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# Sketching Out Your Project

## 10 design guidelines for your next development

By Robin Murphy

**W**hen it comes to designing a self-storage facility, there's no one-size-fits-all solution. It's important to be prepared for the unexpected and to team up with an architectural firm that'll approach your project's unique features and challenges respectfully. Following are 10 factors to consider in the early stages.



### 1. Follow Local Standards

As with all types of commercial development, the design-review process has an impact on self-storage, though it may not influence every project. The process is usually triggered by the scale of the building, its intended use and property zoning.

Design guidelines are often written to prioritize the pedestrian experience at the street/building interface, taking into consideration weather protection, transparency, blank walls and modulation requirements as well as attention to materials, colors and textures present in the urban realm. It isn't uncommon for these standards to result in a homogeneous cityscape of structures that look and feel very similar, regardless of their purpose.

It's the responsibility of the design team to work within local guidelines to create a responsive building that can easily be deciphered by passersby. This Portland, Oregon, project is a successful example.



### 2. Consider the Environment

It's generally true that the more rural a self-storage facility is, the more likely it is to have larger, drive-up units. Conversely, urban facilities tend to have smaller, elevator-accessed units. But urban meets rural in this Seattle facility. Though the building contains predominantly smaller units, at the ground level, it has a climate-controlled, high-bay drive-thru that allows customers to access their units directly from their vehicle and out of the elements.



### 3. Blend With the Community

A self-storage facility's architectural form and massing need to relate to the community's local history. Like all structures, it must follow building and zoning codes, but it should also respect the surrounding culture. At Sherlock Self Storage in Duvall, Washington, rural roof forms have been instilled with modern materials, aligning the building with the idyllic feel of the area. This project would likely not fit in an urban environment, but it's right at home here.



#### 4. Use Less, Get More

It's frequently a smart development decision to adapt and repurpose existing building stock. It's also good for the environment. This three-story, 91,000-square-foot facility in Portland was initially a single-story, tilt-up manufacturing warehouse. It was tall enough to allow two stories within the original envelope, but not three.

The solution was to brace the walls and remove the existing roof. A new roof was constructed 5 feet higher, along with a modern glass-tower element and accessible loading area. The new floors were isolated from the original tilt-up walls through a seismic gap. The result is a slightly larger building footprint that leverages the bones of an existing industrial facility. This project is not only sustainable, it saved the owner time and money.



#### 5. Reach for the Sky

The obvious way to develop on a high-value, tight urban site is to go with vertical construction. However, the site of this impressive, six-story facility in Portland didn't come with such a clear answer.

At the time, the Oregon Structural Specialty Code didn't allow multi-story self-storage buildings to exceed three stories. To get this project approved, we submitted an alternate materials and methods (AMM) request to allow a 2B (construction type) over a 1A building. The successful argument in this case was that the future edition of the International Building Code would allow such a structure.

The AMM resulted in several conditions being applied to the final building, such as increased sprinkler density and improved communications in the stairwells for firefighters. It wouldn't have been uncommon to add fire walls, but that wasn't necessary in this case.

#### 6. Stay in Shape and Get Creative

Creative designs are often necessary to fit an awkwardly shaped development sites. Interbay Self Storage in Seattle had to be constructed as long and rectangular; however, the configuration resulted in some long travel distances for customers from the loading area to their units. The solution was to create two loading zones, one at each end of the building. The primary loading area is adjacent to the office and two elevators. The secondary is at the far end, adjacent to a third elevator. This kept the walking distance from any elevator to about 140 feet.



#### 7. Know What's Below

Some site constraints may not be immediately apparent. This self-storage property in Everett, Washington, had an existing cellular tower, which meant the utility easements needed to be carefully considered in the building, site and fire-access design.

The property also included some interesting topographic challenges. Various alternatives were studied three-dimensionally, and the final solution was selected early in the design process. The result was precipitous drive access, placement of the office in the basement, and a second, two-story storage building near the cell tower.



## 8. Work Around Obstacles

Some properties inherently have more design constraints than others. There are also building programs that add complexities beyond a straightforward self-storage use. Rainier Storage and Work Lofts in Seattle faced both!

The site is adjacent to a major highway and on a sloped site, where the existing access road was modified for multiple levels of parking. It was also built on piles in a liquefaction zone and positioned over a 9-foot-diameter utility tunnel. Due to its height, the facility is classified as a high-rise.

The nine-story structure required constructed parking, a caretaker's residence and an office, plus users must be segregated for security reasons. The project also needed to be expandable at parking levels for a phase-two extension.



## 9. Stay in Balance

It's my contention that no building should be designed to look as though it's for another use, but that doesn't mean a self-storage building has to be a boring box. Through careful use of glass, massing and material moves, a facility can be well-designed to fit its context and be readable as storage.

When viewing a building in its entirety, it should be dynamic and well-balanced, as with Ballinger Heated Storage in Shoreline, Washington. It has two tower elements that are primarily transparent, which help to balance the opaque walls.

## 10. Corner the Market

Projects built on corner urban lots are held to a much higher design standard than those built mid-block. In fact, many design guidelines enhance corners as definers of the landscape. This Seattle CubeSmart is a good example. The four-story, 106,000-square-foot building features a drive-thru with internal loading that required an AMM to fit the city's building code.

To navigate the design-review process, the corner element was given a special hierarchy using brick, glass and height. It's set off from the rest of the opaque building with recessions in the façades called "hinges." This commercially-zoned property is adjacent to several single-family properties, so special consideration was given to privacy and security concerns.



A self-storage project doesn't have to be a cumbersome with cookie-cutter results. Nor must it have a negative impact on the surrounding environment. By thinking outside the box, a facility can be used for its intended purpose and appreciated by all within the community it serves. **ISS**

*Robin Murphy is owner and principal of Jackson | Main Architecture P.S., which has designed hundreds of self-storage facilities in rural, suburban and dense-urban areas. He's a licensed architect in more than 15 states, with 25-plus years of experience in the self-storage industry. Murphy is a LEED-accredited professional, and a member of the American Institute of Architects and the National Council of Architectural Registration Boards. To reach him, call 206.324.4800; email [jackson.main@jacksonmain.com](mailto:jackson.main@jacksonmain.com); visit [www.jacksonmain.com](http://www.jacksonmain.com).*