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Parking lot today, redevelopment site tomorrow

Parking lots and garages in the city may ultimately enable larger, environmentally friendly buildings, according to a new report.

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A sprawling parking lot in Chelsea or lower Manhattan today may be the linchpin for high-density redevelopment in the future, a new report from Columbia University's Center for Urban Real Estate argues. It's an unconventional conclusion that suggests more parking lots and garages in the city may ultimately enable larger, environmentally friendly buildings.

"If you're a policymaker, it's not necessarily a good idea to prohibit the development of future parking lots or limit existing ones," said Jesse Keenan, the center's research director. "[Otherwise] we are foreclosing the future potential of more efficient developments."

The study, which was commissioned by parking-garage operator Edison Properties, examined redevelopment projects that have occurred in Manhattan south of 59th Street and downtown Brooklyn between 1996 and 2010. It found that some 20% of all redeveloped land in those projects had previously been parking lots.

Additionally, developments whose land once included parking lots tended to have greater rates of building density, ranging from 16% more square feet in lower Manhattan to 46% more square feet in midtown. Mr. Keenan said that parking lots effectively served as soft sites for these projects, enabling developers to acquire parcels around them to create larger lots for construction. Those in turn have the potential to be denser, more sustainable projects.

"It's like playing chess or checkers," Mr. Keenan said. "If you fill in all the playing spots now, then you can't make your next move. You can't accomplish the goal of winning the game."

The report concludes that the city should promote land assembly districts in Manhattan—groups of property owners who agree to sell their land collectively to developers—that include new parking allowances.

Vicki Been, who directs the Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy at New York University, expressed concerns about the proposal. "Without a sharper focus on why the private market would fail to result in the efficient level of land development, it is not clear that this 'solution' is aimed at the right problem," she said.

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