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Grain Silos: From Empty Relics to Cultural Landmarks and Luxury Hotels

Changing shipping routes and equipment have left hundreds of these storage towers abandoned. Now, some are being turned into money-making attractions

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In the early 20th century, modernist artists and architects, including Le Corbusier, were fascinated by the tall, stark cylinders of grain elevators, which they considered an American analog to Egypt's pyramids. The structures—round towers of concrete or steel, colloquially called silos, and used to store and sort grain—were typically built along city waterfronts or railway lines.

In the U.S., more than 9,400 grain storage facilities still stand, not including those on farms, according to the Department of Agriculture. Hundreds or even thousands have fallen or will fall into disuse, as [grain-shipping routes shift](#) to chase higher profits. Demolishing a grain elevator can cost millions of dollars because of their heft and size.

Today, cities around the world are repurposing these remnants of their agricultural past to draw tourists and shoppers. In recent years, cultural institutions, visitor bureaus and artists have turned the elevator complexes into money-making attractions, from museums and luxury hotels to shopping venues and art installations.



In downtown Waco, Texas, former HGTV stars Chip and Joanna Gaines built a retail compound around two 120-foot-tall steel silos that once stored cotton seed. The 2.6-acre Magnolia Market at the Silos includes a home décor shop, bakery and outdoor space for food trucks. It opened in October 2015 and draws 1.6 million visitors per year, according to the Waco Convention and Visitors Bureau.

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Chip Gaines credited his wife for seeing the potential in the rusty, century-old silos, now a frequent presence in visitors' Instagram feeds. In the next few years, he said, the couple hopes to renovate the interior space. "It never even crossed our minds to tear those things down," he said. "When you walk in, you feel like an ant walking into a Coke can."

With their smooth, windowless surfaces and vast scale, elevators are impressive, said David Tarbet, a grain-elevator historian and author of the book "Grain Dust Dreams." "There are plenty of buildings in the world that are taller, but when you're up against or inside [a silo], it seems bigger than life," he said. "The limits

of one human being's imagination are pushed by the hugeness of these structures.”



The Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa in Cape Town, seen here ahead of its September 2017 opening, occupies a complex of 42 former grain silos. PHOTO: KYLE WEEKS FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

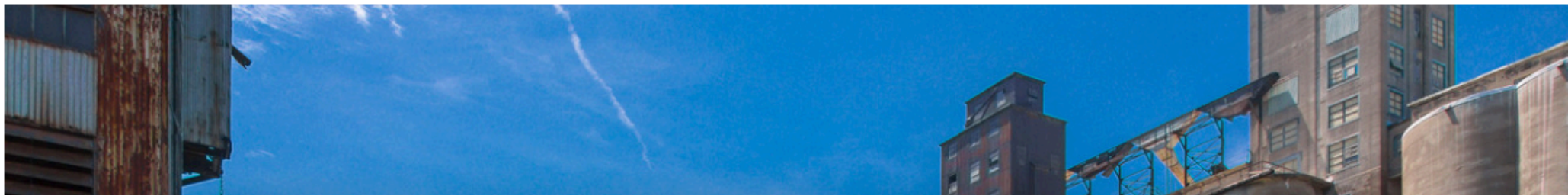
Last September, [South Africa's Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa](#) opened in a complex of 42 grain silos on Cape Town's waterfront. The museum, which houses philanthropist Jochen Zeitz's collection, is projected to attract more than 350,000 visitors in its first year, according to the V&A Waterfront, a joint venture between real-estate investment company Growthpoint Properties and South Africa's government employees' pension fund that owns the site.

The 187-foot-tall complex was the tallest structure in sub-Saharan Africa when it was built in the 1920s, but it hadn't been used for 16 years. The V&A Waterfront decided against demolishing it in 2010, said development director Mark Noble, and a year later hired London designer Thomas Heatherwick to handle the revamp. Other proposals “largely

Heatherwick and his team also redid the exterior of an adjacent workhouse—the elevator’s office and control center—which became the Silo Hotel, a 28-room boutique property with crystal chandeliers and velvet sofas. Rooms start at \$800 a night; the penthouse in the silo goes for \$10,000 a night.

Grain elevators have also been used as backdrops for artworks. For about a decade, Quebec City, Canada, has hosted a free nightly light show presented across the 2,000 square feet of grain towers along its waterfront. Psychedelic artist Isaac Abrams and his son, Raphael, designed a light show for the Kaatskill Kaleidoscope, the world’s largest kaleidoscope, in a 56-foot-round silo at the Emerson Resort & Spa in New York’s Catskill Mountains.

Part of the Arenc Silo Opera House in Marseilles, France, is in an old grain elevator. Minneapolis’ Mill City Museum is housed in the former Gold Medal Flour complex, a onetime milling and storage facility for the flour company.



turned their back on the grain silo building,”
Noble said, but Heatherwick Studio’s plan
“inverted that and made it the hero, the center, a cathedral.”

As part of the \$40 million overhaul, the silos became the museum’s grand atrium. Venetian blown glass inspired the window design on the site, while the rounded atrium mimics the shape of a corn kernel, project lead Stepan Martinovsky said.





In Buffalo, hundreds of old grain elevators, known collectively as Elevator Alley, stand along the Buffalo River. About six years ago, the city began turning them into breweries, event spaces and places to host history tours, raise bees and showcase art. Nearby is a distillery that produces “Grain Canyon” vodka, named for the thicket of concrete cylinders lining the river.

More than 10,000 people tour Elevator Alley every year, according to Visit Buffalo Niagara. “People used to laugh at the grain elevators and call them eyesores,” said Jill Jedlicka, executive director of Buffalo-Niagara Waterkeeper, a nonprofit that tends to this section of the Buffalo River. “And now people are embracing them and calling them iconic to the city.”

