

TEXAS HOLD 'EM UP

By John Wyatt

Whether homeowners are battling jettisoned utility costs in the northeast or the south, one form of construction contractors are selling to communities is the cost-saving advantages of insulated concrete forms.

Though it could be said that ICF construction is still relatively new to builders, those that have used it swear by its ease of installation and its advantages on many levels.

Randy Brock, of Canyon Homes, in Ft. Worth, Texas, is one such maverick sold on the benefits of ICFs. The interest to build with the products found fruition in a chance to develop town homes in downtown Ft. Worth.

When Brock began developing this plan, his knowledge of the homes was only really that they existed: He did not know the benefits or the possibilities of the system. After helping a local builder with an ICF project, he still found himself reluctant toward the systems.

"I really wasn't happy with them," Brock says. "I thought the system was great in theory but just not practical."



FEAR NOT

When FutureStone owner Cameron Ware approached Brock about a line of ICFs he was carrying called Nudura, he agreed for a preview of its properties. He felt that this line immediately addressed his concerns. The Nudura bracing systems and folding wire brackets kept it in line and the concrete pours were much easier. The walls were "straighter than a 2x6."

"When I began looking to build these town homes, I was looking for ways to soundproof walls," says Brock. "In my opinion, many people view town homes as just glorified apartments. But when I discovered all the properties that went into building with ICFs, it just made so much sense, so I decided to make all the exterior walls with this system."

All the properties Brock refers to would be the wind load (240 mph winds), its soundproof capabilities, high R-value, reduced building costs and they are "bullet proof." He hired an energy engineer that calculated

that for two years the utility costs (gas and electric collective) would be less than \$65 per month. The property units, called the Lake Country Villas, would with other types of systems have an estimated utility bill of \$264 per month, for a 2,000 square foot place.



ONE STEP FORWARD

The learning system on the project was minimal. According to Brock, it was a matter of just getting the trades open to using the system.

“They were scared to death of it,” says Brock. “They didn’t know what to do with it, how to penetrate it. I made a deal with them that I would pay all their labor and expenses if they would just do the first unit for me. If they didn’t like it, then we’d switch. The first unit the electrician and plumber both said was easier than standard construction.”

For the project, approximately 90,000 square feet of the Nudura ICF was used. The product supplied was the company’s expanded polystyrene ICF: 6-inch core; 25/8-inch EPS insulation on each side; the standards (96 inch by 18 inch); 90 and 45 degree corners, respectively; and the T-Wall forms.

Brock says step-by-step the erection of the system is quite easy.

Lay out the exterior walls with the chalk lines, lay the first row of blocks and then the system unfolds for the workers. The materials he worked with came in eight sections, with a section in 8-foot lengths. He used all the corner pieces so bay windows and a pop-out fireplace could be installed.

“You literally just set the outside block on the concrete and what you get is square and then epoxy that down so the bottom row stays and then it locks down like giant Legos,” he says. “As long as you line up your framing strip that’s based inside the ICF, which acts as a stud, there’s a stud every 8 inches on center inside and out.”

That’s what he likes about the Nudura line: There are no clips and nothing the drywallers have to omit. The next step is to block out with wood bucks, frame out where the doors and windows go and block around that, drop the rebar in and pour it. Depending on the square footage of the place, a team can set up the ICFs in a matter of a few days. He reports that the main part of the erection is just adjusting the bracings so it remains perfectly square. Since most builders attach drywall to the system, the ICF walls should be as straight as possible.

We asked if scaffolding was erected once the ICFs reached a height that exceeded normal working conditions. Brock says the bracing has a built-in scaffold system, complete with guardrails. So, the higher the building rises, the scaffold remains right at that level to ensure no extra scaffolding. Brock assures that the scaffolding

feature is OSHA compliant.

Aside from the building aspects of the project, additionally Brock found the ICFs are complementary to having major “green” benefits. He says there is “hospital-like” air quality in the units. He has installed humidity removals that are mold and mildew proof, and which will control the humidity level to less than 45 percent (mold and dust mites cannot grow at less than this percentage). The humidity removals are built inside the HVAC units.

Since this project has had some publicity in Ft. Worth, Brock says that a majority of architects and builders are walking through the units, discussing the benefits of the system.

“In all the years that I’ve been building, I’ve never seen people come look at my homes and it’s been very flattering,” says Brock. “My theory is that I’m building a house eight to nine times better than anyone else and I’m charging only 10 percent more for a house that’s eight or nine times better. I think the customer should jump on it. I’ve sold more units in the past three weeks than I’ve sold in the past three years.”

Nudura hosts a one-day installation training course that uses hands-on exercises, combined with a comprehensive, documented curriculum. This walks trainees through the complete installation of the company’s system. The course includes discussion of design, estimating, ceiling and floor integration, and interior and exterior finishing.