LEED Platinum SoMa Studios On the Cutting Edge of Urban Prefab

Modular in SOMA stacks up a 4-story building in 4 days!

The SoMa Studios, a 23-unit apartment building in San Francisco's trendy South of Market district, is believed to be the first modular-built urban infill apartment complex in the nation. The stylish four-story LEED Platinum building was deposited, module by module, on a 3,700-square-foot lot between a parking garage and an apartment complex, after being trucked over the Bay Bridge from a Sacramento factory. The entire building process took three months – a fraction of the estimated 13 months for the same project using traditional construction – and the four stories went up onsite in just four days.

Seeking to move the project forward quickly, the developer, Panoramic Interests of Berkeley, Ca., decided that modular was the way to go. Modular offered "no change orders, better quality, shorter construction, better scheduling and a more predictable outcome," according to Panoramic's Patrick Kennedy.

The company chose the San Francisco-based ZETA as the prefabricator. "ZETA understood the potential for multi-story prefab and had incredible attention to detail in getting this right, first time out," said Kennedy.

In addition to offering a reliable process, ZETA – a company formed with sustainable building as its goal – provided the capability of incorporating numerous green features, which would appeal to the potential tenants for the studios. Panoramic had urban singles in mind – particularly those who work at Twitter's mid-Market headquarters three blocks away – when developing the project.

Green features abound in the SoMa Studios – solar hot water heating, recycled materials, energy efficient fixtures, natural light and ventilation, and high-performance windows, to name a few.

"Green building is being driven by the market as well as the bottom line. On the marketing side, there is demand because it's a differentiated product," explained Shilpa Sankaran, co-founder and vice president of marketing for ZETA. "For an office or an apartment, you can get a premium on rents. On the bottom line, you can save money due to energy efficiency. It's very exciting to builders."

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Inherently Greener

When Sankaran co-founded ZETA with real estate consultant Naomi Porat, the two had a vision for sustainable building, particularly with urban prefab. "ZETA sought to be a sustainable building company, and when we asked, 'how do we do that?' modular was the best solution. It just makes sense in terms of quality, efficiency, cost and sustainability. Our mission was to help transform the industry."

Because modules are built in a controlled environment, modular construction is inherently greener. "There is 50-90 percent less construction waste because of the process but also procurement," said Sankaran. "Because we buy materials almost exactly to what we need for the project – e.g. pre-cut lumber – we have less waste. Also, we can reuse materials and not put them in a dumpster since we aren't out on a construction site."

In addition, the modular method can lead to greater energy efficiency. "The offsite process enables a certain level of quality and energy efficiency," according to Sankaran. "Some of the Energy Star 4.0 components can only be installed in a controlled environment. Also, the buildings are very well sealed."

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While the tightness of the SoMa studios produced incredible sound proofing – "better than any high rise in the city," according to Kennedy – a well-sealed building often comes with the concern for a higher risk of poor indoor air quality. But when using modular, a builder doesn't encounter the same issues as with stick-built construction.

"With modular, you can address these issues," Sankaran said. "For example, you can use kiln-dried lumber – which never gets exposed to elements – so you don't have mold and mildew issues."

