

2004 Facility Of The Year *Construction Winner* Magellan Storage, Torrance, California

By Jennifer LeClaire

The first time was the charm for The Magellan Group. The Los Angeles-based self-storage company is the *Mini-Storage Messenger* 2004 Facility of the Year Winner in the construction category. It's not every year that a young company's first project takes home the honors, but when you put together a stellar team of self-storage construction industry veterans, then anything is possible.

After a challenging 12-month-long conversion project, Magellan Storage opened its doors to the public on September 15, 2003, offering the neighborhood a 166,400-square-foot building with 1,251 units, 76 indoor RV spaces, and a selection of climate-controlled units. The facility has made a positive impact on what had become a neglected industrial area and has sparked new development that will only serve to augment Magellan's victory in the City of Torrance.

"The property was in a very good location," says Kevin Staley, co-owner of The Magellan Group. "The market is strong. Even though there was competition, it was an established storage market and we believed the location and strength of the overall market would lead to its ultimate success. Those factors offset the challenges we knew we would have to face to convert this old industrial facility into a state-of-the-art storage facility."



Photos courtesy of Jordan Architects



The Magellan Vision

This year's Facility of the Year construction winner was once an old paint manufacturing warehouse that dates back to the mid-1950s. But the building had been sitting empty for years until The Magellan Group purchased the 8.91-acre property with a \$15.8 million structured senior mortgage in August of 2002.

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-Gary Albert, Project Manager, Godbey-Monroe



Photos courtesy of Jordan Architects

The property was actually home to two existing structures. Company executives converted the westerly building into a self-storage facility and converted the easterly building into a multi-tenant industrial site. Magellan made the determination early in the program development stage not to cut corners in creating a customer-friendly atmosphere.

Of course, as with any self-storage conversion process, there were plenty of choppy waters through which to navigate. Unforeseen conditions would delay the project's completion several months and cause it to go nearly 10 percent over budget for a total price tag of about \$18 million. But the finished facility is a worthy winner of this year's award with individual show units, a business center with a conference room and work stations, covered loading spaces for customer convenience, a humongous office with plenty of retail products, and a kids' play area complete with video games.

Just 13 months after opening its doors in a competitive Torrance market, in Southern California, Magellan Storage is 55-percent occupied with a nice mix of household and business storage tenants. The facility stores small business, inventory, company records, precious antiques, and simple household overflow. Meanwhile, the second building is being leased to industrial tenants, bringing additional income to The Magellan Group.

“There's been a positive sentiment about the building's transformation and its impact on the community,” Staley says. “We were fortunate, also, because a community of single-family homes were built across the street. It was a nice surprise that improved the neighborhood and helped boost our business. It's always better to be lucky and smart.”

City-Sized Challenges

The conversion team needed both luck and smarts to weave its way through the myriad of construction challenges it faced over the course of the long rehab. The very first obstacle was the host city itself. Pursing a Conditional Use Permit (CUP) in the city of Torrance was risky business. But that didn't stop the developers from pursuing the project.

Bruce Jordan, principal of San Clemente, Calif.-based Jordan Architects, helped the Magellan team wade through the rough waters of the entitlement process with the city planning department. It seems the future storage building did not adhere to the current zoning standards with a 10-foot setback and was therefore considered “legal non-conforming.”

“The construction process took about a year,” Staley says. “We had anticipated something in the order of seven or eight months, but working it through the permit process was challenging. And that’s something you can’t control. It can add to your timeline and add to your costs.”

After a laborious six-month entitlement process, Magellan finally obtained the CUP. The team then sailed into the calmer waters of construction documents, but soon they would face some unexpected challenges that put them right back on choppy waters.

Building A Second Story

Magellan’s goal was to turn an ugly industrial warehouse into a user-friendly storage facility. Jordan designed a scheme to help Magellan play off of its historical name with a nautical theme inside and outside the building. That entailed developing an interpretive bow concept for the façade. The design demanded a high-rise prow indicative of the wooden sailing ships of the Magellan era. Jordan chose stucco because it blended into the body of the self-storage facility, which received new paint color scheme to tie old and new materials together. But that was the easy part. Converting a one-story building into a two-story building and doing an earthquake retrofit was the harder part. And so the fun began.

