

Making the Most, of a Second Chance

Timothy Haahs has designed parking and mixed-use structures to revitalize neighborhoods after he was given his own second chance

— Craig A. Shutt



Timothy Haahs, PE, AIA

Timothy Haahs, PE, AIA, started his design firm in 1994 with the goal of using parking and mixed-use designs to create more active, sustainable, and walkable “people places.” His company encourages sustainable design and employee growth, revitalizing everything from the planet to the individual. Haahs established these goals after a life-changing event. He passed out behind the wheel of his car at a speed of 75 mph, a near-tragedy that revealed he suffered from a life-threatening illness.

Haahs had established a successful career in the parking-design industry, becoming a principal at Walker Parking Consultants over the course of the previous 10 years. Following his car accident, he discovered he had cardiomyopathy, a virus that had permanently damaged his heart muscles. Two years of trying multiple procedures, including pacemakers, defibrillators, and various medications, failed to improve his condition. He ultimately was admitted to the hospital and spent six months there awaiting a heart transplant. The chances of finding an appropriate donor and successfully transplanting the heart left his long-term survival potential at about 25%.



The Annapolis Towne Centre Garage provides dedicated spaces that help support the wide variety of uses for the facility, including banking, retail, condominiums, apartments, luxury hotel, fitness center, office space, and restaurants. Photo: TimHaahs.

“I spent a lot of time thinking, reading the Bible, and reviewing my life,” he says. “When I finally did receive my transplant, I was given a second chance. I decided to start a new company of my own and try to give a second chance to others.”

His interest in parking structures developed during his years at the University of Pennsylvania, where he obtained his Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees in engineering. After several years working in the nuclear powerplant industry, he was intrigued by the opportunity to work at a parking-design firm.

“In college, we’d studied transportation, environmental issues, and structural design at the same time to encourage us to consider all aspects of engineering,” he explains. “I was interested in how I could integrate them. I saw parking structures as the

perfect combination of all three.”

His illness also proved to be one of the catalysts for the founding of Timothy Haahs & Associates, Inc. in Blue Bell, Pa. The firm’s mission statement (“We exist to help those in need”) manifests itself through its support of a variety of medical, religious, and charitable organizations. He also co-founded Calvary Vision Church in 1996. In 1998, he was installed as one of the pastors, and the church currently has more than 200 parishioners. (For more on the company’s employee programs, see the sidebar.)

Parking's Key Role

When Haahs entered the parking field, the industry showed great potential for improvement, since it tended to be considered more of an afterthought, he notes. “At the time, it was assumed parking had to be an ugly,

functional aspect of a project, added after the rest of the building program was designed. But it doesn't have to be isolated and treated that way. It should be considered part of the living space, which will lead to making it more attractive and integrated."

'Parking is never the ultimate destination for those using it, but it's the first and last impression they have.'

Parking plays a key role in attracting visitors and setting the tone, he says. "Parking is never the ultimate destination for those using it, but it's the first and last impression they have. I wanted to capitalize on that interaction and integrate parking with other functions. It was important to convince owners of that significance and to ensure parking designers are invited to work with planners from the beginning."

An example of the role parking plays can be seen at the Philadelphia Zoo Centennial District Intermodal Facility, a four-story, 683-space parking structure built at America's first zoo. The \$24-million project at the landmark facility, which attracts 1.2 million visitors per year, improved traffic flow and created a plaza near the main stair tower. The total-precast concrete structure features a "teardrop" shaped concrete seating wall and curved concrete seating to create a community space. The zoo partnered with the city's Mural Arts Program to create colorful, animal-themed murals on the structure's side.

The facility incorporates a pedestrian ramp along its exterior that offers families a convenient and more interesting experience to reach the ground floor. The structure was designed to incorporate retail spaces to further enhance ground-level activity, but the recession curtailed those plans. "It's still possible to include it if they want that in the future," says Haahs.



Large murals decorate the façade of the new precast concrete parking structure at the Philadelphia Zoo Centennial District Intermodal Facility. The project added parking while improving traffic flow and creating a community-centric plaza. Photo: Steve Wolfe Photography.

