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Quick Port Shelters On This Firm's Agenda

by Tony West

One of Philadelphia's newest businesses just sailed into town in April, with hopes to make big contributions to the growing Port of Philadelphia. Big, important contributions – but not necessarily permanent ones.

Founded in Fort Pierce, Fla. In 2003, Shelter Structures, Inc. is all about companies which travel light and want to leave no more of a footprint than strictly necessary. Its President Patty Smail and her husband Charly develop and sell custom-designed, fabric-covered galvanized-steel buildings for serious industrial users. Their buildings have a useful life of 15 to 20 years; they can be designed and constructed within eight weeks.

These structures can be huge. An assembly building they built in Tampico, Mexico measures 108' wide x 76'3" high x 378' long. They come with a wide variety of choices designed to meet a wide variety of processing needs. They can be simple free-standing roofs with open sides, used by processors who merely need to keep product out of the rain; or they can be climate-controlled to withstand Arctic weather or to maintain internal air conditioning.

Structures that do heavy-duty work, without being built for the ages, have been around for a long time. Armies have been building them for thousands of years; and today, notes Smail, 'the Dept. of Defense is our biggest customer.' A number of companies around the world address this market. Some of them specialize in standardized off-the-shelf models with attractive prices.

Shelter Structures took a different route. "Our niche is custom design," says Smail. "People come to us when they need something unusual." The company has learned how to build really large buildings to customers'



This steel framed fabric covered structure is 60 feet wide and 100 feet long with overhead metal doors as access for temporary warehouse storage.

spec, meeting all manner of site- and task-specific challenges.

In regions where a lot of snow falls, for instance, the company will build roofs one way; in areas where sun is a problem, they'll build them another way. Structures can be built with an extrudable wing on a motorized track – say, if product needs periodically to be moved from the manufacturing area to a dockside without permanently occupying loading space. They can also be built in multiple modules, which can be added or detached as the needs of the project



UNITED POSTAL UNION, Haiti, was constructed after earthquake of January 2010.

Two Lines Increase South American Trade

Two weekly services, Maersk Line's Spondylus Service and CMA-CGM's Black Pearl Service, are now regulars at the Port of Philadelphia's Packer Avenue Marine Terminal in South Philadelphia.

They significantly enhance the Port of Philadelphia's already impressive connections with major ports in South America. These services target the busiest ports on the west coast of South America, including ports in Ecuador, Panama, Chile and Peru.

"We're now seeing increases in both general cargo and refrigerated cargoes, particularly fruit, thanks to these

two new services," said PRPA Executive Director James T. McDermott, Jr. "Shippers doing business that involves a Philadelphia/South America connection now more than ever have one-stop shopping at the Port of Philadelphia."

The Port of Philadelphia's excellent array of South American services also includes a two-weekly service to the west coast of South America by Mediterranean Shipping Co. Contact the PRPA Marketing Dept. at (215) 426-2600 or at marketing@philaport.com for more information about the Port of Philadelphia's new enhanced services to South America.

change. This way, you only get the amount of building you need at any given time.

Shelter Structures' customers include military bases, factories, marine yards, construction sites, quarries, mining operations, oil-field sites and water-treatment plants. Their private-sector company list includes Northrop Grumman, Chevron and Lockheed Martin.

As a rule, Shelter Structures prides itself on fabricating products that will survive long-term use. It uses a one-piece coated fabric rather than a two-piece laminated fabric covering, for instance, thereby leaving less to fail in the building's skin.

Shelter Structures will also make hardside structures; "to my knowledge, we're the only company

doing this," Smail says. This can be crucial if you need office or warehousing space with shelving, for instance.

One Shelter Structures end product may be a factory that can perform exacting precision operations from start to finish of a one-off construction project. Another end product may be a building that can handle a rough, unpredictable hodgepodge of uses and users during the lifespan of a 20-year contract.

A builder whose trademark is flexibility needs a design infrastructure tailored to any challenge that may come down any pike. "We use a third-party engineering firm licensed in 48 states," explains Smail. Whatever local building codes are in force, Shelter Structures will adapt to them in a hurry.

Building within a complete lack of building codes – or any other infrastructure – can be even more demanding, however. When an earthquake devastated Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti, last year, the United Nations turned to Shelter Structures to deliver and erect a 6,500-square-foot mail-processing center near that city, to get mail moving in and out of Haiti again ASAP. Typically, big pre-fab buildings like these are put up with big cranes. But Haiti didn't have any cranes.

What it did have, though, was people – lots and lots of hungry workers, without a job to be found anywhere else in town. "So we figured out how to put up the building, normally a five-person job with heavy equipment, by using 20 people plus the tools at hand."

Shipping weights for large structures, which can run in excess of 100,000 lb., make Shelter Structures products well adapted to portside building sites.

Fabric-skinned buildings can be energy-savers also. "The fabric cover allows light in," Smail points out. "So while you can hang lights in one of our buildings, you don't really need them for daytime use."

Smail prepared for her own company with a lifetime of experience in logistics. She started out as a Teamster driver in UPS, where she worked for 11 years. She notched another 17 years at Fed Ex, where she rose to regional finance manager.

Portability is a business way of life for her. When her daughter settled in the Delaware valley, the Smails reviewed their own options. "We decided it made more sense to relocate to Philadelphia, where we could be closer to our grandchildren," she notes with a cheery grin. "So here we are."