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A Room of One's Own: Why We Store

Text and photographs by Kelle Lawrence

That's all you need in life, ya know? . . . a little place for your stuff.

—George Carlin, 1980

Since the 1980s, many people have needed bigger and bigger places for their stuff, and the self-storage industry is eager to accommodate. There were about 8,000 facilities in the mid-1980s, and experts now put the total between 41,000 and 50,000. Most of those consist of hundreds of units with an average of 100 square feet each or an estimated seven square feet per person in the United States. People across all social strata are storing things in record numbers, and the self-storage industry is booming nationwide.

Why? Because people tend to accumulate things. We collect and hoard. Material objects become representatives of milestones, moments, and emotions in our lives. People often cling to things because they hold meaning rather than value—a deceased grandmother's bed that doesn't match the furniture but can't be thrown away, the leather living room set a downsized, busted dot-comer can't get rid of because it has become the symbol of her now-gone fortune, skateboarding gear that will never be used again but reminds the

owner of his younger, more virile self. Although the Self Storage Association may not intend to conjure emotional attachment when it refers to a self-storage unit as the rental of "air space" rather than "physical boundaries," the idea comes to mind. "Air space," like nostalgia or feeling, can't be grasped, but it can be marketed and sold. Yet while most people tend to view the stuff in storage facilities as detritus of the past, storage units are actually often holders of the present or the containers of hope for the future. According to many storage facility workers, increasingly people store all they own while transitioning between homes or jobs, and the storers hold onto all of their stuff with the belief that they will need and use these things again. The items represent the potential for a brighter future.

And then again, many Americans just own a lot of junk they can't bear to part with. Although the average single-family home has more than doubled since 1950 and family size has declined, a 2007 Howard Real Estate survey of 54 Portland

Metro area storage facilities indicates that 36% of storage renters are homeowners, closing in on the 53% that rent their homes or apartments. This is consistent with the National Self-Storage Association estimates that individual stuff-keepers make up the majority of storage renters.

Once viewed as “the stepchild of real estate, self-storage is now a Cinderella story of success” according to California real estate consultant R. Christian Sonne. Many investors and lenders who wouldn’t touch the storage industry 10 years ago are now touting storage as a sure investment, even in the pricey California and Northwest real estate markets. Self-storage facilities have gone from mom and pop fly-by-nights to a sought-after asset class with five publicly-traded Real Estate Investment Trusts—Public Storage, Shurgard, Sovran, Extra Space, and U-Stor-It. Yet even with the recognizable names of these facilities populating vistas throughout the country, around 90% of storage facilities are privately owned and operated.

According to local self-storage mogul Kevin Howard (*Inside Self-Storage*, the National Self-Storage Association online magazine, ranked Kevin Howard Real Estate 24th of the top 100 storage companies based on total square footage) the first storage facility in the Portland metropolitan area was built 36 years ago on Allen Boulevard, and Howard has been in the business almost as long. Howard says the business is now in its third wave. The first was when self-storage began in the 1960s and 70s, and those facilities were what self-storage conjures in most people’s minds—cement boxes with tin roofs. The second generation came in the 1980s as demand grew. Facilities were designed with features like garage lift doors, electrical outlets, and varying square footages for multiple storage uses. The third generation of the late 1990s has introduced specialty storage—temperature controlled units for wine, antiques, and pharmaceutical samples stored by industry salespeople, units for RVs, automobile, and boat storage, and carpeted/windowed units to serve as small business fronts. The third generation has also introduced portable storage—a service that brings the storage unit straight to your house and parks it out front

like a well-secured dumpster. Fill up the unit with stuff and a facility truck will forklift it away to be stacked like a pallet in a warehouse.

But as with many businesses, a lot of the money made in the industry comes doesn’t from customers with disposable incomes. Longtime storage facility manager Joe Christopher thinks economic experts can gauge the economy by looking at the trends of who rents storage units. “I mean, I see people at the heights and depths of their lives,” he says. “It seems like I hardly ever see your average person.” The height is typically someone moving his belongings into a storage unit because he’s bought a bigger home, is moving to a better job, or has gotten married. The depths include divorce, loss of a home or job or both, and, increasingly, Christopher believes, drug addiction. “Seems like the last five years, I see people at their depths. There will always be the weirdos coming to store their porn collections and all, but I see desperate people now, and a lot more young folks in their 20s and 30s who have lost jobs. It seems like more and more the people that come in here are living in vans by the side of the road or they’re tweakers and thieves or all of the above,” he says. While Christopher tries to have sympathy for people, he says his job can wear your sympathy down. Like a bartender or a bus driver, he is often captive to sad, lonely stories because he works at



a front desk where people come to rent a storage unit, to pay their monthly bill, or try to get out of their monthly bill.

