Cuida Carros and the Emergence of Informal Parking Markets in Guatemala City

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Along the quiet streets of Guatemala City's residential zones, empty bottles, dirty cones, and chairs line the curbs, reserving on-street parking spaces, overseen by a sophisticated network of watchful eyes. To the local Guatemalan, these informal parking attendants, known locally as *cuida carros*, may as well be invisible. But to the observant outsider, they stand out as a peculiar form of urban entrepreneurialism: informal parking management, arising to address the unique challenges of parking congestion and street crime in Guatemala City. The following paper attempts to understand who these *cuida carros* are, how they run their businesses, and how they govern themselves.

Background

The Challenge of Congestion in Guatemala City

Guatemala City may seem like a peculiar subject for the study of parking policy. While data on the rate of car ownership in Guatemala is limited, a recent survey from the Pew Research Center indicates a rate of 19% in El Salvador and 10% in Nicaragua, two comparable countries in Central America.[3] Even assuming a high rate of 20% in Guatemala, this puts the country well below other Latin American countries like Mexico (35%) and Venezuela (36%). Even in Guatemala's relatively affluent capital city, it is clear that the vast majority of residents commute by means other than a private car.

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[3] Poushner, 2015.

If this is the case, why study parking in Guatemala City? While firm traffic and congestion data is currently unavailable, it is clear that traffic congestion remains a major issue in the city. In a report published by the United Nations, Alberto Bull notes a peculiar mix of low car ownership and high traffic congestion in Latin America relative to developed countries in North America and Europe.[4] Mexico's low rate of car ownership, after all, has not prevented its capital city from turning into the traffic congestion capital of the world.[5] Likewise in Guatemala City, the fact of traffic congestion is obvious on the ground; just before dawn, thousands of cars arrive from suburbs like Mixco and Villa Nueva, as commuters from the largely residential zones pour into hubs like Zones 1, 4, 9, and 10. Just after the sun sets, this mass departs, touring quiet side streets and busy corridors alike into an unending stream of bumper to bumper traffic.

The Role of Parking Management in Congestion Mitigation

The literature on congestion management is full of potential solutions, ranging from congestion pricing to enhanced public transit.[6] Yet a growing body of literature finds that parking management may play a significant role in determining traffic congestion. Studies in cities across the world find that between 8% and 74% of urban traffic consists of drivers cruising for parking.[7] A 1993 study of Manhattan found that drivers cruise for, on average, 7.9 to 13.9 minutes before settling into a spot. While these amounts may seem trifling, they quickly add up to substantial amounts of time and fuel wasted, resulting in greater traffic congestion and air pollution.

Why do drivers spend so much time cruising? Parking policy pioneer Donald C. Shoup identifies the culprit as free or underpriced on-street parking.[8] In most American cities, most on-street curb parking is unpriced, while nearly all off-street parking is priced. Under certain

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[4] Bull, 2003.
[5] TomTom International BV, 2017.
[6] Krol, 2016. Anderson, 2013.
[7] Bus + Bahn, 1977. Falcocchio, 1995.
[8] Shoup, 1994.

conditions, this creates perverse incentives for drivers: if on-street parking is much cheaper than off-street parking, fuel is inexpensive, the driver needs to park for an extended period, the driver is alone, and the driver places a low value on lost time, the driver will rationally prefer to cruise around, looking for an on-street parking spot.

As Shoup points out in his extensive work on parking policy, this free on-street parking is hardly free to society.[9] On the one hand, public resources are lost with free or underpriced on-street parking, as properly pricing could yield significant revenue for municipalities. On the other hand, there are real costs imposed on society as a whole when an individual driver opts to cruise rather than to pay more for off-street parking, included added traffic congestion and air pollution. Rather than properly pricing on-street parking, however, policymakers often prefer to address the issue by requiring that new development provide extensive amounts of off-street parking. These requirements have been found to do little to eliminate cruising, while imposing substantial new costs on development, resulting in reduced land values, housing affordability, and urban densities,[10] as well as undermining the ease and enjoyability of walking and bicycling.[11]

Parking Policy in Guatemala City and the Emergence of the *Cuida Carros*

Like many cities in the Western hemisphere, Guatemala City's street grid was consciously planned.[12] Particularly in older zones, street widths consistently range from 25 to 50 feet, leaving ample room for on-street parking. This parking is overwhelmingly unpriced. As predicted by Shoup's model, the on-street parking occupancy rate is nearly always 100% in high demand areas under normal conditions (i.e., without the kind of informal management discussed in this paper).[13] On the rare streets where the municipality has installed parking meters, rates are often well below those charged at nearby private parking lots and garages.

