

# ‘Design Downtown for Women—Men Will Follow’

By David M. Feehan

**D**ARK, DIRTY, DULL, AND DANGEROUS. That is how one woman described parking garages in her downtown. None of us in the parking industry would like to have more than half of our customers saying things like that about the facilities we manage. Yet most parking professionals are not fully aware of how women perceive not only parking in downtowns, but downtowns in general. And the reason is deceptively simple: While women account for more than 80 percent of retail, residential, and healthcare decisions, and today control more than half of the private wealth in the US, they are woefully underrepresented in the professions that design the downtown experience—architecture, urban planning, real estate development, engineering, and related fields.

The new book I co-wrote and edited, “Design Downtown for Women—Men Will Follow,” is a wake-up call for all of us who design and manage what for many is a woman’s first and last downtown experience—parking. The authors are mostly women who will change the way you think about what you do, and how you can appeal to your most important customer. Part of the book is excerpted here.

## Marking Parking Convenient for Women

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 SurveyMonkey 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, a city that has its own parking challenges.

Her approach to parking is simple. She always assumes that there is space available near her desti-

nation, 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.

Marcy 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 Marcy and the organization she chairs seek to change that, making sure that women have an equal voice in managing and owning parking.

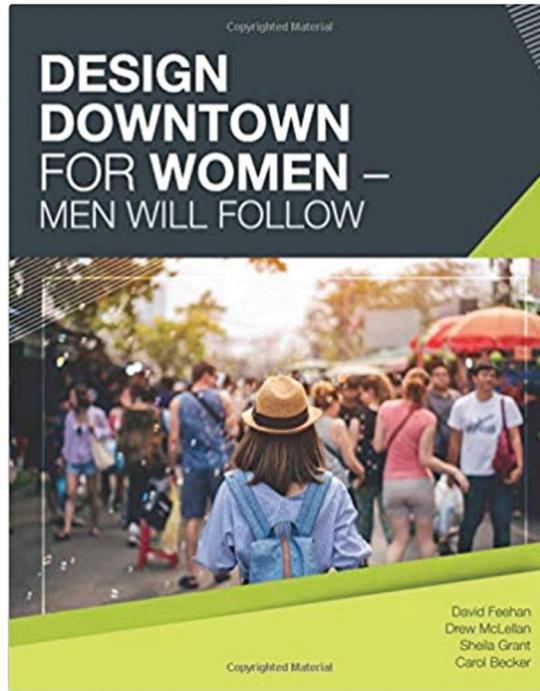
One parking expert who weighed in on how parking can be improved to make the experience more inviting for women is Mark Muglich, former president of ABM Parking Services, one of the largest parking management companies in the U.S.

According to Mark, making parking convenient, safe, and pleasant is essential to the development of downtown, particularly for women. Muglich describes his advice to parking operators below.

## Muglich’s Advice

Very little crime is actually committed in parking garages, except on TV and in movies, according to Muglich. 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:



■ **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," 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 elsewhere 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 elsewhere 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.

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 (clean, freshly painted, expansion joint in good repair, 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 your initial impression will be a good one, making you feel safer.

Jane Jenkins, president of Downtown OKC in Oklahoma City, 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

*Very little crime is actually committed in parking garages, except on TV and in movies, according to Muglich. But, that doesn't eliminate the perception that parking garages are crime ridden and unsafe.*

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 & Mobility 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, 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 on-line websites that highlight parking facilities, and give useful information such as location of entrances, prices, and hours of operation.

In summary, 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 M. FEEHAN** is president of Civitas Consulting, LLC. He can be reached at [dadpsych@mac.com](mailto:dadpsych@mac.com). "Design Downtown for Women—Men Will Follow" is available at [amazon.com](http://amazon.com).