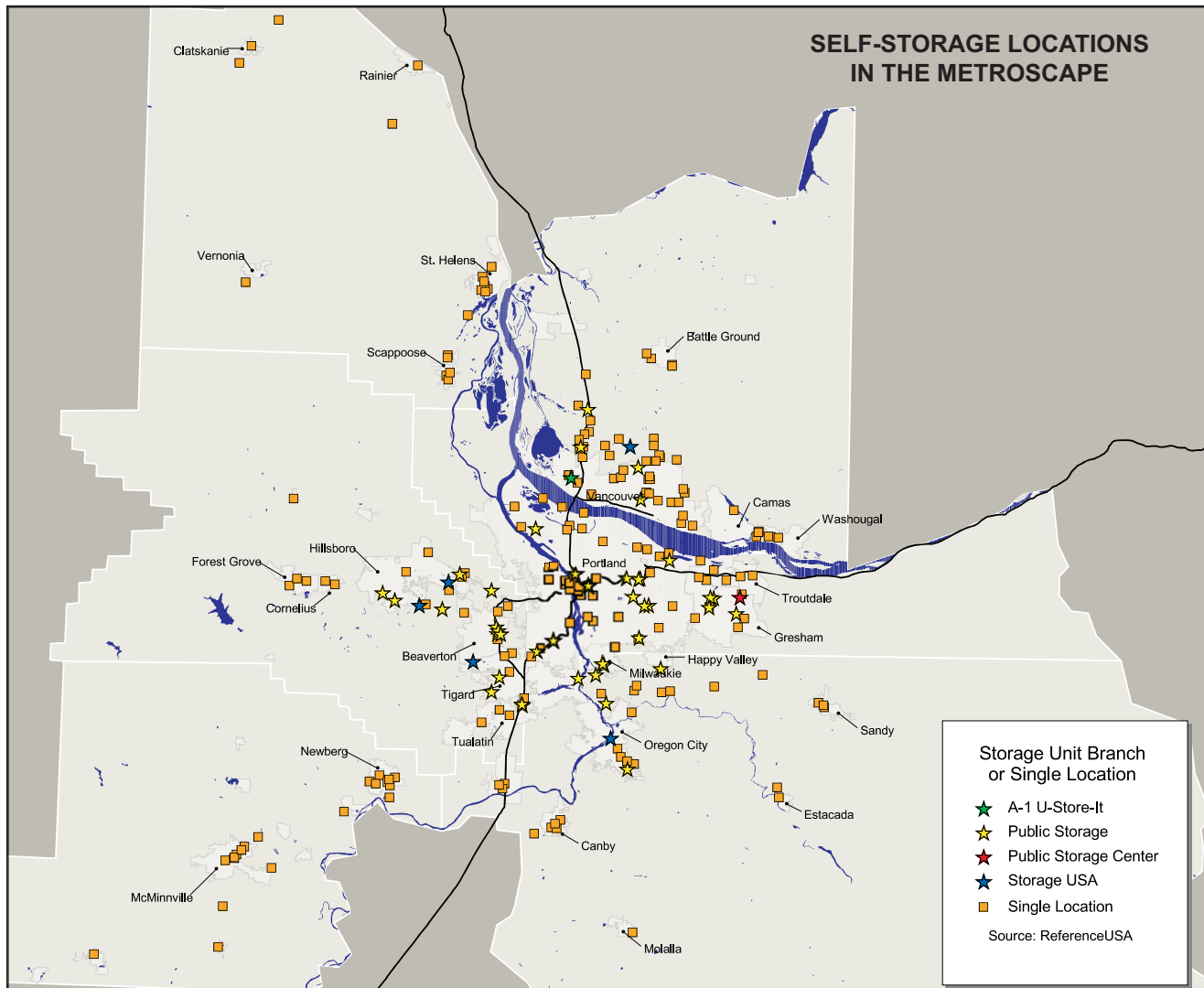
The storage facility where Christopher works is on McLoughlin Boulevard in Milwaukie. Christopher says the socioeconomic class of the clientele has definitely dropped since the technology bust and the outsourcing of computer and engineering positions. In the 1990s, people were storing for only a month or two while they moved into their new houses. Now, everyone seems to be storing on the way out of town.

Despite protests from many concerned with neighborhood property values when “unsightly” businesses such as storage facilities move in, storage is a neighborhood business. Industry estimates that most storage customers live within a

three-mile radius of the facility where they store. Kevin Howard’s surveys indicate that 70% of his customers live within one mile of the storage facility they patronize. This accounts for a lot of difference in clientele from facility to facility. Whereas storage facilities in Cascade Park in Clark County are doing an increased business in RV storage, facilities such as Portland Storage on Southeast Morrison are seeing an increased business in homeless clientele. With some storage facilities providing units as small as foot lockers, self-storage is often the only choice other than a shopping cart for someone who is homeless. And it is safer for property and well-being. Portland police can ticket the homeless for using shopping carts to transport their possessions, or someone could have all he owns stolen from an unattended



Parkrose Mini Storage.





