It’s one thing to read a pile of technical white papers about the performance, superior fire resistance, aesthetic properties, quality and productivity improvements possible with lightweight concrete masonry units (CMU) or concrete block. It’s another to hear it straight from the folks who are out in the field installing the product.

Lightweight concrete block — manufactured in carefully controlled conditions — uses lightweight aggregate, like that supplied by Arcosa Lightweight, in the mix design. The lightweight aggregate is manufactured by heating select shale, clay or slate in a rotary kiln until it expands.

The resulting aggregate, a fraction of the density of normal aggregate, produces a superior concrete block. Lightweight aggregate results in block with a higher fire rating than normal weight CMU, and it makes mason contractors, masons, helpers, and laborers very happy.

Lightweight block can not only provide installation labor savings of up to 50 percent over its heavier counterpart, but also reduces on-the-job injuries and labor problems, and boots employee morale.

A selling point for Shannon Tayes of Tennessee is the fact with Q-LITE block, there’s no need to pour the wall solid to achieve a fire rating. “To get a four-hour rating out of a 12-inch block we typically pour it solid with concrete. That’s a whole lot of concrete to fill a 12-inch block and the labor to put that in the wall.” Tayes also says: “It’s just so much better to lay the Q-LITE and save all that concrete and the time of mixing and pouring, then the cleanup of all that. It’s just so much easier to lay the Q-LITEs and you’ve got your rating and it’s done.”

Joe Bonifate, president of operations at Arch Masonry Inc. in Pittsburgh, PA, likes lightweight block for all of its technical advantages. But one of the prime reasons his company tries to use it whenever it can is the impact on employee morale. “Our guys really prefer to work with light-weight block. We have not had any back or shoulder injuries on a lightweight block project. I can-not say that about other products but I can say that we’ve never had a work related injury due to lifting on a lightweight block project.”

On a movie theater project in McCandless Township, PA, Arch was tasked with installing 80,000 block on a 60-day schedule in the dead of a rough Pittsburgh winter. “There were zero injuries, and it was it was done on time. We didn’t start until November; we finished the first week of January. In Pittsburgh, you’re going to deal with some weather that time of year. “So we even though we had those obstacles we were able to complete
the project on time and safely. And we believe that was attributable to the fact that lightweight block was specified for the project. The masons are not as beat up at the end of the day. They feel like they’re not working so hard. Ultimately that’s what makes it valuable for us as a company. It (lightweight block) results in higher production and fewer injuries. That puts more money to the bottom line. But it’s really about the morale. We have a good relationship with our field workers, and we’re all family.

“We’re slugging it out all day through December weather. And come the end of the day, they just want to go home. They don’t want to take that extra minute to brush the wall a second time. They just want to get in their truck and go home. So if you can if you can lessen their fatigue and increase their morale you’re going to wind up with a better product.”

And at the end of the day, all of the benefits of lightweight block accrue to the ultimate client — the owners of the building it is being used on. “With the way they schedule projects in today’s market, that (getting projects completed on time or ahead of schedule) is critical. These clients generate revenue the day they open, and they’ve quantified that to a value-per-day,” Bonifate said.

A NO BRAINER FOR IMPROVED INSTALLATION, SUPERIOR FIRE RATINGS AND AESTHETICS

To Mike Sutter, president of Sutter Masonry in El Mirage, Arizona, a suburb of Phoenix, the idea of lightweight block is a no-brainer, even though he says it is difficult to find the product in his market.

“Typically, even if the specifications don’t allow it, we’ll try to talk to the owner into it. We like the look of the lightweight block better. And it is easier for the masons. We relate that to workers comp cases and people getting hurt.”

On one recent project the company was able to use 24-inch-long (as opposed to standard 16-inch-long block), which dramatically increased production. “A normal weight two-foot-long block would have been way too heavy for our employees to lift. It helps lower the cost of the wall going up. We can save on labor and get more material in the wall. And that brings the cost down or at least keeps it stable. And the other point is the way it looks. It’s easier to sell a lightweight finish block than a standard concrete block wall in our market.”

Bo Bartlett of W.W. Bartlett, Inc. in Houston, TX likes lightweight block for a wide range of reasons, but one of them is for its exceptional fire rating. “Lightweight does really well for rated partitions. Eight-inch lightweight block has a typical two-hour fire rating and so that works well for a lot of corridors and walls.”

Paul Oldham of Ollier Masonry Inc., Batesville, Indiana, a company that specializes mostly in private institutional work, says that the company tries to use lightweight block wherever possible.

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