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Max Ortiz / The Detroit News

Bill Duffield, McDonald Modular vice president, left, and Mario C. Phillips of Nissan North America, walk outside the 9,360-square-foot building comprised of 13 single modules. It's the temporary home for 60 Nissan engineers.

Firms use modulars for savings, speed

From classrooms to offices, units are popular in Midwest

By Maureen McDonald / Special to The Detroit News

SOUTHFIELD -- When Nissan North America announced plans to build a \$38.8 million expansion to its research and engineering facility in Farmington Hills last summer, the firm selected McDonald Modular Solutions Inc. in Southfield to erect a temporary home for 60 engineers.

McDonald delivered in early August one of its newest Flex/Plex units to the Nissan site -- a 9,360-square-foot structure comprised of 13 single modules seamed together. The building has rest rooms, windows, private offices, cubicles and conference rooms. Yet it was planted on Nissan ground in 45 days. They will remove it once the permanent building is completed.

"Modular construction conjures up a certain image, a number of not-so-funny comments, but everybody, including my staff, have been pleasantly surprised about what a flexible work environment would be," said John Calandro, director of administration and human resources for Nissan Technical Center North America Inc.

Large-scale modular classrooms and offices are sprouting up across America because of new construction capabilities that can seam together any combination of units from two to 20, according to Judy Smith, director of the Modular Building Institute in Charlottesville, Va., representing 280 members across America.

Bill Duffield, vice president of McDonald Modular, says modules can be added or subtracted depending on growing needs. Newer units eliminate poles and all the units interlock. Temporary offices are set 30 inches above grade --to accommodate transportation -- and a foundation is built. Units come equipped with windows, lavatories, heating and cooling systems and downspouts.

Duffield said the difference in permit and construction versus a conventional construction is that modular construction is overseen by the state of Michigan. Local cities approve foundation and utility connections, thus expediting time. Also, the building goes up indoors, so it is not subject to weather variations.

Nissan expects to house 260 new employees at its technical center when the permanent building is completed in early 2004.

"Our first and foremost goal was to stay onsite with the rest of the organization," said Calandro, who ordered the modular unit instead of purchasing rental offices in

McDonald Modular Solutions Inc.

Specialty: The 70-year-old firm supplies construction trailers, modular offices and temporary classrooms to customers around the Midwest.

Contact: (800) 905-3905 or visit www.mcdonaldmodular.com.

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Farmington Hills. He said the cost of running phone and data lines to remote locations was higher than installing a group of onsite trailers.

"The end product is really pretty decent. It's not totally comparable to a regular-built building but it meets the needs we have," Calandro added.

McDonald Modular also installed classroom wings in Wheaton, Ill., and Oxford. They are supplying the modular units for the 2004 Ryder Cup at Oakland Hills Golf Course in Birmingham. The 70-year old company has annual revenues of \$10 million.

Across America, commercial construction of modular units is relatively flat, according to Smith, who oversees the trade organization.

Several builders supplied the gauntlet of trailers used in the Winter Olympics a year ago, resulting in a glut of used units coming to market. The school construction business, a giant chunk of the industry's revenue, has been down because of cuts in education budgets.

"We are seeing a pickup in orders, but it is slow," Smith said.

Maureen McDonald is a Metro Detroit free-lance writer.

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