Future Growth

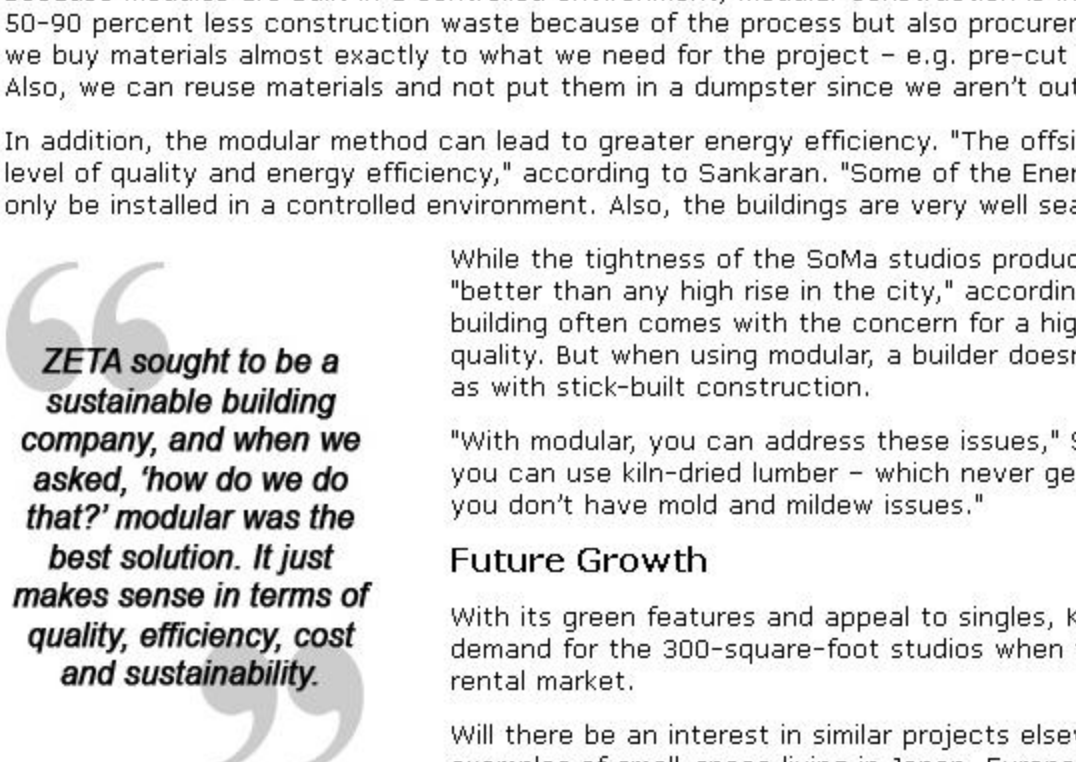
With its green features and appeal to singles, Kennedy believes there will be demand for the 300-square-foot studios when they become available to the rental market.

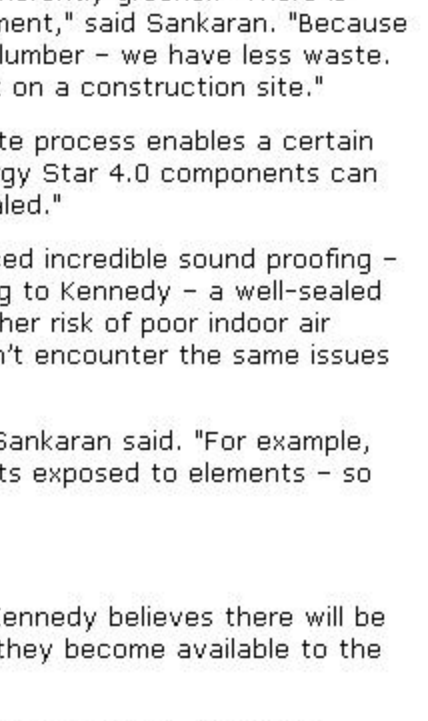
Will there be an interest in similar projects elsewhere? "There are many examples of small-space living in Japan, Europe and places like New York," he said.

He believes that, in the future, any high-cost area could be a ripe market for prefab. It's applicable for "any project that has economies of scale," he said.

If the enthusiasm for green construction is any indicator, there will be no shortage of similar developments in the future. By 2015, an estimated 40 to 48 percent of new non-residential construction by value will be green, equating to a $120 to $145 billion opportunity, according to McGraw Hill Construction.

In terms of broad adoption for prefab, Kennedy thinks it will take more successful projects. "We'd love to build another dozen of these if we had the land," he said.





Interior renderings of one of the 300-square-foot studios. Courtesy Panoramic Interests

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