NOTES FROM THE EDITOR

Scott L. Melnick

Did you know that Proctor and Gamble's CEO donates a portion of the company's profits to the Church of Satan? That the Great Wall of China is the only man-made object visible from space? That we only use 10 percent of our brains? And that there are long lead times to obtain structural steel?

All four are among the most common—though false—urban legends (though most Internet sites only reference the first three).

The truth of the matter is that whether you're talking price or availability, there's never been a better time to buy steel. According to Mark Petitgoue, sales manager at Nucor-Yamato Steel Company, lead times for most structural shapes today are only six to eight weeks. And the price for most structural shapes is about the same as it was 30 years ago—only today, you're getting 50 ksi steel instead of the 36 ksi in years past.

Why is steel so available? The answer is simply one of supply and demand. As Petitgoue pointed out during a media presentation at the recently concluded North American Steel Construction Conference, industry capacity from the three domestic producers (Nucor-Yamato, TXI-Chaparral, and Steel Dynamics, Inc.) totals approximately 6,100,000 tons. In addition, foreign mills regularly ship 200,000 tons of steel into the market (remember, there are no 201-related tariffs on wide flange). The domestic market for structural steel in 2002 was only 3,200,000 tons, meaning there was a substantial surplus.

Further, steel mills have a substantial inventory on hand and can often process orders from product on hand. Regardless, a mill such as Nucor-Yamato typically runs through its entire product list every six to eight weeks. Finally, if you need steel even faster, you can always turn to steel service centers. It's estimated that U.S.-based service centers now have in excess of 500,000 tons of structural steel in their warehouses.

Of course, there are some exceptions to the six-to-eight week rule. Specifically, jumbo shapes—which until recently were only available from an off-shore source (Arcelor International America)—typically had a deliverable time of three or more months. Fortunately, the types of projects that typically utilize these massive members usually have long lead times. Even better, Nucor-Yamato is trial rolling this product and could begin producing a variety of jumbo shapes domestically. These include W14 columns up to 730 pounds per foot.

Structural steel availability and cost have benefited from several factors. Most notable is the increased efficiency of using scrap-based electric arc furnaces and continuous casting. The old integrated mills—which no longer produce wide flange—used to take five man-hours to produce one ton of steel. Today, Nucor-Yamato and TXI-Chaparral use less than one man-hour to produce a ton of steel. At the same time, energy costs have been reduced 40 percent. Added together, these factors have served to speed the production of steel while reducing its cost.

Another factor to consider is steel's recyclability. Today, more than 95 percent of every domestically produced wide-flange section comes from recycled material. To illustrate this, at this year's Steel Conference in Baltimore attendees had the opportunity at the Wednesday night Welcome Reception to take a swing with a sledge hammer at an old Oldsmobile Achieva. The next morning, the wrecked car was delivered to a scrap yard where it was shredded. That same morning, the scrap was delivered to TXI-Chaparral's Virginia mill where it was melted and rolled. Friday morning a small piece of W27 containing some of that wrecked car was delivered back to the convention center where Peddinghaus cut it into thin slices for souvenirs.

Steel can also play a big part in green building design. To learn more about that role, visit www.aisc.org/sustainability, and be sure to read a comprehensive report on structural considerations within the LEED rating system on p. 65 of this issue.

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