

This month, **Colin Davis** seeks to translate the language of car parks. What do they say about the area we are visiting?

Design notes

Can car parks speak? If so, do they say 'welcome', or 'well if you must, buy a ticket here and get on your way'? As the transport minister said recently, 'streets are for people, not just for traffic' so, by extension, car parks should be for people, not just cars.

In fact, car parks have a special role in the economic wellbeing and development of a town. They are where people stop acting as driver, get out of the car and look at the place from the totally different point of view of a pedestrian.

If it is a first visit, it is where a person will get a first impression of a place – hopefully clean, tidy and safe. But is it welcoming? Have we arrived at a nice place that was really worth the journey? Or is the car park some sort of visual embarrassment that is intended to be excused by a local rate payer as an example of necessary frugal public spending and be overlooked by an indulgent first time visitor?

There are some excellent car parks that get awards, often the multi-storey type that are within a new shopping complex where economics and design work together for retail success. There are also some remarkably welcoming car parks associated with stately homes. The National Trust has become adept at converting walled kitchen gardens or even orchards into people-friendly car parks.

Cars are sometimes put where there are historic monuments or even sculpture as well as trees. As the picture shows (*top right*), another half dozen cars could probably have been squeezed into the space, but the cars have been carefully positioned to allow the monument to continue to be the focal point.

Little details such as keeping signs as small as can be practical, and fixing them to tree grills or litterbins, have all been thought through. The result is a car park that says 'welcome' from the moment your feet are set on the ground.

So, if cars can be put in pleasant places, can the places where other cars are put be made pleasant?

Compare this with a typical small town car park. Arrangements for ticket sales, information on times and charges, lighting, litter collection and security all seem to have been put in place by different hands at different times. The result is not too welcoming.

Yet, unlike a public street, a car park is completely under the control of a single agency, usually a district council. There is probably also a strong corporate policy on the economic development of local trade and business, of which encouraging visitors through visitor car parking would form a part.

Techniques for co-ordinating essential equipment are available. The problem is similar to that faced by the designers of bus shelters. There is no technical reason for not including in a bus shelter the seats, bins, bus stop signs, timetables, advertisements and even public phones that are needed at a bus shelter. It can be done, but because each may be provided by a different agency, it is not.

A car park that is controlled by a single agency should be able to say 'welcome.' Perhaps the industry will soon get its head round the problem of producing some co-ordinated kit.



The good, the bad and the ugly: subtle changes to the design of car parks – such as creating space (*above*); and keeping signs small (*left*) – can make a big difference. Adding clutter to an area (*below right*) can be an eyesore, as designers of bus shelters tend to find (*below left*)

