

2010  
SELF-STORAGE  
*Facility* OF THE Year  
CONVERSION  
WINNER

Life Storage | Chicago, IL

By Erica Shatzer

Originally constructed in 1911, the historic building that now houses LifeStorage South Loop, *Mini-Storage Messenger's* 2010 Facility of the Year Conversion winner, has undergone many changes over the last 100 years. The site, which consists of three separate parcels of land that were consolidated into one building, started its life as a department store, was transformed into a warehouse building, and then became a furniture manufacturing facility before being converted into a modern, efficient self-storage facility.

LifeStorage is located within a heavily populated area of the South Loop of Chicago. Much like the facility, the neighborhood in which it resides is undergoing its own renovations. The area is slowly becoming a safer, middle-class apartment dwelling community with the help of the local area Alderman, Patricia Dowell, who has progressive initiatives for improving the area with new housing, better schooling, and new businesses to serve the community. The South Loop area is home to McCormick Center, which hosts major trade shows as well as meetings for Dowell's new city development plans.

Although the building had been vacant for several years, the principals of LifeStorage Centers, LLC, Jean L. Jodoin and Christopher S. Barry, knew the buildings were in decent shape. However, despite being in fair condition, several areas required major structural and demolition work before it could become the facility they envisioned.



BEFORE



AFTER



## QUICK FACTS

**Owner:**

LifeStorage Centers, LLC

**General Contractor:**

Cobalt Commercial Construction, LLC

**Architect:**

Groundwork, LTD

**Metal Framing:**

Waikato Enterprises

**Management Company:**

LifeStorage Centers, LLC

**Doors & Hallway Systems:**

Janus International

**Security System:**

Chamberlain Access Solutions

**Management Software:**

SiteLink by SMD Software, Inc.

**Rentable Square Footage:**

73,427 feet

**Total Number of Units:**

1,064

### Prepping For Construction

Before LifeStorage Centers could get to work, they had to clean house. The structure had been abandoned for years and was inhabited by homeless persons and drug addicts for over a year prior to LifeStorage taking possession of it. In addition to the mess they created, the furniture manufacturer left behind paint booths and miscellaneous equipment that had to be removed from the building. Offices and mezzanines had to be removed as well before construction could commence.

LifeStorage, which owns and operates 10 facilities throughout the Chicagoland area, wanted to showcase the vintage building's nice qualities and preserve the beauty of the structure. To make their dream a reality, they utilized their own general contracting company, Cobalt Commercial Construction, which they created in 2006 to control costs, minimize errors, and keep the project on schedule.

The company then hired Groundwork, LTD of Buffalo Grove, Ill., to handle their architectural needs. David Wytmar, partner and head of architecture, oversaw the undertaking and recalls several challenges that made this conversion project unique.

### Site Challenges

According to Wytmar, the biggest obstacle was that it was an older edifice with two somewhat newer additions. At one time it was actually three separate buildings: 2341 S. State Street, a three-story building with no basement; 2351 S. State Street, a four-story building with a basement; and 2361 S. State Street, a five-story building with a basement.

Because the additions were added at different times, there were various construction materials and methods used throughout the structure. "There were different layers that had to be dealt with," Wytmar says. "Every floor and section had its own unique situation that had to be addressed."

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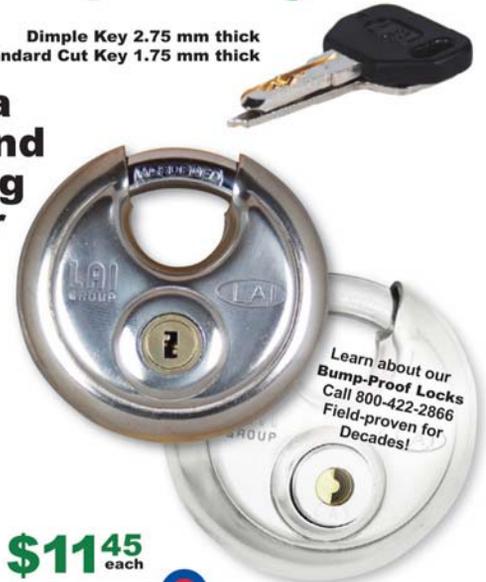
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In fact, while working on the site, Wytmar discovered that several renovations had been made to the building in 1931, 1937, and 1940. During one of those renovations, a fifth floor was added to one of the buildings. Needless to say, that floor did not match the four floors below it.

The various construction materials and methods used throughout the structure made it difficult to meet the current building codes. However, Wytmar says that his detective work paid off. "Knowing how they created it made it easier to figure out how to fix it," he says.

