

The Art of Parking

It works for candy, so why not for cars? A Boston architect proposes a Pez-like dispenser to solve the city's parking woes.

By Steven Rosenberg | March 21, 2004

Keith Moskow admits there are times when the craft he has chosen becomes mundane. That's why every year the Boston architect assembles his staff for a series of brainstorming sessions. They don't purposely set out to design objects that will never be built, though lately Moskow and his team have been on a roll. Since 1999, they have won three Unbuilt Architecture Design Awards from the Boston Society of Architects.

The Zip Tower, which resembles a giant Pez dispenser, is Moskow's latest award-winning entry, but this one seems to have real, albeit humorous, potential. The proposed 51-foot-high mechanical parking garage would hold seven cars and combine old technology - hydraulic cranes that would raise and lower cars - with Zipcar, the Internet-driven car-sharing service that allows people to rent by the hour or day in Boston and other East Coast cities. "Delightful and provocative, this is a great visual presentation of something we might expect to see someday soon," the society's team of judges wrote after viewing the Zip Tower, which has a diminutive 11-by-36-foot footprint and could conceivably serve as a parking garage for ordinary drivers, in addition to "Zipsters," as members are known.

Moskow, who is 44 and looks like a young John Kerry with brown hair, acknowledges that developers and even the folks at Zipcar in Cambridge have not exactly been clamoring to build his tower. With 25 ongoing projects, he also admits that he's been too busy to pitch the tower around town. But, with parking spaces at a premium, he is confident a version of the car dispenser will eventually be built. "It's all automated," he says. "People have gone to the moon - this is simple stuff."

At Zipcar's corporate office, executives list priorities such as increasing membership and business-to-business relationships over construction of a bizarre parking garage. Since its start-up in 2000, Zipcar has raised \$10 million but has yet to make a profit. This year, it hopes to break even for the first time. To sign up, customers need a valid driver's license, a credit card, and access to the Internet. Membership is \$75 a year, and cars can be rented for \$8.50 to \$12.50 an hour, with mileage and gas included. Once online, it takes about two minutes to rent a car, with the information transmitted by a wireless network to a chip inside the car. When Zipsters arrive at the rental (cars are parked at self-service locations throughout the city), they wave their membership card over the windshield, and the doors unlock. The car key is tethered to a wire next to the ignition.

Like Moskow, Zipcar's chief operating officer, Scott Griffith, believes in the Zip Tower. He's just not sure who might want to build it - with its projected cost of about \$200,000. "I'm not out there trying to do this proactively," he says of the tower. "A project like this, you know, is much more visionary in nature, and it's one that you sort of do after you get your house in order, so to speak."

Moskow, a Zipster for about two years, rents from a Post Office Square location not far from his downtown office. On a late winter day, he swiped his Zipcard over a Volkswagen Jetta and drove to Waltham, with the radio off, thinking about the three buildings he's designing there and chatting with a passenger. With his right hand on the steering wheel, his left hand was free to gesture as he talked about the Big Dig and his newest design, "the urban hookah," which allows smokers to lean against heated streetlight poles and have their smoke sucked up by air-purifying canopies.

He drove 41 miles and stopped to look at the project site before heading over to Waltham's City Hall and the city's Conservation Commission to buy site plans. His Ziptrip was over in two hours, and Moskow was unmoved by the experience as he walked away from the Jetta. "I don't use it as a fashion statement," he said. "I just need it for wheels." ■