

How parking stacks up in city

Hi-tech vertical solutions become the norm as core and infill sites get tighter, scarcer and more costly
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Danna O'Brien lives at Queen and John Sts., works in Yorkville and rarely drives.

"It's much easier for me to walk or take transit," she says.

For nights out, she'll often take a cab rather than endure the hassle and cost of parking. But she still has a car and a parking spot - a stacked space that cost \$25,000.

"I'm really deciding whether or not to keep my car, but I do use it on weekends to go golfing or out of town, especially in the summer," says O'Brien, who is weighing the costs of gas, insurance and repairs.

But even if she sells the car, she'll keep the parking because it increases a condo's resale value.

"Whether you have a car or not, it just seems prudent to have a place for one."

It might not please urban planners and anti-car zealots, and it might not make sense to those who swear by car-sharing services, but with so many jobs and other daily activities taking place in largely car-dependent areas of the GTA, it's no surprise that many downtowners still want their own wheels.

But with thousands of people moving into the core, and infill sites getting tighter and scarcer, developers are scrambling almost as much to accommodate cars as they are condo buyers.

Mechanical parking is increasingly becoming part of the solution. Consider Glas, a 163-unit condominium/loft project at 24 Charlotte St., scheduled for completion next May. Situated on a wide-shallow lot only 13.7 metres across, the building can't accommodate a traditional underground ramp system. So the developer, Harhay Construction Management Ltd., is installing two custom-designed parking elevators.

Realtor Brad Lamb, who says he works with the most adventurous infill developers in the city, says the use of two car elevators in one condo building is a first in Toronto.

"It's very James Bond-like. You drive up and the door opens - you have a transponder so the door opens automatically - you slide in and it will take you automatically to your floor, depending on what your transponder says."

Current regulations allow only trained attendants to operate car elevators. So, Lamb says, "We're licensing everybody who's buying in the building as a car valet." (Tenants with parking will also be licensed.)

Car elevators fall under Canadian Standards Association regulations governing freight elevators, says Roger Neate, a manager of operations with the Technical Standards and Safety Authority.

The authority is responsible for all aspects of licensing, inspecting, training and certification in relation to the more than 43,000 elevating devices in the province.

In the past, only licensed car valets could legally operate car elevators. Neate says the authority has drafted proposed new regulations, but admits changes take a long time and must be approved by the province. He says that, provided residents of the condo are trained, they will be allowed to operate the elevators and passengers will be allowed in the car during transport.

Also, the new rules will specifically recognize car stackers - bunk beds for cars. These are a common solution to parking woes in Europe.

Stackers are growing in popularity, according to a list of proposed usages supplied by Andre Filippetti, the city's manager

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for traffic planning for Toronto-East York.

City bylaws mentioned them as early as 1994, and the city deals with them on a case-by-case basis, he says. "We don't discourage these types of devices."

Chris Harhay, vice-president of his family's firm, says stackers are an innovative solution for tight infill sites, such as his previous two condo projects.

Zen Lofts at 42 Camden St. uses double stackers, and 169 John St., where O'Brien lives, houses triple stackers.

Both are a success with residents, Harhay says.

"They're a creative way to solve our limited space issue. We're not recreating the wheel. We only have to look to New York and look to Europe. The car-stacker system is used all over the world."

Lamb says he has had to turn down a few buyers whose vehicles are too large to fit on a stacker.

Dr. Manfred Frenkel, owner of Klaus Car Parking Systems, installed the stackers at both 169 John St. and Zen Lofts. He says an adjustable double stacker will be available in Toronto this fall. (Trump International Hotel & Tower Toronto plans to install about 70 adjustable double stackers.)

Frenkel, who represents German manufacturer Klaus Multiparking GMBH, says the company sells 25,000 to 35,000 stackers a year worldwide. The company began making them in 1964.

Almost all condos and apartment buildings in Germany, Italy and France have stackers, because overnight parking on streets is usually not permitted.

Frenkel says they are very safe and don't require gates, as no one is in the car while the platform is moving. (He wryly suggests we don't use gates on subway platforms, either.)

In case of a power failure, the top cars can be lowered manually and the bottom cars raised with a pump, though he says he has only ever sold one pump. He also says Torontonians are "too scared" to fully embrace this technology.

"What is the big deal?" he asks.

Lewis Poplak, development manager with Context, says parking stackers are a great answer for small sites. For larger sites, he wonders about another European solution fully or semi-automated parking systems, as opposed to huge and costly underground garages.

"A number of projects (in Toronto) are going five, six and seven storeys below ground," he says. "At a certain point, a cost-benefit analysis has to be done on automated parking systems."

Whether for institutional, commercial or residential use, "it's only a matter of time before we see one in Toronto."

In fact, Toronto built two mechanical garages in 1957, one on the site now occupied by Dundas Square and one on Temperance St., between Bay and Yonge Sts. According to the Toronto Parking Authority, these pigeonhole systems were a "disaster."

Drivers pulled their vehicles into the building, turned off the engines and locked the doors. A dolly with mechanical arms lifted the cars and put them on the elevator. They would be whisked to a storage spot until needed.

But Toronto winters were tough on the hydraulics, bearings wore down quickly and hard metal lugs broke off the wheel lifts.

Despite promises of speedy usage, logjams ensued when department stores closed and people tried to leave all at once.

The systems were deemed a failure and demolished in the mid '60s.

Maurice Anderson, outgoing president of the Toronto Parking Authority, says that although they have come a long way, automated systems would not work for public garages in Toronto - the turnover of cars is too high. However, he adds, "I honestly believe that, if I was building a condo today, I would put in one of those mechanical parking garages."

Frederick E. Gorove, a traffic engineer with Gorove/Slade in Washington, D.C., says the idea is slowly starting to catch on in the U.S. and around the world.

"It has a perfect fit in urban situations," he says, pointing to successful operations in Istanbul, Milan and Dubai, among others.

He lists the advantages no need to lock your car, as no one has access; cars can be parked close together; no nicks in your door; fewer security issues; less need for lighting and heating, thereby saving money; no wasted gas driving around several levels to park and remove your car.

Plus, an automated garage takes up about 60 per cent of the volume of a conventional garage and uses fewer construction materials.

Barbara Chance, of Chance Management Advisors, is a former director of on-street parking in Philadelphia. She says there is now a lot of interest in automated systems, but U.S. firms are still reluctant.

Only three such garages are operating in the U.S., but once a major one is built by a reputable group and is operating successfully, she thinks it will make all the difference. Meanwhile, she tells clients to "spend 500 bucks and get a flight to Italy to see one of these. You're just about to invest \$20 million in a facility."

And if you insist on having a car in central Toronto, you'll pay anywhere from \$20,000 to \$35,000 per spot, Lamb says. A few upscale buildings have spots topping out at about \$37,500, but prices drop for those on lower garage floors, because of the inconvenience of driving around and around the ramps.

[Illustration]

Tony Bock toronto star Dr. Manfred Frenkel, owner of Klaus Car Parking Systems, suggests stacked parking is a good solution for condo projects being built on small infill sites throughout the city.

Credit: Toronto Star

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