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**'Robotic garages' plan driven by profit**

BY ASHLEY FANTZ  
 Knight Ridder Newspapers

**MIAMI - (KRT)** - Remember that touchdown dance you did in your car the last time you found a decent parking space downtown?

Computerized, automated parking systems planned in Hollywood and Fort Lauderdale might make those victories a little more common.

As urban planners across the nation design denser downtowns, architects are looking for every possible way to cut corners on space. One notion, borrowed from European cities, is a parking garage whose spaces rearrange themselves to accommodate different sizes and shapes of cars.

While there are various models of so-called "robotic garages," most share some basic features. A driver or hotel valet pulls the car into a large elevator, then exits the vehicle.

Heat sensors scan the car for sleeping infants or pets, and will shut down the system if any are detected inside. The car's weight and dimensions are measured by laser scanners. Usually, a computer calculates the most efficient storage site and the quickest way to get the car there.

The elevator whisks the car up and over, shuffling and stacking other cars accordingly, sort of like an overgrown mechanical Rubik's Cube. With each new arrival, the metal plates that support each car shift about in a shell game. Storage takes about a minute.

Some systems put cars in compartments that match their dimensions and weight. Others are open, skeleton-like storage boxes.

Cars are retrieved using a punch code or key card.

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## COMMON IN EUROPE

Automatic garages are quite common in Europe, Australia, Asia and the Middle East, but only two such facilities exist in the United States - in Hoboken, N.J., and Washington, D.C. By year's end, two more should be operating in Broward County.

Tampa-based Robotic Parking Systems will begin construction this summer on a 229-space computerized garage at the Hollywood Grande resort at Pierce Street on Hollywood beach, said spokesman Larry Byrnes. The company also is working on a 443-car automated garage at a Clearwater condo.

RBS' primary competitor, SpaceSaver, will break ground later this year at a development in the Flagler neighborhood in downtown Fort Lauderdale. The City Commission unanimously approved the project this month.

Both companies have tentative projects proposed elsewhere in the United States, from Boston to San Francisco, but nothing is firm.

"The hardest aspect of this business is not convincing developers -- they know it's a good deal," Byrnes said. It's harder to persuade banks and, sometimes, elected officials. "As with any concept that's foreign," he said, "it's going to take a little while to catch on."

Restaurants and shops near the 148-room five-star Hollywood Grande hotel will be able to use the garage when there's space available.

The Grande, like most robotic parking systems, will have several generators, two extra elevators and a tech team at the ready.

In case of a power failure, cars can be retrieved manually, said Hollywood Grande owner Fabrizio Passalacqua, who dispatched a reconnaissance team to survey Rome's robotic garages before deciding to go automatic.

"It really is the coolest thing to watch," he said. "You watch seven or eight cars at once moving. This is the future."

But developers aren't necessarily architectural pioneers.

"You do it because it saves you money and, with land prices the way they are now, you don't really have a choice anymore," said Danny Bivens of Tarragon South Development Co.

Bivens' project is The Exchange, 87 loft units of urban cachet just north of Broward Boulevard on Northeast Third Avenue.

A developer's math works like this: A conventional garage costs about \$15,000 per parking space and takes up 350 square feet per car (that's including the ramps, toll booths, exits, etc.).

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## GREATER PROFITS

Automated garages typically cost \$30,000 per space. But each car occupies far less space, since they can be packed in close on all sides -- and even on top. More spaces can be squeezed onto the same geographic footprint. More customers mean more profit.

Other benefits of automation: The garage can't become a magnet for muggers or vandals; no one's going to open a door and ding their neighbor's paint; the cars are turned off, so there are no fumes to inhale.

And, of course, for those prone to losing their car in a big garage, the headache is over.

That's the computer's problem.

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