Episode Book

EPISODE #5632

Why Cities Keep Digging Expensive Parking Holes

PUBLISHED	29 September 2026 at 12:03 UTC
DURATION	22:01
LISTEN	myweirdprompts.com/episode/jerusalem-parking-minimums-towers/
HOSTS	Corn, Herman, Hilbert
SCRIPT MODEL	deepseek-flash
VOICES	chatterbox-regular (chatterbox-local)
PIPELINE	V5.2
BOOK GENERATED	19 October 2026 at 17:38 UTC

SYNOPSIS

An architect's question about a luxury tower next to Machane Yehuda reframes the debate: not whether residents get a say, but whether this building should exist in this form at all. The answer runs through the single most expensive thing you can build in a city — underground parking. This episode digs into parking minimums: where they came from, what they actually cost, who really pays, and why so many cities are now tearing them up.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

...and the thing I keep circling back to is that nobody actually chose the tower. It's not like a developer sat down and said, you know what this neighborhood needs, a glass monolith with a moat of concrete under it.



Herman

Nobody chose it, and yet here it is. Every single time. Which is exactly why Hannah's question is the right one to be asking.



Corn

Right, so Hannah sent us something this week. She's an architect, she's been watching this Beit Alliance situation next to Machane Yehuda the same way we all have, and she thinks the question we raised last time was the wrong one. We asked whether residents should have a say in whether preserving the historic building was worth the noise and the disruption. She says no, that's not the question. The question is whether this new building should be built in this form at all.



Herman

Which is a much harder question, and a much better one.



Corn

It is. And she lays it out. Why are we putting luxury towers with seven levels of underground parking into Jerusalem's historic city center? She's an architect, so she's coming at this from the form side, and she says we've gotten into this mindset that construction is automatically good because we need more housing, when a lot of what gets built is driven by developer economics rather than what actually makes a good city. A tower is already an expensive, complicated building type, and in central Jerusalem, with the geology, the archaeology, the historic fabric, the narrow streets, it seems especially irrational.



Herman

She's not wrong about the irrationality.



Corn

Then she gets to the parking, which she calls the clearest example. Why are we spending years blasting and excavating seven stories into Jerusalem stone to bring even more cars into an already congested center? Other cities are trying to get cars out of their centers. Our rules seem to require huge amounts of parking. And she says from what she understands, developers themselves would often be perfectly happy not to build it, because it's so expensive.



Herman

That part is true. That part is very true.



Corn

So she wants the actual math and the actual planning rules. Why do Jerusalem projects still end up with these enormous underground garages? How much do parking minimums, tower economics and planning policy drive the form of the buildings we're getting? And what would have to change for us to build more traditional urban blocks instead. Dense, mixed-use, fitting the historic fabric, requiring far less excavation, going up much faster, and not spending years subjecting the whole neighborhood to construction just to create parking spaces we arguably shouldn't be encouraging in the first place.



Herman

That's a lot of question.



Corn

It's a lot of question. So let's start with the single most expensive thing you can build in a city.



Herman

Underground parking. And I want to put a number on that, because the number is the whole argument. A surface or structured parking space averages around twenty-eight thousand dollars. An underground space averages around fifty-six thousand. That's excluding land cost, which in central Jerusalem is not a rounding error.



Corn

Double.



Herman

Double, roughly. And in downtown Los Angeles, spaces routinely cost more than fifty thousand each. The Walt Disney Concert Hall is the example I keep coming back to. Two hundred and seventy-four million dollars to build. A hundred million of that was the underground parking garage.



Corn

A hundred million dollars of concert hall money went into a hole in the ground.



Herman

Into a hole in the ground, so that people could park under the concert hall. And that's the thing Hannah's pointing at. If an underground space costs fifty-six thousand and a seven-level garage holds hundreds of cars, the garage alone could represent tens of millions of dollars and years of blasting that a different regulatory regime would simply delete from the project.



Corn

So we're not talking about a line item here. We're talking about the difference between a project that pencils out and one that doesn't.



Herman

And notice what that does to the rest of the building. If you've already sunk tens of millions into a hole, you have to go higher above ground to make the numbers work. The garage doesn't just cost money. It changes the shape of the tower on top of it.



Corn

So the parking is driving the height.



Herman

The parking is driving the height, the height is driving the construction timeline, and the timeline is driving what the neighborhood has to live through. It all cascades from one requirement.



Corn

One caveat before we go further, because I want to be honest with listeners.



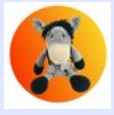
Herman

Go ahead.



