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Why mass timber could be the future of office development in North Texas

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During a recent conversation with Jim Reynolds, development partner at Trinity Groves and West Dallas Investments, it was revealed that the developer is planning to build Dallas's first mass timber office building within the 80-acre mixed-use development.



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Pictured is a rendering of Trinity Groves' 9 million-square-foot master plan, which is expected to include the first mass timber office building in Dallas.

"Mass timber to me is nothing new. It's been around, it's just that different municipalities have adopted the code to build it at different times. Dallas is interested in trying to adopt these new mass timber building codes and they've been receptive to the idea," said Reynolds. "It's a product that doesn't exist here, but we think it would be very well received."

Mass timber is defined by the American Wood Council as a category of framing styles typically characterized by the use of large solid wood panels for wall, floor, and roof construction. The use of wood is obviously not a new concept in construction, but using wood to frame buildings, especially commercial properties, fell out of favor decades ago in favor of concrete and steel, especially as buildings got taller. Some of Dallas's oldest commercial buildings in the West End were originally built using a hybrid of timber and brick. This hybrid was used again for at least one building's recent redevelopment.

While mass timber framing has been used more frequently in Europe and Canada, it's begun to see a revival in the United States over the past decade. Experts say mass timber holds many advantages over both concrete and steel. For one, it's far more environmentally friendly.

"It's a carbon-free material and acts sort of like a carbon sponge. The entire process from forestry to manufacturing is clean. The only hiccup in regards to carbon is the shipping," said Mike Smith, senior project architect at BOKA Powell in Austin. "Concrete specifically emits high carbon with its harvesting, mining, fabrication and construction. The environmental impact is huge."

Mass timber members weigh less than concrete or steel, meaning foundation costs are reduced, said Smith. Installation times are also cut dramatically due to mass timber being prefabricated.

"During the documentation phase, you're essentially creating your shop drawings, which speeds up your installation. Because of this, we're typically seeing install rates be a lot faster. This also means that crews are smaller," said Taylor Coleman, project architect at Gensler.

Both BOKA Powell and Gensler have been involved in mass timber projects in recent years. Smith and his team at BOKA Powell were the architects of record for Texas' first mass timber office building, which was recently completed in San Antonio. Called The Soto, the six-story, 140,600-square-foot office building was developed by Hixon Properties Inc. and was erected in about three months, said Smith.

"We were adding a floor every two or two and a half weeks," he said. "Across the board, mass timber is much more cost effective. We're able to reduce loads on foundations, which can save money, and we're also cutting down job timelines. If you can shave a month or two off a project, you're saving tons of money. On a \$40 million building, you're shaving a couple million off by going with mass timber."

Other experts agree that mass timber does cut down on project timelines, but say the process is more cost neutral. Mass timber is also surprisingly fire safe.

"The thing that people don't understand is, unlike a standard wood-frame building, this six inch thick panel has a fully loaded two-hour fire rating ...," said StructureCraft Chief Operating Officer Robb LaBranche during a tour of The Soto in 2019. "Wood chars, and the char protects it from the flame. So if this column starts burning, the char rate moves at an inch and a half an hour."

While some developers are choosing to go with mass timber for all these reasons, experts say many are choosing it as a way to differentiate their projects from others in the market.

"Locally, we've done a number of studies for developers who are considering using mass timber for office buildings. I think a lot of them see it as an advantage for marketing their building and giving the end-user a different experience," said Scott Armstrong, studio director at Gensler.

Gensler's Dallas office has done a number of mass timber projects with First United Bank, including bank branches across Texas and Oklahoma and a regional headquarters building in Sherman. The firm also revealed last year that Walmart's new campus, which it designed, in Bentonville, Arkansas would incorporate mass timber.

"There's been a lot of studies about how mass timber and wood promote a healthier work environment. With all the projects we've done with First United, there's been great feedback from both customers and employees about how they really love the space," said Coleman.

Dallas' first mass timber office building at Trinity Groves is currently planned to be around five stories and 300,000 square feet. However, future building codes would allow it to be taller. The International Code Council, an influential advisory group in Washington, recently approved changes to the 2021 editions of the International Building Code and International Fire Code, allowing for mass timber buildings to be built as tall as 18 stories, more than twice the current permissible height. These code changes will go into effect next year.

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