

Dublin parking garage a hectic distraction

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(07-15) 20:26 PDT -- It takes a lot to make a building stand out amid the boxy sprawl along Interstate 580 in eastern Alameda County, but BART's new parking garage in East Dublin does just that.

And not in a good way.

The problem isn't the scale of the 1,513-space behemoth. It's the brake-screaming ineptness of the design - complete with turret-like attachments that stick out from the concrete structure with the grace of oversize Legos.

But if the design would embarrass a miniature golf course, the BART garage has value as a cautionary tale. Like it or not, parking garages are prominent features of the landscape. Their architecture should exploit this, rather than try to make them go away.

"Garages need to contribute to their neighborhood and respond to their context, but that doesn't mean faking it by pretending they're something else," says Steve Weindel of the architectural firm Gensler in San Francisco. "When they're stand-alone buildings, there's an opportunity to treat them like a piece of art, a sculpture."

Gensler designed an 810-car garage now being built alongside Interstate 280 in San Francisco's Mission Bay district. The structure will be 61 feet tall, 380 feet long and 120 feet wide. The long side faces the freeway on the west.

Designed for speed

Rather than disguise the dimensions - think an elongated billboard - Gensler's design for Alexandria Real Estate plays to the freeway by flashing a taut screen of stainless steel that pulls tight across the structure. During the day, it's designed to shimmer; at night, it will be lit to appear like a glowing cloak.

The approach is smart, taking advantage of the kinetic perspective that comes from cars slicing past at high speeds.

"We selected a material that creates a surface that will catch your eye and be dynamic," Weindel says. "The fact you're driving by at 60 miles an hour makes a huge difference." Compare this with the East Dublin garage near the Dublin/Pleasanton BART Station and the transit agency's architect, the

Alameda office of International Parking Design Inc.

The basics are blunt, seven levels of concrete slabs facing I-580. The design? A hectic distraction, starting with a stubby square tower at the corner near the station entry. "People can use it as a beacon from any location," says IPD's chief executive officer, Dilip Nandwana.

The tower isn't the only bit of costuming: Four window-frame-like boxes pop out toward the freeway, two levels high and the width of a structural bay, each set at varying heights.

There's a hint of turrets on a castle, yet the colors are vaguely Southwestern. Adding to the confusion, at ground level beneath each turret is a squared-off arch formed by concrete blocks.

All about distraction

"We try to use external design treatments that draw the eye away from the height and size," Nandwana says. "Most cities in Northern California don't want to see a parking garage as a parking garage. They want it to look like some other kind of building."

Communities can't be blamed for not wanting the monolithic garages of old - heavy and grim. This one, though, doesn't look like much of anything - certainly not the station next door with its graceful metal canopy. Those "external design treatments" are nothing more than clutter.

Fortunately for the Bay Area, other garages of recent vintage show that a container for parked cars can look sharp and fit in.

Several are the work of architects of WRNS Studio, a San Francisco firm founded in 2005. Two standouts are in Petaluma and Sunnyvale done when the architects were at Chong Partners. Sunnyvale makes room for 400 cars at the South Bay city's Caltrain station in a brick-clad structure beneath a crisply detailed clock-tower. The 515-car Petaluma garage faces the Sonoma County city's Theatre District with a geometric facade of blue ceramic tiles.

A skeptic would say it's easier to put 500 spaces in the heart of an established city than 1,500 spaces in a fast-growing suburb. But a WRNS garage being built in Mission Bay makes the same confident impression, and it will contain 1,420 spaces on seven levels.

Redwoods in the city

On the side facing South Street, which will connect Third Street to the bay, the garage will be clad in deep ripples of white plaster, thick waves intended to emphasize shadows and light. But the north and east facades will face small parks - so the plaster will give way to a perforated screen of soft green aluminum. Up close, the perforations will seem random; from afar, they'll look like abstract ghosts of redwood trees.

"There's so much inherent opportunity in a parking garage ... you can do beautiful things through

proportion, materials and scale," says WRNS' Sam Nunes. "When I see the ones that are really detrimental to their setting, it's because they're trying to be something they're not."

In a perfect world, there would be no parking garages. We would walk to the store and take a bus to work; when we did use our car, there would be an empty curbside space waiting outside our destination.

In the meantime, life is what it is. Parking garages are part of the public infrastructure, just like power stations or libraries. Bad architecture won't make them go away. Good architecture can turn them into roadside attractions - the kind that make you smile, not wince.

Guidelines for graceful garages

A new parking garage is coming to your community, and you don't want it to be an eyesore? Keep these tips in mind.

Stick to the basics. A garage by its nature is a stocky box that lacks a roof or sealed windows. Trying to make it look homey or cute is futile: "The challenge of parking structures is that they aren't generally what we think of in a typical building," says Michelle Wendler of Watry Design, a Redwood City firm that specializes in garages. The flip side? "You can sculpt the building, make it into an object."

Know the budget. At least two-thirds of the cost of a garage is poured into the concrete. An additional 20 percent goes to the lighting and mechanical systems. That leaves maybe 10 percent for the exterior - limiting what an architect can do in terms of cover-ups.

Exploit the setting. If the garage is on a busy downtown block, push for the addition of enticing retail space. If it's next to a freeway or busy artery, let architects be bolder and more fluid.

An in-between location? Do both. That's how the WRNS architects handled a garage in Claremont (Los Angeles County), next to a commuter train stop. The side facing the village has wood trim and glassy storefronts; the side facing the tracks is adorned with what could be giant flowing reels of metallic tape.

Make room for frills. In the WRNS garage in Mission Bay, the stylish aluminum screen is being manufactured by A. Zahner Co., the firm that did the blue-steel cladding of the Contemporary Jewish Museum. But because WRNS figured in the extra cost from the start, the overall budget is in line with client expectations.

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