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[9] Shoup, 2011.
[10] Shoup, 1994. Ikeda and Hamilton, 2015.
[11] Manville and Shoup, 2004.
[12] Mundico and Crouch, 1977.
[13] Shoup, 2006.

A brief noon weekday survey of Zone 10 finds the typical on-street parking space to cost little more than Q2.00 per hour, while off-street parking begins at Q10.00 per hour.

As in other cities, planners in Guatemala City place minimum parking requirements on new development. In December 2008, policymakers adopted the *Plan de Ordenamiento Territorial* as a comprehensive plan for the city.[14] *POT* requires that new commercial and residential developments include off-street parking for users. Presumably, the motivation behind these requirements are the same as those in U.S. cities: to prevent the spillover of parking from new developments onto already congested on-street parking spaces. Beyond the standard issues with required parking minimums discussed above, Guatemala City's requirements are particularly strange given car ownership is not the norm in the city. For these reasons, the city's minimum parking requirements are a poor means of addressing on-street parking spillover and congestion.

Beneath the noses of planners and policymakers, however, a sophisticated market has emerged in response to this policy failure. Known locally as *cuida carros*, informal parking attendants have effectively appropriated most high demand on-street parking within the city, applying their own prices to formally unpriced on-street parking and charging drivers accordingly. *Cuida carros* are widely disparaged.[15] First, a common concern with *cuida carros* that they are charging with the threat of property damage for non-payment, effectively extorting drivers.[16] Second, there is understandable frustration with what is essentially the enclosing of public commons—on-street parking—by informal agents, to what seems like their exclusive benefit. Finally, as in Guatemala, so in the rest of the world: people simply don't like to pay for something they might otherwise receive for free.

Yet *cuida carros* potentially offer certain social benefits. From a parking management perspective, they perform a useful function: reducing the incentive for drivers to cruise. While Guatemala City has a robust market in private, off-street parking, there is little incentive to

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[14] Municipalidad de Guatemala, 2006.
[15] Franeleros, 2011.
[16] Soy502, 2017(a).

use this parking if cheap or unpriced on-street parking is readily available. When on-street parking is unpriced, drivers will compare the cost of the lost time and fuel associated with on-street parking to the off-street parking fare. When on-street parking is priced, drivers will compare the the cost of lost time, fuel, *and* the fare to the fare of off-street parking. For the unsophisticated driver, the realization that he or she must pay either way may incline the driver toward using off-street parking facilities, even if on-street parking remains marginally cheaper. Thus, in zones where the demand for parking is high, pricing could play a valuable role in reducing traffic congestion.

An invisible cost associated with unmanaged on-street parking may artificially increase the demand for off-street parking: the fear of crime. Property damage is common on the streets of Guatemala City, ranging from stolen car emblems to break-ins to car theft.[17] Thus, from a criminological perspective, *cuida carros* may also make a valuable contribution to the community by operating as "eyes on the street." Originally developed by Jane Jacobs in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, the "eyes on the street" theory holds that having more people share a public space results in natural surveillance, which may help to prevent crime.[18] It is the norm in Guatemala City for middle- and upper-class apartment buildings, stores, and neighborhoods to hire private security guards, who overwhelmingly act as deterrents to crime.[19] It is not unreasonable to assume that *cuida carros* operate in the same way, thereby providing value for the drivers and neighborhoods they serve.

