

Steel-frame homes seen as future

CHRISTOPHER DEWOLF
FOR CANWEST NEWS SERVICE

At first glance, the two houses in the Montreal suburb of St. Lazare, look like any upscale suburban homes.

Even upon closer inspection, it is difficult to distinguish them from other nearby houses.

The difference, however, lies beyond the facades.

Unusually, both houses were built with steel, not wood, and they were assembled with pre-manufactured components thanks to the help of cutting-edge light-steel-frame technology developed by Mississauga, Ont.-based Genesis Worldwide.

As ordinary as they might seem from afar, the houses in St. Lazare could very well point the way to the future of new residential construction.

"It's all just theory until you actually build something," mused Scott Satov, an investor who helped fund the St. Lazare project.

Although commercial buildings have been built with light steel frames for years, the technology has only recently been adapted for residential use, thanks to software developed by Genesis that makes it easy to design customized steel components.

The houses in St. Lazare are Quebec's first single-family homes built entirely with light steel frames.

"We wanted to demonstrate the technology, so we built two very different houses," says Peter Boros, the founder of Eco-Structure, which acquired the rights for Genesis light-steel-frame technology earlier this year.

The first house has 3,000 square feet of space spread over two storeys.

Its high church-like ceilings vary from room to room, thanks to the steel structure.

This is put to good use in the second house, a slightly more modest single-family home which has plenty of open space thanks to its

lack of load-bearing walls.

"With light steel, the flexibility of design is incredible," says Satov. "There's no beams and a lot of windows and high ceilings because the material is stronger. You get these unbelievable cathedral ceilings and unique roof lines that would be harder to get with any other type of frame."

What makes those features so much easier to implement is that the steel components needed for their construction are assembled in advance, shipped to the building site and quickly put together by a relatively small team of builders.

All in all, it takes about 10 people to build a steel-framed house compared with 40 to build a conventional wood-framed house.

In 2006, demonstrating just how efficient the light-steel construction process can be, Genesis took only eight hours to erect a 2,100-square-foot house frame in a Katrina-ravaged New Orleans.

Once they're built, steel-framed houses have other advantages, too. Because they don't expand or contract like wood-framed houses, they require less maintenance, and they conserve energy by preventing drafts caused by shifting wood frames.

Steel frames are resistant to termites, corrosion and fire, and they support a higher snow load. All of this translates into energy, upkeep and insurance savings for homeowners.

Light steel is environmentally friendly, too.

Eighty per cent of the steel used in light-steel-frame components is recycled, so the steel used to build a house comes from seven or eight scrapped cars, as opposed to wood from an entire acre of trees.

Light-steel-framed houses are LEED-certified, too, thanks to the energy-efficiency of steel-framed houses and the lack of construction waste.



Richard Arless Jr., Montreal Gazette

From left, Jason Boros of BR Construction and investor Scott Satov outside a steel-frame home in St. Lazare, Que.

This can mean big savings in tax credits for contractors and homeowners.

"This is where the general public is going to really appreciate our product," says Boros.

"They'll have better homes. They'll see benefits all their lives, because of the lower insurance costs, lower interest rates they'll get from the banks, better health they'll get to enjoy in their homes because steel is non-toxic. I think in the long-term they're going to see that these homes are economical to put up and will save them money."

Still, while their maintenance and

construction costs are lower, the initial price tag of building a steel-framed home remains high, partly because the off-site labour required is intensive and partly because the market in Quebec is still in its infancy.

Satov estimates that a house built with a light-steel frame costs about a third more than an ordinary wood-framed house.

On a larger scale, light-steel-frame construction is already affordable, and Boros plans to focus on apartment buildings, townhouses and retirement homes, which can be built up to six storeys in height with light steel.

In Ontario, several large developers have already worked with Genesis to integrate light-steel-frame technology into their townhouse and single-family home developments.

Last year, the houses under construction in St. Lazare drew a lot of attention, says Boros. Some visitors came from as far as the United States to see them. "I think it's going to revolutionize the construction industry," says Boros. "Building a home with light steel is like building a car: you can have a perfect product every time."

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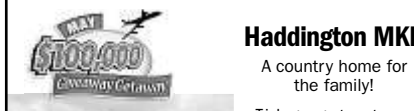
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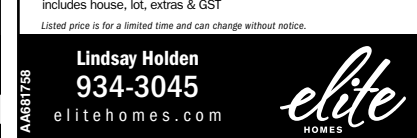
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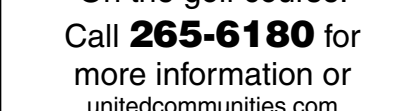


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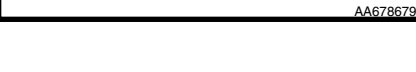
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