

From parkade to daycare ^[1]

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Source: The Globe and Mail

Format: Article

Publication Date: 1 Jun 2021

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

The rooftop of the large city-owned parkade in Vancouver's historic Gastown has some spectacular views: Burrard Inlet and the North Shore mountains on one side; the glassy towers of the downtown on the other.

It's a view that the families of 74 children will get to see regularly in the coming weeks, as two new child-care centres open on that rooftop.

"People are definitely excited about this. We already have a fairly lengthy waitlist," said the YWCA's child-care co-ordinator Cathy Poole.

The two centres, which can accommodate 37 children each, will have one more advantage – even though they're in the heart of a dense, built-up city, the centres will have big outdoor play spaces.

EasyPark, a city-affiliated agency that manages 130 parking lots with more than 10,000 spaces, decided that using some of its property for something besides parking would be a smart move, financially and socially.

"Our philosophy is that we want to support the community and be innovative," says EasyPark client services manager Ravinder Bains.

Besides the daycares, EasyPark has leased out or provided space in recent years to a gardening business, a company specializing in organic solutions for bedbugs, a storage company and for portable washroom trailers for homeless people living downtown.

Finding alternative uses for space is part of a growing trend for parking lots, which are often located in high-rise, dense and expensive areas. Parking-lot managers, city planners, amateur urbanists and mall owners are looking at ways to reuse parking lots and garages as demand for parking is decreasing or plateauing because commuters are turning to other ways of getting around downtown areas.

Some of the repurposing is permanent – garages are being demolished or refitted as apartments or commercial space – while other conversions retain part of the space for parking.

Apart from city-run organizations that manage their own parking, one of the biggest and most adventurous players in the private sector is Reef Technology – a Miami-based company that acquired Vancouver's Impark two years ago, becoming the largest parking network in North America with 4,800 locations.

Reef's chief executive officer Ari Ojalvo announced then that the company planned to turn parking lots and garages into something more like community hubs.

"Reef will completely transform what people, cities and businesses can expect from parking garages, in the same way the introduction of smartphone apps completely changed the way we think about cellphones," he said.

Since then, Reef has worked with a wide array of businesses in the United States and Canada to convert the spaces they manage (and occasionally own) for multiuses, including depots for grocery delivery (New York), ghost kitchens operating in retrofitted containers (San Francisco), a vertical farm (London) and health care clinics (Los Angeles, Miami and New York).

The company is also looking at other uses, including space for computer-server farms, drone or helicopter landing pads and mini-distribution centres, where trucks would off-load goods for bike delivery around the city centre.

"What we're building [is] modern-day infrastructure," says Mason Harrison, Reef spokesperson. "We have this wealth of space that is not being used."

These innovative ideas have earned Reef some buzz in the tech media, along with a New Yorker article last year.

Over the past year, the company has found a foothold in Toronto and is starting new ventures in Vancouver.

For Alex Rechichi, president of food-service group Crave It Restaurants, which includes restaurant chain Via Cibo, Reef's ghost-kitchen concept has been a welcome new option in Toronto, especially during a pandemic.

Reef has brought in shipping containers, outfitted them as kitchens to the specifications needed for the Via Cibo menu, and staffed them with employees trained in Via Cibo kitchens.

The container restaurants can be found in Toronto's Liberty Village, Queens Quay and Front Street, and in Edmonton. A new one is being planned for Vancouver – all in Reef parking lots or garages.

"It's the future of repurposing space in the city," Mr. Rechichi says. "I think it's going to last."

Like many restaurateurs, Mr. Rechichi had been expanding the delivery side of his business. However, he wasn't convinced about the feasibility of ghost kitchens – kitchens that are typically set up in industrial areas on a delivery-only model – until the pandemic.

"We catapulted with COVID," he says. Deliveries became the core business. And they needed more ways to do that.

Then he came across Reef. The idea of having franchises in parking garages close to busy commercial hubs, as opposed to being located in an industrial area, meant closer proximity to residents and a cheaper alternative to setting up a standard street-facing premises.

"Usually, it costs a lot of money to rent and build out," Mr. Rechichi says. "This lowers the cost of entry."

In Vancouver, the head of the BC Restaurant & Food Services Association agrees that there's a benefit to using well-located parking garages for other needed city services that struggle to find affordable space.

"It's going to reutilize an underutilized resource," says Ian Tostenson, whose organization is working on a competition with Reef to provide \$25,000-grants to five local restaurants to start ghost kitchens in parking lots. (The application deadline is June 27.)

Of course, converting parking garages to kitchens or daycares isn't without red tape; cities have rules about how property gets used.

So far, Mr. Harrison says, Toronto has been "one of the easiest markets to deal with."

"[The city] made the process straightforward. They've been pretty open-minded."

Vancouver has been a little more complex, he adds. "The conversations are longer and more intricate."

Region: British Columbia ^[3]

Tags: child care infrastructure ^[4]
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