

BACON'S REBELLION

The Op/Ed Page for Virginia's New Economy

Parking Madness

Virginians spend multi-millions of dollars paving parking spaces. Most of the investment in asphalt sits idle. Worse, sprawling parking lots destroy any sense of community or place.

Consider the humble parking space -- so essential to our auto-centric society, yet so utterly taken for granted.

Whether the parking spots are strung along a city street or wrapped around a shopping center, they are so ubiquitous that they blend into the background. We give them no thought whatsoever -- except in those rare instances when we need a place to park and cannot find one.

Virginia's governors and lawmakers discourse at great length about roads, rail lines, bridges and other transportation infrastructure, but you don't hear them talking about parking lots. Perhaps they should give the subject more attention.

Parking spaces take up an extraordinary amount of surface area, especially in the suburban world of office parks and shopping malls. Endless stretches of impermeable asphalt aggravate the problem of run-off when it rains, contributing to the pollution of rivers and streams. The construction and maintenance of tens of millions of parking spaces

across the state amounts to a not-inconsequential expense of doing business. And to a remarkable degree, parking spaces define the look and function of our public places -- often to their detriment.



In a discussion of parking spaces, there are two points worth emphasizing.

First, in suburban jurisdictions, where land uses are strictly segregated, Virginia devotes far more acreage to parking spaces than needed. Apartment buildings, office buildings, retail areas, schools, churches and even municipal parks surround themselves with space to accommodate peak parking demand. Thus, office buildings have enough acreage to handle the nine-to-five workday crunch, shopping centers enough to take on weekend Christmas shopping, and apartment complexes enough to provide convenient parking for Virginia's worker/shoppers when they come home in the evening. A consequence is that only a small fraction of parking spaces are

utilized at any given time. From an economist's perspective, this is an incredible waste. Statewide, Virginia has billions of dollars of assets sitting idle, underutilized and unproductive.

The second point is that the barren, paved flatlands where we park our cars create an environment hostile to pedestrians and street life. People rush from their cars to their destinations and then rush off again. They do not stroll, window shop, or pause for conversation. Parking lots are not equipped with chairs where people can sit and sip coffee, nor chairs where they can relax and read a novel. Offering no place to linger, parking lots suck the spontaneous social interaction out of suburban life.

In *Bacon's Rebellion*, I have enumerated many absurdities of suburban planning and design. In "[Lost in Suburbia](#)," I chronicled my personal encounter with the "you can't get there from here" phenomenon. In "[Pod People](#)," I described how cul de sacs and development pods destroy the connectivity between the places where people live, work and shop. In "[Suburbia Absurdia](#)," I demonstrated the random futility of suburban sidewalks.

As aggravating and idiotic as these problems are, none are



West End Assembly of God (above)
Montessori (left),

as extravagantly wasteful and socially harmful as the practice of surrounding every public place with parking lots.

For evidence of the zombie-like application of suburban zoning codes, I need wander no farther than a few hundred yards from my own suburban subdivision. Strung along Parham Road in Henrico County are three nearly adjacent facilities -- a school, a church and a synagogue -- that would co-exist easily in an urban environment but are sealed off from one another in the county. Each has its own entrance to Parham, each defines its boundaries with a fringe of trees and scrub, and each engulfs its structures with vast parking lots.

First, let's take a look at Richmond Montessori School. I snapped this photo a few months ago during the school day. That's why you actually see a few cars there. But, please note, the parking lot is empty during nights and weekends.

Now, let's take a peak at the West End Assembly of God about the same time of day. As you can see, it's almost empty. Indeed, the parking lot is vacant nearly all the time, with the exception of Sunday services.

Now for a glimpse of the parking lot at the Temple Beth-el (*below and right*)...

(Due to the layout, I couldn't get a good shot of the sanctuary surrounded by parking lot in a single photo, so I've displayed the building and the parking lot separately. I took these photos Sunday. The West End Assembly of God was bustling. Needless to say, the synagogue complex was a ghost town.)

The first point worth observing is the isolation of the structures. The buildings are ar-

chitecturally distinctive in their own way, but they are disconnected from everything around them. There are no pedestrians. There is no street life. The buildings do not invite interaction with the community. If you seek to withdraw from the world, then such isolation makes



sense. If you wish to embrace the world, then it does not.

The second point worth making is the wasteful use of the land and pavement. How much money did these institutions spend acquiring the land, grading and paving the lots, landscaping them, and resurfacing them?

Here's the irony: The Montessori school generates demand for parking Monday through Friday, the synagogue on Saturday and the church on Sunday. Just imagine a pattern of land use in which these facilities shared the same parking lot with each other -- and, for good measure, with neighboring residents who would use it at night. A much smaller parking lot could do quadruple duty for school, church, temple and homeowner, and knit them all together into a much closer community.

Examples of wasteful extravagance could be replicated endlessly across suburban Virginia. The problem is not any lack of good will between Christians, Jews and Montessoris. The problem is zoning codes that separate different spheres of human activity and mandate huge parking lots around the structures.

Suburban Virginia is awash in parking lots. In the upper right-hand corner is an image of the wasteland that surrounds Regency Mall and cuts it off from neighboring residences. (To be fair, I took

this photo Sunday morning; the parking lot is not always this empty.)

