



LifeStorage Centers of River North Chicago, Illinois

by David Lucas

Patrons of the upscale Trunk Club Men's Outfitters clothier in Chicago enter a lobby adorned with three chandeliers, a contemporary fireplace, rich dark woods, and black granite slab. A seating area in front of the fireplace features an Isamu Noguchi sculptured glass top table and sleek black tufted leather and chrome Barcelona Pavilion chairs. The smell of fresh-brewed Starbucks coffee greets their senses as Trunk Club customers take an elevator to the building's top floor, where they can enjoy a 4,000-square-foot rooftop deck that affords magnificent views of the city.

While they are fitted by a personal stylist, customers can take in the exposed brick and wood beams that have been preserved during the reconstruction of the 100-year-old building that once housed a manufacturing operation. A lush, 3,600-square-foot green roof makes a statement about the building owner's environmental concerns.

What may not be immediately evident to Trunk Club customers is that this lavish retail environment co-exists with a self-storage facility that occupies nearly three-fourths of the building. LifeStorage Centers of River North is the new crown jewel of the company that operates 20 self-storage locations in the Chicagoland area.

LifeStorage River North is housed in a rehabbed concrete and masonry building that was designed around the turn of the 20th century in the "Chicago School" architectural style. The 103,000-square-foot, classic-loft building stands seven stories tall and maintains the beauty and integrity of the original historic structure.

The renovation project, which has earned *Mini-Storage Messenger's* Facility of the Year Conversion award, makes a striking statement about the new look of self-storage in the 21st century.



A Can't-Miss Building

Chicago drivers heading south on I-90/94 into the city can't miss LifeStorage's newest self-storage facility on Ohio Street. The location was the compelling reason Christopher Barry and Jean Jodoin, the principals of LifeStorage Centers, pursued ownership of the building for nearly five years.

This building was part of an adjacent condo project and the owners held onto the Ohio Street structure in hopes of converting it to retail or office use. When the condos were completed and specific plans for the older building had not materialized, it became apparent to Barry and Jodoin that it could end up on the market.

"It has such an incredible presence and branding opportunities that we felt it was worth the challenge and fight to get it," says Barry. "There's a tremendous amount of residential east of us that does not have a location for storage. That's why we chose the battle to go after this building."

The site is located in Chicago's Near North Side neighborhood, approximately two miles from the Central Business District. The area contains a mix of renovated loft/office buildings, new residential condominium towers, and townhomes. The construction activity has increased the area's population dramatically during the past decade.

Construction Challenges

In addition to the visibility and branding opportunities the building presented, it also posed numerous design and construction challenges.

The building, at one time the headquarters of the Bowne Co., a large printing firm, had been vacant since 2001. The seven-story building was constructed of masonry and timber circa 1900. Its exterior walls are clad in clay brick masonry with limestone sills and decorative banding. The face brick masonry was preserved on the north and west elevations.

The most challenging part of construction was posed by the exterior work that had to conform to the city's "make safe" codes. The building sits on a major thoroughfare in the nation's third largest city and pedestrians regularly pass by the building. As one of the busiest roads in the city, it's called the gateway to Chicago.

Loose bricks and limestone had to be removed with voids temporarily caulked or patched to keep out water. Metal strapping and galvanized hardware cloth were installed at the parapet of the two northern

corners as a secondary safety measure. Cobalt Construction, the project contractor, erected 100-foot-tall scaffolding along the entire height of the building along with tented dust protectors to ensure the safety of pedestrians.

"Working off a 100-foot scaffold surrounding the whole building on the gateway to Chicago was very challenging," recalls Steve Osborne, construction manager. "We were putting materials inside the building and bringing them by hand up the scaffolds and out the windows. A lot of masons were bringing bricks inside the building and carrying them up the floors and handing them out the windows."

When a freight elevator was out of operation, a hand crane was devised to transport materials.

A tight alleyway separates the LifeStorage building from a neighboring skyscraper, so there was no room for a Dumpster. This presented an immediate challenge for delivering materials and removing debris. "We had no way to bring in material," Osborne says. "There was no loading zone; we had nowhere to park cars." Cobalt had to use

creativity as well as brute force to solve the problem. "We punched a hole in the side of the building and exposed the building to the alleyway," Osborne says.

