

Mini-Storage Messenger 2002 Facility of the Year New Facility Winner

Arrowhead Self Storage

By Elizabeth Ferrin

Photography by Ariel Valli



Driving up Highway 18 into prestigious Lake Arrowhead, CA., an unknowing visitor would never guess that the new buildings on the horizon house a self-storage facility. At first glance, the structure looks more like a ski resort or condominium development rather than the site of Arrowhead Self Storage. The buildings' sloping rooflines, extensive use of decorative rock, and thoughtful landscaping have all come together to ensure that the property fits in with its neighbors in this upscale resort community. While it may look like any one of the town's beautiful buildings, this self storage facility is truly outstanding in its design, appearance, marketing efforts and overall performance. In fact, it is all of these elements together that have helped Arrowhead Self Storage earn the MiniStorage Messenger's 2002 Facility of the Year Award for the new construction category.



The Need And The Challenge

The site itself is one of this self-storage facility's most unique features. Nestled in the slopes of the Southern California mountains, Arrowhead Self Storage fills a previously unmet need in this community. Stan Sievers, president of SR. Sievers Co., and a co-managing partner of Self

Storage Investors, LLC, the company that owns Arrowhead Self Storage, knew that a storage site would be a great success in this area. The problem was finding a piece of property suitable for development, especially since commercial property was extremely scarce. "I've been a resident of Lake Arrowhead for 20 years and there was nothing like Arrowhead Self Storage in our community because our topography doesn't lend itself to self-storage," he says.

Fortunately, after some investigating, a piece of land sitting directly on the town's main thoroughfare was purchased in hopes of bringing self storage to Lake Arrowhead. While the property was a prime site with a high traffic count, it posed several challenges for developers. "It was a problem site," recalls Sievers. "It had been used as a fill site for an elementary school and the owner had been selling the dirt." The property had also been used as a kind of makeshift dump, so there was a great deal of rubbish and debris that had to be removed before going forward with the development plans.

In addition to the garbage, the town's stringent rules and restrictions were also challenging for the site's development team. "It was a very lengthy entitlement process," says Sievers. "We had issues with CalTrans because of our turning radius. We also had to address the Mountain Advisory Committee's concerns with the treatment of the property's slope, the use of native materials, the building's fire resistance, and the view from the highway," he says, adding that his team worked so closely with local government officials that it became a joint effort between the private and public sectors.

Once they got the go-ahead from officials, developers still faced challenges posed by the grading of the lot. "The site was about 2.75 acres with a 100-foot rise from the bottom to the top in the back," says Ariel L. Valli, president of Aliso Viejo, Calif.-based Valli Architectural Group. "We had to make a vertical cut into the mountainside and then we put in a 30-foot retaining wall that holds the entire hillside." Although an expensive feature with a price tag of approximately \$150,000, the retaining wall was the best solution for creating the flat space developers needed for constructing the self-storage facility.

A Winning Design

After the site was selected, the design phase of the project began. Knowing the mountain community's stringent architectural guidelines, Valli Architectural Group set out to create a plan for a self-storage facility that would be both functional and attractive. Keeping in mind

the target numbers necessary for the facility to be profitable, the company designed a plan that included three buildings that span approximately 77,500 square feet.

The first building houses the managers unit and office, the second consists of self-storage units all on a single level, and the third structure is made up of three-stories of self-storage units. In order to keep the project as cost effective as possible, the retaining wall doubles as the rear wall of the three-story building. In total, the design includes about 57,200 net rentable square feet with 524 units in a variety of sizes ranging from 5-by-5 up to 12-by-35.

With the customer's needs in mind, the developers chose Roll Right Industries to outfit the self-storage facility with roll-up doors. "We used roll-up doors inside and out and added exterior header panels to the area right above the door;" says Terry Rider, national sales manager of the Anaheim, Calif.-based company. "This makes things easier for the customer. When the door opens, it's up and out of the way. It also prevents customers from being hit, which sometimes happens with swing doors."

