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Photo by: Parking Systems, Inc.
An automated system lifts cars into place in this parking garage in Hoboken, NJ.

Space Crunch

By RANDY DIAMOND rdiamond@tampatrib.com

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CLEARWATER -
Gerhard Haag thinks America is finally ready for the parking garage of the future.

The engineer-inventor and about a dozen investors have bet \$25 million over the past 11 years in the hopes that Americans will embrace automated garages.

So far, all Haag's Clearwater-based company, Robotic Parking Systems Inc., has to show for itself is a three-year-old automated garage in Hoboken, N.J.

"People didn't accept the electric lightbulb at first either," said Haag, Robotic's president.

Haag got interested in robotic parking while working as an engineer for a company that built similar facilities in his native Germany. He came to Clearwater in 1993 to start his company.



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Automated parking garages have been around for decades in Europe and Japan, where space is at an extreme premium.

Garages there don't have ramps or columns like traditional facilities. Instead, cars are stacked on rows of pallets like a giant erector set.

At the Hoboken facility, once a motorist drives the car onto a pallet and leaves the vehicle, computers and sensors take over. The pallet is moved up and into a parking space by a series of horizontal and vertical elevators or robots.

Because they are packed closely on top of each other, more vehicles can park in a small space.

However, in the United States, automated parking has been slow to catch on.

Haag said he's not discouraged and that confident investors have funded him for the long haul. "I always see the glass as half full. That is my nature."

In Hoboken, a mile-square, densely populated city across the Hudson River from New York, Haag found a place desperate for more parking but lacking space. Robotic's first garage opened in 2003. It houses 316 spaces on a 100- square-foot lot that sits on a residential street in the middle of town. A typical garage of the same size - four stories - could accommodate 80 to 100 cars, Haag said.

Facing Hurdles

The Hoboken garage is Robotic's only creation. That's not necessarily the company's fault, though, one parking industry expert said.

One pitfall is that building codes in many communities don't cover automated garages, leaving building officials without a playbook to determine how to approve such projects, said Dale Denda, a researcher with the Parking Market Research Co. in McLean, Va.

"They don't know if it's a garage, a warehouse or an amusement ride," Denda said.

Another problem could be perception. A potential market for robotic garages is high-rise apartments and condominiums with built-in parking. However, Denda said, the image of a mechanical parking apparatus may not fit in with the image developers want to convey: a personal touch of luxury that high-end buyers expect.

Haag said resistance to automated garages is changing quickly. Over the past few months, he said, he has finalized plans with developers for five robotic garages - one each in Tampa, Clearwater and Brooklyn, N.Y., and two in Fort Lauderdale.

In Tampa, Colin Breen, owner of the Four Green Fields tavern on the edge of downtown, bought the robotic parking concept in conjunction with the boutique hotel he plans to construct adjoining the tavern. The space-saving aspects of the garage convinced him because he has limited land to provide parking for hotel guests. Going robotic will allow him to construct a garage that's about 6,000 square feet instead of one that could be five times as big, he said.

That means instead of building a hotel atop a garage, as originally planned, the hotel can be built with a more attractive design at ground level because the robotic garage can be along side the building, Breen said.

Hoboken's Experience

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Haag said the success of the Hoboken garage is what has finally convinced real estate developers that his concept works. Using his patented technology, Haag said, he has built a better mousetrap than his predecessors in Europe and Japan. He said multiple elevators and backup motors, computers and electrical generators ensure the garage will always work.

However, John Corea, executive director of the Hoboken Parking Utility, said the garage malfunctioned more than a dozen times last winter as temperatures dropped and snow blanketed the ground. Motorists were left waiting for their cars up to 30 minutes in the best situations, Corea said, and up to eight hours in the worst. "I hate to throw robotic parking under a bus," Corea said, "but there are still some kinks to be worked out."

Under normal conditions, the retrieval time for a car is two to three minutes after a motorist punches a four-digit code and swipes an identification card, he said.

The situation last winter was most frustrating, Corea said, because he was powerless to override the system while Haag's technicians tried to figure out why the garage wasn't working.

"In a conventional garage, you can always manually lift the gate if everything else fails," he said.

Haag disputes Corea's account, saying the garage broke only twice last winter when sensors that propel the elevators were affected by the snow. New procedures put into place to deal with severe weather will avoid future problems at the Hoboken garage, he said.

One garage patron, Hoboken insurance agent Roger Muller, said he has not had any problems in the approximately six months he has used the facility.

"At first I was a little bit nervous about my car getting damaged, but I have been very satisfied with the garage," he said. "I used to drive around for 45 minutes looking for a space. It's worth the \$200 a month to rent a space."

Muller said the most he has waited for his car was five minutes.

Researcher Denda said robotic parking can cost more to build than conventional parking: \$18,000 per space on average, compared with \$14,000 for nonautomated parking.

Denda said the cost differences lessen, though, when other factors are taken into consideration, such as the eventual deterioration of a parking deck's concrete structure.

Haag said robotic parking will succeed because it is a good thing, eliminating such annoyances as walking around a garage searching for a lost car.

"Progress is determined by the increase in quality of life overall," he said.

Reporter Randy Diamond can be reached at (813) 259-8144.

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