

IN THE NEWS

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When the Parking Spaces Become the Destination

Phil Patton
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IT was just a patch of black asphalt, but for the weary Manhattan motorist orbiting the narrow streets of Chinatown, it glimmered like an oasis in the Sahara.

For years, Michael Schneeweiss of MGS Parking Management presided over that patch, dispatching attendants to greet parkers so happy to find a spot that they almost forgot to grumble about the rates. But now the lot is gone. Reversing Joni Mitchell's lyrics, the developers pulled up a parking lot and put in a paradise — a luxury condo development at 123 Baxter Street whose amenities include Internet-capable refrigerators.

The 100 parking spaces that Mr. Schneeweiss managed have been replaced, below the 24 condos, by 74 spots in New York City's first automated parking garage. Two dozen spaces will be reserved for apartment owners. Starting Thursday, the rest will be open to the public — first for monthly lessees and, come spring, for drive-ins.

"This is the future," Mr. Schneeweiss said during a recent tour of the Chinatown garage, shaking his head as if he did not quite believe it yet.

But the future is coming on fast in cities like New York, where shiny towers are rising over what had long been parking lots. "There is a proliferation of high-rise condo construction in major urban areas," said Donald R. Monahan, vice president of Walker Parking Consultants in Greenwood Village, Colo., who follows innovations in the business closely. "Usually these have small footprints that do not offer enough room for traditional garages."

Mr. Schneeweiss, a parking industry veteran who wears a jaunty racing cap, and Ari Milstein, planning director for AutoMotion, showed off the Baxter Street garage. A driver pulls off the street into a room roughly the size of a one-car garage attached to a house. The car rests on a large pallet, a traylike area with shallow troughs for the wheels.

"Lasers check that the car is aligned," Mr. Milstein said, and determines that it is not one of the trucks or S.U.V.'s too big for the garage. The driver locks the car, takes the keys and picks up an electronic card from a nearby machine. A large door closes behind the car; motion detectors ensure that no children or pets are left behind.

Then the pallet holding the car slides below ground level, into two subterranean floors of storage. "It's simple — park, swipe and leave," Mr. Milstein said.

The returning driver pays — using a credit card at a machine, or handing cash to the human "parking concierge" in a booth. The machinery retrieves the pallet holding the car, which rises to ground level, pointing toward the exit. You unlock the doors and drive away.

"You get your car in under three minutes," Mr. Milstein promises. "It's as easy as an A.T.M. or E-ZPass." Rates will be comparable to conventional parking in Manhattan, he said, about \$400 a month.

For the driver, the advantages of an automated system go beyond convenience and speed.

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The car remains untouched and unopened, and with the parking area ostensibly off limits to people, valuables are safe inside. Assuming the mechanized parts are functioning right, the car avoids potential scrapes and bumps. Seats and mirrors remain as you left them; the radio will still be tuned to, say, Lite FM. There is no tipping.

For the developer, automated garages offer cost advantages in construction and operation. By omitting ramps and walkways, about twice as many cars can be tucked into the space. Labor and insurance costs are lower, and getting cars in and out is faster.

Parking is a \$26 billion industry, according to the International Parking Institute in Fredericksburg, Va. The institute says there are about 40,000 parking garages and other facilities with 105 million spaces.

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That, most motorists would say, is not enough. According to surveys done by the National Parking Association, a trade organization based in Washington, the average cost of building a parking spot averages about \$14,000 nationally and about \$18,000 in the New York area.

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