the HOW *and the* WHY

By David Mepham, PhD

*Rethinking parking,
the Main Street place and
access experience,
and where we go from here.*

THE RISE AND RISE OF AMAZON AND ONLINE SHOPPING has transformed the way we consume. This trend can be contrasted with the demise of traditional shopping and face-to-face trading. Despite these trends, some Main Street shopping centers are not only surviving but thriving.

Above and beyond the provision of day-to-day goods and services, successful Main Street shopping centers offer an exceptional place and access experience. There is often a notable point of difference, along with a cultural edge, between successful centers and their competitors. The ones that do well are walkable places that invite people to both wander and linger, with places to relax and watch the world go by. These places offer interesting, unique goods and services with great food and beverages. Accessibility, including car parking and the local walk environment, is central to this exceptional Main Street place and access experience.

While parking is important to accessibility, there are many ways in which it can detract from place quality. Thinking only about parking and cars rather than places and people, we end up with places that are easy to get to but there is nowhere to go or reason to stay. We find poorly designed and located car parking options with inadequate signage, avoidable right-of-way conflicts, and associated congestion. Creating attractive, accessible places requires a holistic approach to the parking experience and this must include safe, comfortable walking access.

Starting the Experience
The parking experience starts when we begin to contemplate our destination and mode choice. There are time and cost considerations, including

ISTOCK

A range of parking options may be available in the center, each with its own costs and benefits. On- or off-street? Center or edge? Structure or at-grade? Public or private? Paid or unpaid? There are then the related issues of safety, comfort, surveillance/security, duration, convenience, and amenity. So many decisions and so little information!

who we are travelling with and our primary and secondary activity objectives. Over and above our day-to-day travel grind, when we have the time and money, we are more inclined to go out with others. Shopping trips easily take on a social dimension and are likely to involve the consumption of leisure. People love to spend money when they are having fun with friends.

While weighing parking options, we must consider a range of decisions. These include the ease of the approach to the center, consideration of available or desirable parking options, how we locate and then enter a car park, and actually parking our car, including the ease and legibility of paying for parking. Finally, the walk experience between the car park and the center is considered.

Thinking or Feeling

So we leave home and drive to the center. Driving anywhere involves dealing with other drivers and

inevitably some level of congestion and delay and then stress. Stress can distort our judgment and compromise our driving behavior. Car accidents are the main cause of serious injury to pedestrians and cyclists, with particular risks at crossings and corners.

Seeking parking in the center can be a particularly stressful experience, especially during busy periods when we have to compete with others for parking. Competition with a sense of urgency can bring out a less friendly side to our personality, sometimes aggression or even bullying. Under pressure to win or just to survive in a car parking/cage fight, our rational brain can flip very quickly into the more emotive/instinctive mode—it's no surprise that some unbelievable stuff happens in parking garages and lots. Minimizing and relieving parking anxiety is one of the challenges for those involved in the provision and design of parking in busy centers. Good design and good information, early and accurate, are important in addressing this problem.

A range of parking options may be available in the center, each with its own costs and benefits. On- or off-street? Center or edge? Structure or at-grade? Public or private? Paid or unpaid? There are then the related issues of safety, comfort, surveillance/security, duration, convenience, and amenities. So many decisions and so little information!

Directional signage is useful as we approach the center, but in the center itself and at the car park entry,

it provides insufficient information and may direct drivers into full car parks, increasing local congestion, stress, and driver anxiety. Real-time wayfinding signage with mobile phone apps help us locate actual, available on-street or off-street parking. Real-time information reduces cruising and local traffic congestion and opens up our parking options depending on how much we want to pay and how long we want to stay. Less stress and less cruising with better, safer driving reduces risk and increases safety and comfort for pedestrians.

Rethinking Main Street Parking

On-street, Main Street parking is highly visible, accessible, and in high demand. The Main Street needs to provide access for on-street transit and delivery vehicles that need shorter-term parking. Typically, short-term parking supports hit-and-run shopping. High vehicle turnover from short-term parking with more complex vehicle movements often creates delays and congestion, with increased risk to cyclists and pedestrians in the center. Demand-responsive parking pricing can spread the peak parking load to other streets, freeing up space.

On-street parking technologies with complementary policies and equitable pricing enable a rethinking of the Main Street place function. By shifting some of the demand for on-street, Main Street parking to other nearby streets, there is an opportunity to socialize and green the Main Street.

