

Making Parking Convenient for Women

by David Feehan

Dull, dark, dirty and dangerous – that is how one woman who was interviewed for this book described downtown parking structures. At the start of our investigation, we used Survey Monkey to contact more than 100 women who were leaders in their professional fields, and women whom we thought would have important viewpoints on downtowns.

The authors interviewed several women who are active in Women in Parking, an organization that describes itself as “the premier association dedicated to the advancement and achievement of professional women by providing networking, leadership, and career outreach opportunities and support of its members.”

Marcy Sparrow, the chairperson of Women in Parking, is a native of Pittsburgh, PA, a city that has its own parking challenges. Sparrow is in charge of sales and marketing for “Parking Today,” a major industry publication. After a career in restaurant and hospitality work, Sparrow moved into the parking profession.

Her approach to parking is simple. She always assumes that there is space available near her destination, but proximity is a major issue for her. Another strong consideration is weather. She wears heels, so she doesn’t want to walk very far.

Sparrow is not afraid of parking garages, a concern many women have, as long as the garage appears to be clean, safe and well-lit. She looks for garages with guidance systems that indicate which floors have open spaces.

One issue Women in Parking seeks to address is gender equality. Parking has long been a male-dominated field, and Sparrow and the organization she chairs seek to

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change that, making sure that women have an equal voice in managing and owning parking.

One parking expert who weighed in on how parking can be improved to make the experience more inviting for women is Mark Muglich, former president of ABM Parking Services, one of the largest parking management companies in the United States. According to Muglich, making parking convenient, safe and pleasant is essential to the development of downtown, particularly for women. Muglich says that very little crime is actually committed in parking garages, except on TV and in movies. But, that doesn't eliminate the perception that parking garages are crime ridden and unsafe.

The following factors are critical to making people feel safe in parking garages, he said:

Cleanliness – A facility with dust, dirt and debris everywhere sends the wrong impression to criminals and customers alike. Criminals see a dirty structure as a facility where no one is paying attention, and an opportunity to break into vehicles or commit assaults. Customers also see a dirty facility as a place where no one is paying attention and see it as unsafe.

Lighting – A brightly lit parking garage is inviting and feels safe. With the cost and efficiency of LED lighting there is no excuse for a poorly lit garage. Bright lighting at the entrance is critical. It's also important to brightly light corners and entrances to elevators and stairways. Muglich advises operators to see the Illuminating Engineering Society of North America publication RP-20-14, "Lighting for Parking Facilities," which describes parking structure lighting minimum requirements.

Bright painting – Let's face it, grey concrete is ugly and always looks like someone's basement. Painting columns and walls in attractive colors, not just white, makes a garage feel pleasant and safer. Painting the ceiling white will also help improve lighting levels. Parking managers should also pay attention to the choice of colors, as noted in Carol Becker's chapter in this book. There is a growing trend to add level theming and wayfinding elements, public art and other "parking garage interior environment enhancements" to enhance the "feel" of parking facilities and improve the patron's perception of safety and security.

Design for safety – Good design elements are critical to making people feel safe in parking garages. Designing for safety, sometimes called CPTED, or Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design, is addressed in the chapter by Ken Stapleton.

Good design requires openness. Parking facility designers should eliminate dead ends and dark corners. Traffic flow that brings moving vehicles to all areas of the garage makes everyone feel safer. This also applies to improving visibility around blind turns, having appropriate turn radii, glass-backed elevators, etc. Stairs, elevator lobbies and elevators should have glass walls. Parking garages should also have ground-level retail to “activate” the street level. No one wants to walk past a long blank wall of a parking garage.

However, CCTV and emergency alarms will help customers feel safer. They must be professionally monitored and provide fast response.

Facility maintenance – A well-maintained parking facility that is clean, freshly painted, with expansion joint in good repair, and no obvious structural or concrete condition issues (spalling, cracking, etc.) sends a strong signal that the facility is actively managed and attended to. A poorly maintained facility sends an even stronger signal but with the opposite message.

