

# UCLA's Philosopher of Parking

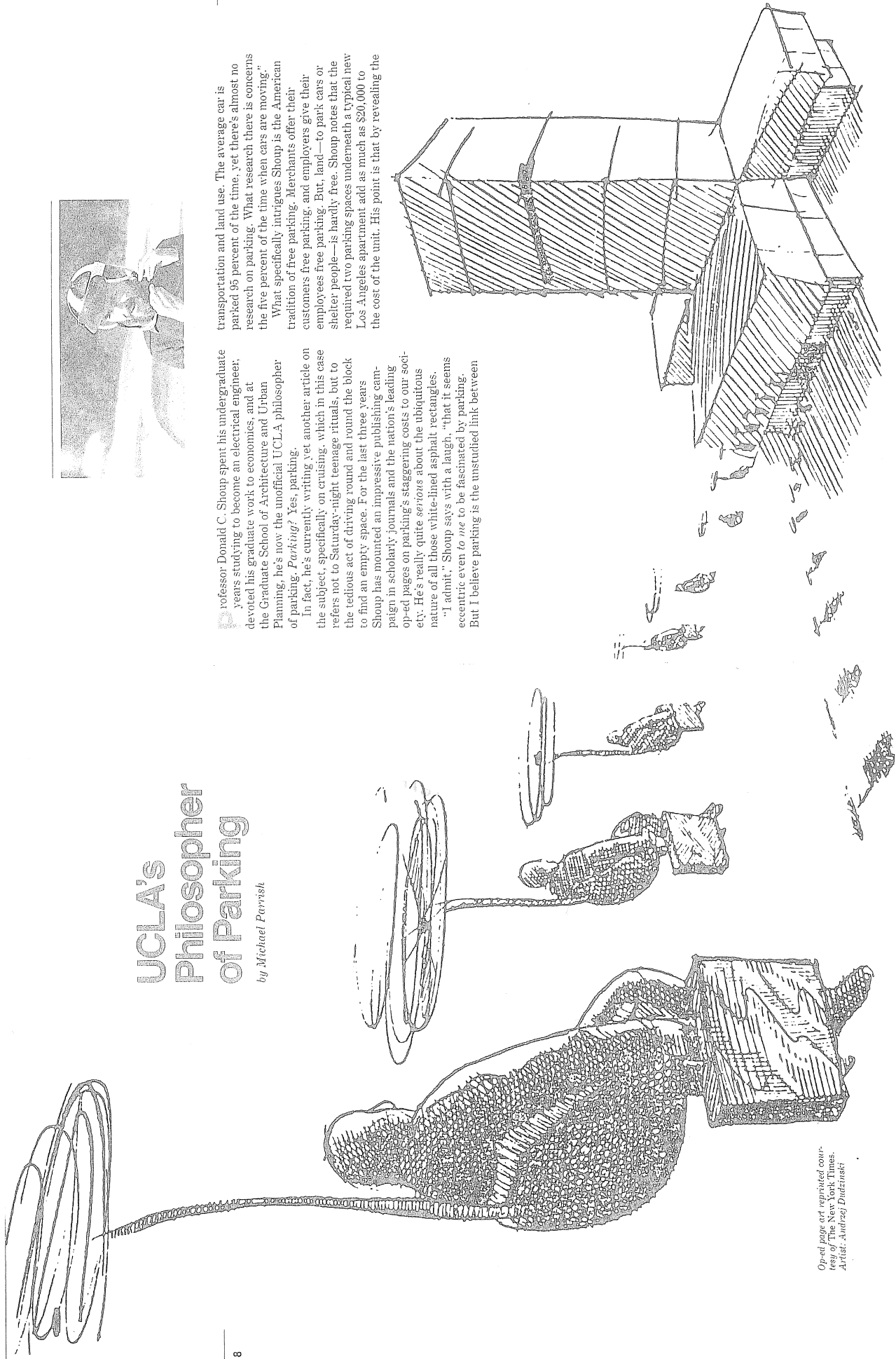
by Michael Parrish

Professor Donald C. Shoup spent his undergraduate years studying to become an electrical engineer, devoted his graduate work to economics, and at the Graduate School of Architecture and Urban Planning, he's now the unofficial UCLA philosopher of parking. *Parking?* Yes, parking.

In fact, he's currently writing yet another article on the subject, specifically on cruising, which in this case refers not to Saturday-night teenage rituals, but to the tedious act of driving round and round the block to find an empty space. For the last three years Shoup has mounted an impressive publishing campaign in scholarly journals and the nation's leading op-ed pages on parking's staggering costs to our society. He's really quite serious about the ubiquitous nature of all those white-lined asphalt rectangles.