Great Aesthetic Versatility

Although parking designs in the past maintained a traditional look, those limitations have been relaxed in recent years, he notes. "Parking offers great versatility, because their designs are totally open." Housing, he argues, is limited, because it has to resemble housing and be economical. "As a result, most housing designs look the same. So do offices. Whereas parking can have a traditional look to blend in, or it can be wild, to stand out. We're seeing more contemporary designs. It's a very exciting time."

Urban facilities create particular design challenges. "Parking structures in urban areas need to be more creative. It's important to make those designs attractive and integrate them with the other uses." But hiding the function doesn't always provide the most effective approach. "In many cases, you need parking to look like parking to ensure users recognize it for its function and can be directed to its entrance."

An example is the Annapolis Towne Centre Garage, where developers of the mixed-use facility wanted an attractive "downtown" look that minimized the facility's mass. A wide palette of precast concrete colors and sandblast finishes were used in conjunction with ornamental metal accents, providing a warm, low-scale, and residential feel.

"The garages are integral to the success of this specialized mixed-use development," he says. The center incorporates banking, retail, condominiums, apartments, luxury hotel, fitness center, office space, and restaurants. "The garages includes dedicated areas for these groups, separating the residential parkers from employees and visitors."

Redevelopment Catalyst

Parking facilities can go beyond providing an attractive, functional facility to being a pivotal part of revitalizing a neighborhood. "Many designers give no thought to the foot traffic that a parking structure generates," he says. "In fact, parking can be the catalyst for redevelopment." Many times, attempts to revitalize an area fail because not enough thought was put into providing sufficient parking facilities, which visitors require to frequent a development. "Parking has to integrate with retail areas, or the retail won't succeed."

The Channelside District parking structure in Tampa, Fla., is an example of how parking can encourage growth. Officials at the Tampa Port Authority recognized the need to provide more parking infrastructure as the district's popularity as a dining and entertainment center grew. The design-build project, a \$13.39-million horizontal



High performance and durability were requirements for the Channelside District parking structure in Tampa, Fla., situated along a Tampa Bay inlet. The facility was designed to encourage more visitors to come to the popular dining and entertainment district.

expansion of existing facilities, continues the original aesthetic design while enhancing the streetscape with textured screening over the precast concrete structure, plus vibrant lighting features and landscaping.

Aiding the versatility of parking designs is the way in which precast concrete can be shaped and blended with other materials to create exciting, durable structures. "Designers in the Northeast are very big on precast concrete due to the short construction season and durability of the material" he says. "It's faster to build with precast concrete."

Haahs has tried a variety of new techniques, including corrosion inhibitors and carbon-fiber reinforcement.

But precast concrete's durability already is a plus. "Precast concrete provides high strength due to the fabrication process. We commonly find compressive strengths of 6,000-psi, or higher whether we need it or not. That creates a very durable structure. With cast-in-place concrete, we often fight to reach 4,000 psi."

As the industry evolves, so does his firm. It opened its first regional office in Miami in 2005, followed by two more openings in Atlanta, Ga., and New Brunswick, N.J., four years later. A Jacksonville, Fla., office opened in 2014. In 2012, the firm expanded its international practice with work in China, South Korea, and the Middle East.

Haahs' Best Practices

TimHaahs was first named one of The Best Places to Work by *Structural Engineer* magazine in 2007, and its programs to encourage growth among employees have grown since then. They include:

- TimHaahs University, which offers required and elective courses to employees on key issues.
- Pathway to Principal, a mentoring program that promotes leadership qualities in employees.
- Tuition reimbursement for relevant classes at local universities.
- The Extra Mile Award for outstanding service.
- Annual company retreat.
- TimHaahs Improvement Memo (T.I.M.) program, which ensures suggestions receive quick resolution and implementation.
- A variety of charitable-donation programs and support for various organizations.

Haahs also has spoken to a variety of groups, including the United Nations Economics and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific.

"Our expansion is a direct result of what I went through," says Haahs, who had to undergo a second heart transplant in 1997 ("a perfect match"). "I learned I had to keep moving and growing, so when opportunities arose I took them. The new offices opened when clients told us they wanted us to work in those areas."

No matter where the industry moves in the future, Haahs will continue to focus on improving cities through educating his clients that parking should remain a key part of the planning. "The widespread success of town centers today is attributable to their ability to provide people with an exciting place to live, work, and play," he says. "Parking has and will continue to play a critical role in that success, providing essential infrastructure while creating a vibrant sense of community that so many people desire." **A**

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