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DECEMBER 2005

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STOR BEECAVES

Austin, Texas

By Jennifer LeClaire • Artistic Builders Inc., General Contractor • Photography courtesy of Artistic Builders Inc, Andy Bujanos Photography.



Breathtaking views and sustainable design are earmarks of 2005 Facility of the Year Overall Winner, located in Austin, Texas. But no one is saying it was easy. In fact, San Antonio-based SV2020 Joint Venture set out to do the impossible when it selected an environmentally sensitive area near Austin's source of drinking water to build its third self-storage facility, giving a new perspective to the phrase "zoning challenges."

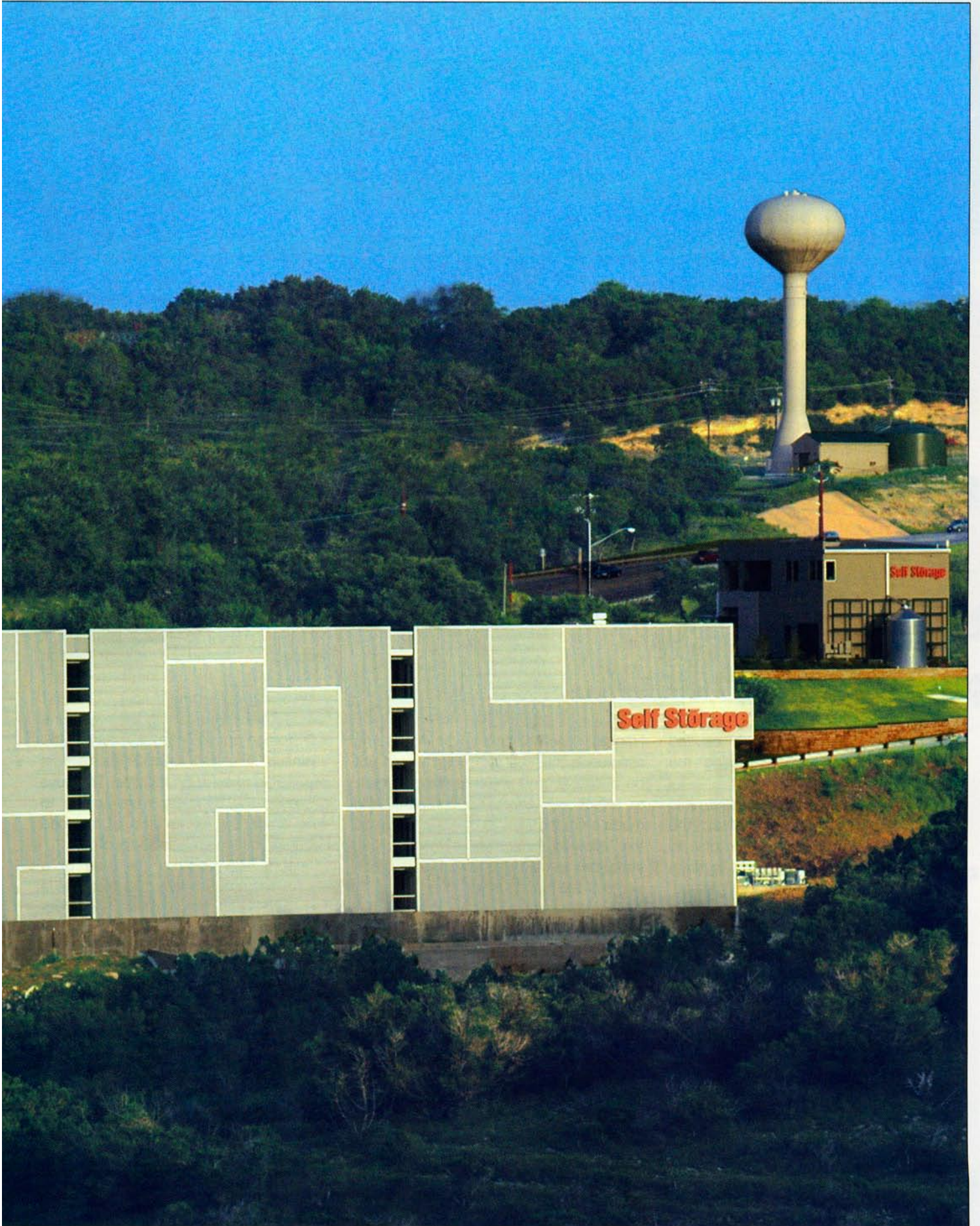
If city requirements weren't enough, neighbors with multimillion-dollar homes and strong opinions compounded the challenge—and the 13-month construction job had even experienced contractors scratching their heads as they were introduced to a site that sat in the midst of a large gorge never designed to house a self-storage facility.

