



FOR

Love

OF

PARKING





A Washington dentist gives sweat, tears, and money to save an old garage, just for the love of it.

By Kim Fernandez

It's not unusual to hear about people falling in love with old buildings. It's why historic commissions exist, after all, and there are entire online communities dedicated to abandoned hospitals, homes, and schools that feature photos, commentary, and ponderings of what might become of them.

But a parking garage? Those in the industry might have a certain fondness for them and people who rely on them for car storage during work and leisure hours appreciate that they're convenient, but love? Too strong a word, probably.

Meet George Bourekis. He's a dentist who grew up in Spokane, Wash., and never left. He has a healthy practice, a wife and three daughters, and a life-long family friend named George Prekeges, who owned a parking garage. But not just any parking garage—Prekeges, or “Uncle George,” as Bourekis calls him, owned the City Ramp garage, which may well be the oldest continually-operating garage in the U.S. Built in 1928, it resembles a castle with points and a parapet across its roofline, ornate concrete spires, terra-cotta ornamentation, and a facade bejeweled with geometric designs. The City-County of Spokane Historic Preservation Office calls “one of the finest Art Deco designs in the city,” and it was considered the most modern ramp parking facility west of the Mississippi when it was built.

About eight years ago, Prekeges announced his retirement from parking and put the old garage up for sale. Engineers who inspected it recommended that it be demolished—it had fallen into disrepair and would take more effort than anyone thought it was worth to bring it back to life.

Anyone, that is, except Bourekis and his friend, Jack Heath, president of Washington Trust Bank. Heath's father had parked in the City Ramp the banker's entire childhood, and both men had fond memories of visiting the garage to see their dads downtown and of parking there to run errands with their families way back when.

When the two old friends heard the garage was likely to be torn down in favor of a flat lot, it didn't take long for them to make up their minds what had to happen.

“We bought it,” Bourekis says, for \$1.4 million. “I grew up going down there when I



was little and spending time in that garage, and it's a beautiful building. We didn't want it torn down. Admittedly, it probably wasn't the best financial decision, but we couldn't bear to see it demolished."

Bourekis, the dentist everybody in town knew, had fallen in love. With a parking garage.

The Renovation

The City Ramp was the brainchild of three downtown Spokane business owners who, in the mid-1920s, feared there wasn't enough parking in the city to bring workers and visitors to their buildings. So they built a six-story garage like nothing anyone in town had ever seen, offering parking for 350 cars plus gas, maintenance, and valet services.

"Buildings didn't have parking in them then," says Bourekis. "And people didn't have the real estate to make lots. So these guys got together and built a garage so their tenants and clients had a place to park and do business."

By 2008, the old garage seemed well past its prime. "It was really dilapidated," says Bourekis. "It needed a lot of care. It's made of rebar and concrete, and moisture had gotten down into the concrete over so many years. The rebar was all rusted and it was spalling chunks of concrete. It was so badly worn that there were holes in the ramps in a couple of spots—someone laid metal plates over the holes so customers could still park there."

Bourekis and Heath faced a decision: fix all the concrete, or tear down the building. First, they had to have the site inspected, as it had been used to change oil and such things in a time when disposing of chemicals meant pouring them on the ground.

"We thought we might have soil mitigation and other things to address," Bourekis says. "Once we knew it wasn't a Superfund site or anything like that, we felt better about it." The local department of natural resources gave the pair a green light to renovate without any action on the land required, and they set about trying to find a concrete contractor—which was more difficult than they thought. No one was willing to set a price on a project whose scope wouldn't be known until they could get down and see how much concrete and rebar needed to go.

"The bids were overwhelming and nobody could give us a firm answer," Bourekis says. "Somebody said \$6 million, someone else said \$2 million, and because we really didn't know what we'd have to do, we didn't have the confidence to start on a handshake and say we'd talk more as we went."

A solution finally became apparent. "Another kid we grew up with is a concrete subcontractor," Bourekis says. "We worked with him to start cutting the concrete, checking underneath, and replacing what needed to go. We made the first one kind of a test cell, where we reconstructed that part and then used it as a template to go down the whole building. We made the steel forms, we did all of that."

"We made a decision to save it and jumped in," he says. "It was discouraging. There were frustrations everywhere, and it always is more expensive and takes more time than you think it should."



They also worked hard to match the original concrete that could stay, along with paint colors and other materials; the goal was always to restore the garage back to its 1928 condition. Additionally, asphalt and asbestos were removed from the roof, which was retrofitted for parking. Boarded-up skylights were restored, new electric and plumbing was installed, and the original metal-framed windows were re-caulked and painted. The owners even went so far as to replace broken window panes with ribbed glass matching the vintage glass.

Treasure

Anyone who's ever renovated an old house knows that treasure lurks behind walls, and it's not unusual to find artifacts from previous generations behind wood, plaster, or ductwork. The same, apparently, is true for parking garages.

"We found random things like old bottles and beer cans," says Bourekis. "I don't even know from when." But a bigger treasure came from next door.

"The City Ramp is part of a block of attached buildings," he explains. "There are a couple of other old buildings attached to it, and one day we got to go through those buildings. Inside one, we found an old parking rates sign from the City Ramp laying around." The sign, along with historic photos of the building, is now on display inside the garage.

"We found an old safe too—that was pretty neat," he says, laughing that, much to his chagrin, it was empty. "It's still functioning and we put it to work to hold paperwork."

Along the way, they found out they weren't the only ones in town to have an affinity for the old garage.

"It's a labor of love," he says. "The community has been very responsive. We've had a couple of older ladies write us notes about how they lived in a farming community nearby and when they came into town, they'd always park at the City Ramp. They'd start there and go shopping all day with their mothers, and it's a very fond memory for them now. We heard lots of those nostalgic kinds of stories."

"We're so close to it and we have so much skin in the game that we're biased," he says of the renovation,

which is now about 90 percent complete. "We've gotten very good response from the community, though, and the city council officials tell us they're very glad we've done this. Other old buildings in town have been torn down, and people are very complimentary and glad we made the effort to save this one."

He, too, finds himself growing fonder and fonder of the old place. "I drove by it yesterday and there was a little graffiti on a pillar," he says. "I about blew a gasket! I've got to learn to let that go, I guess, but it's not going to be easy. After all the coating and the color-matching and everything else, somebody would spray paint my garage? I was going nuts."

Longtime garage manager Lue Guardipee says employees and patrons still use the garage's original Otis Passenger elevators with their sliding glass doors and brass accordion grates, and its Humphrey revolving man-lift.

"The building was not designed as an industrial warehouse building, but instead was planned to be architecturally compatible with Spoke's downtown environment," she says, adding that it looks more like a hotel than a garage. It originally cost \$500,000 to build, including the cost of the land. Today, she says, it's on the Spokane Register of Historic Places, the Washington State Heritage Register of Historic Places, and the National Register of Historic Places.

Bourekis hesitates a moment when he's asked how much his labor-of-love renovation cost, and then answers. "Close to \$4 million. Will we get a return on that in our lifetime? We hope to. That's the goal. But I hope our children do if we don't."

The garage currently holds just more than 200 vehicles and is a popular destination for city residents, some of whom park blocks away from their offices just to walk through its historic floors. Bourekis is currently trying to learn more about the parking industry, now that the building he calls a "jewel box" is almost back to her original glory.

"If I learn more, maybe I'll be able to put more money on the bottom line," he says. "I have a lot to learn. But it's fascinating. It's fascinating and it's necessary, and this one is more of an art piece than a parking garage. And I'm pretty attached to it."



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