



In Urban Developments, Architects Must Dig Deep for Innovative Parking Solutions

By Jeff DiRomaldo

“They paved paradise and put up a parking lot.” No developer wants to be the “they” in these words from the song “Big Yellow Taxi,” because they connote taking something lovely and organic and turning it into something ugly and out of place. But parking is a reality that anyone who hopes to develop new residential units and combine them with retail and commercial establishments and see all of it sold and used must face.

Thirty-five years after Joni Mitchell first sang that line, architects and builders are challenged more than ever to look at parking needs with fresh eyes, and to create innovative, uncompromising designs. It’s an especially daunting task for firms such as mine, which are deeply involved in designing housing

that celebrates the scale and character of traditional urban communities. We must recognize the market’s need to respond to the priorities of today’s home buyers, including reliance on the automobile, even in urban settings. At the same time, we are committed to helping developers find ways to provide parking without undermining the essential tenets of enlightened urbanism.

In his 2005 book *The High Cost of Free Parking*, Donald C. Shoup argues that “Off-street parking requirements have all the hallmarks of a great planning disaster,” because they essentially subsidize cars, promoting unnecessary and unnatural reliance on the auto in towns that might be served more naturally or responsibly by pedestrian infrastructure

and public transportation. Towns and cities also must impose parking requirements — e.g., development of one new parking space for each housing unit — to preserve on-street parking in the town’s business district retail entities. But Shoup argues that “past some critical point, more parking spaces harm rather than help” business by increasing the space between stores and businesses, eliminating the efficiency that is the essence of an urban location.

Certainly, parking structures can be inimical to the scale and architectural rhythm that characterize desirable neighborhoods. As BartonPartners designs and plans urban residential developments, we place special emphasis on meeting the need for off-street parking in ways that contribute to the vitality of the streetscape. The best way to visualize how to do this is to look at examples from our own backyard of Philadelphia.

The courtyard that sits atop the Cherry Street garage has become an integral part of the neighborhood.



CHERRY STREET

With 43 back-to-back, 3½-story townhomes in a half city block, the scale of AFC Realty Capital’s Cherry Street West matches the traditional fabric of Philadelphia row houses. Using traditional brick and stone facings, the architecture harmonizes with its neighbors, but the successful integration of the project into its neighborhood, which is around 23rd and Cherry streets, also depended upon the developer’s ability to create common space and avoid creating dead zones. The city required construction of at least

See Page 32



Except for one, innocuous entrance/exit, parking at Cherry Street is invisible from street level.

43 parking spaces, which, as individual garages, would have occupied a substantial portion of the site and presented an uninviting façade to neighbors.

The solution Barton and AFC devised served several purposes. Excavating to a depth of five feet provided sufficient headroom for construction of a partially depressed one-level parking garage containing 62 parking spaces, which both met the city's bottom line requirement and presented additional parking sales for the developer, addressing a neighborhood parking shortfall. Except for entry and exit locations at a public driveway, the garage is completely concealed. Also, 28 dwelling unit owners enter the parking structure via private interior stairways shared by a group of four townhomes.

The beauty of the solution can be seen at street level, where a courtyard amenity right on top of the garage has become, in many ways, the heart of the development — a landscaped walkway and plaza that invite residents to linger and commune with one another. In fact, the Cherry Street West parking design challenges author Donald Shoup's assertion that "popular historic styles like courtyard housing cannot be replicated

with today's parking requirements."

THE NATIONAL

Another challenge to Shoup's words exists with the design for the National at Old City, which celebrates the space at street level for this historic composite parcel that rests within Philadelphia's revered sites along Second Street above Arch. The East parcel preserves the historically certified National Products art moderne facade in a multistory loft building. New townhomes around a courtyard adjoin Elfreth's Alley, America's oldest continuously occupied street. At the same time, two midrises in K. Hovnanian's West parcel provide new retail space along these chic shopping streets.

The National will contribute to the vibrancy and economic vitality of Old City, bringing in nearly 300 new homeowners without any net increase in parking load in the neighborhood, thanks to innovations in three areas that put residents' cars underground in nearly 300 new parking spaces below grade.

The first innovation came from Barton and the developers establishing a productive and collaborative relationship with the city zoning commission and neighborhood groups. In fact, the developer made an early commitment to the zoning commission to build sufficient parking for all new buyers, which was not strictly required by zoning, but was essential to an amicable approvals process. For its part, the city was uncommonly flexible in allowing the two parcels to be considered as one for purposes of parking requirements.

The second innovation was design of a "transparent" parking facility that does not tear the fabric of the neighborhood. The West parcel garage, with more than 200 parking spaces, is served by one entrance and one exit that do not interfere with the active retail frontage on the

other three sides of the complex.

The third innovation involved the structural engineering. In the West parcel alone, there are five distinct structures: a 10-story high-rise, two six-story high rises and two townhome buildings. This diverse burden above the parking garage required creativity in managing loads through various uses and minimized the expense of transfer beams.

As you can well imagine, parking in this neighborhood is indeed expensive — buyers are paying up to \$42,000 for a space in the National's garage. However, creating parking the right way ultimately will pay off not only for the developers, but also for communities in which they build. The challenge for architects and designers is to dig for innovative parking solutions such as those I just mentioned — solutions that minimize the impact of the automobile on the streetscape.

Jeff DiRomaldo is a project manager at BartonPartners, an architecture and planning firm in Norristown, PA, that specializes in residential and mixed-use design. Reach him at jdiromaldo@bartonpartners.com or (610) 930-2800. ■

advertisers' index

Atlantic Builders Convention	29
Bradco Supply Corp.....	7
Clayton Concrete Block	
Sand.....	Inside Front Cover
Cowan, Guteski & Co. PA	10
Guzzo Masonry & Stucco.....	24
Holliday Architects.....	17
John Martinelli Photography.....	11
Lennox Industries.....	8
P.C. Richard	25
Silver Line Windows.....	13
Stonex.....	31
Superior Walls of New Jersey ...	Back Cover
TJS Floorcovering	3
Total Stone, LLC	27, Inside Back Cover
Tri-County Building Supplies	19
Weyerhaeuser	21
Woodhaven Lumber & Millwork Inc.	23