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Storefront crashes: A bigger urban-design issue than we think

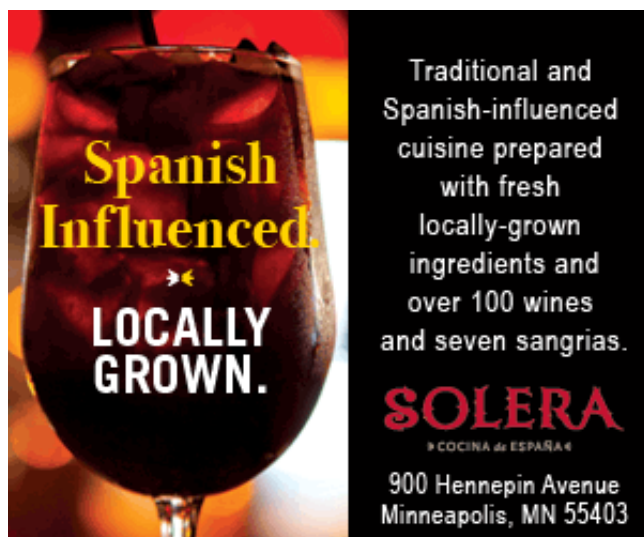
By **Marlys Harris** | 08/02/13

A few years ago, when I was visiting from my then home in Connecticut, I drove my mom to her hairdresser at a Golden Valley shopping strip.

"Go around the back," she said. "You can't get in the front."

Why not? Well, earlier that week, one of the salon's customers, a woman of a certain age as I recall, pressed on the accelerator instead of the brake when parking her car. She smashed through the door and the plate glass window, crushing the chairs where patrons normally waited for appointments. Nobody was hurt, and, picturing a flustered Betty White type with blue hair, I (age-istly) thought the incident was pretty funny.

It turns out, however, that storefront crashes are not oddities. Hard numbers are difficult to come by, but a paper published the other day by Robert Reiter with Dean C. Alberson and Felicia J. Desorcie, both with the Texas Traffic Institute at Texas A & M University, estimates that there may be as many as 50 to 60 store front crashes each day in the U.S., about 20 of those involving convenience stores.



Reiter and Mark Wright, who together founded an advocacy organization, the Storefront Safety Council, have a pretty salient interest in the issue. Reiter says he used to work on terrorism issues but then "decided that the worst terrorist was an 84-year-old man on meds behind the wheel of a Buick." Wright sustained a knee injury when a car crashed into a 7-11 where he was shopping.

Because there were no national statistics on car-into-building pile-ups, the Storefront Safety Council gathered information from media reports and

lawsuits. In the most common scenario, says Mark Wright, a driver goes into a nose-in spot and mistakenly presses on the gas, "aiming the vehicle like a missile at a storefront." But, such car-into-building crashes don't just occur at suburban shopping strips. Two cars can collide in a street, sending one careening onto the sidewalk and into a nearby store.

We've seen both varieties in the Twin Cities. Last year, Rudolph's rib emporium on Lyndale and Franklin saw its corner entrance and sign crushed when a passenger van drove into it. In late 2010, a drunken driver crashed into the Juut Salonspa on the corner of Hennepin and Lake in Minneapolis, leaving two pedestrians with injuries, albeit minor ones.

Rash of crashes

In fact, there was a rash of such crashes in Minnesota that year, at a Stillwater pizzeria, a Blaine flower shop and a pub in Rosemount. In St. Paul that year, a toddler left buckled in a car seat freed herself, crawled into the driver's seat of her mom's SUV and put the car into gear. It crashed into a Cost Cutters salon.

Most of the accidents happen when people are parking, presumably at a pretty low speed. But they can result in horrendous injuries and even fatalities. In one particularly egregious case in 2011, a couple were eating dinner with their 13-year-old son at an Amherst, N.Y., restaurant in front of a foot-high kneewall and window facing the parking lot. A 74-year-old woman confused the gas and brake pedals on her car and plowed into them at a speed of 20 miles an hour. The father died at the scene, the mother a few hours later at the hospital. The 13-year-old survived.

