

An Idea as Revolutionary as the Automobile



W. Allen Morris
Chairman & CEO
The Allen Morris
Company

Fasten your seatbelts.

Our cities are undergoing a quiet yet dramatic transformation as revolutionary as the automobile. In fact, privately-owned the automobile is quickly taking a back seat to new modes of transportation. Cities that don't make the adjustment will soon lose their competitive edge and be left in the dust of those that do.

This may come as a surprise to those of us still addicted to our cars or living in areas where driving is still the norm. South Florida urban living is far from the imminently walkable cities of New York, Boston and Chicago with their well-planned public transit, although areas like Brickell, South Beach, and downtown Miami are paving the way for a new era with millennials leading the charge.

As these areas transform into live-work-dine-learn-play destinations, everything becomes a short walk away. And just as their counterparts in the larger cities put off buying a car, millennials and young professionals here are anxious to ditch the exorbitant cost of driving,

owning and parking their cars. Those who own cars are only taking them from their parking spaces for special occasions because they live in a condominium tower near their office and a few short blocks from their grocery store, their night school classes and their favorite bistro. With an eye to the future, Miami's new building codes (Miami 21) discourage the development of new parking garages.

As Coral Gables, Doral and even the Dadeland area develop more in-town apartments and condominiums, these communities are also converting into more convenient places to walk to work and leave cars at home. What makes this happen is not more high-rise buildings, but the right mix of high-rise buildings bringing residences close to retailers, close to restaurants and close to office jobs. The importance of the change to city planning is in how people are discovering that walking, "Ubering" and rapid transit are finally a real and attractive alternative to owning a set of wheels.

The beauty of this transformation is that we will see a world with more empty parking spaces, less traffic and more social interaction on the sidewalks and pedestrian plazas of our cities. Traffic engineers have estimated that 30% of the traffic in our downtowns is what's called nuisance traffic created by people circling the city, often driving a mile, just looking for a parking space. The next generation of parking garages for those who keep their cars will incorporate "smart parking" with directional signage. Smart parking combines the use of shared parking for different uses at different times of the day and the night, and the information where these empty parking spaces are.

Smart Parking Comes of Age



Parking garage spaces converted into student housing at Savannah School of Art and Design(SCAD)* Image via Savannah College of Art and Design / scadpad.com

One example is that apartments use parking at night when people come home from work and those same spaces are vacated by the office workers who have left to go home. Also, office parking spaces are left unused and available during peak restaurant and theater evening hours and during peak weekend retail demand on Saturday afternoon. These same spaces can be used twice or more at different times of the day, which is far more efficient and avoids unnecessary construction, requires a lower carbon footprint, and lower carbon emissions resulting in cleaner air.

We have proposed a smart parking system for the City of Coral Gables which, combined with electronic signage, computer management and a parking reservation App, will reduce nuisance traffic by 50%, by taking cars off the street and clearing the streets downtown. This can be done in all of our downtowns.

I was recently reviewing a parking study done for the City of Coral Gables in 2013 and realized that it was out of date because Uber had not come to Miami until 2014! Just last month Uber announced the deployment of 100 autonomous cars (with no needed drivers), in Pittsburgh, later to be deployed throughout the country. This will further decrease the demand and need for parking garages and reduce the traffic of those looking for parking spaces. In our development designs we are planning our garages to be converted for alternative uses in the future when parking demand drops dramatically and our cities become more walkable cities.

More and more, “walkability” scores are being looked to as the barometers of urban vitality and quality of life. Forward-thinking cities are re-evaluating outdated zoning and building codes that have filled their business corridors with unimaginative and excessively sized parking garages, sterile buildings, empty sidewalks and gridlocked streets. In Atlanta recently, students at the Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD) designed a conversion of a parking garage into micro apartments for student housing, which has been very successful. This is the kind of adventurous spirit that lures in the millennials who want to make their home in a vibrant oasis of social interaction. For small and mid-sized cities to compete with the New Yorks, Chicago’s and Boston’s of the world, it takes a new way of looking at the city plan and making a few adjustments. Making downtowns walkable is the essential fix for a community hoping to remain relevant. The competition for the brightest and best among our young workforce who want the benefit of a car-free lifestyle has never been more profound. In our new developments we have already designed some parking garage floors with the intention of future conversion into office space and other uses.

It’s a changing world and I think a lot of those changes are for the better, both for us and for the environment. It’s now time to plan ahead for the walkable cities of the future.