Occasional buildouts into parking spaces shift seating and outdoor dining from the footpath to dedicated space enhanced with landscaping, art, trees, and shade. Buildouts also enable safer mid-block crossing points with high visibility holding space and a shorter road crossing. Less clutter on footpaths enables an improved level of service for pedestrians that is easier and offers more comfortable walk access in peak times and at busy points, such as corners and crossing points. Uncluttered footpaths provide safe space for people with disabilities, ease for people with strollers and children, and a better walking and shopping experience for everyone.

Rethinking Off-street Parking

Off-street parking provides for longer stays and time to shop, eat, drink, relax, and socialize. It also provides easier access for people with disabilities and for people with children and strollers. Off-street parking may provide shorter term, high-turnover options in

high-access areas closer to shops or services. When off-street parking is accessed from arterial roads, unnecessary Main Street congestion can be avoided. Vehicle access to parking via connecting side streets or laneways from the Main Street creates right-of-way conflicts with footpath traffic, especially at corners where pedestrians are most likely to be injured by turning cars.

By restricting vehicle traffic through connecting side streets and laneways, there is an opportunity to create attractive, green, animated, and inclusive public places

This may be a case of 1 + 1 = 3: Pedestrian traffic to and from stations and car parking animates the place, supports social and economic activity, and increases the sense of safety both during the day and at night.
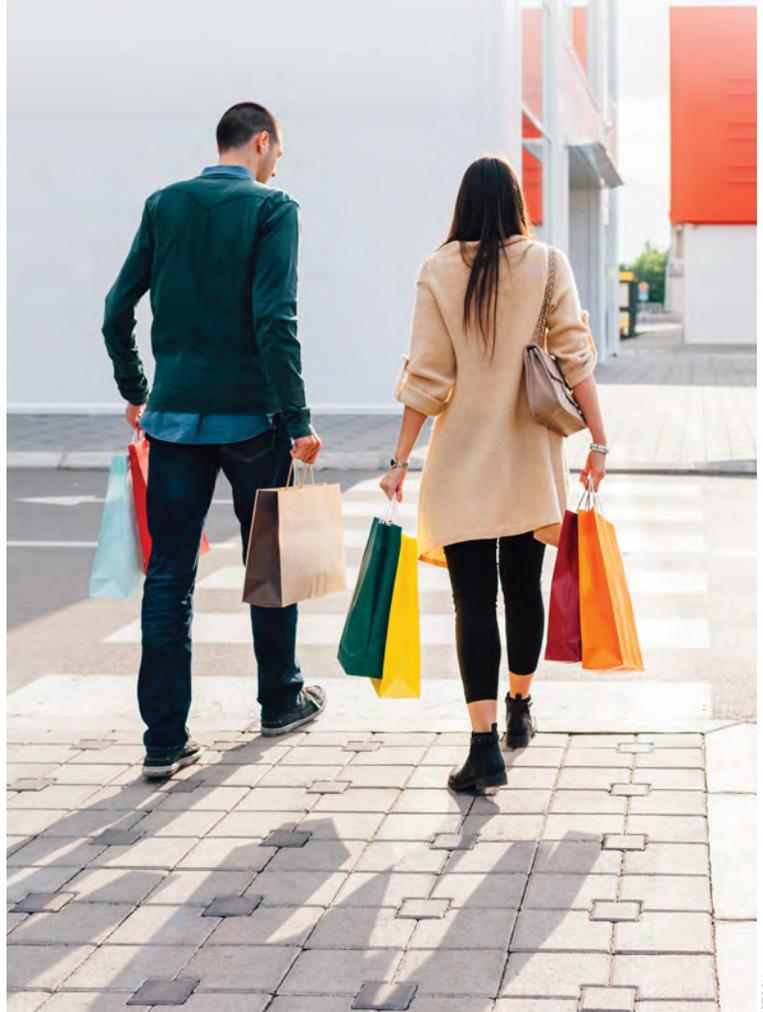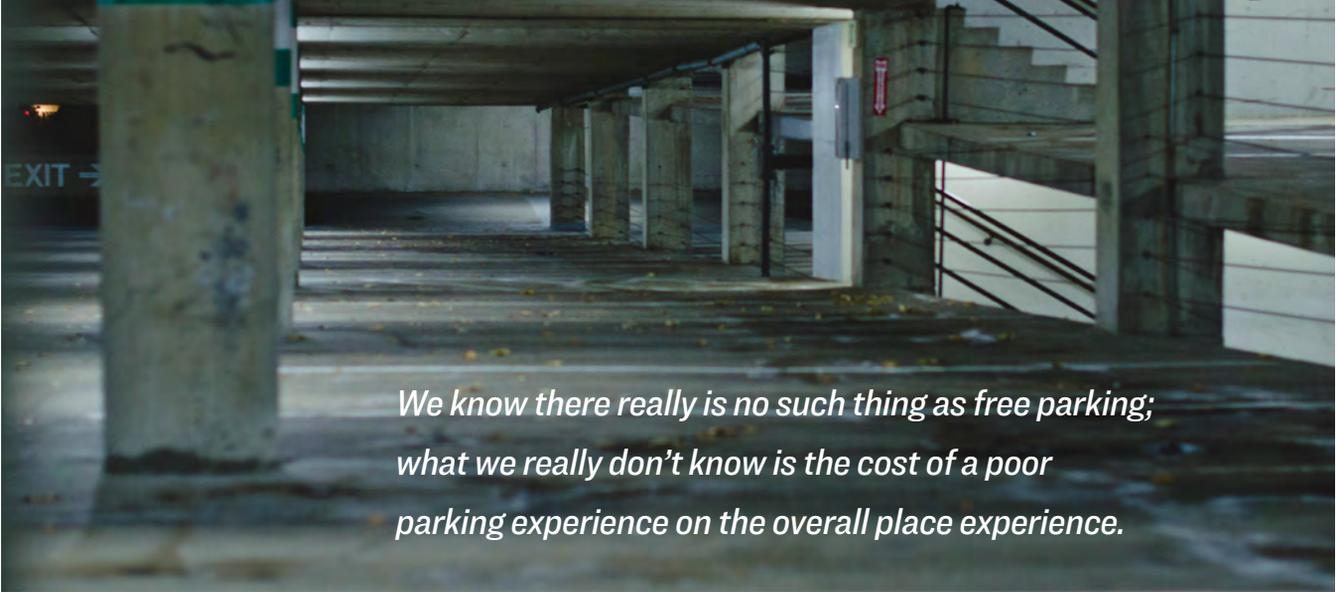
> *We know there really is no such thing as free parking; what we really don't know is the cost of a poor parking experience on the overall place experience.*

