

Prefab timber demand growing

Larry Schlesinger

The managing director of off-site construction specialist Strongbuild, Adam Strong, says demand for prefabricated building components, including those made from cross laminated timber (CLT), is exceeding the supply of these products in Australia.

"There's a lot of momentum in the market and demand so we are pretty well placed. But we need more people providing these products," Mr Strong said.

Over the past 12 months turnover has increased 25 per cent at Strongbuild's off-site panelisation factory in Sydney's north-western suburbs, lifting the group's annual revenue to more than \$30 million.

At present the factory is producing prefabricated timber panels for Macarthur Gardens, an affordable housing project, providing \$5 million of prefabricated CLT for a nine-storey Aveo retirement village and will soon break ground on Phoenix apartments, a six-level development with 134 apartments in Rouse Hill, which will include a lightweight timber frame and CLT-built lift shafts and floors.

Panels are delivered with pre-installed windows and doors and with cladding and then slotted into place on site, cutting down construction time by many months in some cases, redu-



Strongbuild is producing prefabricated timber panels at its Baulkham Hills factory in Sydney.

cing waste and building costs.

Other pioneers in the prefab space include development and construction giant Lendlease, which opened its own prefabrication factory in Sydney last year and which in February sold 5 King, the country's tallest timber building at 45 metres, to the Liberman family's Impact Investment Group, and Hickory Group, whose prefabricated bathroom pods are used in many high-rise developments.

Mr Strong said demand was growing despite concerns about the safety of wood-based building products like CLT following the recent Grenfell Tower fire tragedy

in London, which has cast a spotlight on potentially flammable building materials.

Mr Strong, who will speak at industry body prefabAUS's national conference in Melbourne this week, said CLT performed better than steel under extreme heat.

"CLT is well engineered to mitigate against fire risk. It is more predictable than steel. While we have no idea how steel will react at a certain temperature, timber starts to char at a very predictable rate while insulating the rest of the [inside] timber [layers]," he said.

In Europe and the US, use of timber in construction is becoming

mainstream with both Google in London and Microsoft in California using it to construct new headquarters.

While CLT and off-site construction were still far from mainstream in Australia, Mr Strong said education, student accommodation, childcare and aged care were among the sectors embracing them.

"We're talking with Macquarie about doing student accommodation out of timber and testing a new timber structure for them. We're also in talks on a major commercial project in Sydney," Mr Strong said.