One of the first difficult scenarios was that the building was dock high, meaning the floor of the building was too high to accommodate the tenant’s need to unload directly from the truck. “We had to build up the site pretty much all the way around to get grade level access for self-storage,” Jordan says. “Then we had to cut a bunch of openings into the exterior wall of the concrete tilt-up building to increase the amount of access. We basically created a loading dock situation.”

It took approximately 10,000 cubic yards of fill to raise the grade elevation and eliminate dock-high loading at the rear of the building to accommodate at-grade loading for customer convenience. The result is covered loading docks that keep customers dry on those rainy California days. Tall elevator cabs allow customers to unpack their storage items easily from the free move-in truck that Magellan provides.

The proposed office area in the corner of the building required many structural columns in order to make the entire facility two stories. To avoid shoring up of the exterior tilt-up walls, the contractor installed structural metal beams, added the second floor, and headed-out around the new second floor steel deck and columns to complete the diaphragm before removing the roof.

During the period of time that the building was open to the elements (about six weeks) it rained heavily on numerous occasions. That, too, slowed down the construction process because crews had to focus on clean up before moving ahead with the interior rehab. Eventually, the entire wood plank roof was removed and replaced with a structural metal deck and standing seam metal roof. Rialto, Calif.-based Rib Roof Metal Systems, Inc. provided the new roof.

During the course of construction, Laguna Hills, Calif.-based general contractor Godbey-Monroe discovered that an existing CMU partition wall, which did not have footings, had to be removed and replaced with a new structural wall. This was a major surprise to the entire development team.

“It was assumed that the wall was put up as part of the original building,” recalls Godbey-Monroe Project Manager Gary Albert. “We were cutting access panels out of the wall for our doorways and corridors and had planned to attach a ledger for the deck. But we found out that not only was the roof not attached, it wasn’t grouted either. That brought the project to a screeching halt. We decided the most cost-effective solution was to tear down that wall and replace it.”

Powerful Challenges

Those unexpected, time-consuming challenges were followed by more unexpected, time-consuming challenges. The property is wide and shallow—about 310 feet deep with over 1,300 feet of frontage road. The building planned for storage use was positioned along the front property line and the rear property lines, giving it an irregular, almost triangular, shape that conforms to the unusual constraints of the lot. Moreover, the property was surrounded on two sides by power line easements owned by the Southern California Edison Company and on the fourth side by a railroad right-of-way. Because the storage building sat on the

original south boundary line, on-site circulation around the structure could only be accomplished by negotiating a long-term lease with Edison. Additionally, all of the overhead power lines along the main street had to be placed under ground. This line item was not anticipated in the design changes, therefore was not accounted for in Magellan's budget.

"We couldn't work within the OSHA parameters of those wires," recalls Albert. "It took some time to work with the local power company to get those placed underground and keep power on to not only the job site but also the neighboring building at the same time."

Next, the railroad spur in the front setback that was vacated and moved. And Magellan had to provide a separate easement area for the Santa Fe Railroad along the existing Edison easement.

"When we were putting up the exits in the back of the facility, Santa Fe Railroad came to us and said, 'Are you leaving us access to our railroads?'" Albert recalls. "They said if they had a derailment, they needed room to bring in an 80-ton crane. So we had to stop the work back there and redesign the rear exits."

Designers had to remove a portion of the landscape area along the front of the buildings. But that led to a problem with the city officials, who said Magellan wasn't leaving enough green space. In order to accommodate the city's landscape requirement, the contractors in-stalled turf-block at the entrance to the railroad easement that doubles as landscaping and hard surface area for the railroad.

Creating A User-Friendly Experience

The interior of the building was at least as challenging as the exterior to covert, if not more so. Magellan wanted a relatively high-end interior to spearhead a thematic corporate image with a limited budget. Jordan developed a wharf warehouse image that had to function as a modern-day office. This presented many unique challenges on the course to completion.

One of those obstacles was maintaining connectivity to the self-storage areas. The hallways are five-feet wide throughout the building, and the triangular building shape and the various curves made for an odd hallway configuration. To prevent customers from getting lost in the building, Jordan developed a way-finding system that included street names for the hallways to help people identify their location.

