From Eyesore to
Elegant and exciting? Yes, a few new parking garages are going in that direction. By Jeffrey Spivak

Once upon a time, parking garages were architecturally elegant and stylish. This was way back in the first decades of the auto age. Early downtown garages were designed to blend in with the office buildings around them, with facades featuring doors, windows, arches, terra cotta trim, and ornamental stonework. Their appearance mattered because back then drivers pulled in, left their cars with a valet, then strolled outside past the building to their destinations.

All that changed as valets gave way to self-parking and cities had to accommodate more automobiles. Garages became strictly functional and utilitarian, a building type stuck in a rut: squat, low, and rectilinear, with horizontal slabs open to the air on all sides and a facade that looked like a cold, unsmilng face. Garages were sterile and desolate, prompting urban theorist Jane Jacobs to say, “The more downtown is broken up and interspersed with parking lots and garages, the duller and deader it becomes.”

Fast forward to the current century. Some public and private developers have started demanding more attractive parking structures, and as a result, architecture has rediscovered the parking garage. In diverse places ranging from Miami Beach to Oklahoma City, and from the small town of Columbus, Indiana, to the Los Angeles suburb of Santa Monica, well-known architects have been designing garages with sculpture-like skins, cascades of colored lights, walls of green plants, even a new twist on...
The artistry of some new garages reflects an increasing interest in parking aesthetics generally. "Garage owners and developers are definitely paying more attention to the aesthetics of facilities today," says Casey Jones, director of parking services at Boise State University in Idaho and chairman of the International Parking Institute, an industry association that honors the best new facilities with annual design awards. "The well-designed, pleasing-to-look-at facility is becoming more the norm."

**Dazzling designs**

The universe of dazzling garage designs is still quite small. Nationwide, just a dozen artistically acclaimed structures have been built since 2008. Interestingly, about half of these projects have been done by private developers and half by city governments. Florida is in the vanguard, with Miami Beach at the epicenter of this new architectural niche. Four new-style structures have opened there in the last three years and another is under development.

Architect Frank Gehry, as part of his New World Center concert hall, added a steel-mesh garage that’s illuminated at night by multicolored LED lights. For the Park@420 retail center, Mexican architect Enrique Norten’s white concrete garage facade was covered with perforated holes in Braille-looking patterns. Miami-based Arquitectonica wrapped the four-story Sunset Harbour garage with silver- and gray-colored metal panels in trapezoidal shapes resembling an angled checkerboard.

Swiss firm Herzog & de Meuron created an open-air, concrete-slab garage at 1111 Lincoln Road that’s become a destination because of its sculptural appearance and sight lines, with triangular vertical columns, horizontal slabs varying in height from eight to 34 feet, glass-walled boutiques and restaurants, and a soaring seventh floor parking level that is rented out as event space. This garage draws fashion shows, commercial shoots, concerts, celebrity parties, even weddings.

In the latest project, for the city’s Collins Park garage, London-based architect Zaha

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The traditional wall-less, open-air form.

In the process, something improbable has happened. A few exotic garages have become community icons, attracting sight-seers, photographers, even event planners. "There are some amazing garages out there," says Shannon Sanders McDonald, who wrote a history of parking garage design in 2007 and is an assistant architecture professor at Southern Illinois University. "It’s a trend that restarted with people wanting the garage to have an identity and character as part of the visitor experience. It’s really the garage to the level of art."

In Oklahoma City, stainless steel and translucent mesh help make Chesapeake Energy’s parking garage something special. The facading covers an entire city block, but it seems less massive because of shifting colors on the facade.

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Chicago’s Greenway Self Park Garage (top) won the 2011 International Parking Institute excellence award for architectural achievement. Bottom: Santa Monica’s Civic Center parking structure aimed at becoming the nation’s first LEED-certified garage.

Top left photo courtesy Steve Hall©Hedrich Blessing; bottom left photo by Amy Williams Photography; right photos by Scott McDonald©Hedrich Blessing
Planning
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Hadd—a Pritzker Prize winner—is planning a series of circular decks stacked like pancakes, only with dissimilar shapes.

Miami Beach, a series of islands with a population of 90,000 off the eastern coast of Miami, has a long history of iconic design. While famous for its glittery nightlife, the city also has 10 historic districts and one of the largest collections of Art Deco buildings in the world. The city’s devotion to design even extends to sewer pumping stations, some of which incorporate sculptures and decorative landscaping.

“Our fortunate to have that heritage of taking our liabilities and turning them into assets,” says William Cary, Miami Beach’s assistant planning director. “Every parking garage is custom designed, so they become a valuable part of our urban fabric rather than an egregious addition.”

Green, gold, and silver

Imaginative garage designs are popping up in some unexpected places, too.

In Columbus, Indiana—which has a population of only 44,000 but a long tradition of commissioning buildings from top architects like Eero Saarinen and I.M. Pei—the parking garage architects initially presented the city with a plain traditional design, but city leaders demanded something better looking.

Likewise, in Santa Monica, the city’s initial criterion was a straightforward garage, but city leaders later pushed for something artistic. This garage cost $29 million, or almost $33,000 per parking space.

“The city became so enamored with this becoming a real landmark building,” says Don Marks, president of California-based International Parking Design, the architect of Santa Monica’s garage with Moore Ruble Yudell Architects & Planners. “Very rarely do we get an owner who comes to us and says, ‘I want this to be a landmark building.’ But we’re seeing a lot more owners who are interested in aesthetics than 20 years ago.”

New debates

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In Cincinnati, a proposed city garage to serve downtown office workers and restaurants, and developers don’t want customers’ first impressions to be of some ugly, generic facade. For another thing, some city planning departments and some institutions such as universities have been creating design standards for buildings, including garages, within special districts. Miami Beach’s zoning code requires new garages facing a street or waterway to have a mixed use development. “All this is forcing better buildings and higher concept designs,” says Steve Rebozo, president of Rebozo Aerospace Associates, a national architecture and planning firm specializing in parking. “You can’t come in with a vanilla design anymore.”

Higher costs

Doing these types of projects takes a special commitment, because high-concept structures cost more. For garages, the median construction cost per parking space was $16,000 in 2010, according to the International Parking Institute, which holds annual design contests and publishes an “unused canyon,” in the words of one booster.

“Most people want something that’s attractive and doesn’t just look like a concrete parking garage,” says Christi Branscom, Knoxville’s public works director, who oversees planning and zoning operations. “There’s continued interest in not having a dead zone downtown. The community is engaged, and they want this to be as unique and interesting and alive as possible.”

Parking garage architects say a few factors are leading to better garage designs.

For one thing, more garages are incorporating mixed uses, by adding stores and restaurants, and developers don’t want customers’ first impressions to be of some ugly, generic facade. For another thing, some city planning departments and some institutions such as universities have been creating design standards for buildings, including garages, within special districts. Miami Beach’s zoning code requires new garages facing a street or waterway to have commercial or residential space on the first floor, thus ensuring the garages are part of a mixed use development.

Two views of Miami Beach’s planned Collins Park garage, designed by Zaha Hadid Architects.

The U.S. Department of Energy’s National Renewable Energy Laboratory parking structure in Golden, Colorado, has won a 2013 International Parking Institute excellence award.

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