Corn

We could not independently verify the specific figures for the Beit Alliance garage in this run. So treat the seven-level detail as Hannah's framing, to be confirmed. The policy and the economics are well sourced. That's the backbone of what we're doing today.



Herman

Fair. And the economics don't depend on the specific project anyway. They're general.



Corn

So if it's this expensive, why does it keep getting built? The answer is a rule.



Herman

Parking minimums. Municipal rules requiring new developments to provide a set number of off-street spaces. First enacted in America in the nineteen fifties, though Columbus, Ohio, is cited as the earliest, back in nineteen twenty-three. The original rationale was preventing curb congestion.



Corn

And the mechanism is what matters here. Because a minimum doesn't just say there has to be parking. It says who pays for it.



Herman

It shifts the cost of parking from drivers to building developers. Which means it hides the cost in construction and in rent. Michael Manville at UCLA put it better than I can. He said parking requirements attack the nature of the city itself, by subordinating density to the needs of the car. And then the line that matters: parking minimums take the cost of that space, a cost that should be borne by drivers, and push it onto developers, hiding it in the cost of building.



Corn

So the driver parks for what feels like free, and the renter who has never owned a car pays for it in rent.



Herman

Every month.



Corn

Let me push on that, because I think a listener is going to say, fine, but somebody has to park somewhere. If you don't build the spaces, where do the cars go?



Herman

And that's the right pushback, because it's the one the minimums were invented to answer. But look at what actually happens when you remove them. The cars don't vanish, and they don't all pile onto the curb either. What happens is that parking stops being free, and when parking stops being free, people make different choices. Some of them take the train. Some of them don't buy the second car. Some of them rent a space from a neighbor who has one and doesn't use it. The demand was always there. What was missing was the price signal.



Corn

So the minimum doesn't create parking. It creates the illusion that parking is free.



Herman

It creates the illusion, and then it charges everybody for it whether they use it or not. That's the trick.



Corn

Where do the numbers come from? Because somebody decided how many spaces a building needs.



Herman

Somebody did. And this is where it gets almost funny. The numbers are typically derived from what's called parking generation rates, published by the Institute of Transportation Engineers. Observational data. You go count cars in the parking lot of a similar building and you assume the new building needs the same.



Corn

Assume.



Herman

Assume. And Donald Shoup, who taught at UCLA for decades and died in February of last year, called it pseudoscience. Because it ignores the price of parking and it ignores nearby shared parking. So it produces inflated demand estimates. If parking is free, of course people use a lot of it. You've measured the effect of the subsidy and called it the demand.



Corn

You've counted the free lunch and concluded everyone is hungry.



Herman

That's the whole critique in one line. Shoup wrote The High Cost of Free Parking in two thousand five, and he's the intellectual father of the entire reform movement. His eighty-five percent occupancy rule, his work on cruising for parking. All of it comes from him.



Corn

So the numbers that decide how much concrete goes into the ground aren't measurements at all. They're assumptions dressed up as measurements.



Herman

They're assumptions with a spreadsheet. And once they're in the code, nobody revisits them. They just get copied from city to city, from one building type to the next, for decades.



Corn

So a planner in nineteen sixty counts cars in a lot in Ohio, and that number ends up deciding how much Jerusalem stone gets blasted in twenty twenty-five.



Herman

That's not even an exaggeration. That's basically the mechanism.



Corn

So back to Hannah's specific question. Would developers actually be happy not to build the garage?



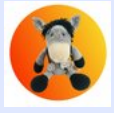
Herman

The economics say yes, strongly. Underground parking is a cost a developer would generally shed if allowed. The constraint is the rule, not the preference. And we have natural experiments. Charlotte, twenty twenty-three. A developer was allowed to build a hundred and four units with zero on-site parking. They built twenty-five percent more units than the zoned alternative, rented them two hundred and fifty dollars a month cheaper, and still turned a profit.



Corn

More units, cheaper, profitable. That's the trifecta everyone claims is impossible.



Herman

And then the other direction. Aurora, Colorado. The city required four hundred and eighty-five spaces for a four hundred and five unit complex. That's ninety-five more spaces than the developer predicted residents would actually need. It added roughly a hundred dollars a month to average rent.



Corn

Ninety-five spaces nobody wanted, paid for by people who mostly weren't going to use them.



Herman

And the aggregate picture. Parking garages add roughly seventeen percent to average rents. A twenty sixteen study found seventy-five percent of renters without cars still had a parking spot bundled into their rent. Collectively, those renters paid around four hundred and forty million dollars a year for spaces they didn't use.



Corn

Four hundred and forty million a year. For parking spots that people who don't own cars are paying for.



