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# THE IRISH TIMES

Commercialproperty

## €25m factory makes pre-cast components for fast-track building

**BuildingMethods:** A company linked to the state's biggest house builder will begin producing pre-cast concrete housing components later this year as a way to speed up construction. The company claims it can reduce build time by up to a third compared to certain types of concrete housing construction.

The company, Alcrete Ltd, involves a €25 million investment in lands, a factory and aggregate quarry. It is based on a 13-acre site in Arthurstown, Kill, Co Kildare.

A factory unit covering nearly five acres is currently under construction and the first production test runs should come off the manufacturing lines by mid to late October 2004, according to Alcrete chief executive officer, Robert Hickey.

When in full production the company will produce pre-cast concrete housing elements, including walls and floors, sufficient to build up to 5,000 housing units per annum, Mr Hickey said. Direct and indirect employment is expected to reach between 250 and 300, he added.

Alcrete is linked to Menolly Homes, Ireland's largest house builder which is controlled by Seamus Ross. The company is preparing to build 7,000 homes and is involved in large scale house building on a number of sites around Dublin, with recent announcements relating to housing going into the North Fringe in north central Dublin.

"Alcrete is a stand alone company but we will be assisting Menolly Homes in the completion of various projects," Mr Hickey said. "We will be producing mainly for Menolly," he added, but the company will also be able to produce pre-cast concrete housing elements for other firms depending on capacity.

Other companies are producing pre-cast walls and floors but the approach being taken by Alcrete is different to many in terms of its production techniques, Mr Hickey said.

"We are not deviating from current designs and building procedures. The difference is in the manufacturing, it is very high tech," he added. "The actual manufacturing process is a cad/cam system." It is all computer-driven with computer output controlling robot units on the production floor.

"It is a very big factory, it is highly automated and uses the latest technology," Mr Hickey said. "We are actually using much more automated systems of manufacture. The components will be partly

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assembled in the factory but the main assembly will still be on-site."

The wall and floor units will predominately be designed for use in high rise accommodation. "They will mainly be for higher rise buildings particularly, because it suits that type of construction," he said.

One of the main differences with the approach taken by Alcrete relates to the higher levels of finish achievable if more planning is applied before production.

"Time on site is less but time in pre-planning is much more. People have to put a bit more emphasis on planning," Mr Hickey said. "There will be a design issue in relation to the overall project."

For example, wall components will be cast with ties for brick and other finishes on the external side, while the internal side will already have ducting for electricity and for plumbing. "Most of the wall units are ready for paint finish," Mr Hickey added.

The positions of wall sockets, light fittings and cable runs are pre-planned and then provided during manufacture. The socket openings will already have plastic housings in position, ready for the socket to be screwed into place by the electrician. Wall and floor units are supplied with pre-installed fire proofing and sound proofing, and bonded using a concrete screed on the construction site. The company is meeting its own aggregate requirements having bought a sand and gravel quarry near the factory in Kill. It will still buy-in cement as required but it will not have to purchase ready mixed concrete for component production. "We have a fully automated batch plant on site, " he said.

The company is also working out deals with other housing component providers for external finishes and roofing. It is negotiating with Kingspan for roof elements, he said. "It is a specific type of roof for different types of housing units. We are interested in using that in our system."

Alcrete was also looking at any other suitable construction product that matches its fast build approach.

"We reckon we could knock off a third of the building time," Mr Hickey added. A typical three-storey apartment block might take up to six months, but the new approach should allow the same building to be finished in about four.

While the approach could be used for low rise units, it is initially planning to concentrate on high rise construction. This suited the current trend towards high density, high rise accommodation, he said.

Mr Hickey said there were a number of advantages to the system. It would require the management of fewer people on the construction site. It would reduce time on site and therefore reduce overheads.

"It also increases the build quality," he added. Test runs to produce finished components should be underway in October and full production will then be ramped up.

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