The University of Arkansas Vision Grows Mass Timber Influence

The inspiration began in 2014 when the newly hired University of Arkansas dean of the Fay Jones School of Architecture and Design, Peter MacKeith, asked one simple question: "What does it mean to be a land-grant university with a school of architecture and design, in a State that is almost 60 percent covered in forest?"

It soon became clear that the best answer to this question involved mass timber. At that time, mass timber, more specifically cross-laminated timber (CLT), was a new concept as a building material in the United States. Cross-laminated timber is an engineered wood product developed by bonding layers of wood together to form an exceptionally strong alternative to carbon-intensive steel or concrete—all while serving as carbon storage itself.

Local Inspiration Creates National Illustration

Turning to his already deep stable of contacts, Dean MacKeith enlisted the help of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Forest Service. He was successful in using both competitive and discretionary funding from the agency's Wood Innovations program as part of the catalyst for answering the critical question.

Three Wood Innovations grants served as stepping-stones to today’s success:

1. From Forest to Campus: The Innovative Timber University

One of the main objectives for this effort was to determine the regional viability to use mass timber and demonstrate its sustainable, economic, and aesthetic advantages. Born from this first grant, Adohi Hall is the Nation’s first large-scale mass timber residence hall.
Not surprisingly, these extraordinary efforts caught the interest of the developers of the new 350-acre Walmart headquarters campus in Bentonville, who have now chosen mass timber for their new Walmart Home Office. These influential endeavors collectively built a path for the Structurlam Mass Timber Corporation to expand its operations and site a new plant in Arkansas.

Caring for the Land and Serving the People
The intersection of vision, strategy, and real-world success for getting mass timber into the mainstream in Arkansas creates the necessary momentum to champion innovative wood use. Promoting forest health and rural economic development expands and creates markets for wood products that help support the USDA Forest Service’s mission of long-term, sustainable forest management.

More Information
Kevin Naranjo
Wood Innovations Lead, USDA Forest Service
kevin.naranjo@usda.gov, 404–673–3482

Marcus Taylor
Wood Innovations Coordinator, Southern Region
USDA Forest Service
marcus.taylor@usda.gov, 540–232–8727

Growing Influence and Momentum
Alone, each project netted excellent results—but together, the synergies powered by the school’s advocacy influenced many practices beyond architecture to think about the virtues and values of mass timber in Arkansas. Contractors, economic development, private forest owners, facilities planners, developers, and more were all influenced within the State.

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