In addition to convenience, aesthetics also played an important role in the overall design of the project. Since Highway 18 is one of California's designated scenic highways, both the community and the developers felt strongly that the buildings should be as attractive as possible. There was also a great effort to help ensure the project would fit in with the area's upscale environment and custom homes. Using community based design, plans included features necessary for the self-storage community to blend into the architecture that already existed within the town. "We designed it to look like a mini resort," states Valli. Rather than building a massive, industrial-looking project, the design called for slightly smaller buildings and architectural features to make the storage facility as aesthetically pleasing as possible.

Working along side the architects, Encinitas, Calif.-based Mako Steel Inc. value engineered the project to help build the extras designed to beautify the structures. "From the exterior, the mansard and dormers are the architectural features that were used to help it blend in with the environment," recalls James Bartnick, project manager at Mako Steel. Other added features include an A-frame roof and mini A-frames over some of the windows to break up the roofline and to make the project more aesthetically pleasing.

Special consideration was also given to the office and manager's apartment. Rather than building a more traditional unit, the owner's set out to ensure the apartment would blend in

with the area, as well. "It's one of the nicest office/apartments you'll ever see in the self-storage industry," says Mako Steel Owner Mike Branon, who is also a managing partner of Arrowhead Self Storage. "It's a very upscale place. Basically it's like walking into a custom home."

In addition, careful thought was given to the materials used in order to make the buildings stand out. To give the project a very residential look, the development team utilized a combination block exterior with Hardi-board siding, which is similar to a vinyl laminate and it gives the look of wood. Wanting to blend in with the mountain boulders and landscape, the roll-up doors, which were originally supposed to be green, were instead painted a rich, earthy tan. In addition, decorative river rock and other local building materials were also used throughout to help give the site its mountain resort look. "A lot of the materials we used were a direct result of negotiations with the city," says Branon. "They were very stringent from an environmental and an architectural point of view."

Landscaping was also used to improve the overall appearance of the property. A combination of cedars, aspen and pines were planted to add beauty and color to the site. In addition, after making the vertical cut necessary for the site's development, the slope was carefully reseeded to help ensure plants would again grow on the mountainside. To finish the look, landscapers added a large number of rocks throughout the property.

Paying so much attention to these decorative details did not come cheap. In fact, all of the added aesthetic elements greatly increased the project's cost per square foot. "It probably added about \$2 per square foot just in aesthetics alone," estimates Caesar Wright, president of Mako Steel.

Extraordinary Obstacles

Building an aesthetically pleasing project was not the only challenge developers faced. There were also several construction obstacles that had to be dealt with in order to create the best self-storage facility possible. First, construction had to begin during harsh, snowy winter weather. In the cold mountain climate, the wind blew almost constantly and temperatures frequently dipped down into the teens. Snow removal also became an issue.

“The construction process was brutal,” recalls Sievers. In order to ensure the property would be ready for the majority of the construction to start in the spring, crews had to start building some of the retaining walls in the middle of the winter. “You can just imagine what it was like pouring concrete in the freezing weather. We were fortunate in that we had a mild winter with low rainfall, but the ice and cold definitely slowed the process down.”

The size of the property also posed some problems for the work crews. With the sloping mountain topography and relatively small work area, there was not enough room to stage a big construction site. This meant construction crews had to be scheduled as precisely as possible~ since there was simply too little space for everyone to work at the same time.

The End Result

While these challenges resulted in construction delays, the completed project was well worth the wait, and both developers and neighbors were pleased with the final result. Although some were initially hesitant at the idea of a self-storage facility being constructed so close to their homes, the project’s owners were careful to meet with neighbors and ease their concerns. Throughout the building process, they kept the community involved and informed—and everyone was happy with the final project. Neighbors recognized the fact that ‘the owners had taken a problem site and developed it to fill a need, and they appreciated the new service Arrowhead Self Storage brought to their community.

