

Paranoia-Free Parking

If you've ever had the dubious pleasure of being a monthly customer at a New York City parking garage, you're probably aware that the price—approximately that of a roomy one-bedroom in any other metropolitan area—is only the start-up cost. You've also got to suffer the opprobrium of the attendants if you give them less than 24 hours' notice that you want to use your car. And then there's the persistent fear/suspicion that the dents and scratches you're noticing for the first time weren't there when you dropped the vehicle off.

This anxiety is usually bolstered by three factors: the way you've witnessed the wheelies, screeching tires, and disco moves as the staff moves vehicles around the garage; the infinitesimal spaces the cars are squeezed into; and the curious fact that the garage has a close working relationship with a body shop that will happily pick up, repair and return your car, often all in the same day.



Rob Bennett for The Wall Street Journal
A conveyor belt moves a car on its pallet to a snug, automated parking slot at the garage on Baxter Street.

Finally, there's your paranoia that the employees have been using your vehicle as a crash pad because the radio is tuned to a station you've never listened to before, their eyes are all glassy when they turn over the keys and there's the faint but familiar smell of something herbaceous in the air.

For all these reasons, it was with something resembling stupefaction, which has frankly yet to wear off completely, that I parked my car at a garage on Baxter Street a few weeks back that offered none of the typical Manhattan garage-parking night sweats. And for one simple reason: There are no attendants.

You heard that right. The place is fully automated. How's that possible, you may ask? That was also my reaction when I drove my car into the place and onto a pallet where, after you answer a few simple questions at a computerized kiosk—such as, “Did you remember to remove the kids and pets?”—you are instructed to swipe your credit card and out spits a parking ticket. Then your beloved Maserati, Mercedes or, in my case, Subaru vanishes behind a roller-shutter door and descends into an automated parking vault.

In fact, there usually is an attendant on duty, but that's mostly to hold the hand of novices such as myself. “It's interesting to see the reactions on customers' faces when you explain the system to them,” said garage attendant Patrick Hamilton. “They don't believe a place like this exists.”

I suspect most people don't fully appreciate their emotional investment in their vehicle—or maybe it's to the loan they're still paying off—until they're forced to take the leap of faith of relinquishing it to another machine. It was those mixed and novel feelings that propelled me back to the garage, situated slightly north of Canal Street and west of Little Italy, on a recent afternoon to learn how the system actually worked.

Indeed, my goal was to go where no one has ever gone before, or at least not that often—accompanying the car as it sank into the subterranean parking vault. My traveling companion for the voyage (I didn't have the courage to undertake the journey alone, fearing I might get crushed in the jaws of the machine) was Ari Milstein, the director of North American operations for Automotion Parking Systems, which runs the garage.

Mr. Milstein told me that the Baxter Street location, which opened in 2007, is one of three the company operates in the city. The garage is able to hold 67 cars—in two decks, each deck two cars deep—in the same amount of space that a conventional garage would be able to contain only 24 cars, Mr. Milstein said, because there's no need for the lanes and spaces required for a human attendant to maneuver the vehicles.

Operating costs, including insurance, are also lower, he added, and not just because machines don't demand salaries and benefits. "We never take the keys," he explained. "Our liability is substantially cheaper."

The ride was nothing short of sweet. I'm not sure I entirely understand the nuts and bolts of the operation, no pun intended, but it goes something like this: You drive your car into the street-level transfer room, a plasma display informing you how to properly place your vehicle. Then lasers and motion detectors size it up to make sure the space is clear of individuals and that you're not leaving anything behind—such as baby Isabel or Fido the family Pekingese. Once that's been accomplished and your credit-card provider has certified that you're good for the storage, the vehicle is lowered on the pallet onto which you drove it, car and platform now inseparable for the duration of your visit.

At the conclusion of your descent into the clean, well-lighted parking vault, the car is spun 180 degrees so that it's in position to drive straight off the pallet and onto the street when you retrieve it. Simultaneously the vehicle and pallet are being moved horizontally and/or vertically on a conveyor belt, depending on where the closest available open parking space is situated on the storage rack, and a replacement pallet is rising to the garage entrance to serve the next customer. The process takes an average of two minutes from the time the car leaves street level until it's snugly stored in the rack. In essence, the whole thing is a giant vending machine.

If there's any downside to the operation for the lonely attendant on duty, it's that tips aren't what they would be in a conventional attendant-operated garage. "Off and on," is the way Mr. Hamilton described them. "They're not really too frequent."

On the positive side, repeat and monthly customers don't run the small but distinct risk of finding their vehicle vandalized if they forgot to tip the last time they used the car, or failed to donate generously enough to the employee Christmas fund. "Robots," Mr. Milstein explained, "don't have as strong feelings."

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