Energy and accessibility codes also were difficult to meet due to the building's many levels. To create an entrance at street level, the first floor of the building had to be lowered three feet. To accomplish this daunting task, the floor was removed, the structure's columns were reinforced, and a portion of the basement had to be filled in. Another challenge and huge undertaking was removing approximately 3,000 square feet of heavy timber composite that was located on the first floor of the original building to accommodate the drive-in loading dock and retail area. Additionally, the eight steps to the front door had to be removed to create a connection to the street and loading dock.

The multiple buildings also made it difficult to draft a unit layout. "The building was cut up," says Benjamin Johnson, Design Team Manager for Atlanta, Ga.-based Janus International. "We had to work around all of the obstacles." The obstacles Johnson is referring to include the existing walls, shafts, and columns. According to Clay Collins, Central Region Sales Manager for Janus, the design team revised the layout seven times before the unit mix was approved. "Jobs evolve as you get into it," Johnson says.

Even getting the materials to the proper floors was a difficult task. In fact, the windows had to be removed in order to get the materials inside the building. The doors, which include the company's standard 650 model of third-generation roll-up doors as well as swing doors, had to be hoisted to the upper levels of the building and through the windows from the outside. Due to the heights of some of the existing ceil-

ings, which were too low for roll-up doors, 716 swing doors were incorporated into the project. Both the swing and roll-up doors are painted silhouette gray with white trim and LifeStorage green (a shade of green similar to lime).

As if all of these challenges weren't enough, the self-storage facility also faced

a roadblock with parking and signage. Within the city, parking is limited. Typically, only on-street parking is available. To remedy the situation, LifeStorage Centers pays a monthly fee to the Chicago Transit Authority for the right to utilize the parking spaces located behind the property.

Gaining approval for the site's signage was another difficult task. The signage had to first be approved by Alderman Patricia Dowell. After receiving her approval, the plans had to be reviewed and approved by the city council. But the time-consuming process didn't end there. Once the signage was approved, applications had to be filled out for permission to use the public right of way. Then, LifeStorage was required to pay the permitting fees. To boot, the city reserves the right to collect an annual fee for this privilege.

### The Work Continues

There were many various construction tasks that needed to be completed as well before LifeStorage could open its doors. A new roofing membrane was installed on the structure to prevent leaks. And to increase the energy efficiency of the building, insulation was added to the structure and all new windows were installed. The windows provide plenty of natural lighting to help reduce utility costs.

LifeStorage also had to replace several other big ticket items. A complete new mechanical system with 10 new rooftop units was installed. A new transformer,



as set by the local electric company ComEd, was installed for the building. Two new multi-stop elevators by Kone Elevators were installed in the existing elevator shafts. All the existing plumbing was replaced with new plumbing and new sprinkler systems were put into place. With fire safety in mind, the company also coated the exposed wood timbers with intumescent fire-proof paint.

### Vintage Charm With A Modern Flare

Part of LifeStorage Center's objective for this project was to retain the vintage charm of the structure. "In the renovation process, we had to showcase the nice qualities of the building," says Wytmar. "We had to hide the modifications and preserve the beauty of the structure."

The building kept its brick detail on the outside and the heavy timber look in the office area. A fireplace with reclaimed wood mantel in the lobby creates an inviting, warm atmosphere. Awnings that adorn the first-floor windows and planters add visual appeal to the exterior of the L-shaped building which has exposure from two frontage streets. Located on the corner, Wytmar appropriately calls it "a nice cornerstone for the neighborhood."

To make the building more recognizable to the public as a storage facility, display windows and corridors were constructed above the entrance to showcase self-storage's iconic roll-up doors. Janus assembled three of these special display

areas, which were made from liner wid-ows with false doors built into the window seals four feet off the floor.

Other noteworthy finishes incorporated into the facility include epoxy floors in the drive isles and contractors' units, as well as vinyl composite tile floors and carpeting.

**Amenities and Extras**

LifeStorage of South Loop offers its customers a wide variety of amenities, services, and security. For starters, the 600-plus square foot office area provides comfortable lounge seating and a flat-screen television. Customers can enjoy a freshly brewed cup of Starbucks® coffee from the coffee bar while they relax in front of the stone fireplace or browse through the retail space, which offers multiple displays of packing, moving, and shipping supplies. When customers are ready to complete their paperwork, they can take a seat at the transaction desk that features high-quality laminate panels and a granite

countertop. A community board is stocked with brochures and business cards of local businesses for the convenience of the facility's customers. Other convenient amenities at LifeStorage include U-Haul rentals and 24-hour access to the site.

