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Flex Storage Systems

Topeka, Kansas

Derek Porter Studio

Derek Porter Studio elevates the image of Flex, a mini-storage center, with simple, indirect lighting

By William Weathersby, Jr.

Since the closing of the Forbes Air Base more than 20 years ago, the Highland Crest neighborhood of Topeka, Kansas, has been in steady, socioeconomic decline. Although the neighborhood improvement association recently fought and won to keep a public school open, few businesses or civic entities have stepped into the void to create new magnets for community development. But in an unlikely turn of events, perhaps the most mundane of vernacular urban structures—the mini-storage shed—has helped mend the community's



Photo © Mike Sinclair

frayed edge and image. FLEX Storage Systems, designed by the Kansas City-based architecture firm el dorado, creatively combines standard building materials and simple forms to raise the profile of this humble commercial building type. Efficient, engaging lighting by Derek Porter Studio helps transform the urban landscape from blighted to blithe.

The 24,000-square-foot facility contains 180 conventional and 120 climate-controlled bays for commercial and personal storage. Led by principal Josh Shelton, the architects designed an aluminum-clad shed structure topped by a sloping roof that steps down the terraced site. Translucent, polycarbonate panels serve as clerestories, while the exterior of each garagelike door is painted a different bright color to create graphic punch.

Surface-mounted fluorescents integrated within the building facade illuminate the colorful exterior garage doors. The luminaires are wet-location-rated and fitted with cold-weather ballasts and vandal-resistant polycarbonate lenses. Each fixture is set in a niche above a 9-foot-wide garage door to simultaneously illuminate the facade, loading dock, and car parking lot. When the door is raised, the same fixture illuminates the inside of the storage unit.

Inside, daylight pours through the polycarbonate clerestories and bounces off the sloped ceiling. Interior storage bins and corridors are indirectly illuminated with continuous rows of two-lamp fluorescent strips mounted on the top of storage cubicle walls. This concealed location shields the direct view of lamps and reduces the likelihood of damage from clients moving goods through the corridors and bins. The luminaires are zoned in rows running parallel to the clerestories and controlled by managers at wall-box switches in the office area, depending upon daylight conditions. Rather than drywall, the ceilings of the storage units are composed of reinforced nylon netting to allow light to permeate the interiors.

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