

STREET WARS

Is Curbside Parking an Endangered Species?

City officials and others are reconsidering how New Yorkers store their cars.



By Dodai Stewart

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This is Street Wars, a weekly series on the battle for space on New York's streets and sidewalks.

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Nia Smith, a born-and-bred Brooklyn resident, has long Covid and drives just about everywhere, every day. Finding a spot to park is never easy. She has gotten up as early as 4 a.m. to move her car if it is double-parked, and there just aren't as many spaces in her neighborhood, Bedford-Stuyvesant, as there used to be.

Elya Shavrova lives in Ditmas Park. She got a car because she was having back problems, and she spends quite a bit of time thinking about parking. "I will plan my week and my day around when I can use my car," she said. "Thursdays and Fridays are like the worst days to find a parking spot. So I try to avoid driving on those days, if I can."

Jake Dann-Soury of Murray Hill inherited a car-centric lifestyle from his father, who drove him around when he was a kid. He describes a familiar morning routine, moving his 2022 Kia Seltos out of the way of the street cleaner and then back. "Every block has their own dance," he said.

New York City drivers, take note: If it seems like parking has turned into a nightmare, it is not your imagination.

"It has never been as intense as it is right at this moment," said Henry Grabar, author of "Paved Paradise: How Parking Explains the World," "because the car ownership rate in New York City has never been as high as it is right now."

There are approximately three million parking spaces in New York City, and 97 percent of them are free. But with so many cars in the city these days — more than 2.2 million registered in New York and plenty more commuting in — it's getting harder for drivers to find parking spots. And as exasperated drivers circle the block in frustration, some experts question whether New York should have any free street parking at all.

"New York City is a place where every single human being is dreaming and begging for slightly more space," said Danny Harris, the executive director of Transportation Alternatives, a nonprofit organization whose mission is to reclaim New York from cars. "And yet we squander 76 percent of our public space on the

movement and storage of vehicles. And this is in a city where the minority of people own cars.”

According to Grabar, the city simply hasn’t caught up to the present reality. “People still have this idea that street parking should be free, because that’s the way it was when they first moved here, in the ’80s or ’90s. And that’s just not the way the city works anymore.”

The idea of allowing people to park for free on public streets — not just for an hour or two but basically full-time — dates back to the 1950s.

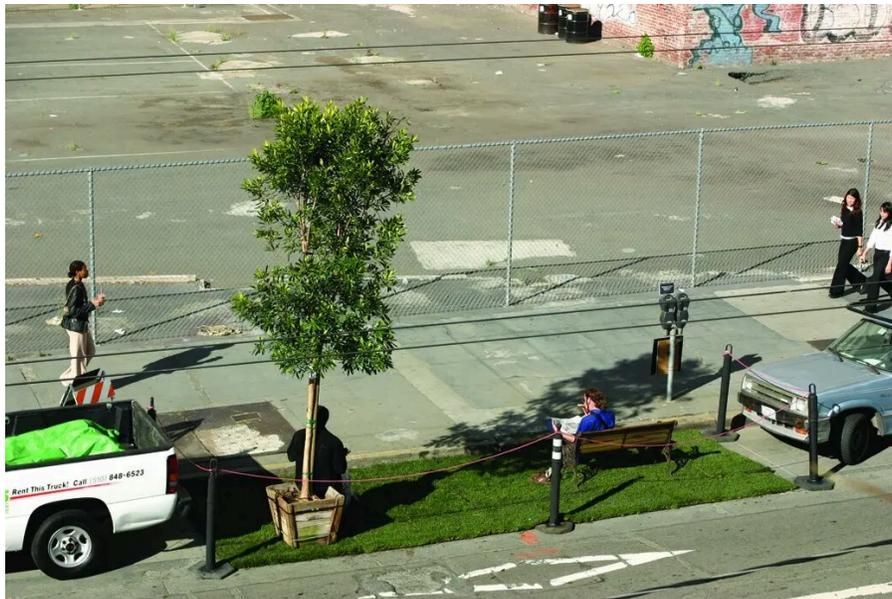
“Car ownership was rising, the population was declining and the transit system seemed to be falling apart,” Grabar said. Street parking was “an attractive option to the middle class,” a kind of incentive to keep people from moving to the suburbs. “There was no grand strategic decision to convert all the curbs in New York to permanent car storage. I think it just sort of happened.”

State legislators have proposed a modest fix: allowing the city to create a parking permit system in the city’s residential neighborhoods, reserving spots for people who live nearby. And in certain neighborhoods, some New Yorkers really like the idea.

The city also intends to prohibit curbside parking close to certain intersections across New York as a way to improve safety.

But given all the demands on New York’s clogged streets and sidewalks these days — bike lanes, dining sheds, trash containerization — people who think deeply about urban planning and public spaces believe New York is missing a huge opportunity to improve the city’s overall quality of life.

In 2005, a group of urbanists and activists called Rebar orchestrated an experiment to show people what could happen if cities devoted less space to curbside parking. They decided to transform a single San Francisco curbside parking space into a small park.