In addition, the facility offers heated, air conditioned, and humidity-controlled units. LifeStorage tenants have access to the facility's business services, which include free Wi-Fi and a sleek conference room with a projection screen and large conference table that accommodates 10 people. The facility even allows customers to ship and receive packages. Other business-related amenities include mailboxes with business addresses, records storage, and shredding and data destruction services.

When it comes to security, LifeStorage didn't miss a beat. The site features Chamberlain Access Solution's flagship product: the Falcon XT Access Control System. The Falcon XT is the core of



the access system and enables the facility to expand its security offerings in the future. Joe Dahlquist, product manager of Scottsdale, Ariz.-based Chamberlain Access Systems, calls the Falcon XT the "brains" of the system. "It allows them to expand," he says. "It grows with the facility as it evolves."

The facility boasts 48 cameras that digitally record activity around the clock. Additionally, six keypads, each complete with intercoms and pinhole color cameras, are stationed at key access areas on the premises. The intercoms were essential to providing tenants with the ability to communicate with the facility's management team. Two of those six keypads are positioned at the facility's elevators to restrict a tenant's access to the floor on which his/her unit is located. Three flat-screen TVs located behind the front desk display the site map and images captured from the casino-style surveillance system. Chamberlain worked with LifeStorage to design this state-of-the-art access system to provide staff with a clear picture of who is on the site at any given time.

**Marketing Mojo**

Prior to opening, LifeStorage hit the ground running with its marketing campaign. The facility left no stone unturned, and the results of their efforts are impressive, to say the least. In less than a year's time, the facility has managed to rent 256 units for an average of over 30 move-ins per month. The facility is on course to reach 90 percent occupancy in less than two and a half years, and the site is currently 28 percent over its projected income. So, how did they do it?

For starters, they placed large "Opening Soon" banners on the building. They joined three chambers of commerce in the area. They attended as many events

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as possible and started networking with local businesses. E-blasts were sent out to chamber members in the area to announce the facility's grand opening. There was also some fancy footwork; the facility's managers went door to door to local businesses and asked the business owners to display LifeStorage brochures.

After opening their doors on Nov. 16, 2009, LifeStorage printed a full-page advertisement in the local *Yellow Pages* and a full-page ad in the South Loop Chamber Member Directory. The facility also advertises in various local newspapers and publications, and offers coupons within local coupon books.

In addition, LifeStorage South Loop has been busy hosting various community and networking events to establish its presence within the neighborhood. The site has opened its doors to its tenants, business contacts, and neighbors for events such as pictures with Santa, Toys for Tots drive, an Easter egg hunt, and a back to school promotion. And during these events, LifeStorage hands out plenty of promotional items such as balloons, pens, pencils, coffee mugs, T-shirts, hats, and notepads. Constant Contact e-blasts are utilized to invite guests to the events. LifeStorage even keeps its customers informed of the latest happenings with monthly newsletters.

LifeStorage utilizes SiteLink Web Edition by SMD Software to send notices

of promotions and public sales events to the site's customers as well. SiteLink Web Edition automatically records leads from all channels and monitors efforts to convert leads to paying rentals. Web Edition eliminates manual tracking and entering of leads and marketing data.

"Owners demand thorough and accurate analysis of the client base in order to craft advertising and marketing campaigns, including e-mails," says Jim Ferguson, Marketing Manager of SMD Software. "With our Web Edition, LifeStorage has complete customer profiles complete with tenants' spending behavior and marketing data. Using Web Edition's unique analysis, LifeStorage can create the right promotions and broadcast appropriate messages for current, past, and reservation tenants. Because Web Edition includes season [time of the year] in tenants' buying behavior, operators know which messages and specials to release at the right time of year."

Additionally, LifeStorage employs referral programs to encourage tenants to bring in new customers; anyone who refers a new rental receives \$50. There are also separate referral programs in place for Realtors and brokerage firms that refer renting customers to LifeStorage.

LifeStorage is on top of their Internet marketing game, too. They have a Web page featuring the new South Loop location on the LifeStorage Web site and they feature online specials on that page. To increase their online presence, the site launched a LifeStorage blog and established profiles on several top social media sites, including Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, Merchant Circle, and Yelp. LifeStorage also utilizes pay-per-click advertising and search engine optimization to augment the traffic to its Web site.

With its high-tech facility, extensive amenities, state-of-the-art security, and stellar marketing campaign, it's safe to say that LifeStorage of South Loop is already on a clear path to success! 🏠



Erica Shatzer is a freelance writer and editor based in Hollidaysburg, Pennsylvania.

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