In these regards, *cuida carros* may be a bottom-up, informal response to the problem of parking congestion and street crime in Guatemala City's busier zones. International news and press reports indicate that the *cuida carro* phenomenon is global, with informal parking attendants managing urban streets in countries across the Global South, from Panama City to Cairo to Kuala Lumpur.[20] Press coverage is almost universally negative, and policy has

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[17] Soy502, 2017(b).
[18] Jacobs, 1961: 78.
[19] Muñoz Palala, 2016.
[20] Mogadiacio, 2002.

generally focused on market eradication rather than formalization. The research on *cuida carros* also remains remarkably limited. One notable exception to this is an extensive study conducted in Montevideo, Uruguay, which studied Montevideo's unique attempt to formalize *cuida carros* (called *cuidacoches* in Uruguay) markets.[21]

Methodology

Research Aims

This paper examines three components of *cuida carros* and their market: participants, pricing and business model, and governing norms. First, to understand participants, we intend to study who the *cuida carros* are and how they came to work in the informal parking market. Second, to understand business model and pricing, we intend to explore how *cuida carros* manage their section of on-street parking and determine prices. Finally, to understand governing norms, we intend to map out how *cuida carros* relate among themselves and with clients, neighbors, and authorities. These sections are explored in detail in the "Analysis" section.

Qualitative Study Methodology and Analysis

Given that there is very little publicly available census or economic data in Guatemala, and the informal nature of the market, this research project is structured around qualitative interviews. The methodology for the qualitative gathering of data and analysis was primarily based on the methodology set out by Robert S. Weiss in *Learning from Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies*. Robert C. Ellickson's work on informal governance among farmers and ranchers in Shasta County, discussed in *Order Without Law: How Neighbors Settle Disputes*, was used as an example for the process of rigorously categorizing, reporting, and analyzing interview data.

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[21] Cabrera, 2014.

Our potential respondents were people who, taken together, could display how the market works in *Cantón Exposición* and could represent how the overall informal parking system works in Guatemala City.[22] Given that our study is about an informal sector whose workers are not officially listed, we were not able to develop a probability sample of the population in question by random selection. Instead, we opted to use convenience sampling. Random *cuida carros* were selected from *Cantón Exposición* and interviewed if they agreed after having the study explained. From then on, we asked for referrals from the people we had interviewed, otherwise known as snowball sampling.[23] Although an interview guide was used, it mostly served as a provisional key guide, in which some questions varied depending on the respondent's unique situation and questions were set to be open ended, with followup questions. This guide, and our general interview methodology, were tested in a pilot interview with a key interviewee who had worked as an informal parking attendant in Zone 10. We interviewed 15 *cuida carros* in total. Interviews lasted between 10 and 30 minutes.

Research Sample: *Canton Exposición*, Zone 4

For our research sample, we chose a small neighborhood of Zone 4 in Guatemala City called *Cantón Exposición* or *Cuatro Grados Norte*. The neighborhood was constructed in the 1890s, as the city was expanding outward and the population was growing.[24] *Cantón Exposición* is centrally located next to the city's historical district and central government cluster in Zone 1. Today, the neighborhood is a vibrant center of commerce, filled with technology companies, universities, and art institutes, resulting in substantial weekday and daytime traffic.[25] Furthermore, *Cantón Exposición* hosts a variety restaurants and bars, making it a hub of Guatemala City nightlife, resulting in equally substantial weekend and late night traffic.

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[22] Weiss, 1995: 19.
[23] Weiss, 1995: 24-25.
[24] Gabriela, 2017.
[25] Dardón, 2016.

Cantón Exposición is the focus of this study for three reasons: First, the relatively small size of the neighborhood makes it easy to compare the different behaviors of the *cuida carros* and their on-street parking rates on different streets. Second, demand for parking in the neighborhood is high at all times, and the area is heavily trafficked by middle- and upper-class non-residents searching for parking. Finally, even though there are over 15 established parking garages,[26] an initial windshield survey of the zone revealed that there were *cuida carros* on almost every street in and around *Canton Exposición*.

Analysis

Respondent Profile

Most respondents shared a similar background: nearly all the *cuida carros* who we interviewed were economically marginalized individuals who were either laid off, could not find work, or had very poor paying jobs such as can collecting. There were two exceptions to this, including a man who had recently been released from jail and did not have the legal paperwork needed to work and a lady who took over the street after her husband, who had managed the street, died. The majority of respondents had worked as *cuida carros* for many years. One lady had managed the street for over 30 years. The shortest amount of time a respondent reported working in this field was one month. Because of the significant amount of time they had spent working their streets, most of the *cuida carros* were well known around the neighborhood. One man in particular, was a neighborhood celebrity. As we were interviewing him, several people walked up to say "Hi" and chat.

