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MIXED-USE DREAMS

**An architectural competition
focuses on beautiful parking,
with amazing results.**



By Per Linde

Frank Lloyd Wright designed gorgeous houses. Frank Gehry dreamed up amazing concert halls and museums. An architect known for incredible parking garages? They're few and far between, but an architectural competition that challenged participants to design just that might have found the industry's future stars.

Combo Competitions, launched in 2013, organizes international ideas competitions mainly for architects, although designers of any other field are welcome. Participants are encouraged to focus on ideas, as projects are judged as much by their underlying concepts as by their aesthetics.

A frequent competition participant, I grew tired of the similarities between design competitions and wanting to bring something new to that world, decided to do so by founding a brand new competition website. Combo Competitions was born, and simply put, the main driver is to promote proposals where everything comes together to form a whole larger than the sum of its parts.

With today's possibilities to create amazing renderings and images, it is easy for participants to invest most of their effort into a final image to seduce the jury, giving less priority to the thinking behind the project.

To shift emphasis back toward well-advised concepts, without taking away from the importance of appearance and presentation, Combo Competitions introduces an additional element to the competitions: the briefs always ask for something extra in addition to the main requirements. Whether this is another structure, a new function tied to the main one, or something completely different, is up to the competitor to decide, as long as it adds value to the project. This presents an opportunity to push the participants' creativity even further, while urging the judges to give all aspects of a proposal equal consideration.

When considering options for the organization's second competition, the idea of a parking garage quickly became a major contender. Equally ubiquitous and neglected from a design standpoint, there is a major discrepancy between the role it plays and the credit it gets. The parking garage could be seen, for lack of a better reference, as the stepchild of the urban fabric. And while warehouses (the other traditional stepchild) are mostly located in desolate industrial areas, parking garages by their very nature have to be located where people are.

There is a huge reliance on vehicular transport (of either people or goods), but the link between the two is often forgotten. As a result, anything relating to traffic is considered in a perspective of maintaining, rather than improving. Cheaper is better.

Of course, this is true not least for structures such as public parking garages, which are still sometimes seen as

a necessary evil. In architecture, adding large structures on smaller budgets very often equals negligent design, which, in turn, becomes an eyesore for the general public. Sometimes the thing that receives the least interest really deserves the most attention.

The competition that ended up being called Poor But Beautiful wanted to look for solutions to this problem. How can a parking garage be integrated with the surrounding streetscape and serve a greater purpose for all those not using it to accommodate their car? How can a garage be a welcome addition to an area instead of a large chunk of concrete to be passed as quickly as possible? Rather than designing yet another concert hall or library—the buildings architects often dream of—the main challenge here was to turn something frequently neglected into something celebrated.

The Competition

The brief read as follows:

GOAL: The challenge of the competition is to design a multi-story parking garage in the Hudson Yards Redevelopment Area in Manhattan, New York City. The structure should house at least 250 parking spaces.

TWIST: In addition to car parking, the design should also integrate a secondary function. This can be virtually anything, from a bowling alley to a house for abandoned dogs, but it should be clear how and why it contributes to the overall design and/or the surrounding area.

FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS: Being a parking garage, participants are asked to strive for excellence in design and function, without relying entirely on potentially expensive materials and solutions. The design should benefit everyone—from a fictional client to the general public—via the actual user.

The site was located on Manhattan, in the Hudson Yards Redevelopment Area. With redevelopment already going on, it conveniently tied the brief together with a plausible location.

Around 70 submissions were submitted from around the world, with a slight prevalence of entries from the U.S. Proposals ranged from basic to futuristic and modest to outlandish. The jury finally agreed on three winners along with three honorable mentions, each ingenious in its own way.

