

Recycled-Container Chic

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The idea came to Christopher Stone as he was looking out the window of his office near Newark Liberty International Airport one day, and his eye fell on shipping containers. Lots of huge, empty industrial containers stacked up high, row after row.



RMJM

'LIVE THE BOX' CONTEST The first-place design, by Felix Heidgen and Thomas Nagy of RMJM in Princeton, was a nine-building complex with connecting bridges and rooftop gardens.

"It seemed like they were just waiting there for some new purpose," said Mr. Stone, an architect. He thought, "Why not create something with them that would benefit people?" And, "How about housing for the poor?"

But when he got a group together from the local chapter of the American Institute of Architects to talk it over, they quickly came to the conclusion that this would be presumptuous.

"So often, those with limited means feel they are being sequestered and forced into something substandard," Mr. Stone said. "Why would they want to live in shipping containers if no one else does?"

And then, it occurred to the architects: "We should figure out how to create housing so cool that everybody would want to live in it."

There followed more than a year of intellectual ferment, during which the group roped in various Newark officials as well as the architecture school at the New Jersey Institute of Technology. The result was "Live the Box: An International Design Competition."

Toni L. Griffin, the director of community development for the city of Newark, came up with a site in downtown Newark for those who submitted design proposals: the big empty lot opposite the Broad Street train station where the Westinghouse Electric Company building stood until it was demolished last year.

A construction company, Skanska USA Building, became a sponsor and put up prize money; the National Portable Storage Association, whose members manufacture containers, followed suit, and other companies made smaller donations.

(Despite the competition, however, the plan to build on the site has not yet advanced beyond the theoretical stages.)

Kim de Freitas, an instructor at New Jersey Institute of Technology, coordinated the contest, which was run entirely online, for three months last summer, drawing 150 entries from architects around the world.

"We were incredibly surprised," she said. "First, we started to hear from students in California, so we knew we'd reached across the country. Then, some people from Italy asked, 'Can we join?' Then, people from Pakistan, Turkey, South Korea — 13 countries in all."

Mr. Stone learned that some of the architects had already thought about using prefabricated containers as housing "modules" before the idea ever popped into his head.

In 2004, for instance, the New Jersey architect Adam Kalkin created his own "Quik House" design using five shipping containers as a base. The next year, a European contest, "Living Box," was held on a similar theme.

But "Live the Box" posed a new and more extensive challenge: creation of an urban multifamily mixed-use project, using the containers as building blocks. Architects were encouraged to study the neighborhoods around the Newark site, and to reflect planners' desire for open walkways and green space.

"People really put their hearts into it," said Ms. de Freitas, who supervised a jury kept "blind" to the identities of entrants.

In December, when the awards ceremony was held, the winners were two architects who work for RMJM in Princeton: Felix Heidgen and Thomas Nagy. They shared a \$10,000 prize for their design of "NewPark Station," a complex of nine buildings connected by bridges and pathways.

The stacked containers in their entry are elevated on pillars so that the ground level becomes "a stage for social and commercial interaction for the residents and the city at large," said Mr. Heidgen, who explained that he had once worked in Newark and sees it as a multifaceted community. Mr. Nagy, who was born in Japan and researched Newark before embarking on the container project, said he envisioned the open plaza as an urban park.

The individual units in their entry vary widely in size (one container makes a small studio; four of them are used to create a 1,200-square-foot apartment), but large and small units are scattered throughout the complex.

Circulation would be improved with a system of air pockets between units, the architects said. They did not formulate a solution to "building block degradation," or rust. "You could leave the containers as they are," Mr. Heidgen said, "and live with the patina; that could be quite interesting. Or paint."

Both the second- and third-place winners — Modulaire of Miami, and Tang & Yang Architects of Savannah, Ga. — presented strikingly bold designs.

The Tang & Yang entry wowed jurors; Mr. Stone even described it as "sexy." But, Ms. de Freitas said, they found it less "buildable" than other winners.

"Having a relationship to reality got design points," she said. "The idea is that this could really happen someday."

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