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By: Catherine Carlock

Scraping the sky: A first-hand look from the top of a 232-foot tower crane (video)

The tower we're ascending is a "luffing jib" tower — it stands at 232 feet, with a 26-ton hook that can handle loads of up to 52,000 pounds. The only way to get an up-close look is to climb a series of ladders — and keep climbing.



To go up 232 feet in a tower crane, first you have to go down.

There are three wooden stairwells at opposing points of EchelonSeaport's perimeter at 145 Seaport Blvd. that lead down at least 30 feet into a concrete foundation. Descending into the chasm, the sounds of traffic rushing toward I-90 diminishes, replaced by whirring equipment, sharp metallic pings and the crunch of wet gravel beneath steel-toed boots. The cavernous chasm will eventually be a below-grade parking garage.

EchelonSeaport, the vision of Cottonwood Management, is the latest development in the prodigiously busy Seaport District. It will eventually span 1.33 million square feet across three towers, with 447 luxury condominiums and more than 200 apartments, some 50,000 square feet of outdoor and indoor amenity space designed by renowned design studio Jeffrey Beers International and another 125,000 square feet of retail space, all surrounding a central public piazza.

John Moriarty & Associates of Winchester is building EchelonSeaport, and it's JMA's Safety & Health Supervisor Kai Wilson who leads me and a photographer down Stairwell A to the wet

concrete and gravel floor on a recent cloudy weekday afternoon. EchelonSeaport will eventually have five tower cranes up at the site.

At present, two dull-red cranes tower above. Wilson leads us to [Mike Sheehan](#), the on-the-ground “tag man,” who is responsible for keeping the crane’s rigging safe and does a visual check every time a crane lifts something into the air.

The tower we’re ascending is a “luffing jib” tower, manufactured by Potain, a brand of crane maker Manitowac Co. It stands at 232 feet, with a 26-ton hook that can handle loads of up to 52,000 pounds.



But the hook is at the very top, and the only way to get an up-close look is to climb a series of ladders — and keep climbing. Sheehan cautions to stay in the center of the ladder, and to use your quadriceps — the body’s biggest muscle — while climbing, to avoid wearing out your arms. For Sheehan, climbing up a tower crane is old news. He was born and bred into this work, and his father is a 73-year-old apprentice teacher who’s still in the classroom a few days a week. Sheehan recalls walking out on open steel at 10 years old.

Any advice for those who may not be the best with heights? Sheehan smiles. “Everybody can overcome it,” he says. Sure, there are days where climbing will send your gut swooping. Even though the tower is embedded into a concrete foundation, locked into a stand secured eight feet into the ground, it has the capacity to sway up to four feet in any direction. But just keep moving up, he says, and it’ll pass. Contrary to the popular “don’t look down” belief, Sheehan advises folks to pay attention to their surroundings, including looking down — once they’re safely located on a platform between ladders, of course.

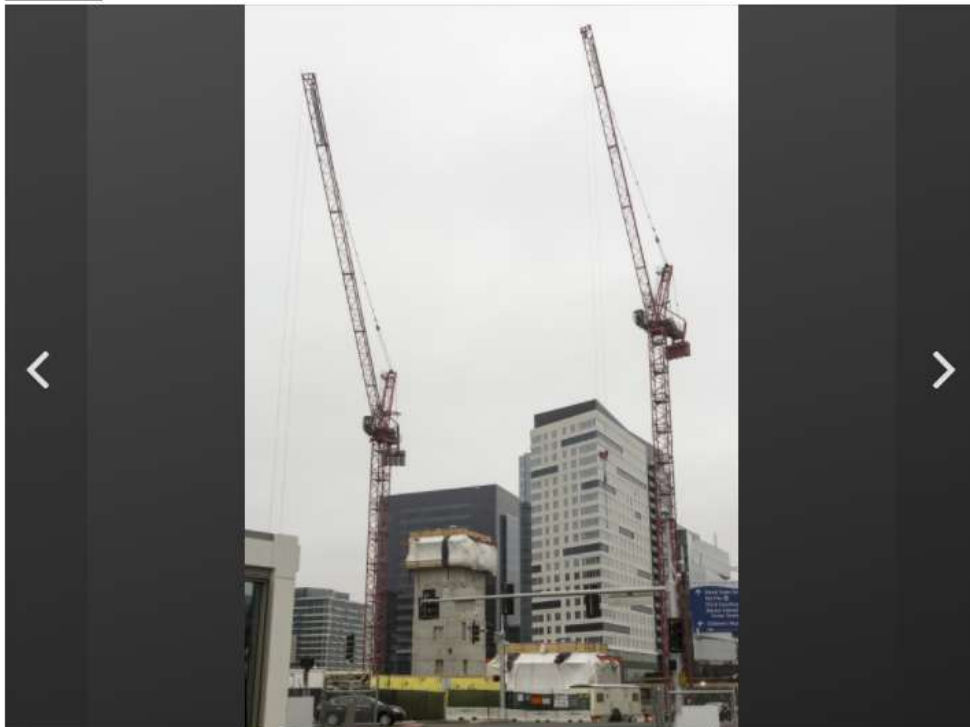
Crane Climb

The only way to get an up-close look of the top of a tower crane is to climb a series of ladders — and keep climbing. Here's a first-hand look from the top of a 232-foot "luffing jib" crane in Boston's Seaport District.

