





Stör Self Storage Cresta Bella

San Antonio, Texas

by David Lucas

Motorists heading along a stretch of Interstate 10 in San Antonio sometimes experience a spell of distracted driving as they pass a three-story building with unusual stucco walls and three eye-catching, galvanized cisterns that stand guard near the facility's main entrance.

A sign reading "Self Storage" is the only clue to the identity of this structure. Rows of orange rollup doors and cinderblock construction are absent from this design.

Instead, the facility houses a sustainable water catchment system that includes a filtration pond and three rainwater collection tanks holding 19,800 gallons of rainwater.

Stor Self Storage Cresta Bella is unlike any storage facility Texas residents have seen in these parts. The striking design of this unusual facility also caught the attention of *Mini-Storage Messenger* editors, who have named Stor Self Storage Cresta Bella the 2013 Facility of the Year Overall Winner.

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Creating An Unforgettable Identity

Stor Self Storage Cresta Bella is a three-story, 573-unit facility that includes 1,500 square feet of retail space and a 1,000-square-foot on-site manager's apartment. Cresta Bella, which opened in April, also features dedicated wine storage, three floors of climate-controlled units, state-of-the-art security components, covered loading, and an Insomniac Kiosk.

The facility's water catchment system captures nearly 90 percent of the runoff from the roof and drive aisles and an irrigation system distributes the rainwater to the grounds to feed the native vegetation. The two-story water tanks create an unforgettable identity for passersby. "Most customers come in the first time asking about the tanks," says Cliff Wynn, vice president of acquisitions and development for Hixon Properties Inc. "It's an eye-catcher and people are interested in it."

The building architect has a somewhat different perspective on Cresta Bella's most memorable feature. "The biggest element we get repeat comments on is the stucco system, a craftsman developed system where they give it a staining technique that almost makes it feel like leather or more of a rustic character," says Jeff Dallenbach, an architect with San Antonio-based Archcon Architecture.

No matter whose opinion carries more weight, the design elements work together to create a dynamic combination of stucco, stone, and steel. Cresta Bella is a welcoming oasis for customers to store their precious belongings in secure, climate-controlled conditions.

Challenging Preconceived Notions

Favorable demographics in the surrounding area and exceptional visibility of the site attracted the owners to this location. Households in the area have relatively high annual incomes and the market did not contain any Class A self-storage facilities.

The site seemed ideal for storage, however, the municipality, neighborhood, and several other interest groups didn't exactly form a welcoming committee for self-storage. HPI's mission was to create a forward-thinking design that would challenge preconceived notions about a modern self-storage structure. Despite



the obstacles, the attractive location presented an opportunity larger than the challenge.

"We had been looking in the area for years and it was hard to find an efficient site at the right price," says Wynn. "The location, demographically speaking, was the exact area we wanted to be in. With the I-10 frontage, the traffic count was very high."

The parcel was encumbered by three deed restrictions prohibiting self-storage. The restrictions were imposed by a nearby park association, a residential association, and by a commercial organization. In addition, the proposal for self-storage on the site required it to be re-platted through the City of San Antonio, which can be both a lengthy and costly process.

Besides the involvement of the municipality and neighborhood groups, the Texas Department of Transportation played a role in Cresta Bella's approval because of right-of-way entry. In addition, the community's Architectural Control Committee had a say in the selection of building materials, colors, and signage.

Wynn acknowledges the deed restrictions were among the biggest challenges facing the developer. "Convincing all those involved that it was in their best interest to have self-storage at this location was certainly a challenge," Wynn says. "We were able to overcome that through educating them about our particular product."

HPI emphasized to the interested parties that rollup doors facing the street were not going to be used to advertise

self-storage. The developer also noted that self-storage has a low impact on the neighborhood in terms of noise, traffic, and light pollution.

With six other locations in the San Antonio area, HPI successfully demonstrated a reputation for creating aesthetically pleasing facilities that are sensitive to their surroundings.

"The quality and attention to design that we have is similar throughout," Wynn says. "That was critical in that we were able to show them actual facilities that were attractive. Once you're able to show a neighborhood that storage doesn't have to be ugly, they start to warm up, their perception starts to change."

Problems With The Site

While HPI considered the site to be ideal for storage, the physical composition of the land made construction challenging. First of all, the site was less than two acres, which was not ideal to accommodate the proposed 86,000-square-foot building. What's more, the soil and drainage conditions on the property required the contractor to remove, replace, and build up the soil, which added cost and time to the project.

