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2005 Facility Of The Year New Facility Winner **Sierra Del Oro Storage Centers** Corona, California

By Betty L. Johnson • Designed by Valli Architectual Group • Photography courtesy of Valli Architectual Group



David Golkar set out to build a state-of-the-art facility in Corona Calif., utilizing cutting edge technology to create something that hasn't been done before. He envisioned a project that would set his company apart from his competition and set a new standard for the industry. The success of that project, Sierra Del Oro Storage Centers, is a result of creating the right team and building the right project on the right piece of land, while combining it with a business plan that lends itself to differentiation.

The piece of land that was developed had been in the Golkar family for 15 years. The property was oddly shaped, and it was small when compared with most parcels developed in the self-storage industry. Golkar turned to Greg Call from Storage Works LLC, based in Irvine, Calif., to do an initial feasibility study in order to determine if a self-storage facility could be successful in the location. "David was looking for the highest and best use of this property," says Call. "The feasibility study showed that the project would be a huge success."

Indeed, the study indicated that the street traffic was excellent. Moreover, there were views of the property from the freeway. While there was a definite need for more storage in the area, this project would offer services that could differentiate it

from the other storage businesses in the area. Those services and the facility's excellent design and performance led to its being named the 2005 Facility of the Year New Facility Winner.

Drawing Up The Plans

Golkar brought Valli Architects on board to design the building. When Valli joined the team, they were presented with two parcels at the intersection of Palisades Drive and Green River Road in the rapidly growing West Corona area known as Sierra Del Oro. Palisades Drive separates the two properties. The largest parcel was 1.67 acres and was triangular in shape.

"Our direction was to maximize the parcel," says Ariel Valli, president of the Aliso Viejo, Calif.-based architectural firm that specializes in self-storage. "We designed a project that pushed the envelope of the zoning ordinance to the max. We went to minimum setbacks and decided on three stories—as tall as we could make it. The owner then came back and said, 'No, not enough. I need more.'"

Building on the second, smaller parcel of land was not an option due to the inefficient layout. The only remaining option was to build a basement; hence, the design was changed to reflect a four-story self-storage building, with three stories above grade. "The floor area ration (FAR) is 1.9, which is very high," explains Valli. "Any time you get over 1.0, you are in pretty intense land utilization."

Following the design of the building, Valli began to work on the unit mix and layout. The irregular shape of the building, which Valli compares to a B-12 bomber, could have negatively impacted the rentable area of the project.

"The only thing that matters is how much you have to rent out," says Valli, "We must ensure that the square footage yielded is feasible from a financial performance standpoint."

The Exterior Elevation

Sierra Del Oro Storage Center is located five miles east of the exclusive community of Anaheim Hills. As such, the site has expensive homes looking down upon it from a hillside. If this project was to receive the necessary approvals, it would need to blend in well with its community.

The design for the facility introduced residential type elements such as cornice treatments and the use of river stone, as well as materials that were non-metallic. The mansard tile roof was slanted, tile insets were placed, and split-face block was used. The exterior sports a smooth troweled plaster finish. Spandrel glass, which looks like a window on the exterior even though there is no window on the inside, was utilized to provide the illusion of windows where none existed.

Real windows were used in the rear of the building to allow traffic on the freeway to recognize that this was a self-storage facility. The roll-up doors, manufactured and installed by Roll Right, are visible through these windows, which clearly exhibit the site's clean, safe interior.

To accommodate traffic circulation, a drive-through was designed at the first and second floors, with a third floor "bridge" over the drive through. The basement was to be continuous under the drive-through, presenting a water-proofing challenge because of an exposed exterior driveway situated over basement storage spaces. The drive-through was designed to connect to the main drive aisle on the north side of the building. This drive aisle provided access to the only drive-up storage spaces in the project, as well as access to the office parking area at Green River Drive.

