

Trends Driving Apartment Parking Garages



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By Barbara Ballinger

More cars, bikes, municipal changes and energy conservation are affecting apartment parking garages.

Some might say apartment parking garages aren't as sexy as well-outfitted gyms, communal, chef-equipped kitchens and Hollywood-style pool cabanas.

But they nevertheless are veering off in new directions because of changes in car-ownership trends and efforts by municipalities, developers and residents to be more eco-conscious.

Depending on the location, apartment developers and managers find that spaces for cars—as well as the growing number of bicycles—might either represent the latest amenity or simply consume valuable real estate.

More Car Owners

Developers, especially those who target a higher income renter, may use an onsite garage to attract residents who want to park their car where they live rather than walk a few blocks.

This desire gained momentum as more residents became car owners after the pandemic hit, driven by wanting to get out and about to do errands or change scenery without risking infection by taking public transportation, a ride-sharing service or renting a car. In fact, car sales, particularly for used cars, have climbed as a shortage of new vehicles has occurred and interest rates stayed low.

New Garages

The garages themselves are undergoing change, as developers weigh where best to construct them. Above ground is less costly than below ground, though a surface lot is even less and more common in a suburban location where land is typically more available.

For example, in Minneapolis, above-ground parking might run \$24,000 per stall in a structured garage versus \$28,000 for below-ground parking and \$5,000 for a surface spot, says architect Chris Palkowitsch, AIA, Senior Design Lead and Partner at Minneapolis-based BKV Group, an architecture and engineering firm.

Developers also carefully calculate how many stalls to include. This involves looking at the number of drivers in existing area buildings, figuring out the return on investment from the monthly apartment and garage rent, how big the stalls must be or how many cars can be parked, as well as trends happening in the municipality, since some have started to limit the number of cars in new garages, particularly near transit-oriented developments (TODs).

“Planning for onsite parking has become a much more nuanced and in-depth conversation,” says architect Jay Szymanski, AIA, principal at Chelsea, Mass.-based The Architectural Team (TAT). “In today’s markets, many [apartment residents] continue to rely on their cars and view garages as an important amenity, but development and design teams also have to take a long view and consider the downstream impact of shifting regulations and evolving lifestyle needs.”

Although cars generally are getting bigger, stalls remain—almost stalled—at 8 1/2 feet by 18 feet, says Palkowitsch. “They even may be getting smaller. In some suburban markets where they were designed larger to accommodate increased car sizes, officials now find the spaces may be too big, so they are scaling them back,” he says.

As an example of cities trying to pare down car use, Minneapolis officials try to do so in their downtown core by removing a parking requirement for new buildings, says Palkowitsch. “The city also wants to encourage residents to use existing garages by

having new buildings develop relationships with them—maybe, through a discount,” he says.

In Chicago, some developers provide as little parking as possible for apartment buildings because there’s so much public transportation and renting doesn’t seem to hinge on having a garage in a building, says architect My-Nga Lam, AIA, Design Principal at Chicago-based Lucien Lagrange Studio. “If parking is included, it’s at the minimum code requirement,” she says.

One alternative is to offer parking only for larger, more expensive two- and three-bedroom apartments, for example, versus studios and one bedrooms, Lam says.

Elsewhere, habits vary. In Dallas, residents expect to have a garage in their building, Lam says. “Renters there like their cars, and some stalls are getting bigger to make it easier to maneuver, she says. “They might also include storage. People want to feel they’re coming home to a single-family home with a garage.”

Whatever the choice now, building in flexibility for the future has become more important. Szymanski’s firm is planning for many “what-ifs.” At Bower, with 312 units divided among two connected buildings and near a light rail line, the podium garage has room for 192 cars, but that parking count needs to accommodate the development’s commercial space as well, he says.

On the garage’s top level, the architects designed it to be approximately 2 feet higher to allow for the addition of car stackers if parking demand increases. “It’s more efficient than building additional garage space,” Szymanski says. “We could add parking for an extra 50 cars.” The developer also sponsored a bike-sharing station outside its doors as part of the permitting process, he says.

Many developers and property managers now face another challenge, as some urban buildings with a garage have seen an uptick in vacancies because of the pandemic, which might mean a corresponding increase in parking spot vacancies.

