Trends in urban building development: parking, bike storage and mail/package delivery - by David O'Sullivan

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David O'Sullivan,
O'Sullivan Architects

What is the trend in architecture today? There are many answers to that question and each is dependent on what aspect of the building industry you focus on as a professional. It is also dependent on who you talk to about those trends.

Our firm works with developers of mixed use urban buildings and multifamily housing. These types of new buildings you commonly see happening in the neighborhoods of Boston, in Somerville, Medford and many downtowns in the suburbs. These sites are always tight and challenging to maximize their potential use while designing a building which does not look like every other building.

One trend is to look at parking ratios and types of parking garages. A big part of the buildings are devoted to parking of cars. The area of these buildings devoted to parking is lessening. Part is the increase utilization of public transportation and changing attitudes about cars, partially because more people are using bikes for transportation. Another trend in the more urban environment, where land is expensive and there are more options for not using cars, is mechanical parking solutions. These include in the simplest form, tandem spaces or sometimes "stackers" where one car is parked above another. The drawbacks of these is one car must be moved to access the second one. Fully mechanical parking solutions is where cars are placed by elevators and lifts and moved by mechanical means to slots which move around like puzzle pieces. This is all done by the car owner and is an automated system. They are just beginning to appear around Boston but have been used in Europe and other major cities in the US. They greatly reduce the volume of the building taken up by parking.

One of the most commonly held theories is that autonomous vehicles will transform the central city. The combination of driverless cars and ridesharing applications could induce city dwellers, never very enthusiastic car owners, to give up their vehicles, freeing space currently devoted to parking for other uses. This has to be considered when designing buildings today. Flexible options for the space devoted to parking is important to consider.

In our more urban buildings another space must be allocated for bikes. Many cities now have more stringent requirements for bike storage inside the building and areas outside for visitor bikes. The bike room can be a valuble amenity for a building, especially if it also has a small area where residents can do minor repairs or cleaning on their bikes. This space needs easy access from the exterior and visibility to other common areas or exterior for security. When designing a large building, bike storage becomes a significant size space. Fitting this on ground floor near the entry is important.

Another changing trend in multifamily development is the mailroom. We all know that mail volume has dropped and getting the mail daily is not what it once was. On the flip side there is Amazon. People love to order items online and this is changing what must be designed into buildings. The mailbox at the front entry with maybe a couple parcel lockers does not serve the resident's needs today or in the future. There are now companies offering parcel management systems to allow residents to have secure delivery of their packages, but space must be allocated for this in the building and even then management of packages can be problematic. Residents want to know their package has a place to be dropped off and make sure it is secure so when the resident gets home it is still there. Access to these spaces gets difficult for delivery men as it is often inside the locked building door. This is one of many new design challenges with today's changing habits.

New buildings, with shifting lifestyle preferences, present new challenges in design and need to consider what else might be needed in the future. Designing spaces which can adapt over time is the best way to allow for future changes. Research conducted by MIT's Center for Real Estate uncovered a number of critical trends that have already begun to shape and, in some cases, disrupt real estate markets or will do so in the near future. The trends catalogued in the Center's report, Real Trends: The Future of Real Estate in the United States, will impact the design and management of buildings today and into the future. It is valuable reading and covers many aspects of today's buildings beyond the few points outlined here. One thing MIT's Real Trends report makes abundantly clear is a series of interrelated demographic, economic, and technological trends will disrupt long-held assumptions about how we design and use buildings.

David O'Sullivan, AIA, is the president of O'Sullivan Architects, Inc., Reading, Mass.