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A brilliant plan to turn parking garages into rooftop gardens

In Melbourne, 1,200 acres are wasted on parking spaces. One architecture firm wants to reimagine how they're used.



1/9 [Photo: courtesy Bates Smart]



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THINGS TO READ

There are more than 41,000 parking spaces in the central business district of Melbourne, Australia. Many of them could be put to better use, says Julian Anderson, a director at the large Australian architecture firm **Bates Smart**.

“It’s the third largest land use in the city,” he says. Community space, on the other hand, ranks dead last. Bates Smart crunched the numbers and found that, in total, parking takes up nearly 1,200 acres of space, or more space than New York’s Central Park. And if it’s not bad enough that these parking spaces take up so much space and encourage more driving, they also **sit empty** most of the time. “You think, my god, there’s one and a half times Central Park wrapped up in car parking in central Melbourne,” Anderson says. “What can we do to unlock this?”

[Photo: courtesy Bates Smart]

One potential solution, he says, is to convert some of that parking into much-needed community space such as playgrounds, community gardens, and rooftop parks. And with a new mechanism his firm is developing in consultation with the city government, there may be a way to incentivize the owners of these parking spaces to make that happen.

[Photo: courtesy Bates Smart]

The idea Bates Smart has come up with is known as a **transfer of development rights**. Cities often have rules about how big a development project can be based on the size of its lot, a rule sometimes called a floor-area ratio. In Melbourne, this ratio is 18 to 1. If a building site is 1,000 square feet, the completed project can be up to 18,000 square feet of total area. “You can exceed that 18-to-1 if you can prove some sort of public benefit is being provided,” Anderson says. By adding a rooftop garden or ground floor public space to a project, developers can sometimes add additional density to their projects. But, he says, proving the public benefit of something like a small garden on the top of a skyscraper can be difficult if not impossible.

Bates Smart’s proposal would create a transfer scheme, allowing developers to buy up parking garages for conversion into new kinds of public spaces, and transfer the additional development rights to their projects in other parts of the city, adding more floors to a new office or residential tower, for example.

[Photo: courtesy Bates Smart]

Anderson says there are at least 20 standalone parking garages in central Melbourne that would be good candidates for reuse. Bates Smart has developed concepts for a few garages to serve as models for how this conversion could work, with some minor structural revision. One, located near the city’s main sports stadium, imagines the space converted into a series of playgrounds and gymnasias, with basketball courts and other recreational spaces. Another, in the city’s Chinatown, uses the

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It would also be a way to inject new life into underutilized space within the city. Many of these parking garages have been underperforming, Anderson says. Because they're often on relatively compact sites, they aren't good candidates for expensive inner-city redevelopment. Plus, Anderson argues, garage owners would be unlikely to sell these revenue-generating properties unless they were getting more than what the land alone is worth. "These car park sites, without this mechanism in place, they might sell on the open market for \$15 million. But if you put this mechanism in place, you could potentially sell these car parks for up to \$80 or \$90 million, which we think will create the incentive for these owners to sell," Anderson says.

For developers in Melbourne, which has some of the **most expensive property** in the world, buying up a parking garage for its development rights could be an easy way to build higher and get a larger return, according to Anderson. The garages would then be donated to the city, and a portion of the sale price would be used to refurbish and adapt the garages into these new public uses.

Anderson has been developing the idea in consultation with the city's design office and says the concept could also be used in other cities. In Sydney, Australia, for instance, such a scheme could be used to inexpensively adapt parking garages into **much-needed social and affordable housing**.

For now, the idea is in a conceptual stage and would require formal action by the city government to be put in place. But the concept has been shown to work in cities such as New York, which regularly sees **"air rights"** sold and transferred from one location to another to allow projects to build bigger and higher. If Bates Smart's concept moves forward, it could be one way of ensuring that the public sees more of the benefits of these kinds of transactions.

"There is a lack of space for people to enjoy in the city that is not privatized," Anderson says. "This is the next frontier for cities if we want to turn them into truly vibrant, exciting, interesting, more diverse places to live in."

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