Herman

That's the hidden subsidy. It's not a line item anybody sees. It's baked into the rent.



Corn

And I want to sit on that for a second, because it connects back to Hannah's point about construction not being the same as housing policy. The people paying the most for this are the ones with the least.



Herman

The renters. The people who can't afford a car, which usually means the people who can't afford much of anything. They're subsidizing storage for the people who can.



Corn

So the rule is regressive. It takes from the poor and gives to the drivers.



Herman

That's the honest way to say it. And it's not a design flaw. It's the design.



Corn

So if the rest of the world is figuring this out, what is Jerusalem doing?



Herman

That's the right question, and the answer is uncomfortable. Over six thousand places worldwide have implemented some form of parking reform. Removing or reducing minimums. Since twenty fifteen, more than thirty-five major American cities have partially or fully eliminated them. Austin, Minneapolis, San Jose, Buffalo, Nashville, Raleigh, Richmond, Spokane.



Corn

That's not a fringe list.



Herman

It's not. And the states are now preempting cities upward. California's AB twenty ninety-seven in twenty twenty-two banned parking minimums within half a mile of transit. Oregon did the same near frequent transit that year. Colorado's HB thirteen-oh-four in twenty twenty-four eliminated minimums near transit. Washington's SB fifty-one eighty-four last year capped minimums at half a space per unit and banned them entirely for affordable housing, senior housing and childcare.



Corn

Half a space per unit. That's a completely different world.



Herman

And it keeps going. Connecticut's HB eighty hundred two in November of last year was the first statewide parking mandate preemption east of the Mississippi. Illinois passed the People Over Parking Act in December, banning minimums near transit hubs and corridors.



Corn

So the direction of travel is one way, and it's been one way for a decade.



Herman

And Europe never went down this road at all. Europe uses parking maximums, not minimums. As a condition of planning permission, a development has to be designed so that a minimum share of visitors arrive by transit, and parking is capped below expected demand. They cap it. We mandate it.



Corn

They treat parking as a cost to be limited. We treat it as a right to be provided.



Herman

The Sightline Institute put out a figure in twenty twenty-four that I think about a lot. Parking reform alone can boost homebuilding by forty to seventy percent. Not with subsidies, not with new agencies. Just by deleting the requirement.



Corn

Forty to seventy percent. From a rule change. And I keep coming back to the fact that this isn't a technology problem. There's no new material, no new construction method. It's a sentence in a code that somebody could strike tomorrow.



Herman

That's what makes it so maddening. The fix is already written. It's just not been adopted here.



Corn

Let's bring it home. Machane Yehuda. The market is bounded by Jaffa Road to the north, Agrippas to the south, Beit Yaakov to the west, Kiach and Alliance to the east. Neighborhood founded eighteen eighty-seven. The permanent stalls went up under the British Mandate in the late nineteen twenties. Two hundred and fifty plus vendors. Around



Corn (continued)

two hundred thousand visitors a week.



Herman

Here's the contradiction that I cannot get past. The site sits on the Jerusalem Light Rail. There is a dedicated Mahane Yehuda station on Jaffa Road, directly across from the market. Ridership was around a hundred and fifty thousand a day in twenty nineteen. Forty-two and a half million annually back in twenty seventeen. The network is expanding. The Green Line has been partially operational since August. The Blue Line is approved and opening around twenty twenty-nine.



Corn

The city is spending enormous sums on rail, and simultaneously requiring car storage at the core.



Herman

That's the contradiction. This is exactly the condition under which cities worldwide exempt developments from parking minimums. You're within a few hundred meters of high-frequency rail. You don't need the garage. And yet.



Corn

Yet the garage gets built. And we blast seven stories into Jerusalem stone to build it.



Herman

Which brings in the archaeology, and this is the part that makes it almost absurd. Jerusalem construction is repeatedly delayed by archaeological discoveries. The light rail itself was delayed by finds, including a Roman-era settlement at Shuafat. You are digging into the most archaeologically dense geology on earth, and the thing you're digging for is car storage.



Corn

You're destroying the past to park the present.



Herman

Jerusalem's planning history shows the city used to understand this. The McLean Plan in nineteen eighteen introduced formal zoning with a protected historic core and a restricted buffer. Holliday in nineteen thirty maintained a green belt around the Old City and pushed the functional nucleus westward. Kendall in nineteen forty-four did the same. Good planning in this city has always been about shaping form, not just accommodating cars.



Corn

The city knew how to do this a century ago, and now it's forgotten.



Herman

Now the rule does the planning instead.