The flooring material utilizes the latest in environmentally sensitive ecopolymeric flooring.

Chip Cordes, vice president of Ocoee, Fla.-based U.S. Door & Building Components, says trying to fit square units in a triangular-shaped building was an interesting experience. "You can't put a full-sized door in a triangular-shaped unit," he explains. "So you have a bunch of square units, then at the end of each hallway you have some irregular shaped units. That means you have to make some walls longer and some walls shorter and make odd-sized doors to get the most door opening size possible for each irregular unit."

Magellan opted for roll-up doors on all units, even on smaller units where many facilities save money by using swing doors, to maintain the upscale image of the facility that features flush white steel hallways with kick plates that prevent cart damage.

The centerpiece of the facility is the office, which includes a bowed front reception desk situated as an island in the center of the 2,500-square foot office between two new structural columns. Directly behind the reception desk is a large multi-screen security monitor wall set in a simulated wood wall panel. Magellan chose Asheville, N.C.-based Digatech International to provide its security system, which includes main gate control, additional keypad controls to enter specific buildings, elevator keypads that will take customers only to the floor where their unit is located, and individual door alarms. "At the office entry there are four 32-inch video monitors with our DigiGraphics system," says Digatech Sales Manager Rick Stumps. "All the site information is on those monitors and they have heavy surveillance video throughout the facility. They also use our DigiCall Remote Intercom System."

With key viewpoints to all exterior and interior traffic, the office is truly the captain's command pilothouse. There is also full-service customer service area, which includes a double Internet accessible desk area, a kitchen, and access to men's and women's restrooms, which themselves incorporate high-end interior design.

Magellan chose Salt Lake City, Utah-based Centershift to provide its management software. "One of the things I like is that they use two PCs," says Terry Bagley, president and chief executive officer of the company. "The managers can sit down with customers in front of one computer and talk about their needs. Then if another customer comes in they can take a payment at the other PC."

New Construction Materials, Techniques

The flooring material utilizes the latest in environmentally sensitive ecopolymeric flooring. The design features simulated wood planking strips set in a sea of blue-green infill with the entire design centered on a large compass image in true nautical style. The ceiling design utilizes a box beam pattern that conceals steel beams, fire sprinklers and ductwork, while also echoing the wood floor pattern. Brick veneer was used on key areas of the exterior at the entry, new canopied bay windows and then again immediately on the inside face of the exterior walls and columns flanking the reception desk to reinforce an old warehouse image.

"We spent a lot of effort to make the elevator lobby areas stand out," Jordan says. "We used a high-tech epoxy system on the floor to create some unique colors to signify the main entries and the elevator lobbies. We also used canopies over the main entrances to the building to give some architectural identification to where they occur."

A key design element incorporates five storage display units of the most requested unit sizes. In an effort to maximize space, these display units serve a dual function as a merchandise retail area, a children's play area, and a copy room. The two largest sample units are finished with galvanized metal panel walls and simulated storage items to illustrate how much a customer can really fit into a unit.

"Our staff really appreciates having the sample units," Staley says. "Not every customer that comes in is necessarily familiar with self-storage. The sample units allow the customer to see what the product is. The challenge is you have to give up additional rentable space, and, of course, you have to build them. So there is a cost dimension that has to be weighed out, but with such a large project it worked out."

A Learning Experience

Staley's first self-storage construction project was quite a learning experience. What did he learn? First and foremost, he will always appreciate the project's team and the importance of including the contractor early in the development cycle.

"Having all the members of the team in place early helps you anticipate challenges earlier and plan for them from a cost perspective," Stanley says. "It's always helpful as well to ensure that your drawings are complete and fully vetted before you start because you don't want to encounter unknowns or surprises during the construction process."

That wisdom will come in handy as Staley and The Magellan Group embark on another conversion project in Orange County, Calif. Could this company pull off another Facility of the Year award in 2005? Anything is possible. Stay tuned to find out.

Jennifer LeClaire is a freelance writer based in Hollywood, Florida, and a regular contributor to the Mini-Storage Messenger and *Self-Storage Now!*