

# Wow!

New facility designs aim to make visual and financial impact. P12





# Intelligent Design

*Storage architects aim to provide facilities with new looks and increased value.*

*By Mark Wright*

What if Steve Jobs had gone into self storage instead of technology? Would today's facilities look or function differently? Might he have created a sleek, iconic design that would have inspired homeowners to stand in line at midnight just for a chance to store their belongings in one of his über-cool facilities?

The famously short-tempered Jobs would likely have hit his boil-over point after dealing with a few local building codes and planning departments. Self storage design requires more than industrial-strength creativity; it takes time, tactfulness and patience. Just ask some of the architects who strive to push the boundaries of facility design forward while trying to please both regulation-driven planners and market-driven developers on a budget.

"There are a lot of architects out there who think they can design self storage because 'it's just a bunch of boxes,'" said

*Above: This 360 Storage Center in Newark, California, shows the larger, multifunctional office space trending in some newer designs. Photo courtesy of Ken Carrell, ARE Services*

architect Ken Carrell, principal of ARE Associates in Lake Forest, California.

Experienced architects who specialize in self storage know that few jurisdictions will green-light an old-fashioned "bunch of boxes" design except those that intend to relegate such facilities to the edge of town or a light-industrial zone—where most operators in urban and suburban markets today don't want to be.

## A New Generation

"We are seeing very different design trends and truly what I would classify as a new generation of storage," said Jeffrey Dallenbach, AIA, managing partner of ARCHCON Architecture in San Antonio, Texas. "Starting at the site acquisition phase, developers are acquiring smaller and more expensive sites in areas with barriers to self storage development. This generation of storage is pushing to taller buildings with predominantly climate-controlled storage in the high barrier and urban areas."

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Indeed, the design stakes in 2017 are higher than ever. Thanks to a combination of market forces within the self storage vertical, evolving retail-customer sensibilities—not to mention those often-nettlesome local design requirements—design has been tasked with achieving a lengthening list of business objectives.

A modern facility has to be acceptable to the local community, including not only the planning staff but also the prospective facility's neighbors. It has to appeal to potential storage customers, with favorable differentiation from its competitors. And it has to be able to attract a company or investor seeking to buy the facility, as an exit strategy for the owner.

"The design process in the current generation of storage is much more complex than in days past," said Dallenbach. "We break down the process into different phases, including feasibility, conceptual site planning, schematic design, design development, and construction documents."

The increased complexity is affecting building costs, observed Wayne Woolsey, principal of Kiwi II Construction, Inc., in Murrieta, California. Depending on the project and the area of the country, he's seen costs increase between 5 and 15 percent from a year ago.

Balancing cost versus return on investment has always been a challenge, but the design imperative has arguably put more pressure on that equation. Product design has an enormous affect on consumer behavior and can make or break the emotional connection between a consumer and a company—a reality that any self storage developer has to contend with today when building in a competitive urban/suburban market.

## Hooking Customer Attention

"Sometimes we try to play upon a design theme that fits the area, but we usually try to be unique so the building is noteworthy," said Bruce Jordan, AIA, NCARB, principal of Jordan Architects Inc. in San Clemente, California. "We want to make it memorable so customers will remember the facility when they need it."

Or, maybe we should say, "when she needs it." Jordan noted that once his firm "realized many years ago that 60 percent of the people who signed a rental agreement were female, it was an eye-opener. It meant, don't think industrial, think retail. So, make the office bright, pleasant and safe. Look at how people circulate. Put music in the hallways. Make it clean, neat, secure and easy to get around in. Put a nice 'you are here' map on the wall just outside the elevator. And put windows by the elevator so there's natural light coming in."

In other words, facility design has come to include not just the visual aesthetic but also how people move through the space, how sight lines affect perceptions, how light and color evoke specific feelings (such as comfort and safety). In some ways, self storage is not unlike other consumer products for which effective design is less about getting a user to say "wow" and more about saying "ahhh"—because the product simply feels right. It satisfies a need, requires minimal decision making to use, and makes life easier and less stressful.

