

Whole New Level For Car Garage

Helms Bakery owner looks to automated facility to lift shopping at retail complex. Friday, November 11, 2016

Culver City's 85-year-old Helms Bakery complex, which houses H.D. Buttercup and Father's Office among a number of other retailers, designers, and upscale restaurants, is stepping into the future.

As part of an effort to expand parking for a forecasted growth in visitors, owner Walter N. Marks Inc. has constructed a fully automated 200-car parking garage on the east end of the Helms campus. The company that built it, AutoParkit Inc. of Van Nuys, claims it is the largest such structure in the western United States in terms of how many cars it can hold.

The structure's mechanics work much like a giant vending machine: Once a patron drives a car into one of the structure's two parking bays, a lift automatically hoists and stores the vehicle on one of the garage's four decks. When ready to leave, the owner simply touches the car's key fob to an electronic pad and the machine fetches the vehicle within 60 seconds. Trial runs of the system began last week.

Wally Marks, president of Walter N. Marks, said the 45-foot-tall automated garage can squeeze in 70 more cars into a physical space that would only accommodate 130 in a traditional structure.

"I think this is a way to get more cars in the same envelope," he said. "I would not build a conventional parking structure again."

Marks said he is anticipating a greater need for parking once the new version of Helms Bakery, a 12,000-square-foot eatery headed by pastry chef Sherry Yard, finally opens. The bakery has been under construction since last year. In order to allow customers easier access to the site's surface lot, employees of tenant businesses at the campus will use the robotic garage.

Automated parking structures are a growing trend in Los Angeles, said Christopher Allen, chief executive of AutoParkit, the engineering firm that built the Helms Bakery structure. His company has signed 40 contracts for projects across the United States and he anticipates completing about a dozen structures in Los Angeles by the end of next year.

AutoParkit built L.A.'s first automated parking structure at an apartment building in Sherman Oaks in 2013, and he said the smooth operation of that facility helped the city become comfortable with such a garage's expanded construction.

"The success of that system was something the city could point to and say there are successful systems out there," Allen said, noting it's now easier to get approval for such structures.

But some structures still have kinks that need to be worked out.

For example, former West Hollywood City Councilman Steve Martin wrote an October article for WeHoville detailing a list of complaints about the city's \$18 million, 200-car automated garage, noting that it can't accommodate low-slung cars such as Mini Coopers and Corvettes or taller SUVs. Also, Martin said, visitors have been forced to wait as long as 20 minutes for the system to return a vehicle.

The Helms Bakery facility promises better performance, said Marks, though he acknowledged the more than \$11 million structure came at a higher cost than he expected and took longer to build.

“Definitely the first one through the wall is the bloodiest.” he said. “There was a learning curve and I was game for that.”