

Parking



Wikipedia defines myopia, commonly known as nearsightedness or shortsightedness, “as a condition of the eye where the light that comes in does not directly focus on the retina but in front of it.” Distant objects seem to be out of focus, as opposed to close objects, which appear sharp and clear.

Industry Myopia?

By Rachel Yoka

My perception over the past few years has been that our parking industry is subject to our own brand of myopia, to the exclusion of broader changes in the marketplace and real estate in particular.

We seem to segregate ourselves from major shifts and transformations in the marketplace. I would argue that this is common to many industries, a certain avoidance of the “forest for the trees,” as a natural human tendency to focus on what is directly in front of us, as that looms the largest in our line of sight.

We in the industry have certainly broadened our worldview in the past 10 years, and raised the awareness and importance of parking and transportation professionals, but there is significantly more work to be done in this area for all of us.

On the flip side, there are movements and trends that seem to be outside our collective sandbox that merit our attention. These will impact our businesses and our industry, so even if they seem out of focus, beyond our immediate line of sight, I would argue that they are worth more than a quick read.

Architecture, choosing form over function

The words “parking garage” and “design” do belong in the same sentence. The evolution from gray concrete boxes to attractive facade and well-designed buildings that fit well in a community is a welcome one. The perception and recognition of a parking structure as a creative and useful building type have changed the way we design and plan for parking.

Some of the most celebrated garages include the LEED-certified Santa Monica (CA) Civic Center garage, a US Green Parking Council Demonstrator site; and 1111 Lincoln Road in Miami Beach, a parking structure that boasts a rooftop penthouse and doubles as a wedding venue with an amazing skyline. ((See Picture of 1111 Lincoln Road nearby.)

This transition has run parallel to an unrelated trend. The last five years have been decidedly unkind to the building and construction industry. Architects often are seen as the “canary in the coal mine.” the first to be impacted by a real estate downturn, and a precursor of things to come for engineers and contractors.

Many architectural firms did not survive the most recent downturn, and even more cut staff in double-digit percentages. Competition got fierce, fees got even tighter, and architects (and engineers) sought different service lines and building types that could return higher profit and sustain their businesses.

In essence, parking garages got much more interesting to many firms that had never really pursued or designed them before. So, creativity and aesthetic design, meet firms that have extremely talented people and little experience designing a complicated building type. This will not be news to the parking consultants and designers and engineers that have helped drive the industry forward.

Parking professionals understand the complexity of parking layout and functional design, which has been in some cases overlooked or ignored in the interest of form or aesthetics. Often, a parking expert could easily identify problems or improvements to a design, but they simply didn’t have a seat at the design table to offer their experience.

Good parking design, like other things, can apply the concept “I know it when I see it.” Or better yet, “I know it when I drive through it.” We have all experienced poor functional design and its impacts in terms of traffic flow, operations and, most important, safety.

As an industry and a collective voice, our expertise makes the difference in evaluating and determining the appropriate balance between form and function. As garage design evolves further, and we continue to push the envelope on what is possible and desirable, we may want to keep an eye on the balance between form and function.

Changing streets, changing transportation

The design, engineering and planning of roadways and transportation in the US primarily focused on the single-occupant vehicle. These efforts have done what they intended to do – create roadway systems that encourage safe and efficient movement of vehicles. This has been to the detriment of both mass transit and, most notably, the pedestrian.

Enter the “Complete Streets” movement. Local governments, planners and transportation professionals are transforming our roads, sidewalks and mobility.

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“Complete Streets” enable safe and comfortable access and travel for all users: pedestrians, cyclists, motorists, and transit riders of all ages and abilities. “Incomplete Streets” may be defined as those designed only for vehicles..

By the end of 2010, more than 200 Complete Streets policies existed at various levels of government, and adoption appears to be accelerating. These policies and regulations vary widely, but often include performance standards, street connectivity and accommodation of all users, including motorists.

A current federal statute mandates that “bicycle transportation facilities and pedestrian walkways shall be considered, where appropriate, in conjunction with all new construction and reconstruction of transportation facilities, except where bicycle and pedestrian use are not permitted.”

So when federal dollars come into play, the motor vehicle will not reign supreme over other transportation modes. Whether you agree with the directive or not, Complete Streets should not remain in the “transportation engineer” or “planner” silo.

