

# Thinking Inside the Box

By Virginia Wilkinson

You might be surprised at how comfortable living in a box can be.

3twenty Solutions, a new Saskatchewan company, has just begun designing and manufacturing industrial worksite structures and accommodations—all from recycled steel shipping containers.

There are more than 700,000 empty shipping containers sitting idle across North America. They're used to bring a variety of different imports here from around the world. Because of this, we are left with an ever-increasing oversupply of these large, steel boxes.

Recently, an innovative group of university students discovered these wasted containers could be used as the source for a unique new housing product. They also

realized that by finding uses for the containers, the group would be helping to address a significant environmental issue.

"The containers not only enable us to create new affordable housing options, they're also a green alternative," said Bryan McCrea, one of 3twenty Solutions' owner/partners.

"Because 3twenty is able to turn these steel containers into worksite and housing structures, we're giving new life to otherwise wasted material."

Just over a year ago, 3twenty Solutions was no more than a unique idea tossed around by a trio of fourth-year business and engineering students from the University of Saskatchewan. In the spring of 2009, the students created a

concept for the company and submitted it to the I3 Idea Challenge at the Wilson Centre for Entrepreneurial Excellence.

In May they were selected as the contest winners, and were awarded \$30,000 in cash and another \$30,000 in business services from Deloitte, Mcpherson, Leslie Tyerman (MLT) Lawyers and ZU.

"The cash enabled us to commercialize our project. The services allowed us to set up the business," said McCrea.

McCrea and partners Channing McCorrison and Evan Willoughby initially focused the company on developing residential housing products, but quickly found a significant demand for worksite and accommodation structures in the resource sector.

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Channing McCorrison, Bryan McCrea, Evan Willoughby of 3twenty Solutions

Photo: Kevin Hogarth

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He believes the recycled wood is a much better construction product.

“When I was in BC we were working with green wood. When we would go back and see the project a couple of years later, it was all gapped and twisted. At one point we used some recycled stuff. It was drier and didn't shrink—it's a much better product.”

Before long, Dobson also began building his own timber homes.

To date he has built more than 60 homes, living rooms and entryways and supplied timber for hundreds of projects. He's created specialty products such as stairs, doors, plank flooring, baseboards, casings and some furniture. He said the demand for timber products is growing worldwide.

While he is proud of the products he creates, he is especially proud that they incorporate the legacy of Saskatchewan's early settlers.

“Saskatchewan's early settlers had these huge pieces of wood brought here by train. They built the elevators with a lot of hard work and determination,” he said.

“We're helping to recapture some of the passion and energy they put into these buildings, and incorporating it into other structures that will continue into the future.” —

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McCrea said the containers work extremely well in this sector.

“They were created to be transported, so they are easily moved around the country or from mine site to mine site, and they are made of steel so they are incredibly durable and can be moved without affecting their structural integrity,” he said.

While its initial focus has been on creating structures for the resource sector, 3twenty will also be moving into the residential market. McCrea expects 3twenty will begin manufacturing residential containers within the next 18 months.

“There is absolutely unlimited opportunity. The containers are really affordable so they'll provide some exciting new residential options. I'm getting phone calls all the time from people looking for residential products.”

He said there has also been significant interest from people looking for containers that could be used as cabins.

Most of the containers provide an area of 320 square feet—which led to the creation of the company name. McCrea said some callers have wondered whether the living space would be tight.

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“People are always amazed at the space inside these containers. When you walk into one of them it's always so much bigger than people expect. We ask people to come into the space, have a look around, and then we invite them to draw their dreams. It's exciting to see what unique concepts the company and our customers can create within the four steel walls.”

3twenty expects to move a significant number of its structures into the market this year. The company is forecasting sales of 30-40 units in 2010. McCrea said while this year has been exciting, he expects next year to even better.

“The time is now to be an entrepreneur, especially in Saskatchewan. There are so many possibilities here, and a very supportive mentorship network. It's exciting to be able to create and add value to this growing province,” he said.

“It's a great opportunity.” —