

## **Parking Retrofits within Historic City Centers and the Potential Effects on their Walkability: A Comparison of San Luis Obispo and Davis, CA**

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Automobile parking in city centers can have a positive or negative impact on walkability, depending on the approaches used. This appears especially true in historic places that have a well-established walkable public realm that persists from a pre-automobile era. This research focuses on two questions: 1) What approaches to parking retrofits have been undertaken within two historic, walkable cities in California? 2) How have these approaches impacted walkability within these cities?

Walkability is generally associated with streets that have a human scale, a sense of enclosure, and buildings that have minimal setbacks from sidewalks, affording an energized environment for pedestrians (Muzzi, 2003). Parking along the street, while causing some vehicular congestion, is seen as having a positive effect on walkability in that cars serve as buffers between people and traffic (Marshall et al., 2008). Surface parking lots are generally seen as detrimental due to increased curb cuts that break pedestrian flow. However, surface parking can vary; some lots are tucked inconspicuously behind buildings that line the sidewalk, preserving most of the qualities that creates a walkable street. Other surface parking is placed between the building and the sidewalk, disrupting these walkable qualities. Parking garages are seen as another possible positive solution in city center parking retrofits, depending on the approach. If the first floor of a multi-floor parking structure contains retail and commercial spaces abutting the sidewalk, a walkable environment is preserved. Parking garages with parking on the first floor can create unattractive and unusable zones for walkers (Shoup, 2011, Muzzi, 2003).

All of these parking approaches are present to some degree in the cities of San Luis Obispo and Davis, two small college towns in California known for their compact, walkable downtowns. Ten blocks from the central core of each city were evaluated based on types and quantity of parking available. Comparisons assessing the degree of walkable qualities present were made using a scoring instrument that measures urban design qualities related to walkability (Ewing and Handy 2009). Overall, San Luis Obispo's approaches of placing surface parking behind buildings that line the street and using a parking garage that incorporates street level commercial appears to have afforded that city a higher quality of walkability than Davis. Discussion of specific variable results between the two sites will be presented.

### **References:**

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