Universities and private developers have gotten smarter when it comes to building new student housing projects. They are smarter when it comes to the impacts new construction have on their campuses, both environmentally and time-wise. Their demands have caused contractors to rethink their ways, and invent new ways of building student housing.

**Time Is Of The Essence**

The top priority with institutions and private developers, say contractors, is the construction schedule.

“The biggest issue is the fact that there is a school calendar and that the students are going to move in when they are going to move in and the product has to be built,” says Les Juneau, president of Atlanta-based Juneau Construction. This can be extremely difficult to juggle when you are dependent on the weather, and you usually only have an 8- to 12-month window to build the project.

Other concerns from clients include the quality of construction and how sustainable the materials used in construction are, as well as the environmentally friendly the project is as a whole.

“Both private developers and universities are concerned about having a quality contractor that can balance safety, quality and schedule,” says Rob Nelson, operations manager with Overland Park, Kansas-based MW Builders. “Both are especially concerned about schedule.”

Juneau, who works with private developers and institutions, adds that there is perceived value with a contractor who finishes on time and with strong quality repeatedly for a client.

Private developers want more amenities built into projects, says Nelson. Since they are competing with on-campus properties, they want to have more that attracts students, other than just a new property. Because the fee structure is similar, the main advantage that private housing developments can give is the amenities they offer. One project MW Builders is constructing called Uptown East in Valparaiso, Indiana, has everything from iPod stations to walk-in closets with custom organizers to granite countertops. The developers of that project are also providing each unit with a large flat screen television.

“To walk into an apartment that is mostly furnished, with a flat screen tv that already has cable — all the students need to bring is their clothes and necessities,” says Nelson. “There’s no more hauling grandma’s recliner to your apartment. Students want a room that they can walk into that’s high end.”

State universities who are building new dorms are getting away from the old dorms...
model, says Nelson. They are building more individualized spaces, such a pod where a living room and kitchen are shared with two to four bedrooms. The private market, he says, is years ahead of that.

“The [private] developers have taken that to the next level where students get their own private amenities, like the walk-in closets and having your iPod tied to your own speaker system,” says Nelson.

There is also a push for more technology in projects, says Juneau.

“Everything needs to be wireless within the rooms,” he says. Oddly enough, there isn’t a real need for telephone wiring in dorms anymore due to the popularity of cellular phones. Kitchen amenities tend to be less in facilities for underclassmen. Another trend that Juneau sees is dorms — or areas — that are built exclusively for freshmen.

“In some cases, while the freshmen may be in a single building and the upperclassmen in other buildings, all the buildings will share a quad or common area,” says Juneau.

Who Is Building?

With money for new development hard to come by for private developers, a lot of the student housing work that contractors are seeing is from public universities.

MW Builders is seeing a lot of bid requests from second and third-tier schools that have traditionally been commuter campuses.

“These universities are really trying to develop a student housing program that is cost effective for students who live close,” says Nelson. They want them to be able to participate more in the college experience, and the kids want that. They want their own space.”

Juneau also sees more work from growing colleges.

“The future is in emerging colleges and universities, as opposed to those that are more established, because there are more students applying to colleges,” says Juneau. “There is less room at the larger research institutions as enrollment in general rises.”

Juneau uses the example of Florida, where a number of two-year colleges are converting to four-year universities. Juneau has built student housing projects at several growing universities, including South Georgia College in Douglas, Georgia, and Southern Polytechnic State University in Marietta, Georgia.

Modular Gains Popularity

Permanent modular construction methods are gaining popularity, especially among growing colleges, because a lot of work can be done off site, shortening on campus construction time. This can be crucial on smaller campuses, such as community colleges, where classes tend to run frequently and activity is bustling. Modular is also considered by many to be greener. Since much of the construction is done in a controlled facility, there is less waste.

Also, because the modules are assembled in a facility, only the on-site assembly is affected by weather delays.