Scott Cannon of Cannon and Van Allen in Geneseo, N.Y., are suing on the son's behalf "to compensate him for the loss of his parents." Defendants include the driver for her obvious negligence but also the property owner, the local restaurant franchisee and the franchisor. The theory: These last three were responsible for creating the dangerous condition of nose-in parking with no protective barrier.

According to the complaint, "the parking area at the restaurant was specifically designed so that automobiles were required to park close to and facing in toward the restaurant, in close proximity to patrons dining inside the Restaurant." Further, "there were no wheel stops, bollards (vertical concrete and steel tubes planted in the ground), curbing or barriers of any kind to prevent an automobile from crashing into the restaurant and its patrons." Cannon estimates that damages should come to \$5 million.

Even if nobody is injured, there is always property damage. The National Safety Council's estimate is \$9,100 per crash. The Texas Traffic Institute report calculates that storefront crashes cost the convenience industry conservatively about \$6.1 million a year

Drivers involved in these accidents generally fall into three categories: the elderly (and/or medically impaired), teens and drunk drivers. Obviously, any educational or regulatory effort that keeps such people off the road (in the case of drunks) or helps them to take extra precautions (teens and the elderly) would make sense. But Wright points out that anybody can make mistakes. "I've been in a parking lot and shifted up into the wrong gear myself," he says. "You can't affect every driver."

Barriers that separate cars and pedestrians would seem to offer the most protection. Curbs and parking blocks (those three- or four-inch concrete things that your car butts up against) aren't enough to halt any but the smallest vehicles. Some shopping centers and stores have installed bollards. They may take forms other than vertical posts. Target stores use those big red balls, but in a recent tour of the Internet, I found bollards shaped like giant footballs, basketballs and baseballs and even humans.

Anti-ram fixtures

Cities have not done much to guard against such accidents. Wright says that as far as he knows, only Miami-Dade County has an ordinance dealing with safety in parking lots. It requires that anti-ram fixtures be placed in shopping centers when head-in parking is located in front of a store. After the horrendous accident in Amherst, the town council took up the issue. According to the local newspaper, it was simply the worst of 32 storefront crashes that had occurred that summer in the area.

Of course, you can't have barriers on every corner. "I can understand there's concern about disturbing the streetscape," says Wright. "You don't want to create a bollard forest."

But he believes that shopping center owners and merchants should take steps to protect their customers. And, says Reiter, large chain stores are starting to look at the problem. They don't want to be subject to lawsuits and legal claims that might result from somebody crashing through their windows and doors.

In the meantime, if you're in front of a convenience store, step lively.

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COMMENTS (2)

Sensor tech

SUBMITTED BY **JIM GREG** ON AUGUST 2, 2013 - 11:00AM.

Cars should sense a barrier when shifted out of park and either warn or prevent movement.

Gas Pedal

SUBMITTED BY **JIM MORK** ON AUGUST 2, 2013 - 12:29PM.

Shifting into the wrong gear happens to anyone. But it seems to me that if damage is done, the driver is stepping way too hard on the gas pedal. Truthfully, when I'm backing out of a parking space, my foot is on the brake. I've accidentally bumped a car behind me in a parking lot. I want to be able to brake immediately. If my foot was on the gas, I wouldn't be pressing hard enough to go into anything. I think maybe the main problem is overlooked here, and that problem is people who have bad driving habits everywhere. The nonfatal crashes in America probably run into thousands, the number never being given because it becomes the business of the insurance industry. If that number were in the minds of most people, they wouldn't be shocked at all that storefronts get rammed because they would know there are a huge number of barely competent drivers out there. Many older folks drive way past the time they should. And I'm 68, so I'm cognizant of aging and the challenges of handling a car.

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