After a challenging, 30-month-long process, Stor Beecaves opened its five-story, 80,000-square-foot modernistic facility to the public in March 2005 in Austin. Many of its

initial customers are those wealthy neighbors who slowed down the construction with their many concerns about hosting a self-storage facility in a luxury residential area. Never the less, with all said and done, Stor Beecaves is making a statement about the next generation of self-storage with a modernistic design that looks more like an art deco office building than a storage facility.

"Stor Beecaves uses corrugated patchwork, galvalume panels, and incorporates concrete decorative block. The exposed steel gives it a high-tech appearance," says Terry Colgrove, principle of Austin-based TDG Architecture. "Three arches spring off the entry of the large, two-story storefront area. Exposed decking and cantilevering canopies shoot off throughout the front entrance to the retail center. What's amazing is we had the same budget of a typical mom-and-pop facility. There was no huge increase in cost to cover these innovations."

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Entering The City Gates

SV202 Vice President John Beecham says the city had a laundry list of environmental rules. Stor Beecaves was part of the city of Austin's Green Builder Program. That means the developers had to comply with various environmental requirements, including the use of some recycled materials, energy-efficient design, and water controls.

For example, the first half-inch of rain has to be collected and filtered before it is released through the ground water systems to reduce pollutants. That required grassy transition zones that naturally filter the water. Parking was also limited to reduce hardscapes, and an on-site recycling center was mandated. There was even a rule that prohibited contractors from cutting or filling more than

"It was almost impossible to build on this site. The guys delivering the concrete were scared to drive down the hill to drop of the load because the terrain was so rough."

—Charles Plunkett, Owner, Artistic Builders, Inc. and Capco Steel Inc.

four feet of the land, which caused major challenges in constructing the sloped driveway.

Beecham says all the requirements were worth the trouble. In fact, the company instructs site selectors to find locations with high barriers to entry in order to cut down on competition. It worked. There are only two other facilities in the high-traffic area. But the site selection process is not what makes Beecham smile when he looks at Stor Beecaves. It was the collaboration with the neighbors.

"The neighbors had some very real concerns about a self-storage facility being constructed next door to their very high-end community," he says. "I am proud of how we listened to them, worked with them, and showed concern for their needs. We came up with something that I think our company and the community can be proud of."

Cooperating With The Joneses

You know the old saying, "keeping up with the Joneses." Well, SV2020 definitely had to cooperate with the Joneses in order to build Stor Beecaves. Beecham says company executives started meeting with the neighborhood homeowners early in the process—a year and a half before ever putting a shovel in the ground, to be exact. In the end, it paid off.

"We presented different design options to the neighbors so that they could play a role in the process because they are not only our neighbors, but they would also be our customers," says Beecham, explaining that the architect implemented several suggestions from nearby homeowners.

The neighbors were particularly concerned about the roof because several of the homes are situated above the valley.

Hence, homeowners wanted some assurance that the roof color would not be offensive, and SV2020 allowed them to select ash gray. The company also made a contribution to the neighborhood that allowed homeowners to purchase trees that would act as a buffer to block views of the facility.

SV2020 even gave up installing the standard large glass panels that allow customers to get a glimpse at the rows of unit doors inside the facility from afar. All in all, Beecham says the neighbors were very clear that they did not want the building to look like a self-storage facility. The only problem was, with all of the neighbors' suggestions, the facility would have ended up looking too much like a research facility for SV2020's liking. So the issue became signage.

