

## The Sky's The Limit Architectural Trends In Self-Storage

By Erica Shatzer

The days when storage facilities consisted of rows of single-story metal buildings sprawled out over large parcels within industrial locations seem to be nothing more than a distant memory in 2017. While the industry's iconic roll-up doors are still a prominent part of any storage facility's design, a shift toward more sophisticated architectural elements over the past several years—due in part to stricter design requirements of high-end neighborhoods—has resulted in projects that easily could be mistaken for upscale retail or office buildings.

Indeed, self-storage has come a long way since its first-generation facilities. Nowadays, most new storage developments, especially those within urban areas, are extraordinary multistory facilities with stunning facades, top-of-the-line security features, and an overabundance of amenities. What's more, many self-storage architects predict that this style shift is only going to progress.

"Design aesthetics have been spiraling up for years," says Ariel Valli, president and principal architect of Aliso Viejo, Calif.-based Valli Architectural Group. "There is an urbanization of the product happening, and I don't see it ending."

### Size Specifics

For starters, although facilities have become grander in appearance, they are situated on smaller lots. This means that developers must build up instead of out in order to make projects pencil out. As a result, multistory facilities are becoming the norm, especially within cities where adequate land is scarce and expensive. In fact, according to Valli, only one-fourth of his clients' projects are single-story facilities.

Bruce Jordan, president of San Clemente, Calif.-based Jordan Architects, Inc., notes that



newer projects have less acreage but more rentable square footage. "There's a trend toward larger facilities, between two and 3,000 square feet," he says, adding that many of these projects have three or four stories to reach those numbers. "Some even have basements, more so than before, even though it's more costly."

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Despite the fact that basements can add 20,000 to 30,000 square feet of space to a project, Ken Carrell, principal of Lake Forest, Calif.-based ARE Associates, reminds developers that underground levels are not possible in areas with high water tables. In addition, they may be cost prohibitive if soil testing and dirt removal are required.

In regards to rentable square footage, Jeff Dallenbach, managing partner of San Antonio, Texas-based ARCHCON Architecture, has noticed a shift in the unit mix of urban sites. "There are more smaller unit sizes," he says. "The average unit size is under 100 square feet." Dallenbach also mentions that the 7.5-by-10 is becoming a popular unit size.

ARCHCON is witnessing several other site trends as well, such as the demolition of single-story facilities to make way for new multistory projects and mixed use projects on large parcels. Valli notes an uptick in multi-use projects as well, stating that storage is becoming more common in shopping centers.

"More complex sites are being acquired," says Dallenbach, who defines "complex sites" as those with odd shapes or extreme slopes that make the basement scenario a necessity. "The slopes create significant costs if you have to cut into a hill and build a basement wall." He also adds that conversions are on the rise in urban areas with high demand.

### Awesome Offices

While the size of the office area can vary greatly by project, Clark Edgecomb, president and principal architect of Houston, Texas-based Edgecomb & Associates, has seen a shift toward larger, more open spaces that are both

brighter and architecturally pleasing. Many of which include custom desks and additional displays for retail items. “Developers are doing away with the standing counters,” he says, adding that conference rooms for commercial tenants as well as lounge/sitting areas are becoming popular features.

Jordan states that the office areas for his clients’ projects are typically between 1,800 and 2,000 square feet, but some are 2,500 to 3,000 square feet. Regardless of the square footage, they all focus on the retail aspect of self-storage. For example, high ceilings, bright colors, and lots of lighting provide better spaces for displaying merchandise. He adds that long counters within offices are becoming passé. “REITs are moving to podium-style counters and bright retail walls,” Jordan says. Those offices tend to have a sit-down area with two or three podiums that are approximately three feet wide.

“The office design continues to evolve,” Valli says. “They are elaborate and flashy

to catch the public eye. Developers are spending a lot more per square foot for the office area.” Valli also mentions good lighting, expensive counters, and posh furniture as a handful of the items used

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to create bright, cheerful, and inviting office spaces that are intended to make female renters feel safe and comfortable. Moreover, Valli has noticed that

developers are shying away from including apartments for resident managers in their projects.

“Retail and office areas are changing,” says Carrell, who mentions that offices he’s seen have been averaging 2,000 square feet. Some of those offices are built with faux units that are used to house mailboxes, merchandise, and conference rooms for tenants. “Those office areas are more for tenant use. The next step in self-storage is more offices inside ‘our’ office.”

Speaking of offices for tenant use, one trend these architects say is gaining ground is called “flex space”. Flex space provides commercial tenants with both an office space and a storage space. These units feature a store-front façade with storage space to the back side of the office. According to Dallenbach, flex space is separately leased to clients who wish to keep their inventory within their office. “It’s an ever-changing design element,” he says.

### Elaborate Exteriors

As for the exteriors of self-storage facilities, they are becoming more aesthetically pleasing with better landscaping and higher quality materials. “It’s improved over the past 10 years,” says Edgecomb. “Improved visibility and appearance have been used to sway governing bodies.”

While more natural materials, such as stucco, stone, and brick, are being utilized for the façades, Edgecomb notes that the governing bodies are becoming more receptive to exterior metal. “Developers are using more complementary materials and various contemporary materials and components,” he says, adding that composite panels with different surfaces and textures are replacing the once-popular corrugated panels.

“More extreme requirements from cities, such as no metal showing, has led to higher-end materials within the facades,” Dallenbach says. “The goal is to add dimension and shape to the boxy façade of multistory facilities.”

Jordan concurs, stating that more sophisticated architecture with unique, contemporary designs—even for single-story facilities—are being drafted. “Different materials are being used in

## jordan architects, inc.

131 calle iglesia, suite 100  
san clemente, ca. 92672  
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fun ways to create unique architectural designs,” he says. “There’s more cost to it, but it’s relatively small. There’s no major escalation in costs.”

Unlike Jordan, Carrell claims that developers are shelling out more and more money to make the exterior of a project blend in with the surrounding area. “Cities are coming up with set guidelines and they’re not giving self-storage any slack,” he says, noting that it costs have increased between \$3 and \$5 per square foot to make buildings appealing.

All costs aside, developers seem to be seeking interesting ways to make their facilities’ facades more fascinating. One popular trend is to utilize glass within the façade. Dallenbach suggests creating glass cubes that enable passers-by to see the iconic roll-up doors. “It can be a dramatic design element when it’s lit up at night,” he says.

Another space being upgraded is the loading/unloading area. Carrell says loading docks should be made as nice as

possible, with extra room for tenants to unload and access the elevators. The location’s weather should also be taken into consideration when designing the docks. He recently worked on a project

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in Hawaii where a former sugar mill was converted into self-storage. Since frequent rain is an issue there, the facility has an area where vehicles are brought inside to unload. “You can’t put overhangs on every building in drive-up facilities,” Carrell says,

“but think about having some covers and awnings.”

Finally, Dallenbach has observed an uptick in green designs. While solar panels are becoming increasingly prevalent at RV and boat storage facilities, he mentions that water catchment systems are attracting attention. The detention ponds and rain gardens are primarily used for irrigation purposes. Other environmentally friendly design options, which are energy code requirements in some locations, include insulation for roofs, glazing/tint for windows and doors to eliminate heat gain, and higher efficiency air conditioning units.

Overall, regardless of what type of storage facility you intend to build, be sure to know your local building codes. It’s always best to have a complete list of requirements in hand prior to planning your project. ■

Erica Shatzer is the editor of *Mini-Storage Messenger*, *Self-Storage Now!*, and *Self-Storage Canada*.



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