

White Heat London 8 / Motoring

Emanuel House development Mechanical car park

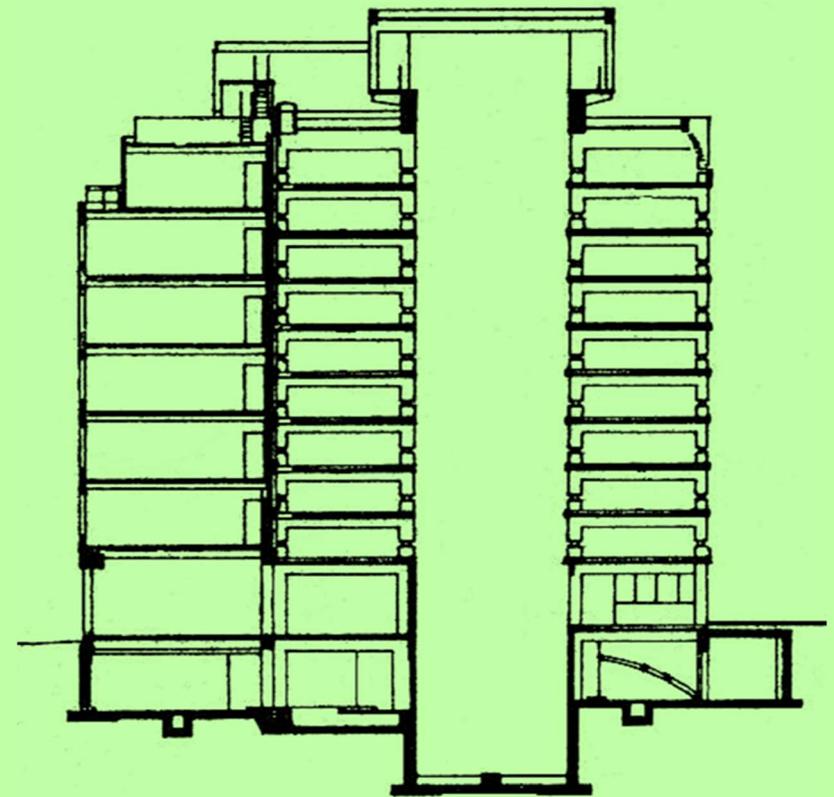
Howard V. Lobb & Partners

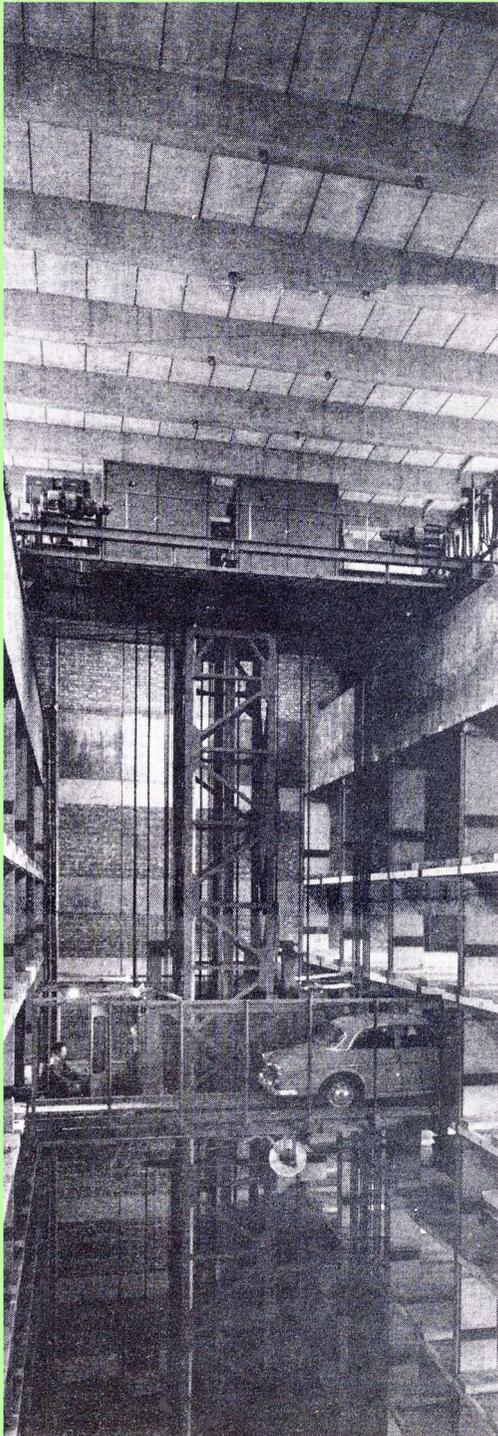
1966-68

The problem of parking in town and city centres was acknowledged almost as soon as the car was invented. Multi-storey garages served by lifts had appeared by the early twentieth century and mechanical parking, where cars were positioned partly or wholly by external means, originated in the 1920s. Perceived advantages included less time wasted looking for a space, vehicles kept more securely and – with no need for ramps or turning circles and lower floor-to-ceiling heights – more cars able to be parked in any given volume or less land taken up for the same capacity. Post-war growth in owning and planning for the car, along with improvements in electrical, handling and control systems, saw a range of commercial designs appear worldwide to exploit this approach.

The Auto-Silopark within Westminster council's Emanuel House development provided off-street parking for 300 cars in the government quarter around Victoria Street. Drivers entered one side of the building, continued down to the basement entry bays, collected a ticket and left their car with the handbrake off and gearbox in neutral (an illuminated sign instructed) before walking away. The hoist operator then took over. On later presentation of the ticket the same operation took place in reverse, except that cars were deposited at ground level on the opposite side of the building, facing the exit.

The car park, along with a petrol station, took up half of what would now be termed a mixed-use development. The remainder comprised seventy flats, offices, showrooms and an air-conditioned computer centre. Only the residential and retail parts remain.





Mechanical parking here used the 'pigeon-hole' approach. A large well or slot ran the full length of the building and extended from basement to roof; parking spaces were arranged on nine levels in front of and behind it. Two tower hoists ran on rails. Either side of their central control cabins was a platform capable of carrying one car; small, wheeled 'dollies' moved forward or backward to deposit or retrieve it. The control panel within the cabin allowed the operator to select spaces automatically or manually and initiate the park or de-park process. In one mode of operation, the highest floors could be used for longer-term parking so that a faster service could be run from the lower levels for short-stay customers.

The dollies, one of which is seen here on an empty platform, were electric tugs receiving power and instructions from the cabin through a tether. Small enough to be driven under a car waiting at the entry bay, a cam mechanism forced the grooved wedges outwards and upwards, lifting two wheels and allowing the vehicle to be pulled onto the platform and hoisted. Arriving at the designated space, the same process functioned in reverse. Retrieval mirrored this.

The exit side of the car park shows the parking levels, collection points and the way out from the petrol station. One façade of the residential wing is seen beyond. Most of the building was made with pre-cast concrete components, which aided alignment of the mechanical systems by eliminating the inconsistencies of in-situ pouring. A decorative frieze by abstract sculptor William Mitchell was created in the same way and incorporated into the Rochester Row elevation.