The use of landscape architecture firms is becoming more prevalent in the industry as zoning regulations become stricter and approval granting entities request more extensive designs. For that reason, John Swanda of Land Perspective was added to the design and construction team to sculpt the exterior landscaping. Berms and meandering walkways were added. Additionally grass, shrubs, and trees were planted to soften the appearance.

Fast Track Approval

"Once we had it all planned, we took the project to the city for approval," says Valli. "The process went much smoother than expected." Notice for public hearing went out to all residents within a 300-foot radius.

Valli was pleasantly surprised when the hearing began at 7:30 and ended at 7:40. Only one neighbor voiced a concern, and he merely inquired about the height of the building. Satisfied with the answer, he had no objection.

“Usually, a project of this size and magnitude in this high end of a neighborhood is difficult to get approval for,” Valli notes, adding that in the normal course of events, a continuance is granted to allow the owner to make changes to the plans to accommodate the concerns voiced by community members.

Construction Phase

Finding the right construction firm to complete a self-storage project is of vital importance to its success. The choice of HBI Construction, Inc., based in Newport Beach, Calif., proved beneficial to Sierra Del Oro Storage Center because of their experience with the self-storage industry. HBI has been building storage facilities more than 25 years, and they are a market leader. The company has worked with most of the architects who work with the storage industry.

“We can see if there will be issues prior to them happening in the field,” says Mike Swanberg, senior project manager for HBI. “That is a big advantage to our owners.”

The size of the site proved challenging, according to HBI vice president Ken Young. “It was an extremely tight site, which required building A to be built first using the building B pad for staging of materials,” he explains. “Large retaining walls and a basement needed to be built.”

The difficulties in staging materials multiplied when the company learned that the cost of steel was about to increase. “We heard reports of increases coming,” says Swanberg. “We would have generally ordered floor-to-floor, but we ordered the top two floors and roof to get underneath the pricing increase. We had to stage the materials across the street.” These measures allowed the project to be completed for approximately 36 dollars per square foot as opposed to 46 to 48 dollars per square foot.

In addition to supply cost and site size issues, HBI battled with record rainfall in the area during the construction phase. This added the additional challenge of an extremely muddy work area much to the dismay of everyone involved.

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Attention to Interior Detail

While the exterior of Sierra Del Oro is opulent, the interior is just as impressive. The office area combines design aspects that effect ease of sale and customer impression.

The high-end market Sierra Del Oro caters to demanded that the facility set itself apart from its competition. Call notes that, “It was the ownership’s acceptance of aggressive management that made it lease up as fast as it did. One part of this was to offer services that differentiated this project from all the rest, such as negotiating with Penske truck to provide truck rentals,” he says. “Penske hands out their dealerships very carefully. There were many U-Haul and Budget rentals in Corona, but the closest Penske dealership was seven miles away.”

The decision was also made to make the facility climate-controlled. This appealed to the pharmaceutical businesses and medical supply companies that the management hoped to attract, as well as to the demographic in the neighborhood who were storing nicer items. Wine storage also tapped into the higher end of the community, and this service required specialized humidity and climate control.

The office at Sierra Del Oro makes use of interior design that rivals many high-end private residences. Valli notes that most statistics indicate that women now comprise 70 percent of the renting public, and that they are the prime movers in household storage. Travertine floors, designer pale mustard walls with recessed monitors, and custom home styled restrooms welcome these customers and create an atmosphere of that is high tech and safe, creating “pride of ownership,” even for renters.

Showpiece Storage

Renters often need assistance in visualizing how much room is actually in a particular size unit, and Golkar goes the extra step in his facility to provide his customers with this information. The office area of the facility includes sample rental units that potential clients can examine without leaving the comfort of the office.

In addition to allowing the staff to be more efficient, (no more rides through the units in a golf cart,) these display units are used to create additional streams of income. One model unit contains a U.S. Postal Contract Center. This use drives between 50 and 300 customers per day to the facility. Not only are potential customers entering the business, the U.S. Postal Service pays to have a contracted station at the location.