Parking Tower

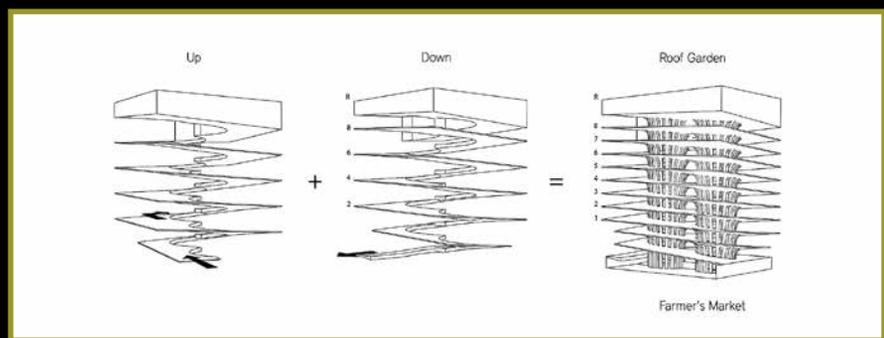
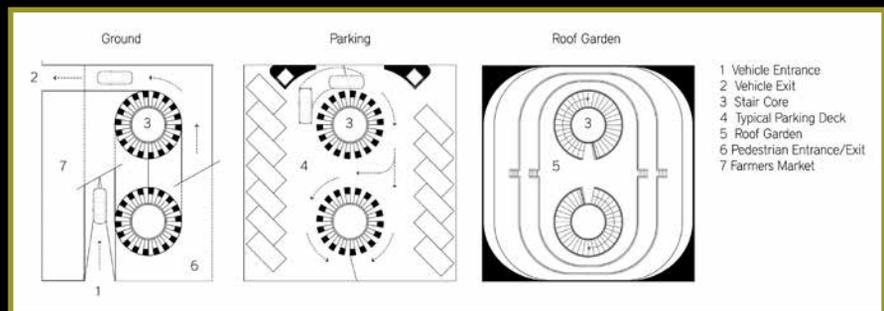
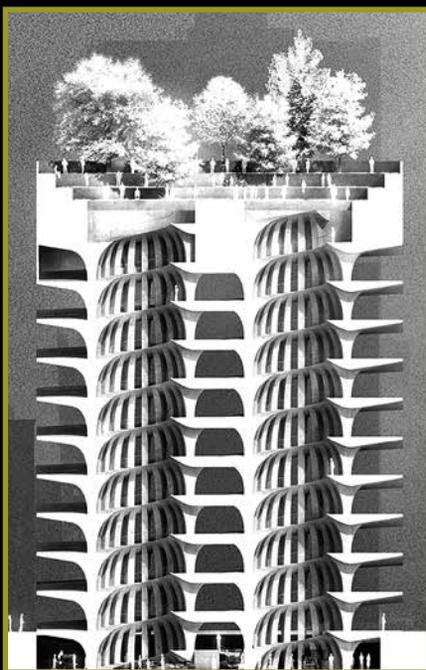
THE WINNING SUBMISSION, Parking Tower by Jonathan Benner and John Bassett, offered a secondary function in the form of a roof garden and farmers market. However, it was the approach to design the entire structure to allow for a sense of grandeur during parking that really won the jury over. It clearly showed that looking back is sometimes the way forward. Rather than relying on gadgets or social interaction, focus lies on simply offering an elegant transition between two modes of transport. In earlier times, structures such as this were devoted to railway travel and created grand gateways for arriving into cities.

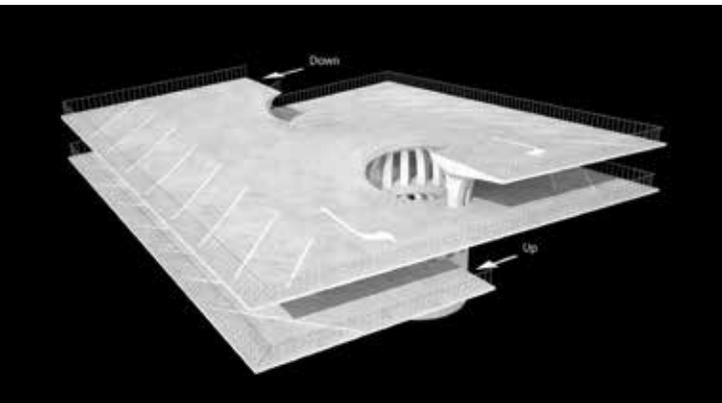
From the proposal: “Like many American cities at the turn of the century, some of New York City’s most iconic monuments of that time were designed as gateways to the city: the Brooklyn Bridge, Pennsylvania Station, Grand Central Station. A visitor passing through each of these corridors would immediately be struck by a sense of awe at having arrived in spaces as soaring and grand as these were, either in the great hall of Grand Central or walking beneath the towering Gothic arches on the Brooklyn Bridge boardwalk. In many cases, the scale of some of these spaces was exaggerated to imbue them with a quality of splendor that was befitting a metropolis as cosmopolitan and symbolic of progress as Manhattan was at the turn of the century.

“Respecting the tradition of some of these structures, we envision a parking garage that could act as a similar type of gateway that would elevate the pedestrian

experience from car to street level. Once through the thick colonnade, the pedestrian is separated from the vehicular traffic and finds him/herself in a completely open and voluminous stair open to the sky above. We intended this space to be as generous and grand as possible to counter the predominant parking garage layout which isolates the stair core in a tight, dark corner of the garage. In this way, the path down or up is as exalted as the gateway spaces of the turn of the last century.

“The play between the slender floor slabs and the heavy top is beautifully designed and the visualizations show a very believable structure—engineering and architecture melt together. Its overall appeal is strengthened by the fact that it does not rely on technological feats like car elevators—keeping all fictional running costs to a minimum. Presentation-wise everything is very well tied together and helps conveying a feeling of grandeur.”





Park Your Soul in Heaven

THE SECOND PLACE WINNER, *Park your Soul in Heaven* by Pedro Martins, Ana Santos, and Miguel Pereira, bases its concept on the fact that many large cities no longer have room for cemeteries for their citizens.

From the proposal: “There are four indisputable facts creating a quandary about the disposition of human remains: a rapidly increasing population, urbanization, a finite amount of land, and the certainty of death.

