

One Hundred Years of Solitude

Transpack Argentina's Old Building Shows off its Glamour

The LACMA Convention in Buenos Aires was seen as a grand opportunity for Transpack Argentina to show off its New "Old" Facility. It is new because it was just purchased by the company, but old in years, and experience!

"When I arrived in Buenos Aires in 1995, I was anxious to get out of this building, in which I saw little charm, and no real commercial advantage," said Cliff Williamson, Managing Director of Transpack Argentina. "The place was old, dingy, and about half of the building was in such a poor state that we considered it unusable. The neighborhood was not very nice either. The place was surrounded by other buildings equally shabby, and there was barely a restaurant or even a kiosk within walking distance."

Still, more out of necessity than for any other reason, we stayed put. We had a rental agreement with the owner. We paid a relatively low rent with the understanding that any improvements to the building would be for our own account. There is little joy investing in a rented facility.

Still there were a few good qualities to be considered. It was close to the port. It was near a quick access highway to Ezeiza International Airport. And it had good vertical clearance, permitting upward growth. While more than 60% of the company's clients were located 40 minutes away in the suburbs, more than 60% of the corporate accounts were based downtown, a mere 10 minutes away. And the reactivation of the economy showed promise that the area might improve.

Improve it did. San Telmo (where tango was born) became the area of most rapid growth in the whole city of Buenos Aires. One by one, the buildings in the neighborhood were bought up, gutted, and remodeled into classic, well-lighted enterprises. One by one, new restaurants opened nearby. Two blocks away the Porto Madero rehabilitation project was taking place; rat-infested warehouses were being quickly converted to expensive offices and lofts. And slowly, our old building began to clean itself up and make for a better place to work.

Today it was certainly one of the more interesting moving company warehouse facilities you will ever see. It is 10 minutes from the center of a city of 13 million. It offers 3 floors, is outfitted with marble staircases, chandeliers, and antique portraits. Today it houses the 4 member companies of the Transpack Companies, and 50 full-time employees. It has 2000 cubic meters of crated storage capacity, 2000 square meters of covered space, 200 square meters of office space, plus a residence apartment for a caretaker and night watchman. There is a 50 storage van mezzanine, two raised "alas" each holding 25 vans above the main floor, a carpentry shop, a small climate controlled storage area, a UPS guaranteeing light and electricity for 6 hours, and a rooftop patio complete with a barbeque grill.

By sheer luck, management located surviving members of the family of one of the builders. Henry Kittering recalls playing there when his grandfather was gracious enough to take him along to work. He was very young, and his memory is a bit cloudy for details, but he claims to have a scar on his right hand that he obtained when he tripped over the

base of one of the big lathe machines in the ship works. Talking with him and his younger sister Kathleen Gittins, we pieced together a few more details.

The building was constructed over 100 years ago by the British construction company, Chadwick Weir. The building's original function was to serve as the premises for *Talleres Navales Anglo-Argentinos* (The Anglo-Argentine Naval Ship Repairs Company, also a British enterprise). At one time the river came up to the front door. Land fill and silt washed down from the river Parana has since extended the shoreline out 3 additional blocks. But the riverfront served to bring luxury yachts right into the warehouse via a small set of railroad tracks. Inside, the yachts underwent outfitting and repairs.

In 1948 many of the British companies were nationalized by the government of President Juan Peron, and that is when the company closed its doors. Thereafter, the building served to make and install boilers for steam powered boats. But as the building fell into disrepair, it served for a time as a parking lot, and finally was abandoned to the elements for a period of at least 10 years.

That is when Mr. Carlos Barrandeguy and Malena discovered the building and bought it from a group who paid a pittance at a forced auction. The first challenge was draining the water which stood one meter deep in the area where the offices are now located. The roof was repaired, the place was cleaned, offices built, and the process of recovery begun.

The ups and downs of the Argentine economy forced more changes, and Carlos and Malena eventually sold the business and later the building to the current owners of Transpack Argentina. Says Cliff, "When I arrived I failed to see the possibilities of the facility. To me it was just a temporary home until the company could afford to move on to a better place. But gradually I began to see the light, and found that not only was the building adequate, it was excellent. Clever work by our warehouse manager succeeded in constantly recovering space we never knew we had, and as we grew, the building grew with us."

"After we bought the building, we began a major replacement of the old roof, resurfaced the floor with 20 centimeters of steel-reinforced concrete, and restored the 100 year-old classical San Telmo style façade to its original glory," says Simon Taylor, Administrative Manager. "We in effect preserved a piece of history by restoring the building to nearly its original state."

Says Williamson, "All that remains now is to build the geodesic dome restaurant and the tango dance floor on the roof to complete my dream for this lovely old structure. It will be ready for the next LACMA Convention in Buenos Aires."