"I admit," Shoup says with a laugh, "that it seems eccentric even to me to be fascinated by parking. But I believe parking is the unstudied link between

transportation and land use. The average car is parked 95 percent of the time, yet there's almost no research on parking. What research there is concerns the five percent of the time when cars are moving." What specifically intrigues Shoup is the American tradition of free parking. Merchants offer their customers free parking, and employers give their employees free parking. But, land—to park cars or shelter people—is hardly free. Shoup notes that the required two parking spaces underneath a typical new Los Angeles apartment add as much as \$20,000 to the cost of the unit. His point is that by revealing the



Op-art page art reprinted courtesy of The New York Times. Artist: Andrzej Dudzinski

"I believe parking is the unstudied link between transportation and land use."

true cost of "free" parking, by making people consciously pay for it, would fundamentally improve the efficiency with which Americans use their cars—and in the process reduce congestion, air pollution and our dependence on foreign oil. In short, appropriately expensive parking encourages carpooling and other alternatives to solo driving.

Hermosa Beach, California, is one city that has adopted this sort of parking philosophy. There, residents are issued parking permits that allow them to park free near their homes. But visitors are charged quite steep parking rates both in municipal lots and by street meters. "The theory," Shoup says, "is that if the price of street parking edges just high enough—but not too high—there will always be a few vacant spaces so both residents and visitors can park without having to cruise. Also, a parking price high enough to restrain demand is a strong incentive for beachgoers and others to carpool. With the same supply of parking spaces, raising their price to the market-clearing level should eliminate cruising, increase carpooling, and increase the number of passengers arriving by car."

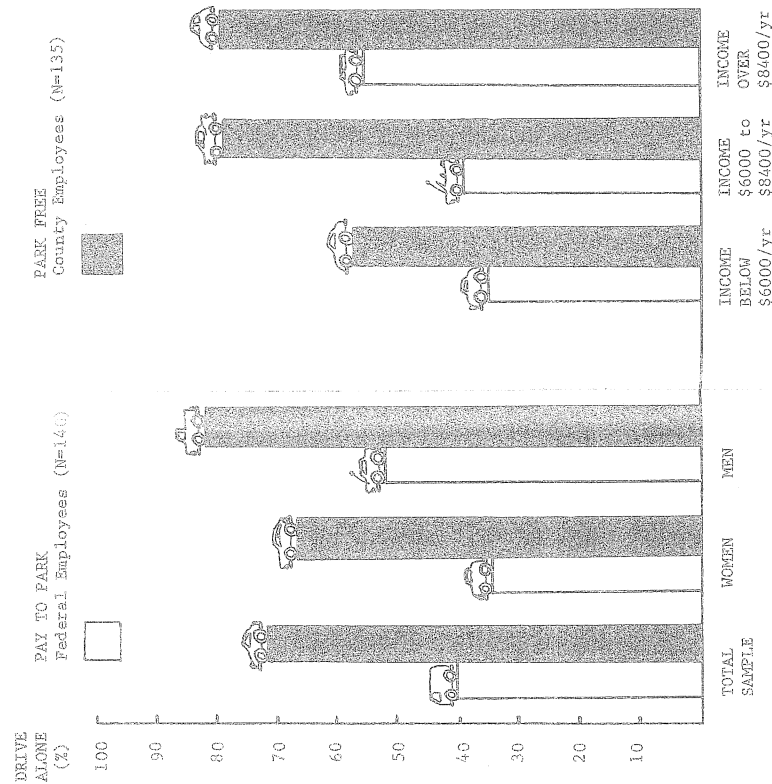
Shoup has so far devoted most of his research to the question of employer-paid parking. "Let me show you my favorite evidence on the effect of employer-paid parking," he says, pulling a bar graph from his files. "They looked at federal employees, who paid to park, and county employees, who park for free in downtown Los Angeles. This 1989 survey shows that only 40 percent of Los Angeles Civic Center employees who had to pay to park drove to work alone, while 72 percent of those who could park free drove alone. So, Los Angeles County's apparently innocent management decision—to give free employee parking—may have almost doubled the number of its employees who drove to work alone.

A lot of cars—and their accompanying congestion and pollution—are involved. Fully three quarters of the commuters who drive to work in the United States park free at their employer's expense.

Shoup's idea for increasing commuter carpooling is to replace employer-paid parking with tax-exempt cash allowances. One commuter may want to spend all the money on an individual parking space; another may want to economize by joining a carpool; and others may prefer to bicycle or take the bus. Cur-

almost doubled the number of L.A. civic center county workers who drove to work alone.

Don Shoup's favorite bar graph shows the effect of employer-paid parking: free parking



rently, there is a hitch: such a cash allowance is taxable, while free parking is not. Most employers understandably prefer to give their employees tax-exempt free parking.

So Shoup, in partnership with Don H. Pickrell, a Harvard assistant professor of urban planning with M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in planning from UCLA, has mounted a campaign to change the state and federal laws to permit tax-exempt cash allowances instead of employer-paid parking. But, unlike many academics who enter more directly into the political arena, Shoup feels that the best way to push his ideas is to write about them as effectively as possible. And so, "End Free Parking—It Isn't Harmless," was the headline on Shoup and Pickrell's Op-Ed Page article in the *New York Times*. The more subdued title of their report to the U.S. Department of Transportation last year was *Free Parking as a Transportation Problem*.

