



17 May 2018



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THE ARCHITECTS NEWSPAPER

As Mass Timber's Popularity Grows, the Concrete Industry Goes on the Offensive

By [AUDREY WACHS \(@GRIDWACHS\)](#) • May 11, 2018

Is wood dangerous?

It's one of the oldest, most sustainable building materials (if harvested correctly) and recent advances in cross-laminated timber (CLT) have made it possible to build taller, multifamily timber buildings, but local building codes are just beginning to catch up. Sure, any Girl Scout knows that you can't start a fire without it, but it's generally considered kosher: CLT boosters say that if contractors know how to work with the material, timber is just as safe as steel.

Despite their widespread use, concrete industry groups strenuously object to the use of "combustible materials" in construction. One industry group has launched an email campaign to ostensibly make members of the AEC industry aware of (non-fire-treated) wood's shortcomings.

These emails are part of an ongoing battle between the wood, concrete and steel industries, a conflict which seems to have escalated in concert with the growing popularity of CLT and the introduction of the timber innovation act, which would provide government support to the development of mass timber technology.

With ominous subject lines like "Georgia Bill Would Leave Savannah Exposed to Hurricane Threat" and "Flames Quickly Consume Combustible Denver Apartment Complex Under Construction," the emails seem to sow doubt about the durability and safety of timber buildings.

The five-story, 84-unit Denver building detailed in the latter missive was under construction when it was engulfed by fire.

"Combustible materials have no place in mid-rise housing projects, regardless of whether they're under construction or fully operational," said Kevin Lawlor, spokesperson for Build with Strength, which initiated the campaign, in the email. "These buildings are effectively tinderboxes on steroids, and when a fire breaks out, they're incredibly difficult to extinguish."

Build with Strength is a partnership convened by the National Ready Mixed Concrete Association. As their names suggest, both groups are unabashedly pro-noncombustible materials, concrete and steel included. Reached by phone, Lawlor said Build with Strength doesn't have a beef with wood—it just wants to fulfill its mission of educating the AEC industry on the benefits of ready-mixed concrete and its use in low- to mid-rise buildings. Its members include architects, engineers, steel and concrete interests, political leaders, and even religious organizations.



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It's not a materials fight," Lawlor said. "The goal is to promote safer construction in three- to seven-story buildings. The notices are not specifically designed to go out and attack any particular industry."

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