

Shipping Containing:

The building blocks of the future

BY BRANDI SMITH

You've undoubtedly seen the viral images as they appeared on your social media timeline: shipping containers gaining new life in architecture. The giant steel boxes, which were built to withstand the stress of shipment, storage and handling, have proven themselves a new tool for builders.

The trend started in Europe, where the containers have been used to create everything from apartments to homes to buildings, such as London's famed Container City. The idea recently transitioned across the pond to the U.S. Here, developers and consumers are examining the benefits of using containers to build or add interest to projects.

That includes Bill Wetterman, who had been wondering what to do with the century-old downtown Waco building he's owned for going on 20 years.

"With all the activity and redevelopment, as well as traffic from The Silos, it was just time to utilize the building for something," he says. "Waco has such tremendous tourism going on right now, we wanted to seize on that."

The building is located on 4th Street, two blocks from the Magnolia Market, basically next door to the historic Dr. Pepper Museum and four blocks off the river, on the one-way entry into downtown Waco off of U.S. 35.

"The location couldn't be much better, in my opinion," says Wetterman.

He explains that he initially considered turning the space into a banquet hall, but decided he wanted something that would bring more energy and vitality to the building. That's when he got the idea to add shipping containers and the concept of The Containery grew from there.

"We started off with looking at leasing the existing building out, then putting some containers adjacent to it," he says. "Well, now we're up to 49 containers programmed in three floors."

That process, Wetterman admits, took time. Generating the \$4.3 million-dollar concept ate



up some of it, as did getting a building permit since the project didn't fit within normal code planning guidelines.

"It took a while for the city to figure out how they were going to treat it. We've had lots of conversations between them and the architect and the engineers," he says, adding that the international success of shipping containers helped in discussions.

Finally, after years of talking about the plan, Wetterman was able to execute it. Construction of The Containery just recently got underway and led to quite the discovery.

"We uncovered an existing basement that we didn't realize was there. Back in the '50s, a tornado damaged the building and they just filled the basement in," he says incredulously. "That's another 4,000 square feet of space that we might turn into a cool art gallery or speakeasy."

That brings the total square footage of the space to 38,000 between the existing building, the newfound basement and nearly 50 shipping containers.

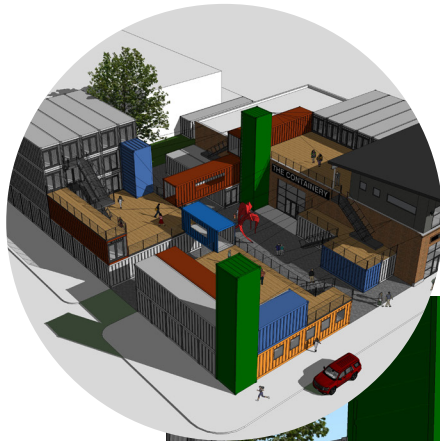
"It will be a mix of little retail stores, a small food hall in the existing building, some office space and even nine or ten hotel rooms," Wetterman says.

The containers will offer a unique retail opportunity, a venue for pop-up shops or opportunity for a small-scale entrepreneur to have a storefront at an affordable amount. Wetterman says 320- and 640-square-foot options will be made available.

Located on the third floor, the hotel rooms, all containers, are currently in the design stage, but Wetterman predicts they will be "fun, cool and popular."

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"They'll be set up so they're key-less. When you make a reservation and book your room, you'll be given a code to let yourself in," he explains excitedly. "It'd be more of a kind of bed-and-breakfast-type delivery than full-service hotel."

The containers will have other uses as well. One will stand on its end on the corner of the property, serving as The Containery's monument sign. An elevator shaft will be housed in a 53-foot-tall container, offering a completely different look and feel than your standard elevator. The project also includes several outdoor decks and patios.

"What we're trying to do is create enough of a mix of different things that it's going to create its own critical mass and its own destination. The feedback we're getting is extremely positive. The Containery is unique, it's different, it's fun," Wettermann says.

He adds that he has some other properties in downtown Waco, but he's ultimately waiting to see if the project proves itself and is scalable. If so, it's something he'd like to duplicate beyond Waco.

"We were able to fit 38,000 square feet on just more than half an acre, so I seen an opportunity to utilize an existing development that may have excess land and parking," says Wettermann. "It opens up the ability to energize and create an experience to reactivate another location. If this proves the concept, I will be looking for other markets to expand into or possibly joint venture with an existing property."

The fascinating thing about using shipping containers as building blocks, almost like giant LEGOs, is that their potential seems limitless. They can add energy and functionality to a project, as they have for The

Containery, or they can create something entirely new, such as Flophouze in Round Top.

The hotel "transforms recycled shipping containers into a unique lodging solution," according to its website. Right now, you can rent one of six Flophouzes, which all have uniquely designed interiors sourced from Kentucky distilleries, demolished Philadelphia schools and defunct Brooklyn laboratories.

A stay at Flophouze could also be considered a test run. The company sells custom-built shipping container homes, which (fittingly) can be shipped anywhere in the world.

Several companies, such as StackHouse, in Hill Country sell customized container homes. Then there's the Houston man who made headlines after he started construction on his three-story, 2,500-square-foot Midtown home, which is comprised of 11 containers.

Build-A-Box Homes, a developer based in the state's largest city, has the goal of building an apartment complex in Houston's Fifth Ward that's comprised entirely of shipping containers.

The project "will create jobs and stimulate the local economy due to the construction, upkeep and maintenance of

the facilities, local philanthropic contributions, and the attraction of new local businesses that will establish their roots and offer their services to the residents of Houston's 5th Ward," says Jerry Hartless on the company's website. "The results of this housing complex will be transformative to the community, elevate entrepreneurial thinking, and raise the economic watermark for residents in the 5th Ward."

The renderings of the complex are stunning. They illustrate a colorful and vibrant, extraordinarily unique development, which breathes new life into the old containers and a neighborhood desperately in need of revitalization.

Habitat for Humanity organizers in North Texas hope for the same result as they develop an entire community out of shipping containers in McKinney, calling it The Cotton Groves. The first-of-its-kind concept for Habitat for Humanity will include 35 units on the 2.75-acre property.

Though many of these projects are early examples of the concept in Texas, the trend is certainly gaining steam and, as they gain success and popularity, we'll undoubtedly see more examples in the near future.

Adds Wettermann: "What we've got going here is very exciting!" ■