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## Builder says his construction technique is more cost effective and seismically stronger



WICKI THOMPSON

**IN USE:** Barry Swenson, president and CEO of Barry Swenson Builder, said he has used his Landmaker method of construction on a number of projects, including Tamien Place. "It's so simple, it makes me laugh," he said.

BY KATHERINE CONRAD

At a time when developers are searching for ways to cut costs, Barry Swenson has developed a construction system he believes will ensure his company's survival during a turbulent economy, with an added bonus — the system exceeds seismic standards.

He calls it the Landmaker, a building system he developed several years ago when he began constructing residential high-rises.

Swenson, president of Barry Swenson Builder, was looking for ways to place structural load-bearing walls while building Tamien Place, Vendome Place and City Heights so that they would not block views.

The result — the Landmaker system — calls for putting the strength of the

building on the inside of the structure, where it belongs, rather than the outside, Swenson said.

"I've never seen it done in my life," Swenson said. "It's so simple, it makes me laugh."

Two-foot concrete walls are constructed around steel rebar, rather than a steel frame. The foundation is 6 feet thick, but the walls require less material, and consequently the entire project costs less to build. The process removes 20 percent of the steel normally required to erect a structure because the reinforcements are already in place.

"The entire Bay Area is obsessed with

steel — it's stuck on steel," said Brice Schilling, project engineer for the company. "But concrete is safer, stronger and cheaper. It's also available locally."

### Seismic possibilities?

Swenson also discovered that the system could be modified to meet stringent seismic standards for hospitals. Add another foot — an extra \$5 worth of concrete per square foot — and it is still less than half the cost of reinforcing the structures with steel, he said.

The system could be a valuable tool in the statewide mandate to seismically retrofit hospital structures — a process that the state has delayed several times because it's expensive and difficult. Bay Area hospitals are struggling to meet the requirements as they struggle with the financial constraints of upgrading their facilities. The most recent deadline of 2010 has been postponed to 2015.

"People are desperate to meet very stringent hospital codes," said Swenson, who sees the Landmaker as a cost-effective solution.

Swenson said his company has done work for the now-defunct San Jose Hospital and still has a relationship with O'Connor Hospital.

So far, Barry Swenson Builder has employed the Landmaker only in its San Jose high-rise projects — a total of a half million square feet.

He believes the system will help his company win more construction projects because the process reduces costs by 25 percent to 30 percent. This is not only because concrete is cheaper than steel, but the system requires less materials to build high-rise projects while providing greater structural integrity.

For example, using the Landmaker, a seven-story structure could cost as little as \$36 per square foot to build for

a total of \$7.3 million. By comparison, a conventional concrete building would cost \$47 per square foot for a total of \$9.3 million, and a conventional steel building would cost \$62 per square foot for a total of \$12.2 million.

After Swenson's lawyer caught wind of the system, he urged Swenson to obtain a patent. The company filed for one last year, beginning the process that could take a year or longer.

Swenson said he is still scratching his head in wonder that something "so simple" is patentable.

"I never knew you could patent a building system," he said.

### Real-world testing

The system couldn't have come along at a better time. Swenson and his team are meeting later this month with representatives from a high-tech company and major mall developer regarding future construction plans.

Another developer, BRE Properties Inc., is still trying to obtain the financing needed to proceed with construction of a high-rise apartment project on land owned by Barry Swenson Builder on North First Street in San Jose.

"The Landmaker made it so they could get a return," Swenson said, referring to the fact that the system reduced construction costs substantially.

But the project remains in limbo, a victim of the credit freeze.

"Not only does the city need jobs. I need jobs — my people do," Swenson said. "But it looks like they're going to delay it. It's a sad thing."

BRE's vice president of development, John Wayland, would not comment on the project.

Swenson knows the decision has nothing to do with the project and everything to do with the economic climate. This is precisely where he believes the Landmaker will help his company — it has before.

Several years ago when he presented bank examiners with the costs of developing City Heights, they were slow to react. Swenson called to find out why.

"They said they were not worried that we were \$10 million too high, they were worried that we were \$10 million too low," Swenson recalled. "They were comparing our costs to other buildings. When we showed them we had done it once at Vendome, then the bank became believers."

Finding other engineers to discuss the merits of the system is difficult because no one outside the company was familiar enough with the system to comment. But Swenson said he has already proven that it works.

Swenson views the Landmaker as his secret weapon that will help his company navigate the tough economic waters ahead. He just needs to obtain the financing. And when he does, he'll be

ready to go on three more projects, the Carlyle, Park View Towers and a project on North San Pedro.

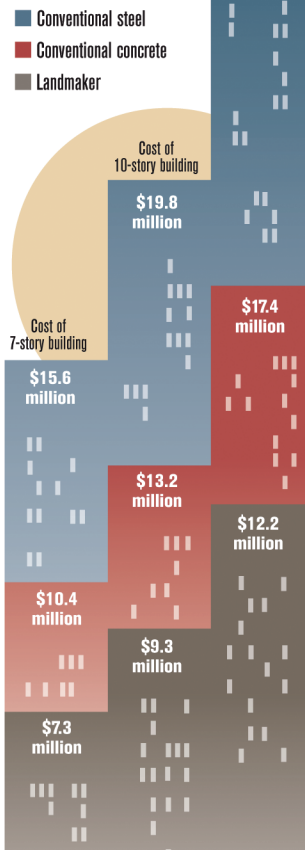
But the markets need to ease up, he said.

"I've never seen an economy like this in my life," he said. "I'm working harder than ever trying to find work. Nobody is building anything in the whole market."

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### Landmaker method

Barry Swenson Builder claims its construction method can save as much as 30 percent in the cost of a building's internal structure.



SOURCE: BARRY SWENSON BUILDER, BASED ON JULY 1, 2008, CONSTRUCTION COSTS