"The site was very small to work with compared to the size of building that's on it which didn't leave us a lot of room to store materials," says Ted Culbreth of SBS Construction in Boerne, Texas.

Dallenbach notes that the project was in the Highway Corridor District, which required the use primarily of stone and

stucco materials with a limited amount of metal in the design. The requirement meant that scaffolding remained on the sides of the building for over two months, which construction crews had to work around.

Soil was removed to a depth of nearly four feet to the limestone base and then built back up in areas so it was level with the street.

Since the site is located over an aquifer recharge zone, environmental regulations required that runoff water had to be filtered onsite. A detention pond was built lower than street level and pumps were installed to remove standing rainwater.

Catchment System

The greenest feature of the facility is the rainwater catchment system, which captures rainwater from 55,000 square feet of surface area. This ambitious project encompasses the building roof, covered parking area, drive lanes, and sidewalks.

"They are the only customer that we've ever done that for," Culbreth notes. "It's

not something we typically see in storage. This project had about 10 things you don't typically see in storage."

The water is directed to drains and taken through an underground pipe system to a sand filtration basin. The system efficiently uses rainfall to effectively meet Cresta Bella's landscaping water needs. It takes just over a half-inch of rainfall to fill the three tanks.

The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality mandates water filtration on the site, but the water catchment system is a voluntary measure HPI adds to many of its building projects. "It's something we like to do when we can," Wynn attests. "We find it provides us with an advantage. People recognize that and often call us and say, 'You're the facility with those catchment tanks.'"

The two-story cisterns that capture rainwater also serve to break up the building's massive façade, which is nearly the length of a football field.

The architect also employed varying materials and alternating shades of

color for visual relief. The most prominent corner, which houses the retail space, extends out from the body of the building and steps down to two stories. The distinctive retail center is clad in Texas native cut limestone, which is the prominent stone on the property. The site is situated with limestone hillside accents and surrounded by dense groves of trees.

"The craftsman developed stucco was somewhat of a pallet to emphasize the cut stone that projects from the building," Dallenbach says. "The native Texas limestone links it to our region, but it also gives you a great distinction of texture between the different elements on the building. So you get the rugged feel of limestone and then it transitions and steps back to a smooth leather-like stucco system."

The design of the stucco was equal parts science and art. "The finish on the exterior stucco was a very specialized stain—it was multicolored," says Stephen Schiffman, president of SBS Construction. "We had a specialized contractor who was an artist who colored the building."

He explains that several acids that react with the concrete were used to turn the wall various colors. "It's pretty dramatic when you drive by. It has more of a contemporary office look than it does a storage look."

Another innovative means the architect employed to break up the visual building mass was through living screens, which are planted with confederate jasmine to provide additional greenery to the facility façade. The landscaping was developed to soften the effect of stone and stucco along the façade. The screens also have the added benefit of helping to keep the building cooler during the summer.

Upscale Retail Space

At the entry to the retail space, the facility has an easily accessible Insomniac Kiosk from Phoenix-based OpenTech Alliance. The kiosk integrates new technology while increasing the convenience of the storage experience. Insomniac allows tenants to reserve and rent units, print leases, pay bills, and purchase locks during traditional office hours or after hours. The kiosk complements the customer service of the on-site manager by providing another option for on-the-go tenants. The retail



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office's polished concrete floor and stucco panel front desk wall are stained to reflect the exterior colors. The Texas native limestone used as an exterior façade element is incorporated into the interior columns of the office.

The sales counter's granite countertops and custom cabinetry complete a high-end look for the retail office. "It's a high income area, so we wanted to maintain a comfortable level for the clientele that would be utilizing the space," Dallenbach notes. "We also wanted to keep it contemporary with a combination of stained floors and cut limestone."

The retail interior features a masonry veneer of limestone, exposed structural steel elements, and energy efficient storefront glazing. Large expanses of storefront glass on the office allow natural light into the space.

The use of exterior elements indoors required several specialized tradesmen to complete. "Not only did we have to find trades that would do those applications on the exterior of building, but trades that

would do them on the interior as well," Culbreth says. "The finish on the interior is held to a different standard than the finish on the exterior, so finding trades that could provide a higher level of finish would be difficult."

Schiffman notes that Hixon Properties considers the appearance of their facilities a critical component of their success. "They build class-A and their operations demand that kind of finish," he says.

