

Company Grows on a Solid Foundation of Pre-engineered Steel

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Gary P. Cearfoss, president and CEO of Steel Building Specialists, Inc., in Halethorpe, wants to clear up some misconceptions about pre-engineered steel.

Many builders seem to think pre-engineered steel can only be used to make Quonset Huts or similarly basic and unattractive structures, he said. But pre-engineered steel can be used to make everything from office parks, banks and malls to fast-food restaurants, car dealerships and residential homes.

And because of the finishes, the exterior can look like be brick, shingle or any other material.

"Brick and masonry facades are a major part of what we can do," Cearfoss says. A building made from pre-engineered steel "can look like anything and it can be several stories high," he said.

Basically, pre-engineered steel is steel that has been created to the specifications of an engineer architect working on a specific structure. The builder manufacturer must then fit the pieces together to create the structure. Many contractors contact Cearfoss when they have a project that's designed conventionally and want us to convert it to pre-engineered, Cearfoss said.

"Often they will come to us and say, 'It's very expensive. Can you give us an alternative?'"

Though some people are still resistant to building with pre-engineered steel, the advantages are numerous. Perhaps foremost is price. The cost of building with pre-engineered steel can be as much as 15 percent cheaper than building with brick and mortar. And construction isn't as weather-dependent, since there is no mortar to freeze up. About the only thing that will delay the project is torrential rain, Cearfoss said.

Steel Building Specialists is the Baltimore area's authorized dealer for Varco-Pruden, the Memphis, Tennessee-based company that's a world leader in pre-engineered steel systems and one of the world's largest steel building manufacturers.

The company Steel Building Specialists supplies everything from just the materials



to a complete turn-key general contracting project, sometimes simply supplies the materials, and sometimes handles the construction through factory-trained subcontractors. [Karen—can you flesh this paragraph out—where are the subcontractors trained, who are they, and how many of them are there?]] The building erection is handled through factory trained subcontractors. The manufacturer, Varco-Pruden, comes on site to provide training to our select subcontractors. Varco-Pruden also makes frequent site visits to ensure quality of the installed product. We subcontract with five crews of varying sizes from 5-30 employees. Erectors are selected based on complexity and size of the project.

Cearfoss says he purchased 2,500 tons of steel in 2004, putting his company as 19th in steel purchases nationwide. "We expect to be in the top 10 this year," he said.

One of the company's largest projects, an 110,000 square foot manufacturing facility for OldCastle Precast in Edgewood, was started in December 2002 and built during an exceptionally snowy winter with very few lost work days, he noted.

Structurally, the advantages of pre-engineered steel are highlighted in large warehouse-like structures. It can be used to create completely open spaces that are more than 270 feet wide and require no

supporting columns. "You almost can't do (such large spaces) any other way," Cearfoss said.

Pre-engineered steel is also gaining popularity for replacement roofs, since it lasts much longer than conventional tar roofs. Though the steel roofs might cost 50 percent more, they last 30 to 40 years instead of 10 to 15, Cearfoss said.

And pre-engineered can also be used for offices, such as the sleek 6,500-square-foot two-story structure where Steel Building Specialists is headquartered.

Cearfoss, sitting behind a modern-looking desk in his spacious office, said his company, founded in January 1997, moved to the new site about a year ago. An old house on the property was torn down, and the offices were built from pre-engineered steel, of course.

He now has six full-time employees, not including the subcontractors who do construction.

Cearfoss got into the pre-engineered steel business in 1975, when he and his brother David founded Cearfoss Brothers Company, Inc. Gary Cearfoss left that company in 1996 to start his own company.

David Cearfoss died several years ago, and Cearfoss Brothers, based in Baltimore, is being phased out of business now operating on a smaller scale by his widow, Victoria, Gary Cearfoss said.

Gary Cearfoss estimates he's provided

material for 1,000 different structures during his 30 years in the business, including perhaps 250 structures in the past eight years. These include the modern-looking Sparks Corporate Center in Hunt Valley, a 325,000-square-foot warehouse near Fort McHenry, and car dealerships for Bob Bell Ford and Miller Chevrolet.

Most of his work is within a 50-mile radius, encompassing Baltimore and stretching as far west as Frederick and Hagerstown. There are a few competitors in the market, he said. "Not a lot, and nobody has very few have our experience."

Steel Building Specialists has earned many awards and distinctions. In 2002, the company was named Contractor of the Year by McGuire, Inc., one of its subcontractors. The following year, it won three awards for excellence in design, for Peterbilt of Baltimore, the Sparks Corporate Center in Sparks and J.F. Johnson Lumber Co. in Annapolis.

The awards help break down resistance and misconceptions about building with pre-engineered steel. And as more buildings are constructed, Cearfoss said, that resistance continues to erode. Now, when potential customers call him up and ask about building with pre-engineered steel, he can often point to a nearby building that he helped create.

"It's a really good sales tool, just that they know a building that you've done," he said. "A lot of times, it's a building they would never have known that it's pre-engineered, but it is."

Though pre-engineered steel is gaining momentum as a building tool, it's not always the right choice, Cearfoss said. "It's best for buildings 5,000 to 10,000 square feet or larger," he said, especially in cases where an open expanse is needed with no supporting columns. "That's when it really starts to shine as to what the product can do," he said.

Of course, buildings made of pre-engineered steel meet all building codes, so there is no compromise in strength or safety. And they're often more fire-resistant than buildings made of other materials.

"It's a good alternative, but people don't think of it," he said. Pre-engineered buildings provide an affordable alternative to traditional style buildings.

Paul J. Gorman
Architect
3 x 36