Corn

Let's talk about the fallacy Hannah named directly. That construction is automatically good because we need more housing.



Herman

Parking minimums are the clearest example of a rule that produces buildings while undermining cities. They're a hidden subsidy to drivers and a tax on housing. They raise rents seventeen to twenty percent. They reduce unit counts. They directly worsen the affordability crisis they're supposed to help solve.



Corn

The rule that's supposed to help housing makes housing more expensive.



Herman

It lowers density and walkability, which is the opposite of what a housing-shortage city should want. CNN put it well in twenty twenty-three. They called it a self-fulfilling prophecy. More parking spaces mean bigger parking lots. Bigger parking lots mean more buildings isolated from roads and sidewalks. And then: faced with so much mandatory automotive-centric infrastructure, many people abandon walking and choose to drive.



Corn

You build for cars, you get cars. You build for people, you get people.



Herman

It's not mystical. It's just what the built environment does to behavior.



Corn

What's the alternative? What would a traditional urban block look like on this site?



Herman

Here's the thing. Israel already knows how to build this. The Geddes Plan for Tel Aviv, nineteen twenty-five. Superblocks, narrow internal lanes, pedestrian scale, mixed use, integrated gardens. It's widely cited as one of the modernists' only successful urban plans. UNESCO recognizes it as the White City.



Corn

Tel Aviv is the proof of concept.



Herman

Tel Aviv is the proof of concept, sitting an hour away. Dense, mixed-use, fits the historic fabric, requires far less excavation, goes up much faster. You could build that on the Machane Yehuda site. You could build it without blasting seven stories into bedrock.



Corn

It would take years off the construction timeline.



Herman

Years. And it would not subject the entire neighborhood to construction for half a decade.



Corn

Hilbert has been waiting to say something about this.



Hilbert

They were hauling it out for eleven months. Trucks. Jerusalem stone, out of the ground, down Agrippas, every morning. You could set your watch by the third one.



Herman

Eleven months of trucks.



Hilbert

Eleven months. And the number I remember from that job, the engineer told me, was sixty-one thousand a space. Underground. That was more than my first apartment cost.



Corn

Sixty-one thousand a space.



Hilbert

More than the apartment. And here's the thing nobody in your papers writes down. The rule isn't the point. The rule is what you trade with. The developer doesn't want the garage. The city wants the garage on paper. So the garage becomes the thing you give up, or the



Hilbert (continued)

thing you give them, depending on what you want the other way. You want two more floors? You keep the garage. You want to skip the archaeology review? You keep the garage. It's not a mandate. It's a chip.



Herman

The requirement functions as a negotiation lever.



Hilbert

It's a lever. Nobody builds it because they want it. They build it because it buys them something else. And the man who signs off on the extra floors never sees the trucks.



Corn

The rule isn't just a cost. It's a currency.



Hilbert

The city's been spending it for thirty years.



Herman

Which means removing the requirement doesn't just delete a cost. It deletes a bargaining chip, and the developer has to find another one.



Corn

That's a wrinkle the policy literature doesn't have. Everyone writes about the mandate. Nobody writes about what the mandate buys.



Hilbert

They don't have to stand on Agrippas at seven in the morning.



Corn

If the requirement is partly a negotiation lever, what would it take to remove it entirely? And would developers actually build the blocks Hannah describes, or would they just find another way to extract the same value?



Herman

That's the open question. Because you can delete the rule, and the developer still wants the same return. The question is whether the return comes from the building or from the deal.



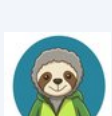
Corn

The deeper reframe here is that construction is not the same as housing policy. Parking minimums are the clearest example of a rule that produces buildings while undermining cities. You get the tower. You don't get the city.



Herman

Jerusalem is investing heavily in light rail while still requiring car storage at its historic core. That contradiction is not sustainable. Either the parking rules change, or the transit investment is undermined. You can't run trains to a station and then mandate that everyone drives there anyway.



Corn

Before we go, one thing from the research that didn't fit anywhere else. In downtown Los Angeles, they've been converting old office parking into housing, because the spaces are so overbuilt that you can put apartments where the cars used to be.



Herman

That's the cutting-room floor, and it's a good one. The oversupply is so large that the parking becomes the housing.



Corn

Which is the whole episode in one image. The question was never whether residents should have a say in preservation. It's whether we should be building this form at all.



Herman

The form is not an accident. It's a rule, wearing a building's clothes.



Corn

Thanks to Hilbert Flumingtop, our producer. This has been My Weird Prompts.



Herman

If you want to send us something, email us at show at my weird prompts dot com. We'll be back soon.