



What traits identify a winner? While the question is surely debatable, ingenuity must certainly be among them. Ingenuity provides the resourcefulness needed to navigate any number of obstacles, expected or unforeseen. Case in point: Putting up a storage facility of more than 500 units with a host of special features in a neighborhood with exacting design requirements—and doing it on a peculiar, triangle-shaped site. Inspired by a warehouse in Chicago that had been converted to retail use, the result is a visually pleasing structure sporting a brick façade, floor to ceiling windows, outdoor sconce lighting, and attractive landscaping. And that’s just on the outside. In the lobby area there’s a 2,000-square-foot “boutique museum”.

Past Projects

Constructing such a meritorious facility was the challenge facing Tom and Debbie Smith of Dayton, Ohio, but the Smiths are no strangers to adversity. Deciding to enter the industry during its early 1980s infancy, the couple took out a second mortgage on their home to put up their first store, a 40-foot by 60-foot building in their hometown of Mansfield, Ohio. Expanded several times over the years, that original facility still operates under the name the Smiths first chose for their business, Storage Inns of America, a name which connotes hospitality and not just a place to store belongings.

After moving to Dayton in 1987, the couple built their second facility in the neighboring community of Centerville, followed by several others over the succeeding years. Dayton, and the surrounding areas, including Moraine, Huber Heights, and Troy all began to host the now familiar Storage Inns of America sign. Today the company boasts no fewer than nine locations, ranging in size from 40,000 to over 100,000 square feet.

A Special Site

With this wealth of experience, the Smiths were well-seasoned

pros when they decided to expand once again in early 2016, this time to the Patterson Park neighborhood of Dayton. A location close to the campus of the University of Dayton, several mature residential subdivisions, and a dense base of retail and commercial businesses, Patterson Park is known as a somewhat upscale area. Market research indicated the area was underserved and had an extensive amount of pent-up demand.

The exact site chosen was one quite familiar to locals. From 1950 to 2010, the address, 1450 Wilmington Pike, was home to WHIO-TV and its radio counterpart, WHIO-AM. As the very first TV station to begin operations in the Dayton area, the broadcaster’s art deco building and landmark transmission tower reigned for decades as community fixtures, and are fondly recalled by generations of Daytonians.

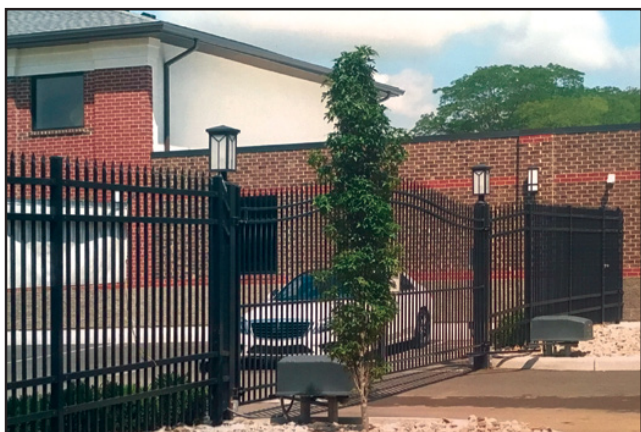
The station represented the crown jewel of its parent company, Cox Media Group, which was founded in the 1920s by former Ohio Governor James Cox. The station’s original building was demolished several years ago, but the location still triggers cherished memories.

“We knew the site was very special to the people of Dayton, and we were intent on honoring that legacy by offering a quality facility that everyone would be proud of,” explains Debbie Smith.

Office Artifacts

The welcoming interior contains enough artifacts celebrating the history of the site and Dayton’s culture of aviation to legitimately be called a museum. One wall pays homage to WHIO, featuring vintage images of the studio, broadcast tower, traffic copter, and staff. Honoring aviation heritage, a wood propeller and fabric swatch from the Wright Brothers’ Vin Fiz Flyer are on display. The Vin Fiz Model EX was the first biplane that flew coast to coast across the U.S. in 1911.

The museum also serves as a marketing tool, with reminders of some of the more specialized services offered, including



climate-controlled wine storage. Denoted by showcase style displays of wine bottles, long-stem glasses, and fine cedar presentation boxes, wine storage is a new offering for the Smiths. "We keep those units at a constant 55 degrees and 75 percent humidity, which is optimal for wine," says Tom. A typical customer is a restaurant with a large inventory to store, often from taking advantage of a distributor's volume discount.

