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The Odyssey



Like rabbits: Parking signs have multiplied all over the city, as on this stretch of Market between Second and Third. Photo By: Michael T. Regan

When it comes to public displays of its regulations, the Parking Authority seems to have taken cues from James Joyce.

by Alan Greenberger

Walk down the street and count how many things actually inhabit the sidewalk -- things like streetlights, signs, garbage cans and honor boxes. I did recently on one side of the 200 block of Market Street. Here's what I found:

- 1 planter
- 1 directional sign
- 1 traffic equipment pole
- 2 utility sawhorses
- 4 honor boxes
- 5 fire hydrants
- 6 trash cans
- 6 parking meter stanchions
- 7 bicycles strapped to poles
- 8 street signs
- 8 parking sign poles
- 14 streetlights
- 16 trees (wow!)
- 32 parking signs

That's 111 individual objects, 103 of which some governmental authority put there. They are not all bad. You get no argument from me about amenities such as lights, trash cans and trees. Nor are fire hydrants, there for our safety, an issue. But 46 things, nearly 50 percent, put out by the Parking Authority? As Jerry Seinfeld used to say, "What's up with that?"



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have become so convoluted that information delivered by the Parking Authority's *Finnegan's Wake*. Layer upon layer of information is doled out, telling us exactly where and when we can park. The system is intended to be in which fools are everywhere. The problem is that the signs are an example:

A pole in front of my office has three signs. The top sign tells you that there is no parking from that point to the corner. The corner is exactly five feet away -- I know, I measured it. Even a Cooper Mini couldn't fit there. The next sign tells you that the other way is "valet parking only" from 5 p.m.-2 a.m., Monday through Sunday. The third sign tells you that there is two-hour parking, 8 a.m.-5 p.m., also Monday through Sunday. It all adds up.

The question I have is this: When the valet parking came into being, did anyone think to replace the one sign that was already there with another that more simply explained the situation? Such as: two-hour parking, 8 a.m.-5 p.m., valet parking only, 5 p.m.-2 a.m., *every day*. It's sequential, it's every day, period. Who on earth thought of Monday through Sunday ("MON-SUN")? Is this a trick? Are there days not covered? If the idea is to be clear, why not put a sticker over the whole thing that reads "EVERY DAY." The fool understands "EVERY DAY." "MON-SUN" sounds like foreplay for ticket writing.

Here is another one, a personal favorite: "No parking if your operating privileges have been suspended under 75PA C.S. Section 1533." I'm not making this up. This is lawyer talk. Almost no one knows what it means, but it allows the Parking Authority to legally impound certain cars. (Meaning: You can't get 'em for driving without a license but you can for parking without one.)

If you are looking for a culprit, start at the top. It's called the MUTCD -- which stands for the *Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices*, a product of the federal Department of Transportation and something of a handbook for local authorities. It's written by traffic wonks, is the thickness of the Philadelphia phone book and has supplements to boot. Various attempts have been made nationwide to make parking regulation signs simpler. In the face of the MUTCD and years of bad habits, these efforts are usually politely rebuffed by local authorities who know that taking on the mess that has evolved is a very big deal.

Then there is the matter of the pole that holds all these signs. Again, the standard is a multi-holed piece of steel whose cross-section looks like a Pilgrim's hat. It's efficient, cheap to produce and unusually ugly. It comes in three different styles: silver, green and rusted. By my informal survey, it is *never* installed straight. Plumb-bobs or training in how to use them must not have survived the budget cuts years ago. Alternatively, signs are attached to anything that doesn't move.

Admittedly, we in Philadelphia are not alone in this quagmire. Other big cities suffer from the very same symptoms. That said, we all tolerate this ugliness, visual chaos and lack of clarity on the street -- our common living room in the city.

Despite what you hear about the Parking Authority, there are people there who take these matters seriously and give them considerable thought. What is lacking is a design ombudsman -- someone who brings another perspective to the problem. The Parking Authority does a very able job of communicating the facts, albeit in obtuse ways at times. What they don't do is consider how things look and whether the proliferation of information, however accurate, is blight on the street.

Alan Greenberger is a principal of MGA Partners, Architects, Chairman of the Old City District and a member of the Design Advocacy Group.



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