New York City-based New World Home has developed a number of modular solutions for campus buildings, including student housing. New World Home offers off-the-shelf turnkey solutions to universities looking for student housing. The company has seven architects it works with to create projects that are consistent with the design of a campus, yet can be built using modular methods. The company designs each project to fit the campus, builds in a green manner and offers a short on-campus building period. As where ground-up construction can take 10 months or longer, New World Home offers a solution that only involves three months of on-site build time. The price is also competitive with what a local builder would provide, says the company’s executives.

“The semester can end, the summer season starts, our project begins and is over by the beginning of the next semester,” says Tyler Schmetterer, chief marketing officer of New World Home. Schmetterer co-founded the company in 2005 with Mark Jupiter, who serves as president, research and development of the company.

New World Home is constructing three 15-bed dormitory structures at Sullivan County Community College in upstate New York. Schmetterer and Jupiter are quick to admit that one of the positives of having one of their green projects is a public relations plus for the campus.

Another company who is building modularly is DeSoto, Texas-based Warrior Group. The company has developed 2.5 million square feet of modular housing for the U.S. military over the last three years. Now, it is taking its expertise and applying it to student housing.

“With modular construction, you are building in a controlled environment in optimal settings, so you are not burdened by the weather in most situations,” says Wayne Lawrence, vice president of business development for Warrior.

“You are also doing parallel construction, so while the site is being prepared, the buildings are being fabricated. You save 30 to 40 percent of time, from a schedule standpoint.”

Warrior’s large-scale projects can be built in a fast manner. For the military, the company recently completed a 500,000-square-foot housing project in 12 months. With Warrior’s modular methods, about 80 percent of the building is completed before it arrives on site; all mechanical, electrical and plumbing are already installed.

“We are using the same materials as you would in a tilt-wall construction project that someone came and put stucco finish on the outside,” says Lawrence. “The applications are boundless.”

While prices of modular versus conventional construction are comparable, Lawrence, like Schmetterer, says the savings is in the time it takes to build a modular project.

“In a university setting, heads in beds allow you to get revenue faster,” Lawrence says. “The savings are also in the cost of money; we’re cutting 30 to 40 percent of the time it takes to construct, so we’re cutting the cost of borrowing.”

Warrior has built modular projects in 30 different states, so it has modular construction facilities in various parts of the country, enabling the company to construct projects near assembly points. Like New World Home, the projects that Warrior is building are extremely sustainable and many are LEED certified.

“With modular, campus interruption is less, and the threat of theft or injury on a construction or job site is less,” says Lawrence. “The number of workers on a site is also fewer, because of the amount done off-site. Because the projects are constructed in a controlled
environment, there is less waste and we are not hauling materials from a site to a landfill.”

**Building Green**

While students expect new buildings to be environmentally friendly, many universities and states now insist new buildings be built using sustainable products, green methodology and have little environmental impact.

“As sustainability becomes more prevalent, it is becoming easier technically, and less expensive because it is easier to purchase the products that are considered to be sustainable,” says Juneau. “Initially, it was quite expensive.”

The popularity of LEED certification, as in other asset classes, has continued to follow the sun when it comes to student housing. The certification is generally easier to obtain in areas that see warmer weather. In cooler climates, or those with harsh winters, the costs to obtain LEED certification can be extreme to limited budgets in some cases.

Juneau, whose practice is mainly in the South, has built a number of student housing projects that have become LEED certified, and most projects the company is building are seeking LEED Silver certifications.

MW Builders, whose practice is spread in the Midwest from Texas northward, sees less interest in LEED certification, but a concern from developers and universities that the projects be as environmentally friendly and sustainable as possible.

“I think private developers are avoiding LEED certification,” says Nelson. “They are being more conscious about the material selections, trying to use low or no VOC paints, making sure the lights are environmentally friendly, using more natural light in the design. They are a lot more conscious of it. We haven’t seen the move to LEED certification because of the cost.”

“Most campuses are building to some kind of green mandate or initiative, whether it is something they have to do or want to do,” says Mark Jupiter of New World Home.