

Berlin Advised to follow London's Lead

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Critics claim that London is lagging behind other European cities in tackling the problems of parking and traffic. But a study just conducted for Berlin, host to this month's European Parking Association congress, has suggested the re-unified city may have a lot to learn from the British capital.

Recent British involvement with Berlin in the development of its parking policy has suggested that the recently re-unified German capital could have more to learn from London than critics of UK policy may have thought.

A paper for the Berlin Senate of Building and Housing, delivered at a special conference in September, has foreshadowed the strong possibility that Berlin's parking provision standards for new office developments will be revised downwards, as a direct result of hearing about London's experience in central area developments.

Major office developments are being planned in Berlin in the vicinity of the Potsdamer Platz, sponsored by large commercial interests, notably Daimler-Benz and Sony, following reunification of the city. The early proposals included 6,000 car parking spaces, though this has been pruned down to 2,600 spaces in the scheme currently on exhibition in Berlin. But, as independent consultant and academic Tim Pharoah, of London's South Bank University pointed out to the Berlin Planners, this reduced figure is still ten times what would be permitted as a maximum in Westminster or the City of London. Excessive parking would make it impossible to achieve the 80%20% modal split in favour of public transport hoped for in central Berlin, Pharoah pointed out, and would also make pedestrian movement difficult because of the roads and access points serving the car parks in the new development.

The special conference on parking in the new office developments was called for by the Senate for Building and Housing and organised by the German Institute for Urban Planning (DIFU), based in Berlin. Other contributions were from Nuremberg, which has probably Europe's largest network of pedestrian-only streets, Hamburg, which has for 20 years restricted parking in the centre in favour of park-and-ride, Zürich, which has Europe's highest per-capita public transport ridership, and New York, which like London has restrictive downtown parking policies. Delegates were particularly impressed with the way in which parking provision has been strictly limited in the City of London and Westminster for over 20 years, without any apparently adverse impact on its economic strength, says Pharoah. The London experience is also felt to be more relevant for Berlin, now with a 3.5 million population, than the experience of much smaller cities.

In his paper on the history of parking controls in London, Pharoah argues that the economy of central London has not been prejudiced by the restrictive parking policies covering both off-street and on-street parking. London's

central area attracts 1.2 million office and other employees every day, travelling through a region whose total population is 15 million. "This remarkable daily flow of people is possible only because most of them (75% in fact) travel by railway. If they all travelled instead by car, there would need to be 40 motorways each of eight lanes simply to bring them in and out," explains Pharoah. "The one million parking spaces required for these cars, plus the local access roads to link them with the motorways would occupy the entire land surface of what is central London," he calculates.

Instead, Pharoah points out that the entire area of central London has comprehensive on-street parking controls. Since the late 1950s on-street parking controls, using meters and yellow lines, along with the creation of special residents' parking areas have actually reduced the amount of on-street parking in central London.

Off-street parking in the central area has also been held in check. After the building of public off-street car parks in the 1960s and 1970s, there was a halt to the provision of new such structures in the 1980s, Pharoah recalls. The system of commuted payments, by which developers paid for new parking provision, was also phased out in the central area.

Private non-residential parking standards in central London are also tough. In 1969 the former policy of requiring a minimum number of car parking spaces to be provided in new developments was replaced with maximum standards, Pharoah points out, while the present standards were adopted in 1971 and allow central London shop and office developments a maximum of one parking space per 1,115 square metres of floor space. While admitting that it would be wrong to attribute the continued success of central London's economy to car parking policy alone, Pharoah says there can be little doubt that parking policy has been the main instrument of traffic restraint. "Traffic speeds have remained stable for many years, while traffic growth been contained," he says. "The public transport share of the peak commuter market has been around 85% for many years.

"Parking supply has increased only slowly overall, but there has been a considerable change in its composition" Pharoah observes. On-street parking has been reduced, and a higher proportion of the remainder is reserved for residents' use. The reduction of on-street parking has been more than counterbalanced by increases in off street parking, most of which has been for private use. "The result has been a declining proportion of the total parking stock subject to local authority management. This remains an issue to be dealt with," states Pharoah.

The Department of Transport's new minister for London, Steven Norris, agrees that to allow the provision of any new parking spaces would create new car commuter journeys rather than satisfy present demand. As the government's stated policy is not to encourage further road traffic growth in London, it is now seriously entertaining the idea of bringing in further planning controls, the minister recently acknowledged. "We may now need to look

more carefully at whether we should allow planning consent only where there is no private parking provision,” Norris said.

Despite his endorsement of such moves, Pharoah sounds a warning about a growing divergence in the application of parking standards across the capital as a whole. ‘The application of these standards appears to have completely broken down, except in central London,’ he believes.

A 1990 survey showed that only eight out of 15 inner and central authorities had adopted the maximum standards recommended by central government. In outer London, only Croydon had adopted the recommended maximum standard. The other 17 boroughs applied minimum standards that ranged between three and ten times more generous than the government’s recommended, but ignored, London maximum.

These more relaxed parking standards are attributed by Pharoah to individual local authorities believing, despite the experience gained in the centre, that they can attract development by offering generous, free off-street parking. “It is believed that a restricted parking allowance will simply persuade developers to go to other authorities where provision is not restricted,” he says.

A second principle which Pharoah identifies as leading to excessive parking provisions is the desire of local authorities to avoid traffic congestion caused by on-street parking. “Restricted parking off-street would lead to more on-street parking where kerb-side parking is mostly uncontrolled,” he warns.

Pharoah concludes that where there is a failure to consistently enforce restrictive parking standards, the trend is fuelled towards traffic growth, rapidly spreading congestion and falling traffic speeds, with attendant environmental and road safety problems. It would be ironic if Berlin took on board the lesson of central London just as other parts of the city were ignoring it, he says.