We found that most of the people working as *cuida carros* had inherited their street. Often, another person had worked the street for several years before them, whether a family member or just someone they knew. Other times, a business located on that street gave them the "right" to work the street. Only two respondents reported that they simply found an empty street and decided to stay there. One person we talked to had a particularly interesting

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[26] El Directorio de *4 Grados Norte,* 2017.

story: he had worked on his street with his mother since he was 12. They started out just washing cars on the street, but over time people started paying them to watch over their cars as well. They assumed the role of *cuida carros* by the request of drivers*.* When his mother passed away, he inherited the street.

The average person worked five days a week, eight to 12 hours a day. Most travel from other areas of the city, such as Zone 18 and Zone 7. Of the three *cuida carros* that live nearby, only one lived on the street where she watched cars. She was a young lady whose father owned the store on the street and had done the job before her. When we interviewed her, neighbors sat outside the store and helped her manage the cars. In general, respondents reported earning Q50 to a Q100 a day, or an average of Q1,500 a month, as respondents often only worked weekdays. Out of the people we interviewed 12 were male and 4 were female. The average age of a respondent was 46. Ages ranged from 21 to 70.

Business Structure and Pricing

One of our most interesting findings was the respondents' view of the service they were providing. While many see *cuida carros* as people who are illegally charging for parking spots on the street, the *cuida carros* see themselves differently*.* In fact, most respondents recognized that the street didn't belong to them or to anybody else. They saw their work as an honest job of providing security for the cars parked on the street. One respondent that had been there for 14 years explained how the trend of *cuida carros* started in the area: "*When Cuatro Grados started getting better, people started parking here. But there were a lot of thefts. Cars were being broken into. So we started taking care of the cars in exchange for payment.*" One respondent encapsulated the general feeling: "*This is a job. We aren't stealing anything. We are actually helping people.*" The job, we found, is to act as "eyes on the street," creating value by deterring crime. "*People don't realize that with us being here, a lot of things don't happen to the cars.... It is because of our presence that no one damages the cars*," said one of our respondents.

The *cuida carros* business is divided in complex ways into different groups and different shifts. There were two main groups of *cuida carros*, including those who worked during the workweek and mainly served workers and those who worked nights and weekends and mainly served restaurant and bar patrons. Although this varied by street and by the unique agreements of each street's *cuida carros,* there were two main shifts that we identified: a morning shift, starting from 5:00 am and ending at 6:00 pm, and a night shift that started around 7:00 pm and continued until 1:30 am. Most of the time, the *cuida carros* that worked on the same street would have sophisticated arrangements that established who would work which hours and days. When we asked our respondents in Zone 4 if they worked for anyone, some directed us to "Sandra." "*She has a lot of people working for her,*" they would say. Sandra had an unusual business model: she "owned" a few streets in the area and hired people to work the for her. Although we did not get an opportunity to talk with her, we talked to her husband and one of her employees. We found out that she had managed her streets for 35 years and had started when she was 7 years old, building a *cuida carros* empire along the way. She now has 4 employees working different shifts on her street, and each one pays her half of their daily income.

Most respondents did not seem to have a clear idea of where their prices came from. Most respondents charged a flat rate of approximately Q10 on every street of *Cantón Exposición* on weekdays. Some said their prices came from what others in the neighborhood charged. Others said they set the price at Q10 because if they charged higher, drivers would not pay. One possible explanation for this price could be that *cuida carros* are in fact competing off-street parking, which generally charged Q10 per hour. Respondents occasionally compared their prices to off-street parking prices: "*For example, the parking lot in front at Tec charges Q16 an hour. We only charge 10 for the whole day*." Two respondents charged Q10 extra to wash cars.

