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Comparing the Carbon Footprint of Mass Timber *vs.* Steel Building Structures

Jordan Biswas*

Department of Environmental Dynamics, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR 72701, USA

Introduction

The construction industry is increasingly prioritizing sustainability, seeking alternatives to traditional building materials that minimize environmental impact. Mass timber and steel are two prominent options for building structures, each with distinct environmental footprints. This study aims to compare the carbon footprint of mass timber and steel building structures, considering factors such as material production, transportation, construction, and end-of-life disposal. By evaluating the life cycle emissions associated with each material, the research seeks to provide insights into the environmental implications of choosing between mass timber and steel for construction projects [1].

Description

Mass timber construction involves using engineered wood products, such as Cross-Laminated Timber (CLT) and glue-laminated timber (glulam), for structural components like beams, columns, and panels. Mass timber offers advantages in terms of carbon sequestration, as wood captures and stores carbon dioxide during growth. Steel, on the other hand, is manufactured from iron ore and coal, resulting in significant greenhouse gas emissions during production. However, steel structures have a longer lifespan and can be recycled at the end of their use, potentially reducing overall environmental impact. This study conducts a comparative analysis of mass timber and steel building structures, considering the entire life cycle from material extraction to end-of-life disposal [2]. Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) methodologies are employed to quantify the carbon emissions associated with each material, accounting for processes such as logging, milling, fabrication, transportation, construction, and demolition. By examining multiple scenarios and construction typologies, the research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the carbon footprint implications of choosing between mass timber and steel. Future research directions may involve exploring hybrid construction approaches that combine mass timber and steel elements to optimize environmental performance while leveraging the strengths of each material. Additionally, advancements in sustainable forestry practices, wood treatment technologies, and steel production processes can further reduce the environmental footprint of both materials [3].

Moreover, incorporating broader environmental considerations, such as embodied energy, water usage, and biodiversity impacts, into life cycle assessments can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the sustainability implications of mass timber and steel construction. Integration of circular economy principles, such as designing for disassembly and material reuse, can also enhance the environmental performance of building structures over their entire life cycle. Furthermore, stakeholder education and policy incentives play a crucial role in promoting sustainable construction practices and driving market demand for low-carbon building materials [4]. Collaborative efforts between industry, academia, and government agencies are essential for fostering innovation, standardizing environmental assessment methodologies, and establishing regulatory frameworks that prioritize sustainability in the built environment. Ultimately, the comparative analysis of mass timber and steel building structures underscores the importance of considering environmental impacts alongside structural and economic considerations in construction decision-making processes. By adopting a holistic approach to sustainability and embracing innovative materials and construction techniques, the construction industry can transition towards a more resilient, resource-efficient, and environmentally responsible built environment [5].

Conclusion

The comparison between mass timber and steel building structures reveals contrasting environmental footprints, underscoring the pivotal role of material selection in sustainable construction practices. Mass timber offers a compelling narrative of environmental stewardship, leveraging the regenerative properties of wood to sequester carbon and mitigate climate change. Its renewable nature, coupled with efficient production and construction processes, positions mass timber as a frontrunner in low-carbon building solutions. Conversely, steel, while indispensable in modern construction, grapples with inherent environmental challenges. Its high carbon footprint during production and energy-intensive construction processes underscore the imperative for innovations in steel manufacturing and construction practices. In conclusion, the choice between mass timber and steel extends beyond structural considerations to encompass broader environmental impacts. Embracing sustainable building materials not only mitigates carbon emissions but also fosters resilient, ecologically responsible communities for generations to come. As the construction industry navigates towards a carbon-neutral future, informed decision-making rooted in environmental stewardship will be paramount.

Acknowledgement

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Conflict of Interest

None.

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***Address for Correspondence:** Jordan Biswas, Department of Environmental Dynamics, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AR 72701, USA; E-mail: biswas12jordan@hotmail.com*

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