound impact. And remember: the laws of supply and demand are not suspended at 6 p.m. or on Sunday, so properly priced parking shouldn’t be either.

Shoup documents how, in city after city, a switch to properly-priced parking has changed merchants’ fortunes for the better. He reminds us that the parking

meter was introduced (in 1935) by store owners in order to improve revenue by creating more churn at the curb and encouraging workers to park elsewhere. Still, whenever someone suggests raising the price of parking in over-parked areas, it is almost always the local merchants who fight it the hardest.

In some cases, no amount of evidence or reason is adequate to change a merchant’s mind. One restaurateur in Norwalk, CT, recently printed up a flyer. It says: “Donald Shoup’s theories are right—just not here in Norwalk.”⁷⁶

For this reason, Shoup introduced one other great idea, the Parking Benefits District (PBD). A PBD makes a commitment to the merchants that the additional revenue collected from higher meter prices will be spent in the location where it is earned. Typically, it can be directed toward street and sidewalk improvements, street furniture like lighting and benches, new trees and landscap-

ing, and even facade improvements to private businesses. Eventually, it can pay for new parking structures as well. PBDs are an excellent carrot for merchants, but they are potentially much more.

Probably the most effective PBD is the one that Shoup helped establish in Old Town Pasadena. Begun in 1993, it paid for all of the benefits mentioned above, as well as a team of public service officers, the burying of overhead wires, and the conversion of a rear alley network into a lovely pedestrian zone. There are no dumpsters in Old Town; each block has its own industrial trash compactor.

The experience in Pasadena has been truly transformative: a virtuous circle in which improvement has led to more visitors, which has led to more meter revenue and more improvement. Within five years of its inception, property tax revenue from the district tripled and sales tax revenues quadrupled.⁷⁷ Clearly, this is an effort worth copying.

Rule 19: Reprice parking with an eye to Shoup’s 85 percent rule, and establish a Parking Benefits District to direct revenue toward local improvements.

FOOTNOTES

⁷⁶ This is quoted from memory and may be slightly inaccurate.

⁷⁷ Jon Geeting, “Ideas Worth Stealing: Parking Benefit Districts,” WHYY Radio (March 28, 2016), <https://whyy.org/articles/ideas-worth-stealing-parking-benefit-districts/>.

For more, visit islandpress.org/book/walkable-city-rules



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