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Valet is a robot

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New Yorkers soon will have a high-tech alternative to the parking attendant who scratches your bumper or changes your radio settings - and you won't have to tip.

The city's first robotic parking garage is set to open next month in Chinatown.

"You'll never have to worry about anybody damaging the vehicle, anybody driving the car, anyone changing your seat settings, your radio settings or your mirrors," said Ari Milstein, the director of planning for Automotion Parking Systems.

The underground garage at 123 Baxter St., near Hester St., is being rigged with sensors, laser beams, turn tables and elevators that go up, down and sideways to park cars with efficiency and precision.

"It's completely automated, completely sterile," Milstein said. "All your personal belongings you can leave in your car, and they'll be right where you left them when you come back."

He said the technology will allow 67 cars to be squeezed into a two-floor basement, where human valets can fit only 24.

All the driver does is follow arrows to line the car up on a pallet and walk away with the keys. The robot does the rest, sliding the cars onto shelves and then retrieving them.

The only human will be an attendant to help people get used to the system and handle cash transactions. Fees will run from \$25 a day to \$400 a month.

"We didn't want a machine accepting cash because of some of those breakdown problems you would have when sticking a crumpled bill in them," Milstein. "We try to keep things as mechanically simple as possible."

Milstein said five additional Automotion Parking garages are being planned for the city, including three in Brooklyn.

The system is also catching on worldwide, with similar garages in China, Turkey, Australia, Germany and Hungary.

"It's like EZPass, it's like the ATM; it takes a little while for us to kind of get comfortable with," Milstein said.

But human parking attendants shouldn't give up just yet.

The only other computer-controlled parking garage in the United States is still working out the bugs.

The Robotic Parking Systems garage in Hoboken, unrelated to Automotion Parking Systems, dropped a Cadillac DeVille six floors in 2004 and a Jeep four stories the following year.

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