

# Wash Trends

A Publication of the Mid-Atlantic Carwash Association

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# Glass Walls Stake Claim for Carwash Innovation

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WashTrends focuses in on the latest carwash trend.

WHAT ARE GLASS AND RED AND CLEAR ALL OVER? Twenty years ago you'd be hard pressed to find anyone who would answer: carwash. Today there are more than 300 glass-walled carwashes around. In the grand scheme of carwashes on the national scale, that barely registers as a blip. But still, that answer may sound less out of the blue these days. The glass wonders can be found all over the country.

If you haven't seen one, the structure is based on engineering used to house

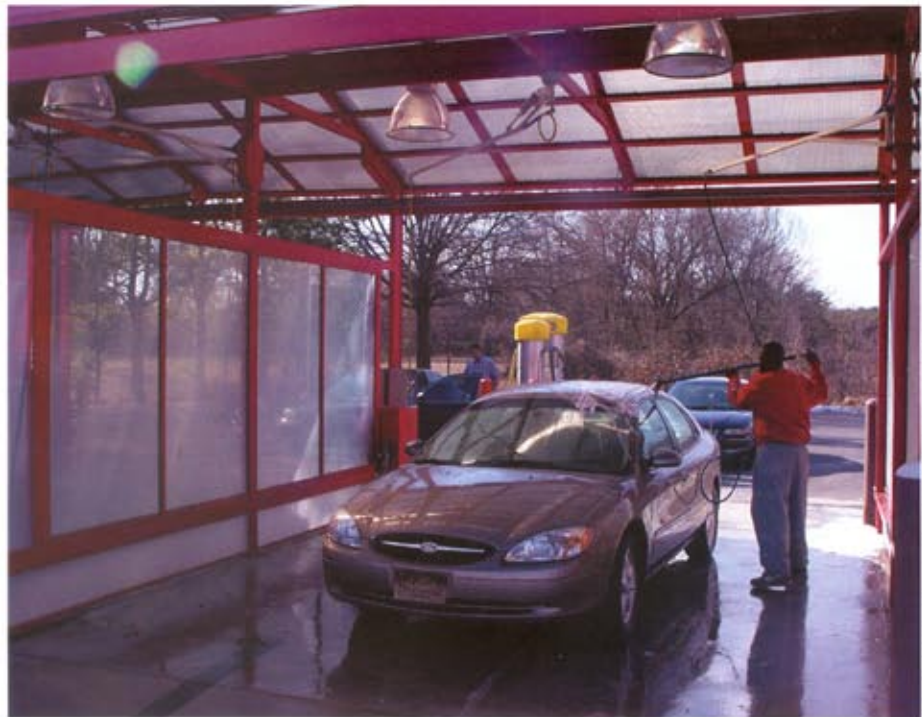
the swimming pools of some of Hollywood's elite. The buildings are constructed of aluminum, polycarbonate and shatterproof tempered glass. In terms of construction, they are easy and quick to put up. If you want to get into the market fast, the glass route is worthy of consideration. In under a week, the building can be completely constructed. They save time by prefabricating the parts, then bringing the parts to the site. If construction is started on a Monday, within a week the building is ready to

have the equipment installed. The structure can be designed to fit any equipment you want installed.

The lifespan of the glass buildings are also markedly long, lasting 15 to 20 years on average. In Slidell, Louisiana, one of the areas most affected by Hurricane Katrina, stands a Shell Station with a glass-walled carwash. The cement canopy of the Shell station suffered some damage from the storm, but the carwash stood perfectly intact. Just two weeks after the devastating



Lario Brightley, 39, of Glen Burnie washing his car at Liberty Mart on Crain Highway in Glen Burnie, MD.



PHOTOGRAPH BY MATT MATKOWSKI

storm, the business was up and running washing cars again. Clearing out the leaves was the biggest problem, the owner said. No broken glass and fittingly, no water damage. Get it up fast and keep it there, all in one flashy industrial package.

