

The Sky's the Limit

Roofs today can do more than just cover your storage facility.

By Mark Wright

When you look at your self storage facility, what do you see? Your distinctive branding? Your unit mix? Your office space? Sure, all that and more. But what do you see when you raise your gaze a little higher? If you say “blue sky” or “clouds,” look again. You might be overlooking one of your most important assets: your roof.

Of course, your roof is already earning its keep just by being there. Customers, after all, would not be happy if Mother Nature had unimpeded access to all their possessions. And maybe it also supports HVAC equipment if you offer climate control. Generally speaking, though, your roof gets to skate by as a necessary but pretty passive element of your facility.

What if you could put it to work? What if you could make a few bucks from it? What if customers started showing up because they loved what you're doing with your roof? Some owners have asked those what-if questions about their own facility and were pleasantly surprised by the answers.

St. Louis Sky Farming

Beau Reinberg converted a two-story building in St. Louis, Missouri's downtown loft district into a 300-unit self storage and U-Haul truck-rental facility in 2008—just in time to hear the sickening sound of the U.S. economy grinding to a halt.

“It was terrible,” he said. “It was like the Depression. So it forced us to think about the highest, best, most creative use of the property. In real estate, when you're faced with adversity, you have to get creative on a number of fronts.”

Reinberg's one-plus acre site in the revitalized Washington Avenue area of downtown (often simply called W-Ave or Wave) puts an innovative spin on the concept of mixed use. Right next to his Wave Self Storage facility sits the Wave Taco Beach Volleyball Bar, which has three outdoor, sand volleyball courts—and attracts a thousand people a week to fun-in-the-sun tournaments, he said. There's also a 62-space parking lot.

One day, when Reinberg happened to be talking with Mary Ostafi, executive director of organic-food nonprofit Urban Harvest STL, Ostafi bemoaned the lack of land area downtown for a community produce garden. He suggested his sun-drenched roof, and the idea germinated into a 9,000 square foot sky farm.

“When our building was constructed in 1927, it was originally meant to go up another eight floors, so structurally

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This page and next: The partnership between Wave Self Storage and Urban Harvest STL transformed the facility's utilitarian roof into a sustainable, vibrant community asset—and a great way to market self storage in downtown St. Louis, Missouri. Photos courtesy of Urban Harvest STL

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it was built to handle a much higher load,” said Reinberg. “Plus, there are no other tall buildings next to us creating shade. So, our roof makes for an optimal growing space.”

Reinberg had to have a number of tests done on how the farm’s weight might affect the structural stability of the roof, he said. “But our insurance company was very supportive. The roof is covered by a living membrane and lowers their exposure to risk.”

The city’s code enforcers took a little more educating, but Reinhard said they eventually came around. “The City of St. Louis was willing to provide flexibility and insight, and wanted to see this project work,” he said. “So I give them kudos for being progressive and looking outside the box and approving this unique use.”

Urban Harvest got a great spot for harvesting much-needed produce for its volunteers and clients, but Wave Self Storage benefited as well, said Reinberg.

“The garden intertwines us into the community,” he explained. “Self storage is such a community-type business. This only strengthens our brand as a local storage provider and differentiates us from other facilities.”

Reinberg said his roof generates less than three percent of Wave Self Storage’s revenue. “But it was generating zero before,” he noted, so having the garden up there is a net gain.

Harnessing Memphis Sunshine

Like downtown St. Louis, midtown Memphis, Tennessee, has been enjoying a renaissance in recent years. Midtown Vault Storage has attracted lots of urban dwellers, who not only need storage space but also seem to bring a higher than average level of eco-awareness.

Developed by Absolute Storage Management (ASM) in 2006, Midtown Vault has a 12,500 square foot roof atop its four-story, climate-controlled building. To save both energy and money, ASM decided in 2013 to install solar panels on half of the facility’s roof.

Luckily, Memphis typically gets 214+ days of sunshine annually, so the panels cut the facility’s electric bill by a third. The experiment went well enough to persuade ASM to expand the solar installation to Midtown Vault’s entire roof last year.

“The community is very happy we have such a system,” said ASM President Michael Haugh. “The Vault is a conversion of an older building, so the whole project is environmentally friendly. Our solar panel system is now covering two-thirds of our carbon footprint at the Vault and will do so for the next 25+ years.”

The financial benefits rivaled the sustainability boost. ASM received a 30 percent federal tax credit, “so effectively the system cost 70 cents on the dollar,” said Haugh. “Also at the

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time, the Tennessee Valley Authority offered a premium on the electricity we generated, so we made out on the spread. Our cost was less than the credit they gave us per kilowatt.”

Haugh urges other facility owners interested in going solar to do it this year. “The 30 percent tax credit sunsets at the end of 2016,” he explained. “If it is not renewed, that is a big discount that goes away.”

ASM also installed a new, standard metal roof, but Haugh said the solar panels simply snapped onto the roof ribs. No additional support or roof penetrations were necessary. He said ASM put solar panels on one of its other facilities in Tennessee and enjoyed similar success with that installation.

Roof Savvy

As these examples show, doing your homework is a vital step before launching a project to put your roof to work. A solar installation, for instance, “does add some weight, but it’s easy to compensate for,” said architect Ken Carrell, with ARE Associates in Lake Forest, California. “All the materials are lightweight. Another advantage is you can use a screw-down roof instead of standing seam. A screw-down roof is less money and it has some structural integrity.”

And Carrell noted that landscaping on a roof is not a newfangled idea: “There are green roofs in Europe that have been in place for more than fifty years,” he said. “Also, solar panels work better with a green roof. The transpiration from the plants helps cool the panels so they operate more efficiently.”

Even if you don’t want anything going on top of your roof, green or otherwise, you can still put that space to good use by making it save you energy and thus money. “More owners are going to white or energy efficient roofs,” said Joseph LeRay, with Global Roofing Company, LLC, in Frisco, Texas. “We’re seeing them provide good returns on energy savings, especially if they are larger climate-controlled facilities.”

Marc Vandusen, VP of TBRC Roofing in Carrollton, Texas, agrees. “We add more R value to our systems. A regular metal roof can hit 130 degrees in Texas. You can get the R value in a coating, but a white roof reflects the sun, too.” (The higher the R factor, the more insulating power a roof has, which helps save energy.)

Whatever steps you consider to get maximum value from your roof, be sure to get advice before making any commitments, advised Robert Pouliot, president of Boardwalk Storage Solutions, LLC, in Mansfield, Massachusetts.

“Consult a knowledgeable professional team from day one,” he said. “Missing something in planning and estimating can throw your end cost for a loop.” ❖

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