To handle debris removal from the interior demolition, the contractor removed an interior stairwell and used the space to create a garbage chute. The construction company partnered with a local company to develop a custom lift to transport a bobcat machine to the various floors during demolition. On each floor, the bobcat smashed through walls and pushed the debris down the chute to the basement.

At the same time, the basement was serving as a collection point for all the debris, workers were busy excavating the lower level to accommodate indoor loading bays and truck-high loading docks. The basement was one of the biggest undertakings of the project, involving the removal of 25 percent of the ground floor and infilling the area to accommodate a street level entry and new loading dock. While the floor was being removed, crews had to reinforce the main columns to support the building structure.

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The pit for a new elevator was not deep enough, so workers had to break through two floors consisting of concrete and blocks of limestone. The work was below the water table because of the proximity of Lake Michigan. "We spent days trying to get it level and then we had to use waterproofing agents just to keep the water from coming into elevator," Osborne says, adding that the water was channeled into a drain and then to a sump pump.

The proximity of nearby high-rises presented another challenge to the project. Original plans called for placing 60-ton air conditioning/heating units on the roof, but the nearby high-rises combined with Chicago's notorious winds precluded using a helicopter to place the units on the roof. Instead, each floor was designed to accommodate independent five-ton A/C systems for climate control.

The building is topped with a green roof imported from Michigan. The owners considered contracting with certified installers for the green roof, however, the cost would have been exorbitant. So, Cobalt became a certified green roof installer and did the job instead of hiring it out.

The installation had to be done during an eight-hour window. As luck would have it, the heat index that day was 120 degrees, making it the hottest day of the year in Chicago. The green room components, consisting of low-water use vegetation, were trucked in from Michigan in the morning, and the plants were transported from the loading dock, up the elevator, and placed onto the roof deck.

Another complication was an infestation of crickets that had stowed away in the plants. The workers had to contend with jumping crickets in the elevator and on the roof throughout the installation.

Tenant Influence

The strategic location of the LifeStorage building was not only ideal for self-storage, but for retail use as well. That's why the Trunk Club Men's Outfitters owner approached Barry and Jodoin about leasing out the top floors of the renovated building.

The sixth and seventh floors of the building were transformed into an open, loft-like space to accommodate the Trunk Club. The space was remodeled to the tenant's specifications, so the look and feel of the original brick building were preserved by restoring maple floors, sandblasting the ceiling paint to expose the raw wood, and leaving the brick walls untouched and exposed.

The Trunk Club's request to add a rooftop deck for their clients and employees complicated the construction process. "What we found out was that the rooftop deck in the City of Chicago has a tremendous amount of scrutiny and challenges through the building code," Barry says. "The elevator system had to go up another floor and we had to take the stairways up another floor. We had to put in structural steel to support the roof deck. We had lots of additional costs and time delays."

The rooftop demolition included removal of the old water tanks and boilers. Since the pitch of the roof is steep, the roof deck had to be elevated. The additional challenge was to line up the elevator and the stairs with the roof deck. "Trying to line up the elevator and the staircases with the deck was a nightmare," Osborne recalls.

The tenant's influence extended from the roof all the way to the lobby. "The owner of the Trunk Club was concerned about what his clients saw upon entering the building," says architect Mark Price of Sullivan Goulette Wilson, Ltd. "The client required a hotel lobby feel. Our goal was to blend the old with the new using much more upscale materials—granite and nice dark woods to complement the exposed loft feel."



QUICK FACTS

Location:

Chicago, Illinois

Date Opened:

August 22, 2012

Rentable Square Feet:

90,637

Number of Units:

Climate Controlled – 636

Facility Owners:

Jean Jodoin, Christopher Barry

General Contractor:

Cobalt Commercial Construction

Architect:

Sullivan Goulette Wilson, Ltd.

Management Software:

SiteLink

Security System:

PTI Security Systems

Doors & Hallway Manufacturer:

Janus International

The architect designed the lobby to greet visitors with a four-foot, sphere-shaped chandelier made of wrought iron centered in the entrance area. Two smaller chandeliers complement the larger fixture and are visible at street level at night. The LifeStorage office features slate-gray tiles and a black granite slab at the sleek contemporary fireplace along the first floor, providing a comfortable environment.

The 3,000-square-foot retail office houses a fireplace, big-screen TV, and seating area. The office features multiple merchandise displays that hold retail items such as boxes, locks, packing tapes, moving blankets, and furniture covers.