Activity and customer assistance amenities – Parking facilities that are designed to promote local activity (first floor retail, bike share stations, integrated transit or shuttle stops, security call stations, customer service representatives, public art, decorative plantings, etc.) promote greater pedestrian activity, which in turn creates a sense of use and safety.

New facilities should be designed as self-serve to maximize efficiency and speed in helping customers to exit promptly. Money saved on cashier labor should be used for customer service representatives.

The exterior of the garage should also be architecturally pleasing. When you approach the garage from the street by vehicle or as a pedestrian, if it looks well-designed the user’s initial impression will be a good one, making her feel safer.

Jane Jenkins, President of Downtown OKC in Oklahoma City, OK, and former chair of the International Downtown Association, describes downtown parking as one of the most annoying aspects of visiting downtown. She notes that signage is frequently lacking or confusing, and as a result, people arriving by cars often look for on-street parking in adjoining neighborhoods, causing problems for residents.

Jenkins also comments that the smell in some parking garages is a turn-off. Spilled food containers, discarded cigarette butts, and animal waste can contribute to an unsavory smell. The ground level of stair towers often ends up as a urinal and can result in a stomach-turning experience.

Tamara Zahn, former president of Downtown Indy, Inc., said that she believes that parking garages are designed around cars, not around people. This runs counter to a statement Dennis Burns, a nationally recognized parking expert, offered at a recent International Parking Institute conference. "Parking is not a car storage business," according to Burns. "It is a people business."

Kate Joncas, former deputy mayor of Seattle and former president of Downtown Seattle, Inc., recalls that she has experienced areas around parking garages that are loitering locations, especially when security is not visible. Women who are using pay-on-foot pay stations in parking lobbies, and are opening purses and wallets, can find this experience uncomfortable and downright threatening.

Attended surface lots, though not good uses of urban land, are much preferred by women. In Kalamazoo, MI, one surface lot attendant kept a small library of favorite novels in his booth, and loaned them to customers with whom he had become acquainted. Having a familiar face in the attendant's booth made customers, particularly women, feel much more comfortable.

Parking operators can make parking facilities much more inviting for women. Having on site a package of services – dead battery jumps, flat tire assistance, help for customers who accidentally lock their keys in their cars – gives any customer, but particularly women customers, a sense of comfort, knowing that if something goes wrong, someone is there to help.

Pathways from parking garages and lots are another area frequently neglected.

Lighting, landscaping and attention to walking surfaces can make a pathway inviting or downright frightening. Some cities have turned grimy, unlit alleys into attractive pedestrian walkways, with openings into shops, and occasional buskers performing music. Removal of snow and ice in cold-weather cities is another service parking operators should maintain regularly.

Just finding a place to park can be a daunting task for anyone. Some cities do a good job of signage, guiding people to public parking. Some parking authorities and downtown organizations offer websites that highlight parking facilities, and give useful information such as location of entrances, prices and hours of operation.

The design of the downtown parking experience is crucial to attracting women, because so often parking is the first and last experience a woman will have with the downtown business district.

David Feehan is a world-recognized expert in downtown revitalization. For more than 40 years, Feehan has provided leadership and management to successful downtown and business district organizations, founded and directed a technical assistance center for community development organizations and a public policy organization, and taught at two universities. He is a frequent speaker at conferences and meetings, and has provided consulting services to many government agencies, organizations and associations. He has served on numerous boards of directors, and has chaired the boards of the International Downtown Association and other organizations. As the chief executive of three downtown organizations, Feehan managed major real estate and infrastructure projects, successful business attraction and retention programs, and an award-winning parking system. As a consultant, Feehan has helped downtown and business district organizations as well as units of government develop visions and missions, strategic plans, innovative programs and transformational processes. As an author and professor, he co-edited and wrote the most recognized textbook on downtown management, "Making Business Districts Work," and is a frequent writer for journals and trade publications.