In addition to informing area residents during all phases of the development process, specific steps were taken to market the self-storage facility before opening for business in April 2002. Relying on the site’s prime location, banners were placed throughout the site to inform passers-by that the self-storage site would be opening soon. Letters were also mailed to neighbors to let them know what services Arrowhead Self Storage would be offering. Although there was no pre-leasing, managers did allow interested parties to add their name to a waiting list. By the time the facility opened its doors to the public, this list had grown to more than 155 names.

After opening day, the management team increased their marketing efforts. In addition to mailings, they also used door hangers and placed banners at the neighboring 24-hour gas station. Ads were also placed in local papers to inform the community that the facility was open and ready to accept new tenants.

Special efforts were also taken to attract business customers. "We went around to talk to all the real estate offices, accounting offices and other businesses that generate a lot of paperwork," says Ray Tuohy, a partner of Yorba Linda, Calif.-based TNT Self Storage Management. He says this kind of one-on-one marketing is especially effective in small communities like Lake Arrowhead. "With a rural community, the key to marketing has been to target in on a small community mentality. It's really relational, not like what you'd see with a big city facility."

Another feature that helps the facility market itself to new customers is the site's state-of-the-art security features. Arrowhead Self Storage utilizes a comprehensive security system from Asheville, N.C.-based Digitech International that includes a display showcasing site graphics, access control and all of the activity on the property. The security system also features a display monitor for the video surveillance in use throughout the property. "It's a very impressive display for the tenants and customers," says Steve Cooper, a member of Digitech's marketing team. "Owners like Arrowhead Self Storage can use security as a marketing tool by putting a nice display in the office."

In addition to the display monitor, Arrowhead Self Storage also boasts complete access control for two gates, one entry and exit and one exit only. These gates not only keep out unauthorized persons, but they can also be linked with software programs to prevent delinquent tenants from entering the property. Each unit is also protected with a hard-wired individual door alarm and the property with an intercom system and keypads that are intercom ready. "We stress the intercom system because we believe the better job you do with customer service the more secure the site will be overall," states Cooper.

The management software system also helps market the facility. Using Empower Software's Storage Commander software package, Arrowhead Self Storage can offer its customers the highest level of accuracy and convenience. The Empower Software's Storage Commander system produces all accounting reports, allows for credit card processing, enables tenants to have their credit cards charged automatically each month and gives managers the ability to do check scanning. The program also duplicates the layout of the facility.

Allowing manager's to focus on target advertising, Storage Commander has a full marketing suite that makes it possible to track customers according to how they first heard about the

facility. The software also offers a feature called Market Analyzer that utilizes Microsoft MapPoint and provides additional customer information. "The software sends the customer database into Microsoft MapPoint, reads the database and plots out customer addresses showing the facility in the middle," says Thomas V. Smith, managing director of Sun City, Calif.-based Empower Software Technologies. "This way you get to see the spread of your market base by zip codes. This allows you to see the areas where you don't have much penetration, so you can then focus very specific advertising in areas where you need to increase penetration."

A True Success

With its features and marketing system, it is no surprise that Arrowhead Self Storage has been so successful. Since April, the self-storage facility has been growing and adding new tenants everyday. In fact, they have seen a phenomenal growth rate of almost 12 percent, which equates to an average of two new customers per day since the site's grand opening. After just six months in business, with three months of full occupancy availability and three months operating under a partial occupancy certificate, Arrowhead Self Storage currently boasts an occupancy rate of almost 70 percent. Plus, managers are predicting the property will reach full occupancy by the end of the year.

This phenomenal growth of this facility is the direct result of the developers' close attention to detail. These self-storage professionals built the facility on an outstanding high-traffic site, created a design that could blend in with other buildings in the upscale mountain community, added extra features to beautify the project, and worked hard to market the facility and bring in new tenants. These factors have not only helped Arrowhead Self Storage become a 2002 Facility of the Year winner, they have also helped make the facility an unquestionable success.