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THE GUIDES

Space Age Parking

How do you cram more cars into fewer spaces? Ask the Germans.

First to fly, first on the moon, first to invent mass production. We're a country always on the forefront of technology. Why then, has it taken us so long to catch on to automated parking garages, **one of the most intelligent inventions of the 20th century?** "It baffles everyone I talk to," says Gerhard Haag, German-born engineer and architect, who introduced the first fully automated parking garage to the U.S. In 2002, his company, Robotic Parking, built the Garden Street Garage in Hoboken, New Jersey. It will eventually accommodate 324 cars on a 100' x 100' lot, in a structure 56' high-that's at least double what a traditional garage with the same measurements could hold.

Completely computerized with two elevator systems that move simultaneously in both vertical and horizontal directions, it lifts and carries cars on steel pallets. Drivers simply pull into a single bay on the ground floor, turn off their engine, leave the bay, then their cars are hoisted into an empty space, untouched by human hands. Patrons need never enter the building, eliminating their exposure to stinky exhaust, potential muggings and an ugly, grimy environment.

The only other of its kind in this country sits on 15th Street NW, two blocks from the White House, in Washington, D.C. Designed by the Spacesaver Parking Company, it houses 74 cars beneath the Summit Grand Parc apartment building, an area too small to fit a traditional garage.

Fully automated garages are by far no new concept. Hundreds were built between the mid-1950s and late 1980s in Europe and Asia. Krupp, a German company where Haag was once employed, sold many of the estimated 1.6 million spaces in Japan's automated parking facilities.

Haag can't explain why it has taken this long for the U.S. to see the value in a decades-old technology. "It's perfect for the Mid-Atlantic," he asserts. "From Boston to Miami, you have dense populations. You find the most amount of cars, so you need the most amount of parking.

"In big cities, especially, it's difficult to acquire enough space to build a [traditional] garage," explains Urban Land Institute's Robert Dunphy. "You're forced to pick up parcels of land, anything that's available." Fully automated garages provide an option where, for example, narrow lots between existing buildings would ordinarily not meet site requirements for construction of a ramped garage. U.S. real estate owners are at last showing interest in the new technology. Robotic Parking has been discussing proposals in 67 American cities, Haag says, including Manhattan, Philadelphia, Baltimore and D.C. He compares the invention to the ATM machine. "It's easy, safe, fast and convenient," he proclaims. "We'll see many, many more in years to come."

--Allison Brunner