Starlae Barger, manager of Parkrose Mini Storage.

shopping cart. While many facilities around the country are excluding the homeless by requiring increasingly rigid ID and address verification methods, many facilities such as Portland Storage remain amenable. “The transients and homeless are some of our best paying customers because what’s in the unit is all they have,” says Mary Briggs, a local self-storage marketer and manager for Kevin Howard’s storage facilities. “We do have set rules. People can’t come and sit in the units all day,” says Briggs.

The increase in the use of storage by transients accounts for some of the change in the storage business—from the 24-hour access of past facilities to the no-night-access model. Modern facilities, like more and more American communities, are gated, guarded by managers living on-site, and monitored by 24-hour video surveillance.

Yet crime still occurs. Individual storage units are protected by the same search and seizure privacy laws as homes are—without a warrant, they are private spaces. Therefore, they can be used for refuge—a place to get away from the daily grind and play with a toy train collection. Or they can be used for privacy—a place to cross-dress or read passionate letters from a past affair. Or they can be places for secrets—secrets such as theft, drug addiction, drug production, and sometimes

murder, as in the infamous local case of Lloyd Stephen Solomon. Solomon confessed to sawing his friend Eric Chamber’s body into pieces small enough to fit into an ice chest and a garbage can. He left the disassembled body in a storage unit on Southwest McEwan Road in Tualatin from 1993 until 1996, when authorities discovered the murder because Solomon miscalculated his prepaid payments and lost the unit in a public auction.

Definitely not adherents of the adage “the only bad press is no press,” *Inside Self-Storage* includes a section in its online format called “Media Monitor.” In its own description, “Media Monitor’ is a monthly section devoted to policing and summarizing industry coverage throughout the nation’s newspapers and other publications.” With billions at stake, the storage unit industry is generally nervous about its bad media image. Storage facilities are often portrayed in popular culture as ideal locations for crime and murder—think *Silence of the Lambs*, *Monster*, *CSI*, and CourtTV’s *Til Death do us Part*—while news media report storage unit drug rings and profile people living out of storage units as housing costs increase. The editor of *Inside Self-Storage* wrote in 2006, “It’s no secret that storage frequently falls prey to the scrutiny of vigilant if not relentless press. Most mornings, it’s a victory to find mind-

Local Storage Facts

The average renter stores for 11.9 months.
RV storers rent an average of 21 months.

Who rents?

- Business - 10%
- Homeowners – 36%
- Renters – 54%

60% storage renters indicate location as their primary choice in facilities.

It is estimated that no storage facility in the Portland metro area is under 80% of rental capacity.

Self Storage industry wisdom claims that if your facility is over 90% capacity, you are not charging enough rent.

—Howard Survey, 2007

“Storage is a recession-proof business” because people need storage whether they are accommodating excess or having to downsize.

—Mary Briggs, Northwest Self Storage Consultant

National Storage Facts

According to the Self Storage Association, self storage is a \$220 billion industry with \$22.6 billion in annual revenues.

Over 90% of self storage facilities are privately owned.

Assuming the storage industry began 50 years ago and using a current estimate of 48,000 facilities nationwide—the industry has grown at a rate of 2.5 facilities per day.

Most people rent storage at a facility within three miles from their home.

—R. Christian Sonne, 2006



numbing dividend reports and acquisitions at the top of the slush pile. If it's not drug- or crime-related, it's good news where this industry is concerned.”

In over a year of research on storage units, only six storage facility managers or employees would agree to an interview with me, and one of those only if I wouldn't use his name or the facility where he worked. Responses ranged from unreturned phone calls (including calls to the Self Storage Association), “I am not allowed to talk to the media,” and “My boss said I would be fired if I talked to any press folks.” The rise of specialty storage and extra construction expenditures to produce attractive buildings whose landscaped lawns and white picket fences blend in with neighborhoods represents a response to market needs and zoning requirements, but also signals the industry's desire to reframe its seedy media image. Storage facilities are sprawling yet quiet—simultaneously seeking exponential growth and little public attention.

Perhaps the proliferation of storage units reflects a pervasive U.S. tendency. Popular American culture tends to scapegoat inevitable and increasing realities—personal tragedy, money shortages, rampant consumerism, and other human unmentionables. Whether for survival, hoarding, secreting, over-spending, base materialism, criminal activity, upgrading, downsizing, retiring, tax evasion or death, metroscapers here and across the country are increasing their dependence on self-storage facilities a dizzying speed. **M**

Kelle Lawrence is a Portland area writer who received her Writing Master's from Portland State and whose recent work has appeared in Oregon Quarterly and Oregon Humanities.