

HOW TO SAVE TIME AND MONEY WITH MODULAR CONSTRUCTION

by Jena Tesse Fox

June 16, 2020



The Hilton Garden Inn San Jose (Calif.) Airport, developed by architecture firm AO, is slated to open in January 2021.

Photo credit: AO

Modular design has gone from niche to standard within the design and construction sectors of hospitality, with owners drawn to the lower costs and faster pace of constructing a building in a warehouse and then transporting the assembled pieces to the site.

But in order to reap the benefits of this quicker and (relatively) cheaper method of construction, hoteliers need to think differently about how they work, said Henry Wong, principal at architecture firm **AO**. “Many of the same decisions that you would make over the course of, say, eight months are now contained over, let's say, three months, which means you have to assemble your entire team earlier. You need to be willing to and be able to make the decisions that you might [otherwise] defer ... You now cannot defer. You need to be willing to make those paradigm shifts, so that by doing so, those decisions made early can be integrated into the manufacturing processing cycle.”

When creating a modular building, designers will need to consider how, exactly, the structure will be divided into its components, said Patti Harburg-Petrich, principal in the Los Angeles office of Buro Happold, a consulting engineering and advisory company. “For the hotel rooms themselves, that’s pretty obvious,” she acknowledged, “but then, what do you do about the corridor, and what do you do about the lobby and all these other pieces?” The back-of-house areas of a building, she suggested, could be partly modular and partly traditional. “There will be a traditionally built concrete podium and then the modules will stack on top of it,” she said of this type of hybrid plan.



Constructing the Hilton Garden Inn San Jose (Calif.) Airport. Photo credit: Reggie Ballesteros Photography

Stephen Siegel, principal at H-CPM, argued that the value proposition of modular design can vary based on location. “One [reason] is the cost of your labor because the cost of your labor in a warehouse or some type of manufacturing player is typically a lower-cost labor,” he explained. “If you’re building in an area that’s a unionized area, your labor rates are higher.” Similarly, if the necessary facilities for building and assembling the components aren’t nearby, the costs of

transporting the pieces from the nearest warehouse can add up. In traffic-logged urban markets, bringing the components to the site may have to be cleared with the department of transportation in advance, Siegel cautioned.

However designers and owners create and develop a modular hotel, Harburg-Petrich emphasized the importance of having a well-thought-out plan in place that works for everyone involved. “You really need to get the design set and the contractor in to help coordinate and optimize that approach,” she said. “That, I think, is a challenge. Sometimes—oftentimes—on projects we’ll have the owner or the designer trying to make changes up until the last minute. And that doesn't work very well if you're going with a modular approach.”