The only variation found was between the prices for daytime and nighttime parking: the average during the day was Q10, while the average at night was Q20. When asked, many

attributed this price difference to the risk incurred by staying up later. "*At night, my friend charges more because it is more dangerous*." Another mentioned that it was more expensive because buses do not run at that hour and he had to pay a cab home. Only one of our respondents engaged in price discrimination based on the background of the daytime crowd and the evening crowd, evidently as a proxy for willingness to pay, claiming that working class people parked during the day but richer people parked at night. One possible reason for the higher price, which was not mentioned by respondents, is that nighttime *cuida carros* frequently work in teams for safety, which may require higher revenue. A couple hours after we interviewed one respondent, we found him helping out a fellow informal parking attendant so that "*he wouldn't have to be alone at night watching cars.*" Another possibility may be that the demand for well-lit parking close to major destinations is simply much higher at night, allowing *cuida carros* to charge more.

Most respondents recognized that they could not demand to be paid by drivers, because the street was not theirs. "*I always tell them that I know that I don't own the street, but you're paying me to watch over your car.*" Most believed that if they didn't get paid, it was because the client did not understand the value of their service. When asked what they did when clients did not pay them, the most common answer was: "*When they don't pay there is nothing we can do… We just let them leave.*" All respondents said they still looked after the cars that didn't pay them because they were already looking after the street and because if something were to happen to that car, the owner would blame them.

In the "Background" section we discussed how, by pricing parking spaces, the *cuida carros* may help to mitigate traffic congestion. Although *cuida carros* overwhelmingly saw their job as vehicle protection rather than parking management, we found evidence that they are still changing parking habits of drivers and eliminating cruising. First, respondents frequently mentioned having regular "clients," which presumably eliminates the need to cruise among this population. Second, respondents frequently use bottles, flashlights, and flags to attract customers, thereby shortening the search for parking and eliminating the need to cruise. As

mentioned above, the awareness among drivers that they must pay for parking either way likely encourages many to forego cruising.

It was during this stage of the research that we realized that there are two kinds of *cuida carros:* those who work the same streets for years and treat *cuida carros* work as a normal job and those that only appear when there are special events and are generally transitory. The first group strongly disliked the second group. Most of the respondents claimed that these were "opportunists" who gave them a bad reputation because they were the *cuida carros* who keyed cars when customers did not pay. As we discovered, reputation is everything for the *cuida carros* in *Cantón Exposición*, and the transitory *cuida carros* could potentially ruin their reputation. "*That's why it is so advantageous to be known and not just come randomly when there is a game. They cause trouble,*" explained one of the respondents.

We also found variety in the degree of trust that customers had with different *cuida carros.* During one interview, the respondent suddenly pulled out a handful of car keys out of his pocket and handed one to a satisfied customer. This respondent was effectively acting as a valet service. He would allow his customers to park in front of garages, with permissions from the owner, and move the car whenever it needed to be opened. *Cuida carros* operating this way effectively increase the available supply of on street parking. We found similar behavior among two other *cuida carros*. According to one respondent, most of her work came from of Da Vinci University students, who were often running late to class and desperately needed a parking spot. Before the interview, we watched her move three cars. Another respondent only worked with recurring clients and did not deal with anyone who he did not know. These unexpected findings suggest that, contrary to the prevailing narrative of *cuida carros* as nuisances, many are in fact highly trusted members of the community.

Self-Governance, Relation to Formal Governance, and Conflict Resolution

There are several tacit informal norms that govern the *cuida carros* of *Cantón Exposición*. Most *cuida carros* had similar thoughts about overarching rules that govern their relationship with

other *cuida carros,* residents of the area, clients, and authorities. As one respondent said, "*the norms that the parqueadores follow have been used for years.*"

Before we began interviewing, we assumed that *cuida carros* watched over entire blocks. This was not the case: *cuida carros* define their turf by other measures. One common response was: "*I take care of the cars parked from that corner to that pole. From that pole to the other corner is someone else's turf.*" Only two respondents took care areas larger than one block. Claimed turf appears to be determined by how many cars the parking attendant could efficiently look after. One respondent explained: "*I used to take care of more cars; the ones on the other half of the block. But it is hard for me to watch what is happening down there. There was a theft, so I kind of gave it up. I got someone else to take care of the other half of the street.*" All of the respondents knew the exact number of cars they looked after. The average number of cars looked after was 10. One person we talked to was an outlier: he managed to take care of 22 cars.