Topping off the lobby/museum is a restored 1928 Ford Model A, promoting the facility's larger units, which are big enough to store an automobile.

Planning And Design Issues

Shepherding the project to completion was no small achievement. In addition to their own standards, the Smiths had to meet community expectations and mandates from the City of Dayton's Planning Division, necessitating a high degree of coordination.

"There was a long approval process, with many layers," says Debbie. In addition to obtaining the blessings of nearby residents and businesses, approval through the city's planning division and ultimately the City Commission were required, steps that proved to be quite time consuming.

"The first step was to go door to door and present our self-storage to our future neighbors. We created a buzz and, in turn, gained the support of those nearby. Next, we presented drawings of our project to the Planning Division at public hearings. We stayed for hours answering questions and concerns and gradually gained support."

For its part, the city had its own requirements. "We were looking for a pedestrian oriented structure," says Brian Inderrieden, Acting Director of Planning and Community Development. "By that I mean a building that is closer to the street to engender a more urban, pedestrian focused environment than an auto based, suburban model. Our goal was to create an atmosphere of walkability."

"The end result was what we wanted," he adds. "The streetscape and the brick walls give the site a different type of feel. They were even able to retain some mature, existing trees which added natural beauty to the site."

The final step was approval from the Dayton City Commission. The Smiths offered a comprehensive PowerPoint presentation designed to explain precisely what self-storage is and who uses it. They also highlighted their well burnished reputations as good corporate citizens, citing their support of the Centerville Arts Commission, the Boy Scouts of America, St. Vincent de Paul, and the Jaycees.

While laborious, the effort paid off, winning the Smiths all the necessary approvals, and allowing the project to commence.

The land was still owned by the Cox Media Group. While negotiations to purchase it proceeded, design and engineering work could begin. In addition to Storage Inns of America, Tom Smith operates Incorporated Investments, Inc., a construction management company that specializes in building self-storage and retail projects. Over the years he's developed a standard template for facility construction.

"Normally with self-storage, the design is straight forward," explains John Roll, the project's architect. "Each job is essentially

a kit of parts that link together to fit on a typical site, which makes the architect's job fairly straightforward. But when Tom brought this to me, I could see it was different. The City of Dayton was rather demanding as to the quality of whatever was built on the site. They certainly didn't want anything that looked like a storage facility facing Wilmington Pike."

The shape of the site also presented challenges. The longest side of the facility, measuring some 100 yards, directly fronted Wilmington Pike. The solution was to enclose the facility behind a series of interlinked, architecturally interesting brick walls. Roll sought to build this main wall along a "human scale" and punctuated it with several pilasters and brick piers designed to disguise the more uniform, functional purpose of the building. At either end is a raised pavilion, intended to provide visual balance. One houses the lobby/rental office and other administrative functions, while the other contains additional units. Each endpoint marks the location of the two vehicular entrance gates.

Additional brick walls, enclose the two remaining sides of the facility, effectively hiding its true identity. Each wall was executed in a dark brown color that lends an air of formality.

The façade of the main building is set back only slightly from the street, allowing for an easement landscaped with manicured grass, white hydrangeas, and newly planted trees. But, beyond this, the site plan makes maximum use of all available space. Almost 50 percent of the rentable units are accessible from the other side of the main structure, dubbed "Building A". The roof line on the side facing inward is slightly lower than the street side, allowing for even greater concealment. Sited at 45-degree angles from Building A are seven free standing structures (Buildings B, C, D, E, L, and K) which house units ranging in size from 5-by-5 (a virtual "closet size" says Debbie) to 10-by-20—large enough for a small car or boat. The wide range of sizes work as a marketing tool. "While there was no other storage in the immediate area, the closest competition did not have the various sizes available to accommodate the requests we receive daily," says Debbie.

Perpendicular to these are three additional buildings (G, H, and I), which, like Building A, are each clad in exteriors of dark brick, since the structures are visible from nearby residential streets. Viewed as a whole, the facility reflects a serious commitment to design and an ingenious degree of space planning.

