

Smart Garage, The • Technology companies are obsessed with devising ways to deliver the entire Internet to anyone at any time. But one of the most significant new ideas in information technology operates with a quite different purpose: it delivers one highly targeted bit of information to you at the precise moment when you need it most. Or, to put it more directly: when you're stuck driving in circles in a parking garage, it tells you exactly where to find the nearest available space.

The technology was first developed in Europe, but it's just being rolled out now in the United States by Signal-Park USA, a Phoenix company. The basic system works like this: Each parking space in a garage has a small monitor above it, which detects whether the space is occupied or not. The monitors feed this data into a central computer, which processes the information and transmits it to display boards located throughout the garage. Upon entering the garage, you drive past a board informing you that there are, say, 6 spaces available on Level 1, 15 spaces on Level 2 and so on. Each level has its own board telling you which rows have available spaces; each row has a board telling you exactly how many spaces are available within it. And atop each parking space — placed high enough that it can be seen all the way from the end of a row of spaces — is a light, which turns green if the space is free, red if it's occupied. (This last touch helps alleviate one of the banes of a parker's existence: spaces that look empty from a distance, but turn out to be occupied by subcompact cars.)

All of this costs money, of course — around \$400 to \$550 per parking space — but for garages in high-traffic locations, that expenditure might make sense. Oftentimes, parking-garage operators post signs announcing that their garage is full when it isn't, because they can't gauge how many free spaces they have. If, during peak times, Signal-Park's system allows a garage to be 100 percent full instead of just 95 percent full, the extra revenue can recoup the cost of investment. The company has already outfitted garages at airports in Baltimore and Jacksonville, and it has been in talks with officials in San Francisco about placing the system in a municipal garage there. TIM CARVELL