

City's parking garages sprout like weeds, yet more are needed

DESPITE the last 20 years of green guilting, the automobile remains the king of the road in America and Connecticut. And despite the state's underwriting of rail transportation into New Haven (to the tune of \$8 million annually for the Shore Line East commuter line alone), the vast majority of people who commute use cars to get into our little New England city.



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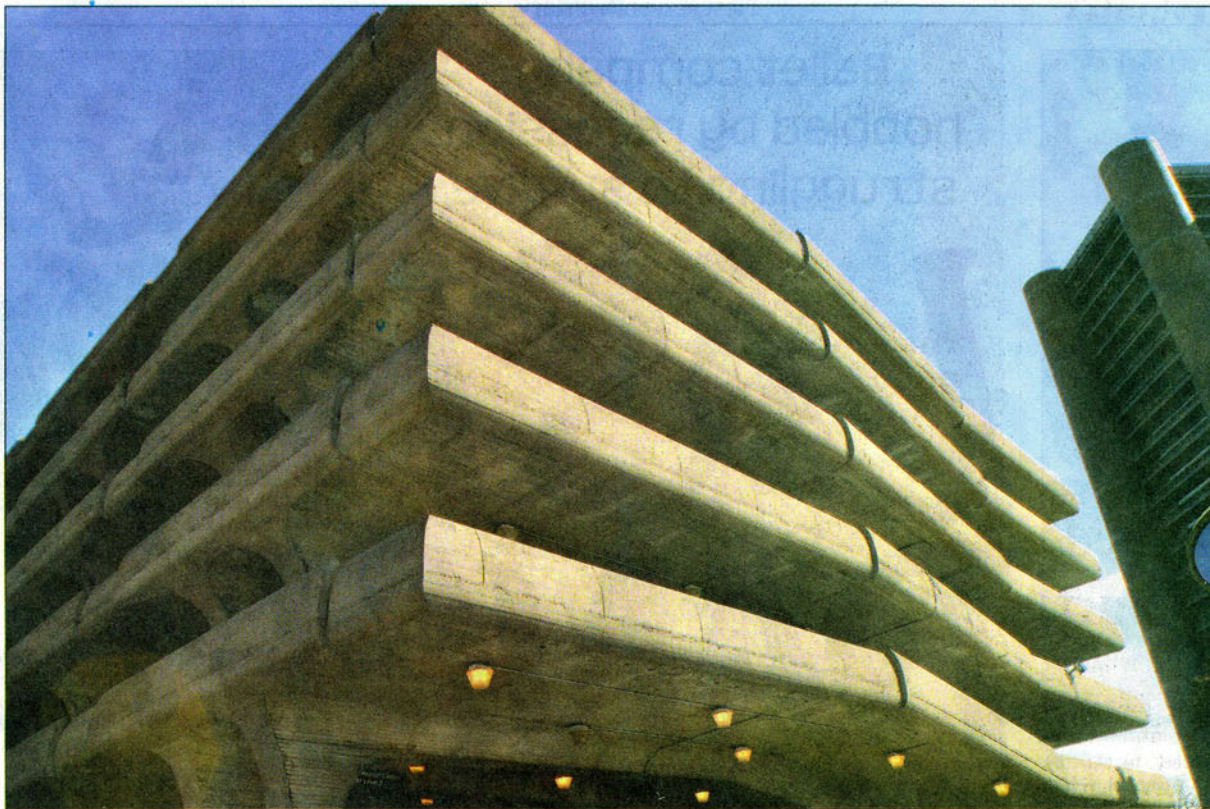
Larger, more densely packed cities like New York or Boston can afford to have the vast majority of parking garages built underground — their costs can literally be buried in the high rents caused by building so much on so little land.

New Haven can't afford to bury its cars. Additionally, much of downtown New Haven is built on land that has a boggy undertow, so there are also physical limitations to how low you can go when you need to store cars. If you can't hide them, these thousands and thousands of cars spawn an undeniable architectural presence: parking garages.

