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SLI starts installing prefab panels at Belltown apartment tower

- **Equity Residential is set to buy the tower on completion.**

By [BRIAN MILLER](#)
Real Estate Editor

The groundbreaking for the 15-story, 112-unit “kit of parts” apartment tower at 303 Battery St. was held in June, following demolition and preliminary site work last year.

Last week came a second ceremony and important milestone for Sustainable Living Innovations, following the shoring and excavation, as some of the first premade panels were craned into place within the steel exoskeleton that’s now about two levels above grade. The Belltown project is on the corner of Third Avenue. Completion is expected in August of next year, 10 months from now.



Photo by Brian Miller [\[enlarge\]](#) [\[gallery\]](#)

It’s SLI’s second project after the six-story, 24-unit 47 + 7 building in the U District, which was completed circa 2015 and later sold. That was the proof of concept that established SLI’s business model — and attracted investors including Equity Residential, Sustainable Development Capital LLP and Goldman Sachs.

Crews from By Design muscle a premade floor panel, with radiant heating already installed, into the steel exoskeleton; the process takes only a few minutes.

Arlan Collins and partners established SLI under a different name some 13 years ago. It’s now a spinoff and entirely separate entity from CollinsWoerman. When that firm was slowed with the rest of the industry by the Great Recession, said Collins, “We thought it was a good time to do something different.”

The goal then was to complete a project in half the time, compared to traditional construction, with half the water use and half the energy use. That goal has been achieved, said Collins, thanks to SLI’s patented system of panels — here being deployed in 10 different types — that contain all the plumbing, wiring, heating, windows, fireproofing, etc. The paint and finish work come later.

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In fact, says Collins, 303 Battery will use 70% less energy than a comparable apartment building, thanks to its 600-plus solar panels, various energy-saving features, heat controls, A/C and the like

(all run by app). SLI calls the project the world's first net zero energy apartment building, to be powered entirely by electricity, and to meet standards set by the International Living Future Institute.

Units will run from studios to two-bedrooms; 27 units will be affordable to future renters per Mandatory Housing Affordability requirements—and via the city's Multifamily Tax Exemption program (MFTE).

Collins also announced that, following a certificate of occupancy next fall, Equity Residential will buy the project. Terms weren't mentioned; nor is it known how much Equity has invested in SLI. The 303 Battery project will likely not be the last kit of parts effort for EQR — which, by coincidence, owns the Moda next door at 2312 Third.

“This is a big day for us,” said Carrie Cassidy, the director of construction at 303 Battery. “It's something we've been wanting to celebrate for a long time.” She explained that all the 895 flat-pack panels assembled at SLI's Tacoma factory “are ready to go,” meaning no supply chain delays and just a short truck delivery route to Belltown.

There, unlike a more traditional job site that's teeming with workers, only about two dozen laborers will at different times be at 303 Battery. Meanwhile the Tacoma production line workers are preparing panels for affordable Seattle housing projects planned for Downtown Emergency Service Center and Chief Seattle Club. Workers from Tacoma came up for the ceremony, where a wood-fired pizza truck stood ready to make lunch for all.

SLI is acting as its own general contractor. The steel came from Supreme Steel, of Canada; and it's being erected by a specialty crew from By Design Steel Services, of Oregon.

“The panels fit like a glove,” said Cassidy. To ensure a good fit, the By Design workers “have to be slow and methodical.” Trickest to install are the elevator shaft panels. The Otis elevator, with its regenerative electric motors, will be operating near instantly after topping out — thus to serve the workers once the tower crane is removed.

The rhythm of the project is to alternate one level of steel, then the panels, then another level of steel. “The learning curve is gonna be very quick,” said Cassidy. She expects that, with a few weeks more practice, a whole floor could be installed in one day. “We're expecting some really great productivity.”

Once the panels are on site, the trip from truck to crane to installation takes about three minutes and 30 seconds, said Cassidy.

The team also includes private equity firm Renova Capital, of Denver (a partner in the venture); Swinerton and UMC of Mukilteo; DCI, structural engineer; Berg Electric, Q-Tran (LED lighting); Stantec, mechanical and plumbing engineer; Wood Harbinger, electrical; KPFF, civil; Weisman Design Group, landscape architect; Riley Group, geotechnical engineer; and Maxim Crane Works. JPMorgan also provided an unspecified construction loan.

Brian Miller can be reached by email at brian.miller@dj.com or by phone at (206) 219-6517.