

## New Warehouses Take On a Luxe Look

*Designs Feature Skylights  
And Lush Greenery in Effort  
To Please and Lure Tenants*

BY RAY A. SMITH

**WAREHOUSE DEVELOPERS** are thinking outside the plain brown, no-frills box.

Minimal attention had been paid to aesthetics on warehouses and industrial parks often located off the beaten path. But now creeping into some new warehouse projects are elements of high-end design—glass curtain walls, precast concrete, skylights, ornamental awnings, elaborate canopies and tasteful earth tones.

Developers are hiring renowned, high-profile architects, such as Skidmore, Owings & Merrill. Industrial buildings are winning prizes for design. Earlier this year, the American Institute of Architects recognized a warehouse used to store airport snow removal equipment in Oklahoma City with an honor award for architecture. And there's even a new coffee table book on cool-looking warehouses.

Reasons for the move toward fancier warehouses vary—from tenant companies wanting buildings that reflect their brands or their image, to the shaking up of corporate architecture that was ushered in by dot-com companies in the 1990s, to restrictive zoning boards. Some of the trend also is related to the sluggish economy: To attract and retain tenants, owner-developers are willing to go the extra mile, letting tenants call the shots and dictate what they want and need their buildings to be.

### 'A Step Up'

Whatever the genesis, the new warehouse movement wins plaudits from both companies and employees. When Jim Wood, a general manager at GPS Logistics, moved some of its distribution operations to the World Houston International Business Center in Houston last month, he felt like he had arrived.

"We definitely made a step up," says Mr. Wood, recalling with some disdain the outdated and worn-out Houston facility from which the Chicago-based company had just moved. "It's a professional, classy, nice-looking building." One GPS employee compared the move to going from the slums into a luxury neighborhood.

The 16 buildings that make up the center, designed by Houston-based Architects Plus and built by EastGroup Properties Inc., Jackson, Miss., feature aluminum trellises and canopies, reveal work in the concrete, and green reflective glass



A warehouse in **Ninigret Park** in Salt Lake City.

to bring in natural light. Decorative light sconces adorn outdoor walls.

The Houston center is among 20 warehouses and industrial parks featured in a new book entitled "Exceptional Industrial Projects: Beyond the Box." A panel of eight judges selected the "facilities based on criteria such as visual appeal and responsiveness to surrounding environments. The book is scheduled to go on sale next week at a National Association of Industrial and Office Properties conference in Newport Beach, Calif.

### Patios and Parapets

Another building featured in the book, the Marshalls National Distribution Center in Philadelphia, has paint stripes and panels of pastel earth tones. These are coupled with reveals in its precast wall panels. The one-million-square-foot warehouse facility also contains a landscaped boulevard and an outdoor patio.

The 835,000-square-foot warehouse distribution hub for Thomson Learning, a division of Thomson Corp., in Independence, Ky., is embellished with a dark bronze entry way and a color-coordinated, tinted glass curtain wall. Thomson "wanted to have a corporate feel and look to their facility but didn't want a standard industrial big box," says Daniel N. Frasca, a vice president of development at Alter Group, Skokie, Ill., the facility's developer.

Even the truck drivers get their own exclusive, well-kept parking lots and air-conditioned lounges.

The Irwindale Business Center, in Irwindale, Calif., incorporates Spanish architectural themes

in an effort to blend in with the community, says Gilbert Aja, president of GAA Architects Inc., Irvine, Calif., which helped design the distribution warehouse campus. These include curved parapets, arched entry ways, curvilinear covered entries and covered pedestrian colonnades.

Newer facilities also commonly feature lush landscaping. **Ninigret Park** in Salt Lake City, for example, is surrounded by trees: maples, evergreens, linden and indigenous olive trees. "It takes away from the starkness of all that concrete," says Randolph G. Abood, chairman of New York-based developer **Ninigret Group LC**, which built and co-owns the 2.5-million-square-foot, 15-building industrial park and retained Skidmore to design the park's next phase. "It gives the whole park a much softer look."

Not all of the changes are superficial, though. For companies consolidating numerous warehouses into one, developers are accommodating them by constructing facilities with higher ceilings—to stack more goods—more doors, larger truck courts. They also are offering more column spacing options.

Some designs are inspired by personal hobbies. A few buildings at the **Ninigret Park** are shaped to look like a wave and a mountain. Granted, the facility is located near mountains and the ocean. But that wasn't the only reason for the design. Mountains and waves "are my two passions," Mr. Abood says.