

# Cape May Parking: Designed To Scam

Product designer Michael Grossman isn't too impressed with the city's new parking meters

**S**OME designs in life are ubiquitous; you don't need to dissect them. You just know what they are and what they are supposed to do. Parking meters were one of those things to me. You pulled into a parking spot, saw the familiar "head" of the meter that displayed how much time was left and you fed it coins. That is how it is supposed to work. That is, unless you want to increase the number of people that you give tickets to.

Last week I was in Cape May on vacation, and was the victim of a new design for parking meters. I drove into the main section of town and pulled into an empty parking spot. As I pulled in, there were no visual cues anywhere that I had to pay for parking. That is, there wasn't until I got back to my car and found the ticket on the windshield. That was my education by the town of Cape May that they want you to pay for parking. So instead of fifty cents going into their budget, they got \$32 out of me.

How did this happen? You pull into a spot that has no number in white text on the black pavement. There isn't a familiar parking meter with a blinking red "expired" display on it. There isn't a sign nearby saying you have to pay for parking. There are zero visual cues to let you know that you are about to break the law.

Here is the despicable design of their parking system that I learned about AFTER getting ticketed. In the section I parked, there are 19 parking spaces. To let drivers know they have to pay for parking in these spaces they provide two signs for all 19 spaces, along with two computerized machines that accepts your money. If you don't happen to park near them, like I didn't, you are screwed. It turns out



that there are numbers on the spaces, but not in the familiar place before you enter the spot. They place it in small letters on the gray curb, where you can't see it from your car. It's a real-life "I Spy" game, and I lost.

It turns out that the design is so bad the local newspaper, *Exit Zero*, has a centerfold story on it. The title of the story is, "An Encyclopedic Explanation on How to Handle Those Pesky New Parking Meters... Please Read!" The need for an article explaining how to use parking meters speaks volumes

InteractionDesignBlog.com has a few articles on the design and usability of parking meters, but they assume that the person knows that the meter exists. I hope that they add this to their design recommendations for better parking meters.

If someone came to me and said, "Please design me a parking meter system that will not be intuitive and drive up ticket revenues" I would have designed this exact system. If they wanted a system that was fair to vacationers visiting their town, you would have designed something familiar. According to the *Cape May County Herald*, the design-to-scam is working flawlessly, with parking meter revenue up this year already by \$26,365. A number on the ground painted in yellow and green parking meters at each spot with a "P" on them would probably have an impact on this number.

Other than the parking meter scam, Cape May is a wonderful place to vacation. A highlight was eating at 410 Bank Street, which had parking right next to it, with good old parking meters installed.



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