for social and community activities, cafes, restaurants, or bars, along with play places for kids, big and small. These places may evolve out of temporary, pop-up closures that will let planners understand impacts and enable informed community and business consultation. These can evolve to be the multi-functional spaces that are often missing from Main Street shopping centers.

Side streets and laneways may also function as the key connections to rail transit. In Melbourne, Australia, rail lines often run adjacent to Main Streets, and smaller, less trafficked cross streets connect rail to Main Street buses. Parking and rail stations are often accessed via these connecting streets.

Increasing Place Quality

A good walking experience is a key element of a great part-of-the-journey parking experience, and it's one we often overlook in planning for parking. This may be a case of 1 + 1 = 3: Pedestrian traffic to and from stations and car parking animates the place, supports social and economic activity, and increases the sense of safety both during the day and at night.

At-grade, off-street car parking can easily degrade place quality but with a more creative view of the site, you can alternately add something positive to the space. They may be seen as land banks for future development, especially where land adjoins a transit station. If parking is paid, a business case may exist for a higher quality parking structure, ideally mixed-use with an activated street level—maybe with a giant art or green wall. Where at-grade parking is a longer-term preference, it is reasonable to consider larger trees, stormwater management, and water-sensitive urban design with complementary gardens to filter runoff. Solar panels can support onsite electric-charging stations and might double up as weather protection on dedicated walk paths with local area traffic management and security lighting and closed-circuit television cameras.

Paid parking typically supports the provision of higher quality parking outcomes. If the user is not paying, then who is and why? It seems reasonable to independently access the cost/benefit of unpaid public parking to properly understand the real costs and then consider higher and better outcomes. We know there really is no such thing as free parking; what we really don't know is the cost of a poor parking experience on the overall place experience.

Parking, Place, and Accessibility

When we think about parking, we often fail to consider the effects of car park planning and design decisions on the wider place/access experience. I'm interested in how parking can enhance the place experience. How can we make places better and safer for pedestrians, attractive places, "sticky" places, and places that balance a vibrant local economy with inclusive social and community activities? We should consider how parking space might be more flexible in the shorter and longer terms and how parking can be cleaner, greener, and smarter.

Developments with parking technologies, transport technologies, artificial intelligence, electric cars and buses, shared cars, bikes, and other transportation modes with a range of environmental, economic, and social changes and challenges are catalysts for a rethink of parking and mobility, place, and accessibility. The question is how can we, as parking professionals, encourage these healthy, vibrant accessible places and stay one step ahead of Amazon? ℗

DAVID MEPHAM, PhD, is an urban access consultant based in Melbourne, Australia. He can be reached at mepham.consulting@gmail.com.