

Amazon Warehouses: An Overview of the Different Types

Amazon has built an extensive global network of fulfillment and sortation centers to meet the growing demand for its vast array of products. These warehouses use state-of-the-art technology and processes to receive, pack, and ship items efficiently to customers around the world. There are a few main types of [Amazon warehouses](#), each serving a specific purpose in their fulfillment operation.



Fulfillment Centers

Fulfillment centers are the largest and most integral warehouses in Amazon's distribution network. These massive buildings store millions of products that are sold directly by Amazon or by third-party sellers using the Fulfillment by Amazon (FBA) service. When a customer places an order, high-tech robotic systems retrieve the items from shelves and bring them to stations where they are carefully packed for shipment by warehouse workers.

There are over 175 fulfillment centers worldwide, making up the bulk of Amazon's storage capacity. Many are over one million square feet, equivalent to around 28 football fields! The largest is their warehouse in Canada spanning over 2.2 million square feet. Fulfillment centers use complex proprietary software to coordinate product storage locations based on factors like order frequency and size. This allows the warehouses to operate efficiently and rapidly meet customer delivery promises.

Sortation Centers

After orders are packed at fulfillment centers, many items pass through sortation centers. As the name implies, the purpose of these warehouses is to sort shipped packages by final destination. Packages from

multiple fulfillment centers converge at sortation facilities where they are divided up and transported closer to their end point on the delivery route.

The sorting process relies heavily on automated scanning and conveyor routing managed by algorithms. By pre-sorting products based on zip code while still near the fulfillment center, Amazon can take advantage of transportation efficiencies across the final mile to customers. This allows faster estimated delivery times and cost savings.



Prime Now Hubs

For superfast shipping, Amazon relies on a growing network of Prime Now hubs located close to major urban areas. These smaller regional warehouses store up to 15,000 of the most popular locally-demanded items. When a Prime member places a Prime Now order, delivery promises are extremely tight - sometimes within just an hour!

The Prime Now hubs use picked up contractor drivers to deliver smaller shipments rapidly from the nearby facilities straight to the customer's door. In some cities, Amazon has even set up dedicated Amazon Fresh centers to handle quick delivery of grocery orders. The program requires strategically placed, compact warehouses for speed and access to local neighborhoods.

Specialty Sites

While extremely versatile in storing almost any retail product, most Amazon warehouses are built for general storage and order fulfillment. But some product categories require special handling or facilities. For example, jewelry, apparel items, and perishable goods each have unique warehouse needs compared to books or consumer electronics.

That's why Amazon has several dedicated specialty sites optimized for storage and distribution of specific product types. They operate jewelry distribution hubs, larger apparel-focused warehouses, and

refrigerated Fresh centers for perishables like fresh produce, meat, and frozen foods. Specialization allows efficiency gains despite handling atypical warehouse products.

Return Centers

With billions of packages shipped each year, returns are an inevitable part of the business. Packages coming back from customers don't route through the main fulfillment workflow though. Instead, they are sent to dedicated return processing centers designed specifically to handle excess inventory.

When a returned item arrives at a return center, it goes through inspection, sorting, and dispositioning. Products get evaluated for their resale potential and routed accordingly. Some items go to clearance outlet sites while others get sent back to main fulfillment centers if still in sellable condition. Damaged goods and other waste get recycled appropriately. Proper handling of returns is essential for Amazon to minimize losses.

In the future, Amazon plans to continue expanding all areas of their distribution network to meet rising e-commerce demand. More fulfillment center construction is planned across the globe along with growth in specialty delivery hubs for 1-day and same day shipping. Their logistics capabilities underpin the entire customer experience - from product browsing to unpacking their order at home. The variety of warehouse types working seamlessly together is what enables Amazon to set the standard for convenience and speed in online retail.