"Part of the compromise with the neighbors was to eliminate some of the standard self-storage design features in return for a big sign that says

'self-storage,'" Beecham explains. "That was a great source of pride for me because it worked out for everyone. The sign is very visible."

Building On A Mountainside

Stor Beecaves is tucked away in the corner of a 7.5-acre site that includes natural trails. The site is in a valley, with multimillion-dollar homes on located either side. Moreover, the ground was steep, rocky, and uninviting. Project team members agree it was almost like building on the side of a cliff.

Charles Plunkett, owner of San Antonio-based Artistic Builders, Inc., the project's builder, and Capco Steel, Inc., the project's roofer, still remembers the first time he saw the site. There wasn't a flat spot to be found, and he asked himself, "Where are we going to build a building?" The solution was to tuck the building into the side of the hill.

The two-story office-apartment at Stor Beecaves is at the top of the hill. From there tenants drive down a curving roadway that takes them to the entrance of the facility located on the third-floor. Tenants take an elevator down to the first floor or up to the fourth floor. "I haven't seen such a difficult construction site for a self-storage project in my 20 years in the business," Plunkett says. "It was almost impossible to build on this site. The guys delivering the concrete were scared to drive down the hill to drop of the load because the terrain was so rough."

Indeed, building on the side of a ravine that drops down 130 feet was a somewhat scary challenge, agrees structural engineer Mel Danish, principal of Danish & Associates in San Antonio. "I remember icicles actually hanging on the side of the hill in the winter time. So first we had to dare to go to the side of the hill and cut out a pad to build," Danish says. "We built a retaining wall on the uphill side that was two stories high into the rock, then built our foundation down to the outside edge, and then built a vertical wall. From there we erected the metal building frame." An upside to the difficult site, however, is that the separate, two-story office/apartment now has breathtaking views of the valley.

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The project also called for an unorthodox use of building materials. Corrugated metal panels are designed to be installed vertically, but SV2020 wanted to arrange the panels in a patchwork quilt design that ran both vertically and horizontally. The L-shaped sections give it an art deco, quasi-industrial appearance. The challenge was transitioning the materials. Plunkett says every time the panel changed directions he had to make the connection water-proof so it wouldn't leak.

Even though there was a temporary road, there was no motorized equipment available to get down into the basin. That meant scaffolding the entire building to put the sheeting on.

"We designed a system where we sheeted the building five stories high with a metal panel so that it creates a channel for any moisture to run down to the bottom and away from the building,"

Plunkett says. "On top of that we put a rubber membrane over the whole building, and then sheeted it with the corrugated panels to create the look they wanted. So it's a three-layer system that's water tight."

A Tough Road To Hoe

Even though there was a temporary road, there was no motorized equipment available to get down into the basin. That meant scaffolding the entire building to put the sheeting

on. Every piece of sheeting had to be carried up the scaffolding by hand, piece by piece, and packed by hand. Plunkett says it was like building an inch at a time—although there were tight time constraints.

The driveway presented yet another challenge. The city required a road that was wide enough to allow fire trucks to come in and out. The only available space was at the far end of the building, where Artistic Builders constructed an elevated parking deck out of poured-in-place concrete. Plunkett's crew drilled holes into the ground, filled them with concrete and reinforced steel, and installed a wood framing system.

"The easiest thing to equate it to is building a highway overpass. We analyzed the cost and determined it was better to pour the concrete in place than to use prefabricated concrete," Plunkett says. "Keep in mind this is on the side of a sloping hill that's at least 45 degrees. But we took advantage of that and actually placed a condensing unit for the air conditioning system underneath the elevated parking structure."

The facility's interior gives an open, light, and safe feeling, with natural light coming in through windows. Whenever

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possible, the corridors end on the exterior walls so that there is continuous floor-to-ceiling all the way from the first to the fourth floor.

