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12 stories in 8 months?

Prefab leaps to the sky

By ALICE COLLINS

Although prefabricated building had its early beginnings more than 30 years ago, a highly advanced version is about to revolutionize the construction industry.

An example is Southfield's 12-story senior citizens housing center — McDonnell Towers — going up on Clive Center Drive just east of Telegraph Road.

Almost everything above the ground on the \$4.6 million project was precast elsewhere, including combined bathroom-kitchen modules completely decorated and furnished with appliances, cabinets and plumbing fixtures.

It's all lifted into place by cranes and unified with cement pumped through foundation port holes and voids left in weight bearing walls in the building.

"When done, it's actually a monolithically-poured building," said its job superintendent Jack Armstrong. "It's good, it works and it's the future of the construction industry."

The F. C. E. Dillon Co. of Akron, Ohio, general contractor for the project, is using its Dillon precast method of construction throughout the country and is currently putting up four in Michigan, including the Southfield building, Armstrong said.

F. C. E. Dillon has branch companies to do its own precasting and core systems, and all components are transported to the construction site from Ohio by semi-trailer.

The big advantage of the precast method is the saving of time — as much as cutting it in half. And this is translated into saving money, Armstrong said.

"I can give you a good comparison," the job superintendent said. "It took 10 months to top out a seven-story building in Dearborn using conventional unit masonry. It's taken us four months to top out this one."



"It's good, it works and it's the future of the construction industry" — Job superintendent Jack Armstrong on the Dillon precast method.

McDonnell Towers is Southfield's first high-rise senior citizens structure and is slated for a mid-April completion. It includes 162 living units, primarily one-bedroom apartments — and will also be the home of the city's senior citizen program.

The largest precast units transported to the site, according to Armstrong, were 37 feet long, 10 feet high and eight inches thick.

"The heaviest component was an elevator module weighing 14½ tons and had to be lifted the full 12 stories."

"On an average day," said Armstrong, "we set 17-20 semi-trailer loads of precast in place."

The heart module is a two-room, kitchen and bathroom unit. It is completely finished, painted, tiled, floors laid, and furnished with

appliances and cabinets. "One semi could handle two of these."

The whole project, from beginning to end, including the landscaping, if weather permits will take eight months. Ground was broken Aug. 6, the first piece of precast was set Oct. 27 and the last module put into place the week before Christmas.

"I've been in the construction business for 25 years," Armstrong said, "and production methods haven't changed much until now."

"People come up to me and say 'My God, you're going so fast, I can't believe it!'"

Armstrong, formerly with the Paul Johnson Builders, Inc. of Birmingham, went to work for the Dillon company last April. He was born and raised in Detroit.

"Precast slabs have been used for a long time, but this is the first process like this. I don't know of any other company doing what we are."

"Why hasn't it taken off before? I guess the big expense of completely changing over the process, and convincing the public that it's been well tested and safe," Armstrong said.

"We're very well supervised by independent inspections."

The Michigan State Housing Development Authority, which has the mortgage for the financing, has an inspector on the job, the state has an independent inspecting architect here, and we have continuous quality control checks by an independent laboratory on the cement poured for the floors.

Southfield's building department has been making daily inspections as the work progresses, said Clayton O. Diebel, director of the department.

Diebel said representatives of his department went to Ohio to observe the Dillon methods and "we feel the building structure will be more than adequate."



Cranes lift precast modules into place in sophisticated prefabrication. Job method cuts construction time in half.



\$91,000 pump shoots cement up 12 stories to the roof of Southfield's McDonnell Towers.



The heart module of the building is one-piece kitchen-bathroom combination, pre-decorated and furnished.

Photographed by Douglas Bauman

Despite the recession

DB&T economist predicts high interest

Recognizing that the United States economy is in a "sharp recession," bank economist Thomas D. Thomson said last week he doesn't expect interest rates, especially long term rates, to be taking any quick dramatic slides.

A Birmingham resident, Dr. Thomson recently joined Detroit Bank and Trust as vice president and chief economist, after serving as an economic forecaster with the Federal Reserve System in Washington.

"Although rates may gradually fall, said Dr. Thomson, there are several aspects of the current economic environment that will keep them from going down dramatically."

He predicted that "unlike most previous recessions, the current dollar (gross national product) will likely continue to grow" — perhaps as much as an average of five per cent, even during declining first and second quarters of 1975.

"Real growth — taking account of price changes — will probably be negative," he continued, but the five per cent will be nominal and must be financed.

"One could make the related point," he said, "that inflation will remain a problem and interest rates will usually remain high enough to compensate investors for their loss of purchasing power."

Pressure to sustain interest

rates will also come from businessmen attempting to refinance a large part of their short term indebtedness into longer term instruments, and from the financing needs of various levels of government, Dr. Thomson explained.

"During the last several months business short-term indebtedness has grown at unprecedented rates. And in the last seven quarters, nonfinancial corporate businesses have increased the level of their borrowing in the form of bank loans and open-market paper debt by almost 50 per cent," he said.

"Any consideration of interest rates must take into account future federal reserve policy moves,"

Dr. Thomson continued. "The money supply has grown very slowly since midsummer."

He predicted that "money numbers will likely soon start growing much more rapidly in lagged response to the almost 8.5 per cent increase in the monetary base (bank reserves and currency) since July," and the drop in the federal funds rate from over 13 per cent to less than nine per cent.

"This easing, in my opinion, will push money toward the fed's desired long run growth path. Further easing might be necessary in two or three months, however," he added.

Before joining Detroit Bank and Trust, Dr. Thomson was an officer of the board of governors of the Federal Reserve System and chief of its econometric and computer applications section.

The section provides the Federal Reserve Board with economic forecasts concerning the U. S. economy in general, using statistical modeling techniques. It also developed a monthly money market model, a tool heavily used by the board in its analysis of interest rates.

Dr. Thomson has authored articles and essays published in national and professional journals and spoke throughout the country on subjects dealing with economics and finance.



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