



THINKING INSIDE THE BOX

Each year, some fifty thousand merchant ships crisscross oceans and seas, carrying goods in millions of reusable shipping containers. Between 1999 and 2008, as worldwide container trade grew at an annual rate of 10 percent, so did the number of containers. But the global recession cut demand for both ships and shipping: By March 2009, global trade volumes decreased by 22 percent from the previous August, according to the World Bank. (Though there's been some recovery, as of October, worldwide trade was still 2.8 percent below the pre-crisis level.)

What to do with 17 million shipping containers and not enough products to fill them? Fill them with people. To make use of surplus containers, architects and developers throughout the world are transforming the steel boxes into stores, malls, homes, hotels—you name it.

Even before the economy hit rough seas, developers were giving shipping containers second lives. For example, in the Netherlands, few universities offer students dormitory housing, and Amsterdam's tight housing market poses a particular challenge. To accommodate frustrated students, in 2006 Tempohousing, a construction company specializing in the reuse of shipping containers, finished building Keetwonen, "the biggest container city in the world" (pictured above). Each of the one thousand units, the most basic of which measures 20 feet long, 8 feet wide, and 8.6 feet high, features its own kitchen, bathroom, balcony, and—with monthly rent starting at €400—a yearlong waiting list.

Students shouldn't get too comfortable inside their metal boxes, though. To make room for other projects, the city plans to relocate the entire village in 2016. Apparently, one benefit to building homes out of shipping containers is that they can be easily, well, shipped. —Vadim Liberman