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Twelve days of building

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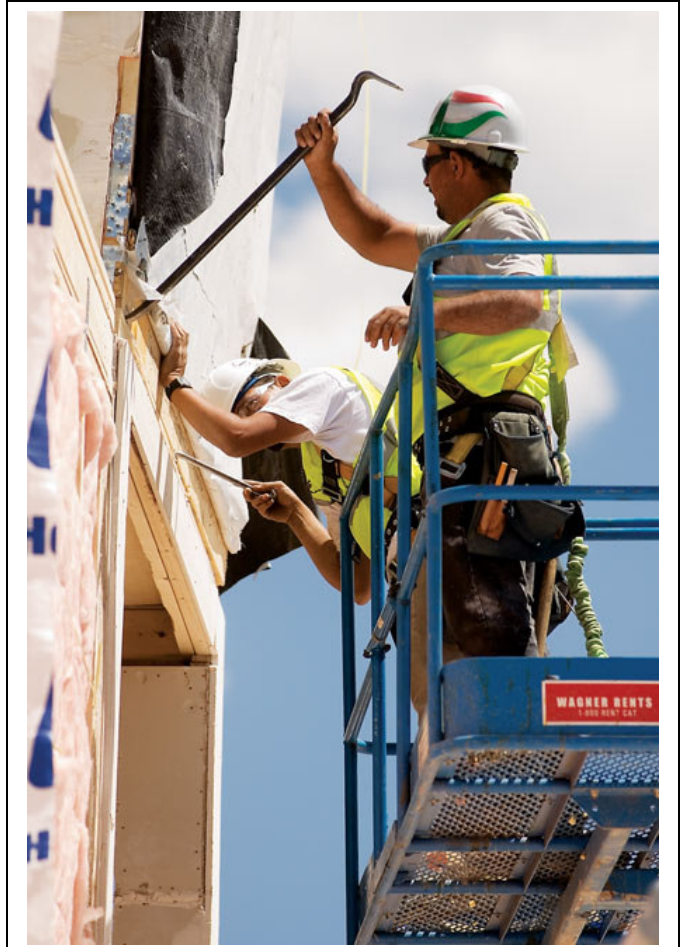
Somewhere near the Snowmass golf course, behind the Club Commons seasonal housing complex, a unique affordable housing project is going up — in just 12 days.

While the hot housing topic in Aspen is the much higher-than-anticipated cost of the Burlingame Ranch affordable housing project, and the first residents of the Snowmass' Rodeo Place employee housing neighborhood are moving in 10 months behind schedule, Club Commons II is on budget and on schedule. From clearing snow on the site to the final landscaping, the entire 100-bedroom complex, which is being built using modular pre-fab construction, will be done in slightly more than six months.

“The biggest benefit to this is probably the impact on the community,” said Larry Thompson, general superintendent for Neenan Archistruction, the design-build firm on the project for Related WestPac, which is developing Club Commons II as mitigation housing for Base Village. The impact, he added, is obviously minimal — less time on site, hence less noise, dust, hammering and back-up beepers, which can be the bane of living in a mountain resort in the summer.

Real-life Legos

If everything is ready to go, it takes about 30 minutes to set one of the 63 factory-made modular units that make up Club Commons II, which will include 36 apartments in two buildings. One of the buildings will be nearly identical to the existing Club Commons, which offers college-style living for Aspen Skiing Co. seasonal workers — four small bedrooms around a common kitchen and living area. Another 12-unit building will be longer term rental housing. The entire project will go for LEEDS certification, which is a green stamp of approval that includes criteria such as minimizing waste during construction and energy-efficient building practices.



Construction workers align the edges of adjoining pods as one unit is lowered into place.

It's like a giant Lego project, but with cranes, semi-trailer trucks and workers scurrying around literally stitching the pieces together as they are laid.

Here's how it works: After a design and planning process that started last fall, it took eight weeks this spring to build all the boxes at the Johnstown plant of Barvista Building Systems, the modular manufacturer near Fort Collins.

The 63 units, complete with everything including the kitchen sink, were then trucked from the Front Range to Carbondale, where they were staged on a couple of sites near Catherine Store and on Buggy Circle.

“It's very important that we get them trucked over the mountains and into the valley because once we start setting them, we set 10-15 units per day, so it's

more jockey trucking from a temporary storage area,” said Ron New, director of mountain operations for Neenan Archistruction, implying that the chance of delays is far less from a closer location.

Still, traffic delays do come into play when the company’s four semis, which have special hydraulic systems that minimize the time and effort spent loading the boxes onto the trailer, haul them from Carbondale to Snowmass.

“We’re sometimes waiting for the trucks,” said Mike Barker, sales manager for Barvista.

Once everything is on site, a crane plucks the box from the truck and moves it carefully to its designated location, with one worker helping guide the box by a rope tied to its bottom. The sides and corners are lined up, and the boxes that are stacked one on top of the other are fastened with nails six inches apart and a vertical metal strip running along the entire height of the three-story building.

“It’s a puzzle but it’s a planned puzzle,” said Dusty Stutsman, a Related WestPac intern working on the project.

Inside one of the recently placed units, it looks like the apartment is just days from being done. All the counters, cabinets and appliances are already installed, as are the toilet and sinks, windows and the bathroom mirror, light bulbs, electrical outlets and light-switch covers. Everything is so precisely fitted at the factory, with two to three inspections before the box gets shipped out, that it’s extremely rare for even a window to break upon placement, said Barker.

The plumbing, heating and electrical wires and tubes are all there too, just waiting to be coupled as one of the final steps along with hooking up the main electrical line to each apartment and putting sheet rock in the spaces in between each unit. Rolls of carpet come with each unit, just waiting to be rolled out and secured.

About 7,000 square feet of living space is placed in a single day, after which the top-level roofs are fitted lifted up diagonally and put together. Wooden decks and staircases are also added later.

Cost, time savings add up

Like a frozen microwave dinner that eliminates pots and pans, a pre-constructed project such as Club Commons II doesn’t need as many electricians, plumbers and carpenters as an entirely onsite project — about 10 percent of the usual work, said Thompson. Carpenters will hang a few doors and build the decks, and some drywall work will be needed in the hallways, he said.

“The biggest thing is the cost,” said Thompson. “You pay someone in the Denver area \$12 per hour instead of the \$35 per hour here.” Related WestPac’s project manager Joe Enzer said that for the building portion of the project, the number of workers and car trips was reduced by 75 percent by doing it modular — 25-30 people on site versus what would normally be more than 100.

There’s no real way to compare the Club Commons II project — which is a mix of seasonal and long-term rental housing — to Burlingame and Rodeo Place, which are both made up of for-sale units. And Related WestPac refused to divulge any overall cost information about Club Commons II.

But it’s fair to assume that the off-site construction process is far more economical, and less susceptible to weather delays, than something built entirely in the very expensive Roaring Fork Valley.

In this kind of market, modular housing may be the wave of the future, and it doesn’t need to imply cheaply fabricated mobile homes. Related WestPac is going modular for its 21-unit Sinclair Meadows employee housing project, which is currently under construction. And Colorado Place, a Barvista project in Carbondale, will have upscale luxury townhomes selling for upwards of \$1 million. SkiCo’s Keator Grove project in Carbondale is also partially modular.

“It’s true, some things can’t be done modular,” said Barvista’s Barker. “If we get in early in the project, we can almost always incorporate it. But if we’re brought into a project that’s already designed, maybe not.”

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