They are everywhere and there are not enough of them. New Haven's city guide lists 20 public parking garages. One of the major goals of New Haven's ongoing urban rethink is the provision of more and more off-street parking spaces, and while it costs too much to bury them, a surface parking lot can seldom, if ever, pay for itself given how few cars are accommodated.

The parking garage represents a natural evolution as cities graduated from extremely limited street parking to parking lots into the heavily engineered and exquisitely focused branch of architectural practice that is parking structure design, which is no less specialized than prison or hospital design.

It is easy to argue that the greatest New Haven symbol of the parking imperative was the New Haven Coliseum, demolished in January 2007. Architect Kevin Roche venerated the parked car



Arnold Gold/Register photos

ABOVE: The Temple Street Parking Garage in New Haven, designed by famed architect Paul Rudolph, is notable for its soft muscularity.

RIGHT: Yale-New Haven Hospital's new Lot E parking garage is an example of the stacked slab design's blank functionality.



on high. He cast the Coliseum's garage nine stories above the ground to form the lintel of a triumphal gate into our city. Cars followed sinuous ramps upward to form the roof over a medium-sized civic auditorium. Adding to that perversity was the use of an intentionally rusting steel superstructure as the medium by which this veneration was rendered. The Coliseum's functional expression was decapitated for much of its last decade on Earth as poor maintenance rendered the parking garage unusable. More cars now park in its naked footprint lot than could climb its spiral ramps in its later years.

Like pasta, parking garages have an identical purpose, but a myriad of realizations. Parking garages in New Haven have been woven into the fabric of its buildings as at 360 State Street apartment tower, soon to be finished; prominently laid up beside iconic buildings, the parking garage at Union Station; or quietly tucked behind others, the Crown Street Garage behind the Shubert theater; and the Audubon Court Garage, tucked behind the New Haven Foundation building; and even hidden behind a large dirt mound, the Pierson-Sage Garage on Whitney Avenue at Edwards Street. The parking garage for

the Omni Hotel is the rare subterranean, stealth version.

Sometimes, parking garages are intentionally rendered as great architecture. Paul Rudolph's Temple Street Parking Garage has exquisitely precise and carefully crafted concrete to allow a semi-sculptural state-

ment to accommodate a very prosaic need. Its soft muscularity stands in contrast to the very forgettable pre-cast concrete pieces-and-parts versions that surround it, including the Crown Street Garage. Sadly, Rudolph's work will soon be hidden from view by the new Gateway Community

College building, which includes yet another garage.

A great statement rendered somewhat silly by the failure of urban planning to control our future is the Air Rights Garage that was to span a buried Route 34 as it ripped through a modest neighborhood set up against Yale-New Haven Hospital. Just like the parking garage at Union Station, the floors of the garage have enormous spans facilitated by post-tensioned concrete, and just like Rudolph's parking garage, it utilizes cantilevers of concrete slab tray construction. Its raison d'être, that slicing highway, failed to happen, and the Air Rights Garage now presents the gaping maw of a man-made cavern to those zooming into the hospital side of town.

The Air Rights Garage's status as an aborted bridge over high velocity traffic is made even sadder by the uncoordinated patchwork quilt of new buildings that is now marching beyond it. This higgledy-piggledy of awkwardly expressive boxes are filling the void created by the previously vaporized neighborhood.

These new buildings have their sites staked out by quickie parking lots to ease the parking squeeze and now spawn their subordinate byproducts — more parking garages — one of which uses varieties of chain-link fence and wire mesh to eyewash the blank functionality of these stacked slabs of storage.

Perhaps, New Haven owes its full and growing palette of parking facilities to its extraordinarily effective ability to tow any inappropriately parked car at a moment's notice. When you can't park on the street, when parking lots become cost ineffective, parking garages pop up like weeds in an otherwise well-manicured garden. Unfortunately, we need those weeds, and that tells a lot more about us than about the architecture they employ.

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