

Weird and Wonderful Habitats

- Dov Levy

Zman readers residing in places like Brooklyn, Lakewood, Monsey, etc., know all too well about the problem of affordable housing—or non-affordable housing, as the case may be. The real estate crash has hit everybody, and families looking for new housing are having a hard time finding places to live. As local community activists continue searching for solutions, many individuals are turning to homes further and further out from the established city centers.

Unfortunately, while Zman can't relieve the housing problem, we can offer some comic relief by providing an entertaining look at the alternatives some people around the world have found for their housing.

In this article you will learn that an airplane that has been converted into a home sells for only \$200,000, and that a shipping container can be rented for as little as \$80 to \$140 a month. For just \$30,000 you can purchase a mobile home and will not be subject to exorbitant property taxes.



Container City

Everyone has seen the huge metal shipping containers being carried around on large tractor-trailers, chugging along on the back of a freight train or being lowered by a huge overhead crane onto a cargo ship.

Containers are used to transport all sorts of goods, including private possessions and furniture for people moving overseas, and offer a relatively economic solution for carting goods around the world. They are loaded by the thousands onto large ships, often several stories high, and transported over the ocean until they arrive at the port of their destination to be unloaded again.

And then the containers are filled up again and shipped out once more.

Shipping containers must be built very strong to withstand the abuse they take, including many times their weight being piled on top of them. They must also be waterproof and resistant to rusting. Because they are a must for a global economy, our planet is flooded with shipping containers. In fact, the world contains enough containers to build an eight-foot wall around the planet—twice!

Thousands of shipping containers are removed from service each year, some after being used only two or three times. Once they leave service, they are relegated to scrap yards where they are taken apart and recycled. Getting rid of containers that have outlived their usefulness can be a headache for their owners, as they must still pay for the empty containers to be transported to the scrap yard. However, now there may be a very convenient solution to the problem.

A decade ago, a group of developers came up with a novel idea: to take old, unwanted containers and convert them into badly needed housing. This would help both the former owners who are looking for a cost-efficient way to get rid of

them as well as the new homeowners who are desperate to find an affordable home to live in.

British developers Eldon Scott and Eric Reynolds saw in used shipping containers nearly complete structures that needed only to be outfitted with the amenities expected of a modern home to make them perfect for living in. They took a few old containers from London's ports and cut out windows and doors, adding plumbing and electricity, and installed heating and cooling systems. In no time they had created finished homes!

The pair literally built on their success by adding another story of containers above the first and then yet another. They dubbed their project "Container City" and a legend was born. Since all containers are built to be compatible so they can be piled onto and next to each other on ships, Scott and Reynolds were able to purchase their containers from anywhere in the world, knowing that they would all be reasonably alike.

It took five months to complete the work on Container City Number 1, which opened in May 2001 near the London docks. The original project included only 12 units, but it became so popular that in 2003 a fourth floor was added in less than two days, raising the number of homes to 15. Today, Container City Number 1 totals 20 containers.

Because containers are designed to be piled one atop another, and can hold many times their own weight, developers can regularly add more stories without worrying about the ability of the containers to support them. The London developers even added porches, also built from used containers, to the homes so the residents can enjoy the outdoors and sun (for the few days each year that the London weather permits).

In 2002, Container City Number 2 was built from 30 containers that were converted into 22 dwellings. The entire development went up in just four days. Today Container City Number 2 has been expanded to include a grand total of 100 apartments.

The Container Cities have a Lego-like appearance from the distance, since all containers resemble each other in size and shape but vary in color. Each apartment is 300 square feet in dimension and costs between \$80 and \$140 per month to rent.

One resident told a reporter that he receives shocked responses from people when he tells them that he lives in a container. Listeners assume that he is homeless and ask him, "What do you do in the winter?" Family and friends who have visited, however, were surprised that despite the homely outward appearance, the interior is finished so nicely and comfortably that it makes a great impression on visitors. In addition, containers are undeniably stronger than the average home since they are built to withstand a lot of weight and abuse.

The London projects were so successful that they spawned a number of similar container cities around the world. Furthermore, containers have since begun to be used by schools and hospitals that are pinched by a shortage of space. One school in England that had little property on which to expand was able to add 12 classrooms between the end of one semester and the opening of the next by installing modified containers.

Britain's deputy prime minister visited Container City to see whether the containers really provided an appropriate, quick and affordable solution to the housing crisis that plagues London. According to the media, the man was very favorably impressed with what he saw.

Scott and Reynolds, the men who first came up with the idea, soon found themselves busy in a highly lucrative line of business. They receive orders from around the world on a daily basis. Since containers are designed to be transported around the world, Scott and Reynolds can convert them into homes in England and then send them on their way to be integrated into new container cities around the world. Their company, Urban Space Management, has become a global empire that responds to orders from South America, Pakistan, Australia and other lands.

City leaders in Amsterdam granted permission to a developer to create a container city for thousands of university



Containers are unloaded from ships by huge dockside cranes.



Container City, London.



The developers added porches, also made from containers.