The final project is an example of sustainable self-storage design. A water quality detention pond collects all the water that drains off the site and filters it so that no water leaves the site. The finished facility has a rainwater harvesting system that collects rainwater off the roof

Stor Beecaves' wine storage was a market test—one that is paying dividends. The wine storage has done extremely well—it is 100 percent occupied.

of the office/apartment and uses it to irrigate the native landscaping. In their ongoing efforts to appease the neighbors, SV2020 even hired the same landscape architect who worked in the surrounding residential neighborhoods to ensure the foliage had the same look.

All The Bells And Whistles

Temple, Ga.-based Janus International provided the doors, interior partitions, and hallways for Stor Beecaves. The roll-up doors with cylinder locks are fairly standard in new self-storage facilities, but a specially-designed soffit was something Janus project manager Pat Nesbitt had only seen one other time—in SV2020 Joint Venture's facility across town. The soffit system incorporated two-by-four light fixtures and a suspended ceiling grid system using corrugated metal in place of tiles to match the facility's exterior.

"Visualize corrugation going across the hallway five feet in one direction and then lights running the other way against it. It gives the interior a modern architectural look," Nesbitt says. "The corrugation runs through the hallway until you get to the windows, then it becomes smooth. It's a very unique design, but it required heavy labor, lots of cutting, special fitting, and precise laying to pull it off. It was very challenging to install."

Lance Comstock, CEO of Scottsdale, Ariz.-based PTI Integrated Systems says because security was top-of-mind for SV2020, PTI developed a complete overall security strategy, beginning with seven keypads on the site—two on the front gate, one for each of the three main entrance doors, and one in each of the two elevators.

Comstock says the interior keypads are recessed into the walls for an even

more detailed look. Each elevator keypad is installed inside the elevators as to prevent access to anyone that does not have a unit assigned on the floor. The managers and owners can use exempt codes which allow them to travel to any floor with one code instead of memorizing different codes for different floors. Elevator controls are clearly the best way to control access to specific areas in multi-floor facilities.

In addition to the usual state-of-the-art bells and whistles such as video cameras and monitors, the facility also features an intercom and music system to help create a warm and friendly environment. The office includes a site graphics program that allows managers to check the status of the entire facility in a quick glance or to print a map for a tenant.

Catering To Upper End Clients

SMD Software, based in Raleigh, N.C., provided the management software, with e-billing, client tracking, and market optimization functions. SiteLink records how each customer learned about the facility so owners can determine how well *Yellow Pages*, direct mail, and other marketing strategies are working.

"SiteLink also tells owners how each section of their storage is performing," says Markus Hecker, marketing director for SMD. "Stor Beecaves, for example,

can track the revenues coming in from their wine storage and compare that to other storage types and services."

Stor Beecaves' wine storage was a market test—one that is paying dividends. The wine storage has done extremely well—it is 100 percent occupied. Consequently, SV2020 is in the process of planning an expansion of this amenity in the next few months. Hence, managers have not rented units in the area surrounding the wine storage so that it can be easily expanded. The facility also features a retail area with all the standard self-storage products located on the first floor of the manager's office/apartment.

Larry Easley, director of operations for Dallas-based Revest Management Services, says the remaining storage units are already more than 20 percent occupied. Easley's marketing initiatives have included door-to-door visits, cold calling on local commercial establishments, brochure distribution, and, of course, the *Yellow Pages*. The area is primarily residential, but Easley says within just a few miles is a large number of potential commercial customers and a mall is currently under construction in the area.

"We have managers on site who truly believe in the marketing concept and making sure the word gets out about the product," Easley explains. "They are doing everything they can to get the word out."

Stor Beecaves is not through innovating yet. Beecham says the company is looking for new sites in Texas and the surrounding states. You can bet that, as they build their self-storage portfolio, the company will be building on sites that other developers may not dare to venture into, and they'll implement sustainable features whether it's required or not.

"This developer is committed to environmentally friendliness," Plunkett says. "They have done a lot of things with this project that they didn't even have to do. Everybody involved is happy. You can't ask for a better outcome." ■

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