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K-12: Past, Present, and Future

I have daily discussions on building with precast concrete. I have three precast buildings right now we are either building or designing. It is a tool in our pallet, but you have to know what you are doing. There is a certain amount of education and myth-busting.

For example, I used to be a huge naysayer of putting thin-brick panels on precast. There were a lot of bad examples to draw from. But today, there is better collaboration between the brick and precast industries. There were so many bad projects, and they were not working. Now, they are seeing that it's a win-win for both of them. Both industries decided to figure out: how do we make it better? The general perception was that precast schools looked like prisons. Through thin brick types of panels, you can get it to the point of looking like a traditional brick and block masonry school without anyone being able to tell that it's precast.

Safety is a great consideration in designing K-12 buildings. Unfortunately, in today's world of school shootings, you have to be able to think about the unthinkable, and there has to be an added layer of security. Precast is very a stable material you may have for 50 years. Essentially, you're building a tank or a vault.

Schedule is a driving factor that brings precast into the discussion. Generally, four months is the number you hear, and which has been validated on what you can pick up on a construction schedule. If you can reduce a 24-month construction schedule by four months, you can save a lot more than just material. After all, time is money.

One thing I did not anticipate a few months ago is a major trade issue. We are hearing a lot about whether steel tariffs are on the horizon, and precast has become more of a discussion item. It does contain some rebar, but, by and large, it is not steel. So that is a bit of an unknown factor in many of our discussions lately: What is the impact of steel tariffs, and how do we react?

David A. Bellamy is studio leader at LS3P in Charleston, S.C., and devotes much of his time to designing K-12 buildings.

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