Less Parking, More City: How Mexico City Became a Leader in Parking Reform

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“The right to have access to every building in the city by private motorcar in an age when everyone possesses such a vehicle is the right to destroy the city.”
-Lewis Mumford (1957)

In February, at an event hosted by ITDP, the Mayor of Mexico City made a major announcement. As part of his mobility and development government strategy, the city would prioritize parking reform. This announcement was the first of several from the city, culminating in the implementation of a major, progressive policy change enacted on July 11th. The policy, called “limitation of parking spaces in the city construction code”, changes the law from requiring a minimum number of parking spaces in a development to setting a cap for how many can be built. This positions Mexico City, the largest city in North America, as the leader in rethinking land use policies that favor the car and prioritizing spaces for people in this rapidly growing city.

This groundbreaking policy change is the result of a decade-long campaign by ITDP called Menos Cajones, Mas Ciudad (Less Parking, More City), in collaboration with the Ministry of Urban Development and Housing, the Ministry of Mobility, and the Real Estate Association (ADI), among others. ITDP’s focus on parking is a challenge to one of the largest unintended consequences of the 20th century model of car-oriented cities – sprawl created in part due to the amount of space the car needs when it is not moving. The demand for parking and its enshrinement as a right in public opinion, and, often, in law, has resulted in more sprawl, less pedestrian safety, incentivizing driving, traffic congestion, pollution, and most of all, a reduction of the space available for the much more essential uses of housing and transit.

Mexico City was no exception. Since 2007, ITDP has been actively pushing on-street parking reform in the city as a first step to give priority to people. In 2012, we achieved our first milestone: the implementation of Ecoparq, an on-street parking enforcement and pricing program. Before Ecoparq, unregulated or loosely regulated parking resulted in chaotic streets with illegal parking, cruising, and a perceived lack of parking availability. Ecoparq helped prove this parking saturation was, in fact, a demand management problem, and that the right policy can modify driving patterns towards a more sustainable vision and calmer streets. This was the key that opened the door to a very
much needed conversation: the revision and reform of off-street parking laws. Neighborhoods that used Ecoparq saw the results of regulated parking immediately, and the program has continued to expand to nearby areas.

Less Parking, More City, a study released by ITDP in 2014 with the support of the UK’s Prosperity Fund and the Ministry of Urban Development and Housing (SEDUVI), gathered evidence of the unsustainable trends of the city. More space was being built for parking spaces than for housing. In fact, the study found that more than 40 percent of Mexico City is actual parking spaces, above any other land use including housing. The city was using prime central city space for parking structures, while people were sent hours away to live in the periphery of the city, with few options but to commute by car.

The costs of this are both financial and societal. The average parking space in Mexico City costs $150,000 MXC (8,500 USD) to construct. In the 251 big real estate projects analyzed between 2009 and 2013, we found that more than 250,000 parking spaces were constructed, with an estimated cost of 37,000 Million pesos. That is roughly the cost of about 12 lines of bus rapid transit that could move more than 2 million people per day.

On top of this, there is much less demand than supply, and that supply was mandated by minimum parking requirements, with an incentive to build more parking. In the great majority of cases, real estate developers try to get as close as possible to the minimum required—less than 10 percent of parking spaces above the required minimum. When the parking number went over the minimum, it was often because of constraints with the site. For example, a development has a minimum of 90 parking spaces required, but due to the size of the lot, the project fits 3 stories for parking with a capacity for 40 parking spaces on each, so it makes economic sense for the developer to just build the 120 parking spaces.

Once this kind of evidence was gathered and the best international practices were studied, the communica-
tions campaign Less Parking, More City was born. It brought together a diverse group of agencies and actors that was needed to make policy reform happen. This collaboration made it possible for the messages to be developed and broadcast to a wide audience and was aided with a contest to re-imagine parking lots for people; an idea from the Mexican Institute for Competitiveness (IMCO), with the support of the strategic allies coming from private companies, civil society organizations, and a multidisciplinary jury of prestigious members: architects, urban planners, economists and public policy experts.

The list of supporters is long – this is what it takes to achieve major policy change. Agreements were made with the National Association of Supermarkets, Convenience and Departments Stores and also with the National Chamber of the Industry of Development and Promotion of Housing with the intention to reach win-win agreements. The Legislative Assembly recognized the need to reform the policy, and the support of civil society was incredibly important. Bicitekas, WRI, editorial house Arquine and, of course, IMCO, were all key to creating this more powerful, cross-cutting and lasting public policy.

This policy shift is a huge win for Mexico City, once again placing it in the vanguard of progressive cities addressing sustainable and equitable urban development. To guarantee a constant evolution and success of the reform, ITDP Mexico will continue to work with the city and our partners to educate residents on the advantages of this new policy, supporting a shift to transit. We’ll measure the direct impacts of the policy with regards to enforcement, traffic reduction, and the uses of this newly-available space, advocating for affordable housing and improved public spaces. We will also, as always, continue to improve the options of sustainable urban mobility, specifically mass transit, which is the backbone of any truly equitable city.

Latin American Cities Taking the Lead on Parking Reform

São Paulo, Brazil

In 2014, São Paulo became the first megacity to eliminate parking minimums, and set certain maximums. The city allows one parking space per new housing unit if located near an accessible transit corridor, requires street-level retail and public spaces in residential complexes, and limited parking spaces to one per 70 square meters of commercial developments. The amendment was included as a component of an ambitious city-planning instrument; the Strategic Master Plan (SMP). SMP is guiding São Paulo through a Transit-Oriented Development policy for the next 13 years.

Medellín, Colombia

Colombia’s second largest city passed parking reform in 2014 in connection with the enactment of a new Territorial Order Plan (TOP). The TOP sets a series of urban districts called Strategic-Intervention Areas (SIA) that seek compact and dense neighborhoods with access to short commutes and transit capacity. SIA eliminated minimum parking spots among the new classification of apartment units at the same time they negotiated a maximum parking standard with developers. Other measures include a requirement to bicycle parking in any new parking development.

Guadalajara, Mexico

In 2016, Guadalajara city got rid of most of its minimum parking regulations, along with a progressive TOD policy. Parking spots are no longer required in new buildings with less than a 90 square meter construction perimeter; buildings in the Cultural Heritage Catalog; and new buildings that interact with pedestrian and “traffic-calming” street design. There is a maximum of two parking spots per new apartment unit located at TOD-Central zones. In addition, on-street parking facilities related to non-residential and commercial land use can be repurposed for public space, sidewalks or bicycle parking.

Images: ITDP