Most *cuida carros* did not have any problems with others trying to claim their streets. In fact, we found that strong informal norms regulated and enforced street claims. As one respondent explained, "*each parqueador has his own area. And we just know who takes care of each one. This is my area and they know that.*" The *cuida carros* always took precautions against outsiders, even going so far as to coordinate management during their off-hours to avoid invasion. One respondent explained that a friend "*take[s] care of the place on Saturday and Sunday because there's someone who wants in. So he comes to make sure no one takes the street.*"

Most designated their spaces using bottles and buckets. One man even used blocks of concrete. One respondent explained that he uses objects to designate his space so that the customer can know there is a *cuida carros* there. Others, especially those with recurring clients, didn't feel the need to use markers: "*Sometimes I put blocks on my spaces, other times I don't put anything. My clients know where to park.*"

We found that *cuida carros* also have a strong sense of internal community and are expected to reciprocate favors. "*Sometimes when the guy up the street wants to go get a coffee, I look after his cars,*" was something we heard from many respondents. Other times, unrelated *cuida carros* helped each other to cover shifts. In fact, three of our respondents were working days that were not part of their official schedule as a favor to someone else. The most interesting institutional norm was how the *cuida carros* helped each other out in face of conflict. One man explained how "*sometimes there are people that come looking for a cut in the job…. There was a couple recently that would go and ask money. They would try to keep the streets for themselves. The lady would call me to help scare the people away… because I look stronger*." The youngest informal parking attendant we interviewed told us: "*When I see something suspicious I tell the other fellows* [*cuida carros* on other streets] *and then they help me out.*" Respondents were generally confused about the legal status of their work, in part owing to mixed signals from municipal officials and police. One respondent told us of a time when the transit police (EMETRA) told him he couldn't park cars anymore. "*They said it was against the law. I told them I understood. I just removed my bottles. But I kept on doing it after they left.*" Another respondent told us: "*The people from the municipality have told us it is illegal. But they just talk to us. They tell us to be careful not to charge too much, like Q20 or Q25. So I don't have a problem there.*" Most *cuida carros* said that EMETRA is okay with them managing on-street parking, as long as they do not obstruct the street or park cars on curbs or red lines. The general confusion regarding the legality of the *cuida carros* comes from the fact that there is no law that sanctions them. While Guatemala's public road regulation[27] prohibits people from obstructing the public streets with any kind of unapproved object, there is no regulation whatsoever regarding *cuida carros.* This makes it impossible for the police to arrest or ticket them for appropriating a street. As a result, *cuida carros* are stuck in a quasi-legal, gray market. One respondent summarized the norm on the ground clearly: "*They* [the municipality] *said it was fine if we parked, but that we couldn't obstruct the stree*t."

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[27] Municipalidad de Guatemala, 2012.

Contrary to what we expected to find, *cuida carro*s have a good relationship with the transit and national police. When asked what they did when they saw something suspicious in the area, all respondents answered that they would call the police. "*We have the direct number of police officers. So if we see anything suspicious, we call them directly and they come. That is how we prevent a lot of thefts.*" Many respondents gave specific examples: "*One time there was a man that was stealing an emblem from one of my cars. I called the police. And we caught him a couple of blocks further up.*" Instead of being chased by the police, as we expected, *cuida carros* often coordinate with the police.

Contrary to the prevailing view of *cuida carros* as transitory opportunists, our interviews uncovered a market of well-established entrepreneurs, subject to their own forms of sophisticated self-governance and intimately connected the communities they serve. If our limited qualitative study is at all indicative of the broader *cuida carros* marketplace, it is likely that the opportunistic extortionist is more the exception than the rule. If policymakers and future studies are to develop policy reforms addressing on-street parking management, including the formalization and regulation of existing *cuida carros* claims, they must first understand who the *cuida carros* are and how they operate. By providing some of this understanding, this paper attempts to lay a groundwork for a broader literature on informal parking management in the developing world.

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