LIVING

Hamden's 'Ghost Parking Lot' once attracted tourists from around the world. Now it's a Starbucks.

By **Abby Weiss**, *Staff writer*
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The Ghost Parking Lot, a world-famous public art sculpture in the Hamden Plaza shopping center, which had in disrepair for years, before it was torn down in 2003. The sculpture had twenty junked automobiles covered over by asphalt. Created in 1978 by SITE, Inc, the Ghost Parking Lot incorporated two typical ingredients of a suburban shopping center - automobiles and asphalt.

Peter Hvizdak / Hearst Connecticut Media file photo

When longtime Hamden resident, Tony Griego, discusses the Starbucks drive-thru at Hamden Plaza, he mentions two notable features: the traffic jams during busy hours and the elevation of the land it sits on.

"The Starbucks is lower than the main parking lot," Griego, 81, said.

That's because 20 years ago, dozens of asphalt-covered cars were excavated from that location, he said, creating a deeper ground for the drive-thru, which opened in November 2022.

Before it was a Starbucks drive-thru, that spot was the site of the Hamden "Ghost Parking Lot" — a famous art installation that commented on America's car and consumer culture. The piece, designed by Emilio Sousa and SITE founder James Wines, was installed in 1978 and consisted of 20 cars buried in asphalt at the front of the lot along Dixwell Avenue. It was demolished in 2003.

Griego, who's lived in Hamden his whole life, remembers reporters and customers swarming the installation when it was first completed. Hamden residents eventually got used to the sight of it over the years, he said.

"It was something that was unique to Hamden and probably unique to our country," he said.



The "Ghost Parking Lot" at Hamden Plaza 1977. This photo was taken by staff members of the NYC-based art studio, SITE.

SITE Studio / Contributed photo

David Bermant, founder of Hamden Plaza, commissioned the Hamden Ghost Parking Lot. He was an avid art collector and commissioned public art for his centers starting in the 1960s, Andrew Bermant, his son and the current plaza owner, said. Donated station wagons and convertibles from the 1950s to early '70s were shipped to the Plaza to create the Ghost Parking Lot, he said.

"My father believed that art should be enjoyed by the masses, not just kept in a museum. He was a big believer of particularly art that stimulated thought and spoke about society in some way," Bermant said.

Wines told The New York Times that the concept of The Ghost Parking Lot tackles multiple aspects of American society, including its dependency on cars and fossil fuels.



The "Ghost Parking Lot" art installation at Hamden Plaza in 1977.
SITE Studio / Contributed photo

Bermant said the concept spoke to both the current and future state of America's car-oriented society.

"These cars are buried under asphalt, and it looks like they're rising up from the dead. It's kind of paying homage to our vehicle-based society and the future where eventually cars will probably become outdated and outmoded. Maybe we won't survive, and the cars will just deteriorate," he said while describing the former installation.

However, the piece deteriorated over the following 25 years due to weathering and skateboarders using it as ramps, Bermant said.

In 2003, Hamden Plaza Associates demolished the installation after advocates failed to raise enough funds to preserve it.

"I always thought it would be one of the things that would last forever in the town of Hamden, but over the years you could see it start to deteriorate," Griego said. "Every time it rained, it saturated the metalwork and it was just becoming an eyesore."

Wines and Bermant, who had taken over the business from his father, had no interest in preserving the installation. Bermant said Wines told him that the piece's gradual demise was intentional and encompasses the message of the artwork: everything humans build will eventually deteriorate.

"He had a vision, and as much as maybe it became an eyesore for people, it still spoke to our society and our civilization," Bermant said.



The "Ghost Parking Lot" under construction at Hamden Plaza 1977.
SITE Studio / Contributed photo

A year after the piece's removal, he installed a plaque at the shopping center next to Marshall's honoring the sculpture. He doesn't plan to follow in his dad's footsteps and commission more art pieces in the Hamden Plaza, citing rising costs of operating shopping centers.

Two sculptures still remain in the plaza, Bermant said: "Crystals" by Clyde Lynds and "Windamajig" by the late George Rhoads.



The "Ghost Parking Lot" project at Hamden Plaza was directed by Emilio Sousa and James Wines, founder of the NYC-based art studio SITE.

SITE Studio / Contributed photo

Instead, he's spent the past few years solely focusing on the plaza's businesses. He began building the new Starbucks in 2021, since the Starbucks in the plaza at the time didn't have a drive-thru. He's also added a DSW shoe store, a branch of the tech repair store uBreakiFix, Jersey Mike's and a Teriyaki Madness.

Although the Ghost Parking Lot is no longer there to draw in tourists from all over the world, there is still chatter about it in Hamden 20 years after its demolition, Bermant said.

"When I'm at the shopping center, I'll bump into somebody who says I remember when you had the ghost car parking lot there. It is amazing," he said.