

Making a Parking Garage Look Nicer Than a Parking Garage

By KEITH SCHNEIDER

TRAVERSE CITY, Mich.
THREE years ago, elected leaders here won a tough public fight to replace acres of surface parking with a distinctive parking deck designed to blend into this handsome lake city's thriving downtown.

They never anticipated that the architect would do such a good job that people driving into Traverse City regularly missed the new \$9 million four-level deck entirely, mistaking its dark brick facade, big windowlike openings and first-floor retail spaces for a new office building. That problem was solved the old-fashioned way: by hanging white and blue banners on city street lights, urging visitors to "hit the deck."

"It's kind of a balancing act," said Bryan Crough, the executive director of the Traverse City Downtown Development Authority, a city government agency that oversees the two-year-old parking deck, which was named for a former city commissioner. "We didn't want it to stand out, but we still need people to know it's there."

Indeed, the 540-space Larry C. Hardy Parking Deck represents a new value — handsome architectural design — added to the lengthy list of utilitarian considerations, like size, lighting, ease of access, safety, durability, efficiency and cost, which have long guided parking deck construction in America. So many cities, universities, hospitals, airports, train stations, corporate parks and housing developments are building upscale parking decks, that they now represent a mainstream movement in civic design.

Dale F. Denda, the research director at PMRC, a parking market and operations research firm in McLean, Va., said that 355 parking decks were built across the



Marty Katz for The New York Times

HOLDING ITS OWN The parking deck at the Amtrak station in Wilmington, Del., echoes traditional architecture.

country last year. Those decks had an average of 860 spaces, at a cost of \$12,000 a space. Do the math, and parking decks added about 305,000 new spaces in America. Builders spent \$4.2 billion to put them up. A third to a half of all new decks were designed to blend in, at \$1,000 to \$2,000 a space more than a conventional unadorned parking deck.

Much has changed since the first self-park deck was built in Detroit in the 1930's. Inside modern decks, ceilings are higher, lights are brighter, colors are more soothing; and traffic engineers have made driving in and out easier, faster and safer. But the most visible changes have come on the outside, Mr. Denda said, because builders

are now asking architects to help them make parking decks more compatible with their community.

"People are much more sensitive to how these decks look than they used to be, and there's a reason for that," Mr. Denda said. "In a lot of cases, the parking deck dwarfs the buildings that generate the traffic. Take a 150,000-square-foot office building. The typical parking ratio is three spaces per thousand. You're talking about a garage that is as large as the office building. So builders and architects are trying to reduce the mass from an architectural standpoint. They use architectural treatments to seemingly scale down the garage, hide it, make it fit in."

Architects use two principal design tools to accomplish this. The first is updating the exteriors with facades of brick and molded concrete, installing aluminum screens and other window treatments, incorporating plantings and, in some cases, limiting the structure's size. The second trick is to try to hide the deck behind other buildings.

In combination, the effect can be striking. For example, Princeton, N.J., built a 500-space parking deck that is almost indistinguishable from a new public library, new housing and a retail, restaurant and office complex under development downtown. The project also includes a new public park.

In Boca Raton, Fla., MBNA America, the big credit card company about to become a subsidiary of the Bank of America, built a 499-space parking deck in the late 1990's as part of its new Southern regional headquarters. The deck incorporates a tile parapet wall along the entire roof of the building, aluminum grillwork on the windows and a white décor that makes it look like a corporate office building.

One of the best examples of parking structure design and construction was completed along the Christina River in Wilmington in 2003, where the Delaware Department of Transportation built a two-level 422-space deck with grapevine joints, cast-stone keystones, flame-finish granite, cornices, column caps and Victorian scrollwork grilles. The design and flourishes of the Riverfront Parking Deck pay

homage to the Philadelphia architect Frank Furness, who designed three buildings in the city's Train Station District.

The \$8.5 million parking deck, designed by John Hynes, a Wilmington architect with Tevebaugh Associates, also serves the Amtrak station, built on a 20-foot viaduct and one of the busiest railroad stations in the country. But the deck is low enough for passengers and those waiting for trains to see the new landscaped riverside park, which Wilmington now regards as its gateway.

Trying to keep the decks from overshadowing the buildings they serve.

"The state spent a lot of extra money for that facade because they wanted the aesthetics to match the nearby train station and the park next to the river," said E. James Ebert, executive vice president of Tim Haahs & Associates, an architectural and engineering firm in Blue Bell, Pa., and in Miramar, Fla., near Miami, that specializes in parking decks, and helped design the Wilmington deck. "Builders want the nice architectural finishes."

The flourishes and extra costs of high-minded parking decks, however, are not always appreciated. Almost two years ago, when Waynesville, N.C., opened its \$4 million, 376-space deck downtown, resi-

dents were unimpressed. The five-level structure, which leaders said would not look like a parking garage, looked exactly like that. "Masking the bottom seven feet of the front of a five-level parking deck with a strip of stonework won't change the way it looks from a distance or the way it looks when approaching it by vehicle from the side," wrote Becky Johnson, a writer for The Smoky Mountain News.

Traverse City's deck, however, is a hit. It is among the tallest buildings in this city of 14,500. The entrances are embellished by ironwork, and the stairways and elevators are housed in a lighthouse-style tower with huge glass windows. The first floor on State Street houses offices, Bart's Texas-Style BBQ restaurant, and is across from the Park Place Hotel, the city's oldest and grandest.

At about \$15,000 a space, the Larry C. Hardy deck represents an investment that is nearly double that for an unadorned concrete parking deck. But city figures show it is generating higher-than-expected parking revenue; 18,000 vehicles used the deck in July, the city said. It has proved to be such an asset that there has been no argument about building a second deck on the city's west side.

"Our plan for downtown is to make it more walkable, more dense," Mr. Crough said. "We want to make it look and feel much more like downtown did in the 1930's and 1940's. Taking cars off the surface lots and putting them in great looking parking decks helps."

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