How does that translate into designing a new storage facility?

"We look at a number of issues," said Carrell, "including the size of the site, traffic flow, visibility, and convenience (ease of use). I'm seeing larger offices that do more than just rent spaces and sell boxes. A lot of my previous and current projects incorporate office features—a conference room, mailboxes, fax service. Some offices even include

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Unique lines, such as in this rendering for a new Great Value Self Storage facility in Austin, Texas, help prospective customers remember a facility. Image courtesy of Bruce Jordan, AIA, NCARB, Jordan Architects Inc.

a full-service postal station and/or an office area where a customer can sit and work on their computer.”

Design also influences prospective facility buyers. Whether an owner hopes to attract an acquisition from a larger operator or investor within a few years, or get top dollar from a new owner when retirement eventually beckons, a successful design is an important piece of that exit strategy.

“You want to make it a Class A facility,” said Jordan. “Even if you have no inclination to sell, you always want that [end game] in the back of your mind when you design a facility.”

Branding can be a factor as well.

“It’s a priority for some owners but not all,” said Dallenbach. “In many cases, owners like differing designs depending upon the location of the facility, and they utilize their branded signage to designate the facility. With the REIT



Practicality remains a valued design approach in some markets. Photo courtesy of Wayne Woolsey, Kiwi II Construction

involvement in the industry, we are seeing projects that define accent colors based on the management company they will be hiring. Most all owners want visibility and differentiation from their competitors and we design all projects for the specific environment in which they are located.”

### Fitting into a Community

Setting the design bar high helps put a smile on local planning officials’ faces. “Most places now have design guidelines to help architects and owners come up with a look that the city will like,” said Carrell.

Unfortunately, there is no uniformity from one jurisdiction to the next.

“The International Building Code has standards, but those are building codes, and jurisdictions can modify their building code. The zoning code varies for everyone. Some don’t even have zoning requirements,” Carrell noted.

Thus, requirements and priorities not only differ between, say, Manhattan and Missoula, as one would expect, but they can be different in the town right next door.

Similarly, issues like sustainability are important in some markets but not others. Carrell said he sees more jurisdictions requiring storage facilities to be eco-friendly, and most places require recycling areas. On the other hand,

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Woolsey said that storage developers who go the extra mile to achieve LEED certification discover it wasn't worth the extra cost. Other variables include color and doors.

"Design guidelines in many areas preclude the visibility of metal doors on the building exterior," said Dallenbach. A popular workaround: using more and larger expanses of windows to enable passersby to see the storage doors. And when a city-approved color palette prohibits bright and bold building colors, using vibrant, eye-catching color on the roll-up doors behind those windows can help attract customer attention.

Jordan said he's seeing "more and more cities understand [self storage] a lot better. The process has become more sophisticated—there's more paperwork and regulations—but overall we have an easier time getting a project approved than we did 20 years ago."

To get the best designer for a new facility, Woolsey suggested identifying architects via referrals and trade shows and asking each one for at least 10 project examples.

"A storage architect is preferable," he said. "They bring so much experience, and they usually have their own team of consultants they bring with them who are well versed in the industry."

Some owners want their architect to take the lead in creating potential designs, while others bring preconceived ideas to the table. Carrell, Dallenbach and Jordan all typically use a consultative process that empowers the owner/developer to exert as much design control as he or she wants.

The odds are, even Steve Jobs would have turned to architects like them for help if he'd wanted to change the world one storage facility at a time. ❖



*SurePoint Self Storage in San Antonio had design guidelines that led ARCHCON Architecture to modify accent elements from the company's brand color to a more neutral color scheme, while the brand colors remained on the prominent entry, doors behind glazing, and on building signage. Photo courtesy of Jeffrey Dallenbach, ARCHCON Architecture*