

Garages make parking less of a pain:[FINAL Edition]

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Nation

Smart bombs. Smart growth. Smart cards. Smart cars. And now, smart parking.

With more cars and less space to build on, airports, hospitals and shopping centers are embracing parking design and technology that have been used in congested European cities for 20 years.

Developers are trying to make parking garages more convenient for drivers and more cost-efficient for them. They're installing pay machines and electronic displays that guide drivers to vacant spaces to reduce labor costs, gridlock and parking rage.

Parking is customers' first and last impression of any place they drive to, says Jerry Fondaw, president of Signal-Park USA in Phoenix, the only U.S. company to sell a Swiss electronic parking system that tracks which spaces are filled. The system has been available 20 years in Europe, three here.

"When you go in to a garage and you're going to take a flight somewhere or you're going to shop, you want to find a parking space as quickly as you can," Fondaw says.

What garages are doing:

* Electronic displays. In Baltimore/Washington International Airport's "Smart Park" system, electronic signs tell drivers how many spaces are vacant on every level. Drivers can skip levels that are full and zoom up the ramp to one that has spaces. Green lights flash over vacant parking spots.

Sensors in every parking space tell a computer system when a car pulls in and out.

"The coolest thing since sliced bread," says Jonathan Solomon, 27, a TV engineer who travels in and out of the airport at least three times a month. "The amount of time it saves is amazing."

The Signal-Park system sold by Fondaw's company is the most advanced and most expensive: \$400 to \$500 a spot.

Jacksonville International Airport adopted the same system. Chicago Midway Airport and the San Diego Convention Center want it. The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore and airports in Portland, Ore., and Houston are considering it.

More common are electronic display systems in use at the entrance of garages that show the number of spaces available but stop short of guiding parkers to vacant spots.

* Pay-on-foot machines. Get a ticket and park. When ready to leave, walk up to a machine, pay

by cash or credit card, drive to the gate, slide the prepaid parking stub in a machine and drive out.

There are at least 100 facilities in the USA that use this system, and the number is growing rapidly, says Mary Smith, senior vice president of Walker Parking Consultants. Among them: Purdue University, Texas Medical Center and airports in San Diego, Newark, Chicago and New York.

Hartsfield Atlanta International Airport tried the system in 1981 unsuccessfully. Smith says people were still reluctant to trust machines with their money. Today, "ATMs, pay-at-the-pump for gas, etc., has made use of such machines far more acceptable and less intimidating to American parkers," Smith says.

* Attention to design. Developers of The Grove, an upscale shopping center in Los Angeles, not only built a smart garage but one that looks smart. Aside from electronic display boards telling shoppers how many spaces are free on every level, parking spaces are 6 to 8 inches wider, a crystal chandelier hangs from the third-level entrance, and the landings are carpeted. The ceiling is painted white. There are no walls. Music plays. Parking spaces are angled. The double-helix ramp is wide enough for two SUVs side by side. Soon, parkers may get a whiff of orange blossoms emitted by "scent cannons."

"We wanted to give the parking structure the feel of a resort and hotel," says Daniel Burgner, a senior vice president for Caruso Affiliated Holdings, a shopping center developer in Santa Monica, Calif. "

Smart parking is smart business, he says. If customers find parking difficult or unsafe in one center, they'll do their shopping somewhere else.

[Illustration]

PHOTO, B/W, H. Darr Beiser, USA TODAY; Caption: A lot better: The Smart Park" system shows where parking is available at Baltimore/Washington International Airport.