On-street parking quality and quantity will be impacted due to street reconfiguration, dedicated lanes for bus rapid transit, streetcars and bike lanes. On-street parking is recognized within this trend as valuable, and often retained or increased to create a traffic-calming effect, as well as a barrier between active sidewalks and traffic lanes.

Ultimately, the redesign of urban and semi-urban roadways presents an opportunity to revisit and reshape physical and operational parking programs, one street at a time. It’s a window of opportunity to parking professionals to jump into the fray and add value, as well as making sure that parking has its appropriate seat at the table.

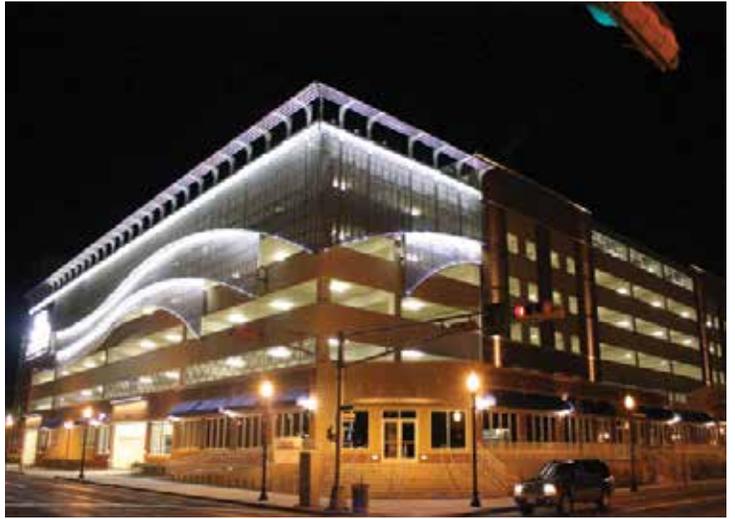
‘Right sizing’ isn’t just about shared parking

We often talk about “right sizing” parking, making sure we build the proper amount of parking into a structure, program or campus – as we should. Reducing overbuilds of parking makes economic sense in terms of capital costs, as well as ongoing operations and maintenance.

Larger forces are at work in terms of right sizing in real estate. Smaller occupied spaces cost less to build, buy and maintain. This has become an obvious target for reducing expenses beyond just rent per square foot.

Space per employee has decreased dramatically in the past 20 years, and many employers have shifted away from dedicated office and cubicle spaces to flexible space that is multi-use, and takes the standard office floor plate to a whole new level.

A recent Jones Lang LaSalle report cited average office space per employee at just under 400 square feet in 1985. It was just under 250 square feet in 2011, and is projected to be below 150 square feet by 2020.



The new office isn’t just a response to reduce expenses or the whim of the hottest new architect. It’s also a calculated response to the demographics, temperament and preferences of Gen Y and the creative class. They don’t live, work or consume like the Baby Boomers, so don’t expect them to park and commute the same, either.

On a recent visit to the Googleplex, the corporate headquarters for Google Inc. in Mountain View, CA, I learned that a high percentage of employees commute – no surprise since Google picks up all costs of transit on a brand new shuttle bus with all the amenities, including Wi-Fi so employees can work (or play) on the way to work.

What was more surprising to me was that the parking arrangements were otherwise quite ordinary, aside from a high-quality valet operation by Propark America. Given the transformative power of Gen Y, the best operators will be able to predict how the mobility and parking operations will change as well.

Retail space is undergoing the same transformative change. Compare your local Best Buy to your Apple store – talk about reducing space per customer and the evolving retail environment. Parking at the mall and the “lifestyle center” hasn’t changed much either, yet.

Across all sectors of real estate, “less is better,” according to the Urban Land Institute. Shrinking office, retail and housing configurations will impact how we commute, travel and move around on a day-to-day basis. Impacts will extend beyond vehicle miles traveled and space counts, including changing revenue models, as well as the pace and “style” of demand for parking and related assets.

In sum, our parking industry is part of a greater collective that includes not only architects and real estate owners, but transportation and planning professionals, and others far beyond these disciplines. We may sometimes find ourselves part of an insulated silo, maybe missing the forest for the trees.

But the crucial thing to remember is that we stay there, or move beyond that silo, by both personal and organizational choice. It’s up to us as an industry to position ourselves strategically to maximize the opportunities and minimize the challenges inherent in these current trends.

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