The focal point of the retail office is a 20-foot long panoramic picture of Chicago that is mounted on a curved wall and lit by halogen lights. The transaction desk is finished with a granite top. Behind the desk is a security and site display panel integrating three flat-screen TVs displaying the digital security and video surveillance images that are captured throughout the facility. Adding to the ambience, Starbucks coffee is brewed throughout the day, crating a warm and friendly atmosphere for visitors.

Prominent Signage

LifeStorage River North's location boasts high visibility from the Ohio Street feeder ramp during the daily commutes of Chicago drivers, and a 39-by-11-foot illuminated sign serves as a landmark beacon to keep the building prominent at night. The location's main sign is the LifeStorage logo positioned at the parapet of the west elevation.

Approval for the signage proved to be a difficult and time-consuming process. The first step of the process was winning the approval of the local alderman. Any sign over 100 square feet must be submitted to the city council for approval, which can take up to four months. Once these approvals were met, the owner had to apply for public right of way use.

Soon after the main sign was installed, another problem was quickly identified: It was too bright. This issue was resolved with the installation of a dimmer and timers. Despite all the restrictions, LifeStorage was able to install all the exterior signs five months before opening to aid in the facility's marketing.

"We wanted to give prominence to the building from the expressway, but we wanted to do it in a classy fashion and not block the entire façade with a big storage sign,"

Price says. "With the sign at the parapet, it definitely helped to enhance the building."

Security Features

LifeStorage River North is equipped with 32 cameras that monitor all key entry areas as well as the loading dock and hallways. The images

from the cameras are displayed on TVs behind the transaction desk in the retail office for real-time viewing by the manager.

Eight PTI electronic keypads were installed at all entries and by the overhead garage bay doors to allow after-hours access. In addition, three keyfob entries provide access to the elevators. Access is controlled through PTI's StorLogix system, which integrates with SiteLink property management software. The system runs off a FalconXT system controller. The Apex series keypads are equipped with HID card readers and built-in cameras, according to Matt Sirotzki, who designed the access system. Willcox Electrical of Vernon Hills, Ill., completed the installation.

LifeStorage River North contains 636 storage units and 35 rental parking spaces with a diverse unit mix with larger units on the lower floors and smaller units on top floors for ease of loading. Jamie Tuck of Janus International in Temple, Ga., says Janus installed Model 650 Mini Storage rollup doors and flush panel headers with wire mesh for secure storage. Janus also installed locker units on the first floor.

Marketing Efforts

An important part of pre-opening marketing was the addition of the River North location to LifeStorage's website. This allowed potential tenants to make online reservations for the new store. Store managers, area managers, and the director of operations actively marketed the new facility by distributing "Coming Soon" fliers to local businesses and high-rise condos. After the facility opened, LifeStorage created new fliers with the "Now Open" message as part of a door-to-door campaign.

LifeStorage used Constant Contact to send monthly newsletters to customers and contacts within the facility's SiteLink system.

Principal Jean Jodoin says SiteLink was valuable in the company's marketing efforts.

"We capture information and that helps us determine who our customers are, where they're at, and where we should be spending our marketing efforts," Jodoin says. "When we try to understand our customers, we're able to break them down by commercial or residential, and we can see what size units they're renting and how long they're staying."


SiteLink Web Edition allows operators to easily gather tenant's information through Marketing Profiles and Exit Surveys modules. SiteLink tracks marketing responses from current and prospective tenants allowing the operator to tailor email and marketing campaigns. LifeStorage also maps tenants to show where they reside.

LifeStorage placed advertising in local publications as well as coupons in community catalogues. The company joined the local chamber of commerce, attends and hosts events, and networks with local businesses.

The company also increased its online presence and e-commerce visibility with weekly blogs and maintaining a presence on websites such as Yelp, CitySearch, and Google Places. Pay-per-click advertising campaigns and search engine optimization are important measures to gain more traffic to the facility's website. The marketing paid immediate dividends as 23 new units were rented in River North's first two days of operations and the new facility achieved 10 percent occupancy after just one month of operation.

LifeStorage promoted an October grand opening by sending e-blasts, press releases, and creating social media buzz. They also partnered with two popular radio stations to collect winter wear that will be donated to two area foundations.

With its landmark Chicago architecture and positioned at the gateway into the city, the LifeStorage brand stands tall over incoming traffic to Chicago's vibrant residential and business districts. This historic structure enters its second century as a

repurposed, award-winning business center that shows early signs of success. 



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