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## News

# For Parking, Chinatown Building Enters the Matrix

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By Eddie Kim | 0 comments

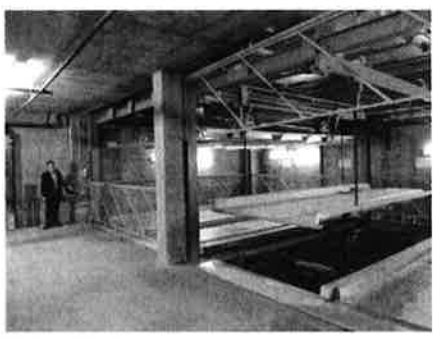


photo by Gary Leonard

DOWNTOWN LOS ANGELES - The Lotus Garden apartment building in Chinatown looks like a lot of new housing developments sprouting all across Los Angeles.

Standing seven stories tall, it features a clean, simple façade. The 60-unit project from developer Affirmed Housing Group is slated to open in December and will provide affordable housing for low-income families. Amenities at the building at 750 Yale St. will include a rooftop terrace and a computer lab.

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### For Parking, Chinatown Building Enters the Matrix

The Carmatrix system in Chinatown's upcoming Lotus Garden housing complex moves 17 cars vertically and horizontally, creating a space-saving, stacking effect.

But an underground feature may ultimately prove to be the most compelling feature in the \$18.5 million project: a semi-automated, puzzle-grid parking system, the first of its kind in Southern California (see video below).

The Carmatrix system, built by Denver, Colo.-based company Harding Steel, looks at first glance like an odd cross between a mechanic's car lift and something that might fetch large packages at a UPS distribution center. Bright orange, waist-high gates block the front of the contraption; inside, several levels of steel car lifts hang from thick roller chains.

Operating the machine is simple — after the gate rises, you drive the car into a stall and then use an external keypad to send the vehicle vertically and horizontally into an open space in the grid. Upon your return, a keypad command identifies where your car is and brings it whirring back down to ground level.

The system has 17 stalls. The garage also contains 46 traditional parking spaces.

Rubik's Cube-like platform parking systems are popular in cities such as Tokyo, where the hyper-efficient use of space is paramount. Yet there are only a few in California; the most similar puzzle-grid system is in Oakland.

Affirmed President and CEO James Silverwood said the developer didn't initially intend to use such a parking system. That changed during the planning process, he said, when architects realized that the property's placement against a steep hill made an entire conventional underground garage unrealistic.

"We recognized that the costs were going to be excessive for the large amount of excavation and shoring we would have to do for the parking structure," Silverwood

said.

That isn't to say that a platform-based parking system is a cheap solution: The Carmatrix at Lotus Garden cost \$17,000 per stall, adding up to



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a total of \$289,000. Each system is custom-designed for a development, and stalls normally cost between \$15,000 and \$20,000, according to Harding Steel National Project Manager Ryan Myers.

"It's not necessarily going to be cost-effective in many situations, especially if you have a flat property that doesn't require such tall excavation," Silverwood said. "Many developers also can be wary because it's a system they've never implemented."

Concerns about whether such parking machines are effective and safe extend to the city permitting process. Myers said that a lack of familiarity with the technology can lead to delays and other regulatory hiccups that discourage developers from investing in such systems.

"The approval process has been the biggest limiter to implementation," Myers said. "I think the toughest part is getting the city to understand how the systems work. Some are turned off by the machinery even though there are so many safety features."

Still, as development gets denser in communities such as Downtown Los Angeles, developers will have more reason to maximize parking efficiency and preserve revenue-generating retail or residential space. The trend toward semi-automated parking systems has begun to blossom in other parts of the country, Myers said, pointing to projects in Portland, Miami and New York.

"We've never seen growth in the market like we have in the last seven years," Myers said.

It's not just developers who are warming up to new parking options. Silverwood went on a scouting trip to Portland to see other semi-automated parking systems at work. In the process, he learned that many tenants get peace of mind from the fact that the systems provide better protection from break-ins and even door dings.

Some Lotus Garden residents will probably balk at the hulking steel parking machine and opt to use the building's regular stalls. But for others, the new system will be an intriguing taste of what the future might hold for parking all across the city.

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