Though located in an upscale part of Henrico County, Regency is in decline.

New regional malls at Short Pump and Stony Point, dressed up as "pedestrian" destinations, have attracted much of its clientele. Regency Mall management has spiffed up its parking lots with shrubs and ornamental trees but nothing can hide the Saharan barrenness of the mall perimeter.

Contrast Regency Mall with Carytown, an urban shopping corridor that is prospering despite a glut of retail space in the Richmond metropolitan region. If you judged Carytown by architectural style, there is nothing impressive about the retail district. Most shops consist of plain, two-story buildings. Only an old church converted into a restaurant and boutiques stands out a visually impressive. But Carytown "works" because of its pedestrian-friendly streetscape.

One key to the streetscape is the placement of the parking spaces. Carytown runs about 10 blocks along Cary Street, a one-way thoroughfare of four lanes. Two lanes are reserved for parking spaces,



Parking lot at Regency Mall

which usually fill up in a hurry. The parking lanes fill a dual function: They provide places for cars to park. But they also create a barrier between the traffic in the street and the pedestrians on the sidewalk.

This photo near the old Byrd Theater shows clearly how parked cars separate pedestrians from traffic. The sidewalk is narrow but lively. Retailers display merchandise and promotions on the sidewalk. Restaurateurs place small tables out front. Cary-





Carytown people watching (left), Libbie & Grove sidewalk scene (right)

town is a fun place to visit and stay a while -- to grab a cup of coffee, eat a meal, read a book, window shop, stroll down the street or engage in everyone's favorite pastime, watching other people.

Aesthetically, Carytown pales compared to the new malls. The sidewalks are cement -- no fancy brick pavers. There are a few trees, but there is little other landscape ornamentation, certainly nothing like the bright flower boxes that can be found in the new "pedestrian" malls out in the county. Carytown works because it is embedded organically in a larger neighborhood of grid streets and alleys, with houses behind all the stores. In contrast to retail centers in the suburbs, the presence of Carytown does not hurt residential property values. It *elevates* property values. People pay a *premium* to live within walking distance of the district.

Carytown also is popular because its streetscapes work. The shops are not insulated by asphalt badlands. Yet there is plenty of room to park. Spaces are tucked away on side streets, alleys and lots behind the shops. On a side street behind the Byrd Theater there also is this modest two-story parking structure (*below*).



Streetscapes are handled skillfully in other parts of Richmond, too, including a neighborhood shopping area known to locals by the intersection of two streets, Libbie and Grove. As in Carytown, parking

spaces that buffer the sidewalk from traffic are crucial to defining the streetscape. As in Carytown, merchants treat the sidewalk as an extension of their establishments, where they display wares and create inviting spaces with planters, benches, tables and chairs.

Curbside parking at Libbie and Grove is not sufficient to accommodate all the customers but, as in Carytown, extra parking is tucked away *behind* the stores, as seen in the photograph below, where expanse does not interfere with the streetscape out front.





the sidewalk and the store. No window shopping here!

Someone also has scattered ornamental trees and bushes randomly around the

Suburban retailers can't replicate the pedestrian experience to save their souls. The retail experience in Henrico County is entirely dependent upon the automobile. Despite the existence of pedestrian-friendly amenities such as sidewalks and landscaping, the elements are laid out all wrong. (In a supreme irony, even the "pedestrian" malls are accessibly only by car and are surrounded by endless parking lots.)

One example of dysfunctional parking shall suffice to make the point.

On the Broad Street retail strip, there is a Walgreen Drug Store. A sidewalk runs along Broad Street past the store. But the sidewalk looks like someone's idea of a bad joke. Other than a curb, nothing stands between the sidewalk and the Broad Street traffic. In contrast to Carytown, where parking spaces serve as a buffer between cars and pedestrians, the parking lot serves as a buffer *between pedestrians and the store*. Get that? The parking lot stands *between*

Walgreen perimeter, but this "landscaping" fails to define the space in any meaningful way. Here's the kicker:



Between the sidewalk and the Walgreen parking lot runs a stone-lined drainage ditch!

Some lobotomized automation installed the sidewalk, planted the trees and shrubs, paved the parking lot and, for good measure, threw in an open drainage ditch without any apparent thought to the impact on customers. Whoever was responsible for this abomination -- developer, retailer or county planners -- could not have created an uglier, more dysfunc-

tional arrangement of streetscape elements had they locked themselves in a room, dropped acid and scribbled their blueprints with blindfolds on.

Carytown will endure. Libbie and Grove will endure. Even as the buildings age, sidewalks crack and curbs crumble, people will continue to savor the sense of place created by the streetscapes. They will always find the area worth saving. But the Walgreen store on Broad Street will not endure. When the building outlives its fully depreciated life span, Walgreen will move to another location, leaving a vacancy for a low-rent tenant. The configuration of elements is so poorly arranged that the landowner would be well

advised to bulldoze the entire tract and start over.

Sadly, the same can be said of entire zip codes of suburban development. Oceans of asphalt destroy any sense of place, leaving behind nothing worth saving. By failing to appreciate the significance of parking lots and streetscapes, the architects of Virginia's suburbs have prevailed over the massive destruction of wealth and the eventual demise of their commercial tax base.