

Texas construction block sets trend

By RICK KELLEY Staff Writer | Posted August 13, 2016

HARLINGEN — If you're indoors reading this, you're surrounded by them.

Concrete blocks are one of the basic foundations of modern construction, and have been mass-produced since the early 1900s.

But at the Rio Grande Valley Credit Union building now undergoing renovation, a new age may be dawning when it comes to traditional construction materials.

Meet the Bautex Block, a concrete-polystyrene-glue concoction that has some properties that might make the venerable concrete block obsolete.

"It's a foam block that they fill full of concrete," said Dallas Taylor, lead architect on the credit union's overhaul and expansion of what was the First National Bank building at 1221 Morgan Boulevard.

"When they lay out the block, they glue it together, whereas with regular masonry, you'd use mortar," said Taylor, who works with TGS Architects in their Austin office.

The modern concept of using filler inside concrete to make blocks originated in Europe after World War II. Builders there used wood fiber and concrete to make blocks in an attempt to improve a wall's insulating properties.

But architects in Austria decided wood fill didn't provide enough insulation, and in the 1970s replaced it with polystyrene mixed with cement.

Bautex, which is based in San Marcos where they manufacture the new blocks, has taken the concept a bit further.

Ninety percent of a Bautex Block is foam polystyrene that looks like tiny white BBs captured like bugs in amber inside a cement matrix. It is installed, like concrete blocks, using steel rebar to give the wall strength.

"The beauty of this is you've got one system that becomes the entire wall," said Paul Brown, president of Bautex (pronounced Boh-tex), at a demonstration at the RGV Credit Union construction site last week.

"The designers don't have to look at trying to marry four or five materials and stack them all together to make a finished wall," Brown added. "You've got one system that's the entire wall and one installer like RGV Alliance comes in there and installs that wall."

RGV Alliance Construction Corp. is based in Edinburg and is working to install the Bautex blocks at the new



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credit union. Installers with RGV Alliance said the new blocks go up more quickly than traditional concrete blocks.

But faster installation is just one of several advantages to the new blocks, the company says.

The walls provide better insulation, which is an increasingly crucial aspect of construction to meet ever-more-stringent environmental building codes.

"Obviously, we don't want to spend a fortune air-conditioning these buildings, especially as hot as it is down here," said Bautex's Brown.

Another claim is that they stand up better to hurricanes than traditional construction materials.

"It's good for hurricanes, it's impact-resistant to hurricanes," said Taylor, the lead architect.

RGV Credit Union purchased the old bank building and is spending \$1.8 million to expand it to provide office space and banking facilities for its growing customer base.

RGV Credit Union President Missy Morrow is bullish on the use of the Bautex Blocks, and said the new credit union building is the first time they've been used in the Rio Grande Valley.

Still, she sounds a little dubious about the Bautex Block's ability to withstand hurricanes.

"I'm praying to God that we're not really going to test your product, but if we do, I feel safe," she said to laughter.

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