Since Tom wears another hat as a construction manager, he's developed close relationships with suppliers of key structural components: roofs, doors, interior, and security systems. The Wayne Dalton Division of the Overhead Door Corporation of Dundee, Ohio, was responsible for providing the doors and interior systems. Doors and galvanized walls represent the "guts" of a self-storage facility, with the manufacturer's name being clearly visible. For this reason, installers from Wayne Dalton, a fellow Ohio-based concern, took special care with Wilmington Pike.

"The fact that we're a fellow Ohio company undoubtedly played a role in the effort our crew put forth. They gave it that extra touch," says Brian Wilcox, senior project manager.

An unusual feature Tom included in the specs were mullions between 19 exterior units. Mullions allow a partition wall separating two side by side units to be quickly removed to yield a module twice as wide. For example, a 10-by-15 can be modified to a 10-by-30 in just an hour. Making such a change allows management to meet a specific customer request

or reconfigure available offerings based on market conditions. Mullions also allow for quick removal of two smaller doors and replacement with a larger one. This makes it possible to offer the customer a larger, integral unit.

Security, Software, And Services

Most self-storage facilities have two separate software systems: one dedicated to all security functions (i.e. monitoring gates, alarms, and motion detectors) and one devoted to the management side of the business.

The Smiths worked with PTI Security of Scottsdale, Ariz., to supply the security



system and software. A longtime player in the industry, PTI offers several hardware and software options. For the Wilmington Pike facility, the owners selected version five of StorLogix software with the Falcon XT controller, the most recent iteration. The hardware chosen includes some of PTI's most reliable keypads, cameras, alarms, and gates. Combined, these tools allow the server to archive up to 40,000 events inputted from outdoor or indoor cameras or alarms by use of Ethernet or USB connectivity. Customer access is accurately monitored and controlled, and is offered from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m., 365 days a year.

"The products that Storage Inns of America chose are basic but very robust. They opted for a well-lit and gated site with key pad access, some of the most effective deterrents available," explains Christine DeBord, marketing manager at PTI. "And, since our software is scalable, it's capable of handling additional hardware the Smiths may want to add down the road."

For management software, the owners decided to partner with DOMICO, a provider based in Walnut Creek, Calif.

DOMICO's program makes everything look easy. The main screen consists of a graphic diagram of the facility, with each unit color coded to reveal its status at a glance: occupied, late, vacant, or reserved. Simply hovering the mouse over any specific unit displays the tenant's relevant information on the side panel: personal details, move-in data, payments, and credits. The main menu can display

tables containing aggregate figures with a simple click. An example includes a summary list of unit inventory displayed in list form. The system also performs POS functions, such as accepting in-person rent payments and the sale of packing supplies.

"Our program doesn't have the most 'flashy' of features. Instead, it's rather a tried-and-true solution, and has proven itself to be the most efficient and straight forward management software in the industry," says Rodney Vernon, vice president for business development for DOMICO.

A logistical necessity is for management and security software to interface when handling functions relevant to both. One example is the question of access to customers whose accounts are delinquent.

"When a customer rents a unit, our system generates an access code which is shared with the management program. If a customer falls behind on their bill, the management software tells our program to deactivate that code and deny access until the account is paid," says DeBord. "We have a long history of working closely with DOMICO and know how to seamlessly mesh with their products."

But despite all the Wilmington Pike facility has to offer, the biggest reason for its success is something intangible: the matchless level of customer service they continuously offer. For the Smiths, service is an ongoing process. Debbie explains it as if she is advising others, "Listen to your customer now and over the years. Keep

doing what works. Change can be good also, so have an open mind.



Feedback from customers helps with planning future projects."

For the Smiths, the "personal touch" aspects of customer service and networking are both musts. These include knowing each tenant by name and becoming an established fixture in the local business community. By becoming acquainted with and patronizing area restaurants, landscapers, and home improvement companies, the couple has cultivated a loyal fabric of local commercial customers.

Seeing themselves as stewards of their customers' belongings, the Smiths remain ever humble, always striving to improve their level of service. ■

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DEVELOPMENT TEAM

Builder: Incorporated Investments, Inc.

Architect: Roll and Associates

Management Software: Domico Self Storage Software

Security System: PTI Security Systems

Roof: DBCI

Doors and Interior: Overhead Door Corporation