An experiment in finding new uses for curbside parking spaces in San Francisco became a movement. Rebar Group

“It was a guerrilla art intervention,” said John Bela, a designer, one of the participants. “We didn’t get permission. We just put some coins in the parking meter, set up some lawn and a tree. And then we withdrew just to see what would happen. How would you respond to this change in the environment?”

Soon, he said, one man sat down to eat lunch, another man sat under the tree and they started talking. Bela and his associates were thrilled. “We’ve done it,” he said. “We’ve created a space for social interaction, whereas before it was just a metal storage location.”

This experiment soon became known as Park(ing) Day, a project to temporarily convert street parking spaces into parks or other public design sites, and the idea spread to other cities and countries. Sometimes there’s an arm chair and a rug. Sometimes there’s an umbrella, for shade.

If you live, as most New Yorkers do, in an apartment building on a street that consistently has cars parked at the curb, it’s not hard to imagine what you’d do with a green, leafy place to sit outside your building instead: Read, have coffee, meet a friend, talk to a neighbor.

Although she drives, Shavrova, who lives in Ditmas Park, likes the idea of tiny parks. “I would search longer for parking if it meant that my neighborhood could have more green space,” she said.



Leon Edler

Four ideas for the curb

What could New York City do if it devoted less space on the street to free parking for cars?

- **Create green space:** Climate change is real, and giving up parking spaces could be part of the solution, said Henry Grabar, the author of the book on parking: “The city is suffering from heat waves and from flooding events. Each of those problems can be addressed by making our streets greener and planting lots of trees and more water-absorbent plants — which could help absorb water before it floods people’s houses. That’s an ambitious idea, if we actually get to the point of ripping up some of the asphalt.” The “garden streets” of Antwerp, Belgium, could serve as inspiration.
- **Invest in child-friendly spaces:** In Paris, “school streets” are closed to through traffic and car-free, making children’s safety a priority.
- **Consider vending and commerce:** In New York, fruit carts and food carts end up on the sidewalk when they could be in a parking spot. In the Dumbo neighborhood of Brooklyn, the Pearl Street Triangle, once full of parked cars, is now a flea market location.

- **Think of the streets as an extension of your living space:** “We have to start looking at them like they’re a habitat,” said Katrina Johnston-Zimmerman, an urban anthropologist and adjunct professor at Drexel University. Block parties are a great example, she said, but even a flower box or a nicely tended tree bed can invoke the extension of your home. “Put your life into the street more, take ownership over that space and invite other people to participate in it.”

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Leon Edler

What happens when the police can't find parking?

By Lola Fadulu

Many New Yorkers, especially those with disabilities, have been frustrated by police cars parked on sidewalks and crosswalks near precincts, blocking their ability to safely get where they're going.

Federal prosecutors recently opened an investigation into the Police Department's parking practices and found violations of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

While both the A.D.A. and local law prohibit parking on public sidewalks and crosswalks in a way that impairs accessibility, the federal investigation found that the Police Department vehicles “frequently obstruct sidewalks and crosswalks in the vicinity of the N.Y.P.D. precincts” and that they have been permitted to stay there “beyond a reasonable period of time.”

Police cars obstruct other areas of the city, too.

People with disabilities have reported having to navigate the streets and risk injury in areas where sidewalks were blocked by police vehicles, according to the investigation. Some made 311 complaints or complained at community board meetings but said the situation didn't improve or had actually worsened.

A spokesman for the Police Department said officials were reviewing the letter.

The city police officers' union said that officers simply don't have enough places to park. “The burden and blame for the city's inadequate parking facilities cannot be passed off to the police officers who need to use these vehicles to do our job,” said Patrick Hendry, the president of the union, the Police Benevolent Association of the City of New York.

But a lack of options is not a satisfactory answer, said Dr. Sharon McLennon Wier, the executive director of the Center for Independence of the Disabled.

“It's not just a nuisance or a burden — they are breaking the law,” she said. If the situation doesn't improve, she added, disability rights groups may take legal action.

“The sidewalk is already crowded with other things, with branches, with bike stands,” Dr. McLennon Wier said. “To have N.Y.P.D. vehicles on the actual sidewalk is even further challenging.”

Federal officials made a handful of recommendations as a result of the investigation, including that the department create a parking policy that ensures accessibility around precincts and provide quarterly reports identifying complaints and how the Police Department resolved each one.



Leon Edler



The “vertical parking machine” of 1932 could hold 48 cars.
Hulton Archive, via Getty Images

Parking machines of yesteryear

In the 1930s, cars became incredibly popular in cities. But cities had issues figuring out how, and where, to store them. A 1932 article in The New York Times stated that New York “has yet to solve the problem of the parked motor vehicle.” The “first automatic parking machine” was erected in Chicago in February 1932. A kind

of cross between an elevator and a Ferris wheel, it held 48 cars and took 55 seconds to deliver a car from the highest point down to its owner on the ground.

Dodai Stewart writes about living in New York City, with a focus on how, and where, we gather. More about Dodai Stewart