“Every year, globally, more people migrate to cities and live in increasingly close quarters, which creates a premium on finite land. This premium on real estate often makes the use of land for the interment of the dead inefficient, if not wasteful,” says Christopher Coutts in ‘A Lifetime after the Baby Boom, a Burial Boom,’ *The New York Times*, October 2013.

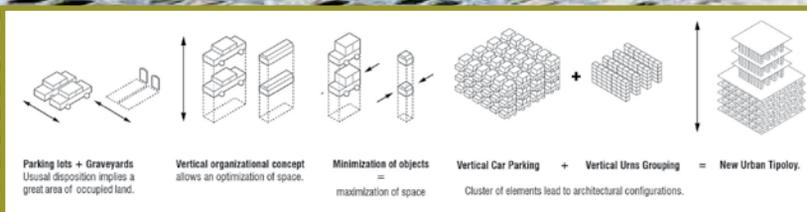
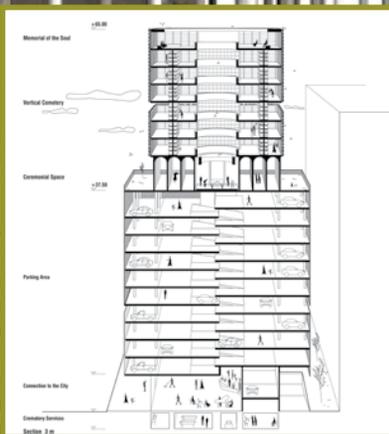
“Like it is unconceivable to imagine a city without cars, it should also be unimaginable to conceive a city without its dead.

“A big part of us was already born in the city and, as referred in the article, will most certainly die here.

“Aren’t we allowed to linger in the city, where we lived our lives, forever?”

“If there isn’t enough space for both the living and the dead and their cars, then an efficient metropolitan solution should be proposed. The concept featured establishes the relation of the proportion of soil occupied by cars and graves (and cemeteries) and concludes that a vertical growth could be a beginning.

“This is a more indirect comment to the use of cars today—it relates to cars and urbanization on a much larger scale, and over a longer timeframe by drawing on the notion that cars have, by being a crucial part of how modern cities are shaped, forced cemeteries out of cities. Additionally, it makes an interesting point in times when traditional methods of burial and memorial, using vast areas of land, are coming to an end as the world population (and numbers of deceased) continues to expand: a new vision for commemorating our dead is required. *Park Your Soul in Heaven* helps to place this in a context that prevents it from coming across as morbid and sets up a dialogue about dealing with death in the future. While the two programs are physically separated from each other, they are tied together not only by their theoretical relation, but also through their uncluttered and contained design, where the columbarium distinguishes itself with a softer, warmer feel.”



The Community Actuator

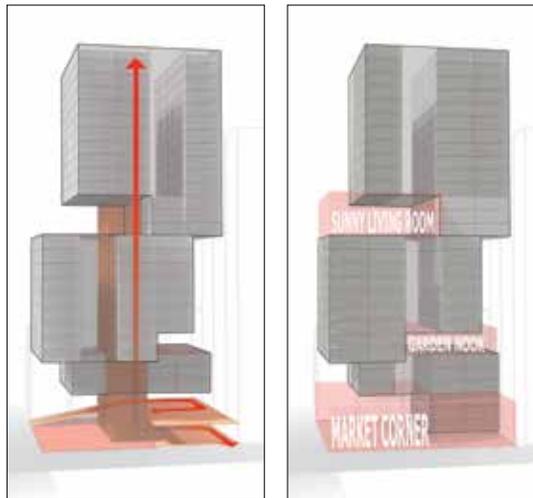
THE THIRD PRIZE WINNER, The Community Actuator[®] by Manson Fung, revolves around a more down-to-earth social aspect, the local area and day-to-day life, providing room for small businesses, communal gardens, and the like. A refreshing touch here is that the symbiosis between cars and people that is offered is actually dictated by the people's needs, rather than an interest to maximize parking spots, which enriches both parties.

From the proposal: "Community Actuator reconceptualizes the parking structure from a private singular enterprise to a multivalent public service provider. By using a programmable robotic parking system, the Community Actuator not only efficiently stores cars for individuals, but also contains much-needed urban public spaces that are activated by the infrastructure stored within the system. Community Actuator is a new way to recast an urban infrastructure as a flexible and adaptable purveyor for public services.

"The approach of treating all spaces in the same manner would lead to the composition of the building changing over time—based on how the tenants decide to utilize the compartments—and by doing so puts a

finger on the possibilities/issues with the vast areas (in central New York City) that would become available if the car gave way to other uses."

Looking back, there were a lot of very interesting ideas about parking, allowing for a socially sustainable Manhattan where cars and people could continue to coexist. But what made the winning entry stand out was the fact that it embraced the car rather than hiding it behind a secondary function. It makes a lot of sense: regardless of its negative impact on the environment, the automobile will not be disappearing from our cities in the foreseeable future. And because it plays such an important part in everyday life, why not celebrate it? This is exactly what a great parking garage should do. P



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