

Glut of parking spaces in city

Ancient zoning rules force developer to overbuild. But reforms could reduce number of empty parking spaces.

Avalon Fort Greene, a new 42-story luxury building near downtown Brooklyn's mass-transit hub, devotes two stories and 256 parking spaces to one of its most elusive residents: the automobile.

The building is well-occupied, but the garage is half-empty. The same is true down the street at 80 DeKalb Ave. Nearly all of the building's 365 apartments are filled, but only half of its 126 parking spaces are leased.

“The reason people live at Avalon Fort Greene is to be close to mass transit, not to own a car,” said Fred Harris, senior vice president at developer AvalonBay Communities Inc. “The garage is not something we would have built if we were not required to.”

Most car-owning New Yorkers live by the dictates of alternate-side parking, anxiously circling for a spot or double-parking until the sweeper makes its rounds. Off the streets and under buildings, however, exists a glut of parking spaces, built not to accommodate demand but to comply with zoning that the city has barely updated since the auto boom more than half a century ago.

The result is not just little-used garages in neighborhoods bordered by car-packed curbs, but a policy that seems to be at odds with Mayor Michael Bloomberg's vision of a sustainable city that rationally allocates precious resources and removes barriers to business.

The Department of City Planning knows its 1950s-era parking requirements are outdated and is preparing to issue recommendations for Manhattan and “inner-ring” neighborhoods, such as those in western Brooklyn and Queens. But transportation advocates worry that reforms will fail to dent what they deem an oversupply of parking at large developments.

“We've asserted that limiting parking supply can be a valuable tool to encourage mass transit,” said Paul Steely White, executive director of Transportation Alternatives. “[The city's] point of view is people will own cars and drive, no matter what.”

Building the bare minimum

That was the prevailing view when zoning was crafted decades ago requiring public housing projects built after 1951 to include parking lots. As a result, two-thirds of the city's 334 complexes have parking lots for residents, who pay as little as \$23 a month for a spot. The New York City Housing Authority has begun to turn some lots into low-income housing and senior centers, but has retained subsidized parking for residents.

Much of the zoning approved in the era of master planner Robert Moses remains intact. The glut can be traced to requirements that for every 10 rental units developers build outside Manhattan, they must provide four parking spaces—sometimes more. A study by New York University's Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy found that developers universally build the minimum number of spaces “because they do not think the market supports the required amount of parking,” said Vicki Been, the center's faculty director.

Manhattan's minimums were replaced with a cap decades ago to comply with the Clean Air Act. It was the city's first acknowledgment that garages encouraged driving.

However, when Mr. Bloomberg's sustainability blueprint, PlaNYC 2030, was issued in 2007, efforts to change parking lot mandates were suppressed, said Rachel Weinberger, an urban planning professor at the University of Pennsylvania hired by the city to consult on parking policy.

“There was a lot of pushback from the Department of Transportation at the time,” she said. “The folks at City Hall thought it would be a nonstarter with the public. People are very emotional about parking.”

Parking requirements can head off complaints that projects will make spots harder to find (see “Progress trumps parking in the Bronx”). But too much parking presents its own problems. Garages near the new Yankee Stadium accommodate nearly 9,000 cars but are never more than 60% full. Advocates warned in a 2006 letter to the City Council that it made no sense to increase parking by 75% for a stadium that would have fewer seats than the old venue, as well as a new Metro-North station and, soon, a mall with 2,600 spaces a few blocks away.

Low demand has forced the Bronx Parking Development Co. to dip into its reserves to pay off state-issued debt. It is trying to lure a hotel, which would fill more spots. And its executives are praying for a Bronx World Series.

Blacktop city

“It's a good thing people use mass transit,” said Charles Lesnick, a vice president of the company. “It's probably better if they don't park. But the question is rightsizing it to make sure it works. Fortunately, we've been blessed with playoff and World Series games. We're not allowed to put them in our projections.”

Transportation advocates worry that the glut at Yankee Stadium will be replicated at Atlantic Yards in Brooklyn, which is to have 3,670 parking spots when residential buildings are completed in the project's second phase. Until then, much of the space next to the site's arena, the Barclays Center, will be a blacktop parking lot.

“If the economic conditions change and phase two of the project doesn't go forward, you will have this big empty space in the middle of Brooklyn,” said Kate Slevin, executive director of the Tri-State Transportation Campaign.

A City Planning spokeswoman declined to comment on the policy recommendations it is readying. But sources briefed on the matter said residential garages in Manhattan could be allowed to rent to the public (which many do illicitly), while developments in transit-served areas outside Manhattan may see parking requirements lowered.

The reforms could reduce the excess parking that plagues developers like AvalonBay's Mr. Harris. Then again, he said, it is hard to compete with free curbside parking.

“If the spaces on the street cost as much as my spaces,” he said, “I guess I'd be full.”