The facility is constructed of structural steel and cold rolled, formed steel members that create a 10-by-10 grid system, allowing load bearing walls every 10 feet. The interior hallway systems, which were installed by Temple, Ga.-based Janus International, incorporate two large cargo elevators. R-32 insulation is used under the roof deck.

The site also features a covered drop-off area, where tenants can escape the hot Texas sun while moving in.

The on-site manager's apartment is situated on the ground floor away from the heavily trafficked sections of the property.

The two-bedroom apartment achieves a high-end appearance by incorporating granite countertops, stainless steel appliances, and dark wood laminate flooring.

While many storage operators have moved away from on-site managers on new properties, most of HPI's facilities have them. Wynn sees advantages in offering the apartments. "Sometimes it's hard to pencil out the returns of doing that, but what it allows us to do is retain some of the best managers," Wynn says. "Those apartments are great selling tools to allow them to stay with us long term."

Wine Storage

The 1,125-square-foot wine storage component caters to the facility's upscale clientele. A refrigeration system is designed to maintain consistent temperature and humidity in an ideal setting for wine.

Janus International installed nearly 50 wine storage lockers with a variety of unit sizes from 2.5-by-2.5 to 10-by-12.5. The storage space serves as both a personal wine cellar and commercial storage

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for restaurants. "This is our fourth location with wine storage. Everywhere we've done it has been very high household incomes and it's worked out fine for us," Wynn says. "It helps set us apart from our competition in terms of the perception of quality for the overall facility."

The envelope for the space incorporates a traditional insulated wall system and rigid board insulation in the walls and slab to ensure a clear thermal break from the rest of the building.

SBS made two pours of the foundation under the wine storage space. After the first pour of concrete, a layer of polyurethane foam was installed, then the final pour. "The entire room had to be airtight because if the system leaked air, the room would condensate," Schiffman explains.

Marketing

Prior to opening, a "Coming Soon" landing page was used to build an online presence for Cresta Bella. The marketing strategy included mailers as well as fostering relationships with surrounding apartment complexes. Wynn estimates that 90 percent of the company's marketing is done through Web efforts, including search engine optimization, pay-per-click, and website promotion. The strategy is working as the facility is on target to meet or exceed the proforma lease-up of 36 months.

HPI has not dedicated special marketing for wine storage, relying on word of mouth from current wine customers. "Most of them are either private collectors or members of some wine club, so word of mouth goes a long way," Wynn says.

The signage continues Cresta Bella's green theme by incorporating energy efficient LED lighting into both a building sign and monument sign. Signage required multiple layers of regulation and approval, including gateway corridor design requirements as well as the master planned community's architectural control committee.

Since the facility is located near a military base, design parameters included military dark sky overlay requirements. This ordinance regulates the type, intensity, and positioning of all outdoor lighting to reduce glare and other distractions that could impact the base's night training operations.

"We utilized wall mounted fixtures that were shrouded so only a certain percentage of lighting could project upward," Dallenbach says. "They light up areas that would be used after hours and create a safe environment but not

hinder the dark sky requirements we had to comply with."

Cresta Bella's computer technology operates with SiteLink Web Edition. The company's website uses SiteLink API to pull real-time data that allows for online account management, payments, reservations, and up-to-date pricing. SiteLink integrates directly with Blue Moon, which allows Texas-based operators to print documents more quickly and reduce data entry errors. Blue Moon is designed to reduce paperwork and associated printing and storing costs.

The facility's keypad controlled security elements are offered through PTI Security Systems of Scottsdale, Ariz. Units are accessible 24/7 via security controlled access points. Tenants enter the wine storage area by keying in a passcode, adding another level of security.

Translated from both Spanish and Italian, "Cresta Bella" means "the beautiful crest, or hilltop." Cresta Bella is also the name of the master planned community where the facility resides. As Facility of the Year, Stor Self Storage Cresta Bella certainly lives up to its name, and then some.

David Lucas is a freelance writer and editor based in Phoenix, Arizona.

QUICK FACTS

Facility Owner:

HPI Cresta Bella, LLC, San Antonio, Texas

General Contractor:

SBS Construction, San Antonio, Texas

Architect:

Archeon Architecture, San Antonio, Texas

Kiosks:

OpenTech Alliance, Phoenix, Arizona

Doors & Interior Systems:

Janus International, Temple, Georgia

Security System:

Sitesafe/PTI Security Systems, Scottsdale, Arizona

Management Software:

SiteLink by SMD, Raleigh, North Carolina