The prospect of double-podium projects like WREN spreading throughout southern California excites Cobo and Zapata. "New code language allowing multiple podium levels with Type III wood construction allows us to maximize the density and speed of wood construction," observes Cobo. For developers, that represents "bonus density" within Type III construction. For city leaders, it represents the possibility of safe, new housing.

WOOD: MULTIFAMILY DENSITY WITH TENANT-WINNING STYLING

It's humbling when the architect's vision helps rewrite a neighborhood's narrative. The $144 million WREN multifamily project in L.A.'s fast-rising South Park district does just that through thoughtful innovation, commercial discipline, and the magic of a remarkably nimble building material … wood.

Last June a new chapter for Los Angeles' fast-rising South Park district was delivered when a $144 million, 362-unit multifamily community called WREN warmly greeted its first residents.

The glittering pair of seven-story buildings transform the skyline along Pico Boulevard through a series of innovations, including the city's first Type III double-podium design. The project is earning rave reviews from the owner, tenants, city officials, and the designer community.

WREN launched a six-building, $1.2 billion South Park community that will ultimately add over 2,000 rental units to the city's housing stock. "The owner has big plans. WREN brings the first phase of that vision to market quickly," explains Matthew Cobo, AIA, associate principal of Togawa Smith Martin (TSM). TSM is an L.A.-based architect firm specializing in West Coast multifamily projects.

Double-Podium Breakthrough

The TSM design team faced the challenge of making a signature design statement that met the owner's 195 units/acre density requirement. "We had to figure out how to hit that density within an 85 foot height," Cobo says. They accomplished it through an innovative double-podium design supporting five levels of wood-framed structure, utilizing what is now a city of Los Angeles standard code modification.

The building will be protected by a full NFPA 13 fire sprinkler system throughout the entire project. The wood levels above the podium are split into five zones with 3-hour fire walls. By providing the sprinkler system, the wood portion of the building was able to increase in height from four to five stories.

"The structural engineers are able to do a lot of things with wood that they can't do with other materials," says Matt Cobo, AIA, associate principal of Togawa Smith Martin, project architect. "Wood gives us lots of flexibility. We're able to do more things with exterior wall insulation and corridor wall acoustics because of wood. The owner gets a maximum return from the space. We utilize every square foot we can. The efficiencies of leasable to overall square footage in this project were greater than 85 percent, which is a very good number."

Density wasn't the only challenge. Because of site size and shape, the design necessitated deeper interlocking units that were designed to showcase larger windows. Larger windows were a desired feature because typical urban in-fill projects are often shaded by existing structures. Fortunately, WREN has open-sky access. The TSM design team was determined to make the most of this property attribute with expansive windows.

Design Advantage

The challenge for wood framed buildings in high seismic zones is how to provide large glass areas and still provide sufficient shear walls. To achieve this, the team worked with the structural engineer to determine the minimal length of shear wall required at each floor. Any area not required for shear wall was used for windows. The structural characteristics of wood were blended to create an aesthetically pleasing open grid on the exterior of the building.

But larger window openings add structural complexity. Wood proved to be the architect's best friend in conversations with project engineers. Jay Zapata, AIA, LEED AP BD+C and TSM's architect/job captain on the project, says "Wood is a forgiving material, especially during the construction phase, since it allowed us to quickly resolve unexpected issues in the field without compromising our original design. We were able to negotiate lengths and locations of shear panels with our structural engineer to quickly direct our general contractor and their subs. Wood is a material that lets you achieve your design goals without affecting the budget or the time schedule." Zapata says.

Meeting code proved to be an exceptionally positive experience. "The city was great," Cobo reports. "They have a developer services group that brings together many city departments. Code compliance wasn't an issue."

Lease-Up Excitement

Is southern California leading the way in multifamily double-podium design and innovation? There's no shortage of opportunity and belief. "We are very proud of this building. It is leading a new type of design in the multifamily sector. With the adoption of the 2015 International Building Code, multiple podium levels are now acceptable without code modifications. We are excited about the expansion of this concept as we can now offer our clients additional density that was not achievable before," Zapata says.

As for WREN, the owner couldn't be happier. The amenity-filled complex was nearly 20 percent leased at opening. Full occupancy is expected within a year.

Owner/Developer: Mack Urban in partnership with AECOM Capital and Capri Capital

Architect: Togawa Smith Martin

Structural: Englekirk

MEP: Donald F. Dickerson Associates

Civil Engineer: KPFF

General Contractor: Tishman/Morley Builders

Photography: Kevin Korczyk / Jeremy Samuelson

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