And Shoup writes letters. "I want to be the first person," he says with a grin, "to convince a federal department of a good idea simply by writing to it. I've had a long, amusing, but so far fruitless correspondence with the Department of Transportation."

Parking policy is hardly the only string to Shoup's bow. Another specialty is local public finance, a field in which Shoup thinks he has invented a new tax, or rather a new way to pay an old tax. Basically, his proposal is to finance neighborhood public investments by special assessments on the benefited properties, but to allow owners to defer paying these assessments, with accumulated interest, until they sell their properties.

"Compare a federal grant to a deferred special assessment as the way to pay for neighborhood public investment," Shoup says. "In the case of a federal grant, all taxpayers, including renters, pay now. In the case of a deferred assessment, benefited owners pay with interest when they sell their property. Which is fairer?"

"I believe deferred assessments will enable neighborhoods to rely more on themselves to finance what they collectively want. I also believe deferred assessments will be of most use in Third World countries where public investment is lagging and land prices are rising."

"I want to be the first person to convince a federal department of a good idea simply by writing to it."

*Some of his nonrandomly parking requirement examples include: one parking space for every ten nuns in numeries; three parking spaces for every four clergymen in rectories; and two spaces per pool table in pool halls.*

The deferred assessment proposal was well received when Shoup presented it at the First World Congress on Urban Land Policy held last year at Harvard. It is also included in his essay on land taxation in a forthcoming World Bank book, *Urban Land Policy*, to be published by Oxford University Press.

Shoup has also done research on the cost-effectiveness of traffic-law enforcement, the effects of resident control and ownership of self-help housing, and advance land acquisition by local government. Most of this work has centered on knotty, if often unspectacular, policy problems.

"Some academic planners," says Shoup, "study big issues such as inequality, or world development, or the radical redesign of cities. But I'm much more interested in learning how to make cities work better the way they are. And I think there are lots of ways in which it can be done."

He also has a preference for sound data, which he thinks derives from his engineering education. "Electrical engineering gave me a great respect for data. When you're a student working with high voltages, your life as well as your grade may depend on making the right inference from data. In planning, data are treated with less reverence. The way planners sometimes misuse data would shock an electrical engineer."

And for an example, he returns to how city planning departments set parking space requirements for new buildings. "The general rule," Shoup says, shaking his head, "is for these requirements to come firmly out of thin air. Planning departments either look at some average from the past—or they copy another city's ordinance. And, if you look at the ordinances, they can be hilarious."

Some of his nonrandomly selected examples include: one parking space for every ten nuns in numeries; three parking spaces for every four clergymen in rectories; and two spaces per pool table in pool halls. "Do these parking requirements mean that a hundred nuns drive in ten cars to play on twenty pool tables? The sad truth is that parking requirements have no theory whatever. They're planning without science."

Because the cost of parking is hidden in the cost of the building itself, more parking spaces become all too easy for planners to require. "Planners are beguiled into thinking of the need for parking," says Shoup, "But employees will need more parking spaces if they park free. You might as well ask, 'How much food will office workers need for their lunches?'"

*"Do these parking requirements mean that a hundred nuns drive in ten cars to play on twenty pool tables? The sad truth is that parking requirements have no theory whatever. They're planning without science."*

Well, if the food is free, they'll need a lot of food and some will overeat. Yet, planning departments require developers to provide a minimum number of parking spaces, and planners usually base that minimum on the huge demand artificially created by free parking."

Unfortunately, some might contend, Shoup has had little to do with UCLA's own parking policies—"Though," he says, "the Campus Parking Services

provides excellent data." New parking spaces on campus cost as much as \$20,000 each, Shoup points out, and yet all campus parking permits are priced the same, \$12 a month, regardless of location—even for Lot 32, which is so far away Bob Hope once cracked that it takes four years to get through UCLA, or five if you park in Lot 32.

"Although equality is served by charging everyone the same low price, there are 42 different categories of campus parking privilege," Shoup says, clearly intrigued by the intricacies of the academic pecking order. "UCLA's system of parking permits makes the *Titanic* look like a one-class ship. Assigning parking spaces according to employment status has led to an almost feudal pattern of land use, with everyone put in the proper place."

All this in contrast to what Shoup sees as a simple, fair system of parking prices set by supply and demand, with the increased parking revenue used to fund increases in salaries and scholarships. "Then, if you could park anywhere on campus," says Shoup, "if you thought it was worth the money. But, you'd have to decide whether it's worth paying, say, \$40 a month near the center, or \$25 a month farther away, or \$15 a month in a peripheral lot. This would encourage carpooling because carpoolers could more easily than solo drivers afford the most convenient—and expensive—central parking spaces."

"With the same number of parking spaces and cars parked on campus, more carpooling means more commuters can come to campus in the same number of cars. Do you see the paradox? Higher—but not too high—prices for parking would bring more people to UCLA by car."

So, after all this, how does Shoup commute to campus, and where does he park? A bicycle leaning against his office wall answers the question.

*Michael Parrish is a free lance writer who has published in Los Angeles Magazine, Rocky Mountain Magazine, New West, the Los Angeles Times and the Chicago Reader.*