A second model unit doubles as a retail show area to sell boxes and other moving supplies. Yet another model unit, this one a 10-by-20, serves as a business service center/conference center. Lunch can be served and commercial clients can hold business meetings at the location. The conference center includes support services such as a fax and copier, and it is a wireless computer hot spot, as well.

Management Software

Markus Hecker, marketing director for SMD Software, Inc., based in Raleigh, N.C., provided the software program to help bring clients to this well-designed facility, and to maximize the profitability of the facility. "Our program has tools that help owners lease up the facility, not necessarily giving away money in the front end, but putting together attractive leasing programs for tenants," he says.

The SiteLink software provides detailed information on clients that pinpoints why clients rent with you, what *Yellow Pages* book they used to find you, and where they live. The program helps managers know who their clients are: their ages, whether they are male or female, and whether they are commercial clients, and if so, what type. The software also monitors occupancy and availability.

With this information, an owner can be responsive to market demand in the pricing of their spaces. This system is much fairer to clients than merely raising rates on a yearly anniversary date, as rates can be set to rise only for renters who have been using the facility for at least six months. Unoccupied unit costs can be raised and lowered in response to the occupancy rate of the facility.

The SiteLink software is also expandable. Options to allow electronic billing, automatic credit card billing, or leasing via the Internet are built in, are available for use when management sees a need to institute the services.

Security Systems

The Sierra Del Oro facility set itself apart from its competitors not only in design and customer service, but also by incorporating state-of-the-art security features. Lance Comstock, president of Scottsdale, Ariz.-based PTI Integrated Systems notes that customers will definitely notice the level of security provided. "The office is saturated with 42-inch plasma screens for video and also with a PTI site graphics system, which is a graphical display of the entire facility. This allows the manager to quickly know what is happening in all areas of the facility without much effort."

In addition, individual door alarms maintain security on every door, and these require a valid code to disarm. There are keypads positioned on special custom bollards, which are strategically located at two different heights—one for cars and one for trucks for customer comfort. Decorative finishing touches were important, even in the security system. According to Comstock, "PTI Apex keypads were chosen for their reliability and their esthetic appeal, which blended nicely with the travertine tile in the office area."

The property includes a high-security wine storage area with a biometric fingerprint reader for access control. Sixteen cameras are strategically placed throughout the property, including two that are located on the cash drawers. "This facility has clearly kept to the standards of state-of-the-art," says Comstock.

The property also boasts an intercom system throughout that is used to pipe music into the facility when not in use for messaging. It includes a message notification feature that announces promotional messages and end-of-day messages. The system was installed by Cary Hutton of Vitrac, located in Orange, Calif.

New Facility Success

When completed, the Sierra Del Oro Storage Center contained 91,545 square feet of rentable space and 912 units. It is well accepted in the community and more than 75 percent of the facility has been leased, exceeding the target established in the proforma.

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Final marketing touches were employed to ensure quick rent-up. Ads in the *Yellow Pages* were placed approximately one year in advance of completion. An on-site trailer was set up during the last few weeks of construction to take phone calls and space reservations. Ongoing marketing includes on-site banners, *PennySaver* advertising, and distribution of door hangers.

Community involvement helps to extend the marketing reach. The management sponsors Little League teams and is active in American Cancer Society fund raising and Chamber of Commerce free truck rentals.

In the end, Golkar believes it is important that owners be involved in the construction process. "Oftentimes, you put something on paper and it gets lost in the translation. I was personally involved from design through construction. I paid close attention to the details to make sure everything I had in mind was followed through and done the way I wanted it to be done."

The right vision, the right piece of land, and teamwork paid off. "I knew I had the right team. I put the landscape architect, the construction manager, and the marketing team together to make this a reality, and pushed them to their limits to basically think out of the box," says Golkar. "This was an opportunity for all of us to do something unique. We all worked together as a team and made it possible."

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