

Modu Tech

takes the leading edge



Modu Tech framing components used in The Pershing apartments in Arlington, Va.



**Baltimore's
pioneering
turnkey
carpentry firm
emphasizes
technology**

By Joanna Masterson

**Photography by
Robert Strenge, Modu Tech**

With 25 years of turnkey carpentry business under its belt, Modu Tech has witnessed some significant changes in the Baltimore construction scene.

Back in the 1980s, when most general contractors purchased the wood for their carpentry subcontractors to install, Modu Tech saw an advantage to being in control of its own materials. So the forward-thinking company opened a lumberyard and manufacturing facility that produces open-web wood floor trusses, wood roof trusses and open wall panels for its multifamily projects.

Those distinctive services have served the company well, but with success often comes competition. In the last five years, the industry has shifted from about 20 percent of general contractors purchasing their framing turnkey to about 80 percent buying lumber and trusses through a labor contractor.

“There’s a lot of competition,” says Modu Tech President Scott Stevens. “Before, you could only go to three people for a price. Today, you could get a price from 15 people. The problem with that is it’s very hard for the general contractor to distinguish between value, so margins have been very low.”

In a numbers-based procurement environment, Modu Tech has had to devise ways to stand out when contending with less experienced firms and lower bids. In addition to keeping materials production in-house, the firm relies on its employees’ experience and the efficiency gained from using a variety of technologies.

“We decided that technology is going to be the backbone of our business going forward, so we hired a full-time person to manage systems and train personnel,” Stevens says. “I don’t know of another carpentry contractor of our size that has a full-time IT person on staff.”

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Microsoft SharePoint is used for internal project management tasks, such as locating files and identifying milestones. Staff members also rely on PlanSwift to quickly retrieve project plans and documents. “There are very few rolls of blueprints around the office anymore; everything is housed on the network,” Stevens says. “We have worked toward a paperless design and project management system.”

Modu Tech also uses jobsite cameras to monitor activity remotely and encourages virtual meetings among team members, rather than trying to coordinate schedules with 10 or more people representing various aspects of the project.

“We’ve always been very innovative and understand the efficiency of meeting online. But because most companies still operate on paper and face to face, some customers aren’t comfortable with this technology,” Stevens says. “They still want to meet in the jobsite trailer because they don’t understand the time savings. We offer training seminars, but ultimately the limits of our technology use are set by our clients.”

The same can be said for building information modeling (BIM), which Modu Tech has used intensely for the past two and a half years. Now that employees are skilled in the technology, the challenge is to educate—and ease the fears of—customers that have never procured or pre-planned projects in this manner.

“I don’t think the market puts a value on BIM yet,” Stevens says. “If my bid is \$1 million and someone else’s is \$990,000, it might be because I’m using BIM. But the client may not understand the \$10,000 premium BIM brings to other aspects of the project.”

Despite these obstacles, Modu Tech is fully committed to its technology-driven approach to carpentry. And its efforts are paying off.

Although the Baltimore multifamily sector took a major hit during the recession, with most jobs requiring a state tax credit to build, Stevens

Committed to Conservation

In addition to prioritizing technology in its operations, Modu Tech is dedicated to conserving natural resources and promoting responsible forestry. The company is a member of the U.S. Green Building Council and has a handful of LEED Accredited Professionals on staff. It also recycles excess lumber from its manufacturing plant into mulch.

Modu Tech is a Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) Chain-of-Custody certified supplier, and is one of only a handful of manufacturers that provides FSC-certified manufactured trusses and wall panels—all of which allows project teams to claim a greater dollar amount toward their certified wood goals. LEED points also can be gained because the bulk of what Modu Tech supplies to projects is regionally harvested and distributed.



“Because we operate a truss plant and have design and engineering staff, we are able to handle plans, trade coordination and other types of pre-planning activities in a virtual manner,” says Modu Tech President Scott Stevens. “That sets us apart.”



Baltimore native Scott Stevens has been with Modu Tech for 20 years and took over as president 10 years ago, around the time the company joined ABC. Stevens says he values ABC's many training opportunities, particularly in safety and education. "We worry about the pending craft shortage," he said. "We have a perpetual business plan that has identified young people in the organization that are being mentored to move up and take over."

says the preponderance of jobs today are privately funded because of the excellent rate of return for equity investors.

"It's as hot an apartment market in the Baltimore and Washington, D.C., region as I've ever seen," he says.

Currently, Modu Tech is working on Union Wharf, a 280-unit garden apartment building along the waterfront in Fells Point. The four-story type 5A residential building, which also contains 5,900 square feet of retail space, is being constructed above a cast-in-place concrete podium.

"It's an extremely logistically complicated site," Stevens says. "In the old days, we would send 20 truckloads of lumber to use throughout the duration of the project. But with a job like this, we have to feed the site daily."

The Bozzuto Group, Cigna and Pritzker Realty Group are responsible for bringing the project to Baltimore, with locally based Hord Coplan Macht, Inc., and Ziger/Snead Architects leading the design effort. Modu Tech expects to complete its phase of work next summer, with the entire project wrapping up in November 2013.

Another high-profile project is in the works near H Street and New Jersey Avenue, N.W., in Washington, D.C., where Modu Tech is coordinating with Clark Builders Group to provide 200,000 square feet of wood framing for a four-story apartment building located atop a new Walmart store. Modu Tech will be onsite through February 2013, with safety and security top of mind in light of the proximity to the U.S. Capitol, the upcoming election and inauguration activities. ■

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Modu Tech framing for the Crossroads mixed-use project built in White Marsh by Whiting-Turner.