One of the hardest things a business has to do to be successful is drum up awareness. Typically, a concrete and cement structure isn't going to draw too much attention. On the other hand, driving by a well-lit see-through carwash at night can produce quite a few double takes. It advertises itself.

"During the building process, people come up scratching their heads wondering, 'What are they building,'" said Steve Smith of Lighthouse Carwash, a company that manufactures the structures, adding, "As soon as it goes up, you have a piece of marketing up there."

That marketing capability and a speedy assembly are where this concept stems from. However, the underlying benefits are where this innovation shines.

"It's well lit at nighttime, it's clear, you can see through it. Security wise, it's a lot better," Angelo DeLeonibus said of

his 11-month-old glass carwash in Glen Burnie, MD.

"The openness breeds a certain level of safety in the customer", as he explained. During the day, the sun shines down through the roof of the structure. At night the vivid high bay lighting *looks* like the sun is shining through the roof. DeLeonibus has also found an abnormal number of women using the self-serve carwash bays – predominantly used by men in conventional structures. He chalks that up to the openness and the ability to keep an eye on your surroundings.

If the customer feels safe, they will come back. The safety issue is important. The four self-serve bays and automatic carwash are open for business all day everyday at DeLeonibus' convenience super-plex. If someone gets the inclination for a midnight snack, a full tank of gas and a scrub, the option is there. But because the carwashes run unattended with nobody around to chase off loiterers, or someone with more nefarious intentions, the late night cleaning spot could turn into a hot spot for abductions or other such crime. The car wash was built on the side of the convenience store and away from the

gas pumps – out of the eye line of casual passersby. If a single car pulled up to the carwash, there wouldn't likely be any people around to ensure safety or notice someone in danger.

In the case of the glass structure, it's bright and open and like most carwashes, there are cameras keeping track of activity. There's no corner to hide around and no wall to disappear behind - eliminating the sneak attack and the cover of shadows. These factors all add up to a not-so-hospitable environment for the criminal element. For these same reasons, graffiti has yet to rear its ugly head on any of DeLeonibus' walls, saving him money other carwashes have to spend on removal.

An additional cost-saving bonus to the see-through carwash is in the energy department. During the winter months, you can't have your carwash icing over. It creates a hazard for motorists in the automatic carwashes and for people who wash their vehicles in the self-serve carwashes. The glass walls and smoky polycarbonate ceiling panels work like a greenhouse. While standing in a newly built structure in Maryland before the heat was turned on, the temperature

read 68 on the indoor thermostat. Looking outside through the glass wall, the digital thermometer on the gas price sign read 49. That 19 degrees can equal a significant amount of savings, especially in these times of ever-rising energy costs. During the summer, the structure works the same way. It gets hot in there. To alleviate some of the excess heat and cut down on cooling costs, the roof of the building retracts letting the heat rise out of the structure.

There is even a medical benefit to the glass walls. Many people who suffer from vestibular disorders like vertigo, imbalance or general dizziness can't put their cars through an automatic car wash. The conflict between actually being still and the visual motion of the vertical wraps moving along the side of the vehicle creates the perception of internal motion. This can send a person suffering from one of these ailments into a full-fledged attack or overall nausea. According to Sean Forsyth of Mid-Atlantic Autec, the open feeling of the glass enclosure alleviates much of that

problem. Needless to say, it does the same for those who enter into a panic attack from claustrophobia when in the carwash.

So what does all of this cost an entrepreneur looking to enter the enigmatic carwash industry? It all depends on the location, but around 10 to 15 percent more than a standard block carwash structure. Although in some places where finding construction workers is more difficult, it can actually be cheaper because it takes fewer

workers to build the glass structures. And because it may be classified as a non-permanent structure, and therefore qualifies as equipment, the structure may be leased, contrary to the block buildings, which can only be purchased.

Matt Makowski has toiled in various forms of media over the past six years. He is currently a freelance writer based in Maryland.

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