Some buildings are compensating by offering garage concessions. For example, in Chicago, renters might get several months or up to a year of free parking, which can mean saving \$285 to \$300 a month, or lowered monthly rates down to \$99, says Erika Rios, Leasing Director and Founder of Chicago-based apartment brokerage firm Downtown Apartment Company (DAC).

For the Energy-Conscious Driver

Another change—and fast moving—is the surge in electric vehicles (EVs), which represented 2.2% of the global vehicle market in the first 10 months of 2019. The recent announcement by General Motors that it will cease production of gas-powered cars and trucks and exclusively produce zero-emissions vehicles by 2035 is expected to increase numbers more.

Garages are trying to keep pace by adding more electric charging stations, and some developers are adding stalls equipped with charging stations that can lead to a premium monthly fee.

For example, Parkline Chicago offers 34 parking spaces for its 189 rental apartments. Of the 34 spaces, four are equipped with electric charging stations. There is a premium of a \$20 fee per month for these spots to cover electrical usage, on top of the monthly parking rent.

“This low parking ratio of 0.18 spaces per unit is feasible because of Parkline Chicago’s central downtown location,” says Thomas Roszak, FAIA, partner of Mocerri + Roszak and Founder and Principal of Thomas Roszak Architecture.

For Cyclists

For years, many apartment garages have housed bicycles for avid riders who didn’t have room or didn’t want to keep bicycles in their apartments. More garages are adding the option, either because of resident interest or an increasing number of municipalities requiring a certain number of bike spots in new buildings, says architect Phil Renzi, AIA, Senior Project Manager at TAT and a cyclist himself.

As an example, he cites the Somerville, Mass., ALTA XMBLY apartment building being developed by Wood Partners and the desirable amenity of a 24-hour bike parking and storage facility. Nearby, the Residences at Brighton Marine’s supportive housing community for veterans will have 100 bike spaces and a repair space for the 102 units, which opened in late 2020.

In designing these spaces, design professionals are arranging them in attractive, well-illuminated areas, often near a garage entrance, rather than tucked away in a dark corner, says Szymanski. Lam has witnessed the trend. “They may not be right by the lobby, but they’re definitely not off an alley, and they have nicer finishes,” she says.

And the bicycles are secured by bike valets or security cameras in many cases as thefts continue. According to Cycling Industry News, more than 2 million bicycles are stolen annually.

Garages with extra room are also setting aside space for a repair shop. However, a newer addition is a bicycle lounge, which during non-pandemic times became a place to gather, says Palkowitsch. The space, perhaps 300 square feet, might include couches, a mini-fridge and wet bar. Some include showers, according to TheParkCatalog, which offers many types of racks and other accessories.

The Future

What the future holds is a matter of debate. One unknown remains the viability of driverless cars. More exteriors of garages may similarly get spruced up. For example, in

a mixed-use building designed by BKV Group, MoZaic, one key facade has a six-story green wall. How much the carless community takes hold is another question mark, as the no-car Culdesac Tempe neighborhood is constructed, developed by Culdesac Inc. and Sunbelt Holdings and designed by Opticos Design in downtown Tempe, Ariz. (opposite page). There will be zero residential parking on the 17-acre infill site near a light rail station. It is said to be the first in the U.S. to do so.

Leasing has not yet started on the one-, two- and three-bedroom apartments, but the waiting list is filled for the first neighborhood phase to be completed in 2022.

Pecking Order

The least costly option for garage construction is above ground in a precast structure followed by podium parking of noncombustible steel or concrete with wood-framed residences above, which is less costly than all steel construction, says architect Jay Syzmanski of The Architectural Team (TAT).

Below-grade parking is more expensive and usually reserved for condos and office buildings in tight urban areas. For example, At The Archer Residences, a 62-unit condo converted from existing institutional buildings in Boston's Beacon Hill neighborhood, the below-ground parking has 50 parking spaces and was designed with stackers and a vehicle elevator to increase capacity, says Syzmanski. "Beacon Hill land is at a premium and it was the best way to get the highest parking yield," he says.

Multifamily communities staffed with a valet might be able to fit in more cars, as can garages equipped with new mechanical systems that store them on storage racks. The lingering uncertainty is how driverless cars will impact apartment parking in the future. —B.B.