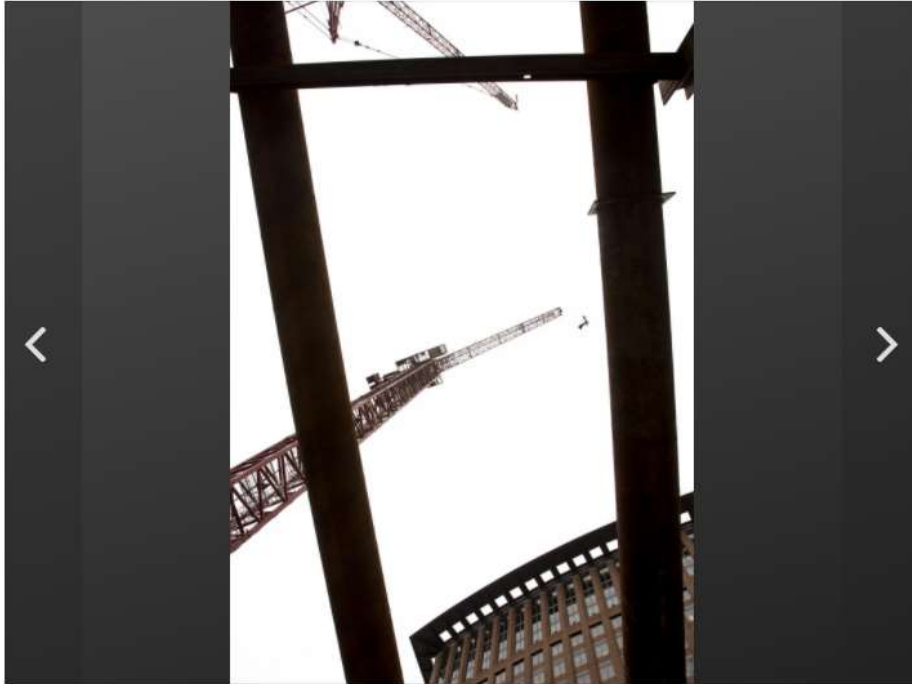


Cottonwood Management's EchelonSeaport project is the latest development in Boston's prodigiously busy Seaport District. Here's the look up the 232-foot Tower Crane 2, located at 135 Seaport Blvd.

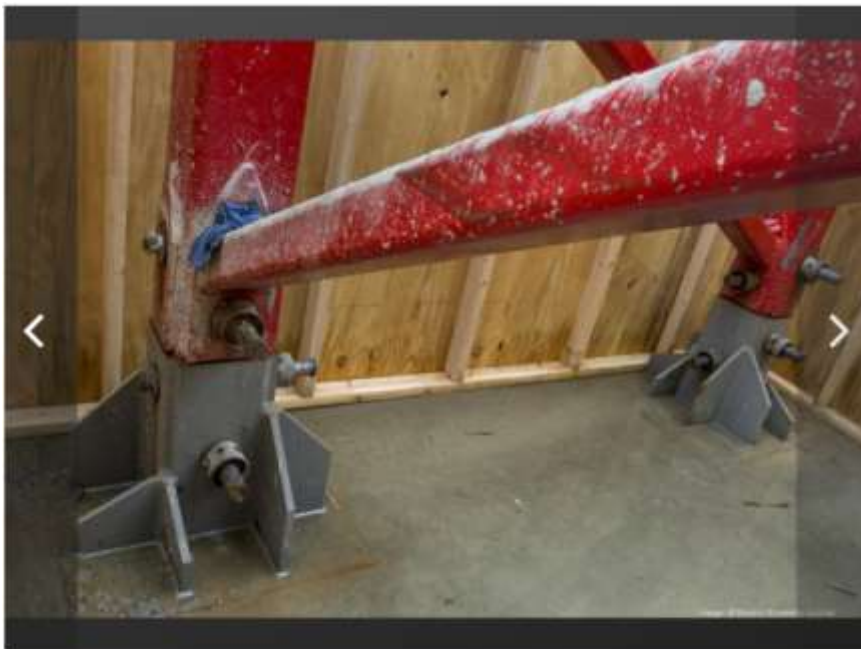
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EchelonSeaport, a luxury residential and retail development at 145 Seaport Blvd. in Boston, will eventually have five tower cranes on site.



Looking up through the slurry wall support beams at the cranes based in the EchelonSeaport foundation, which is at least 30 feet below street level, at 145 Seaport Blvd. in Boston.



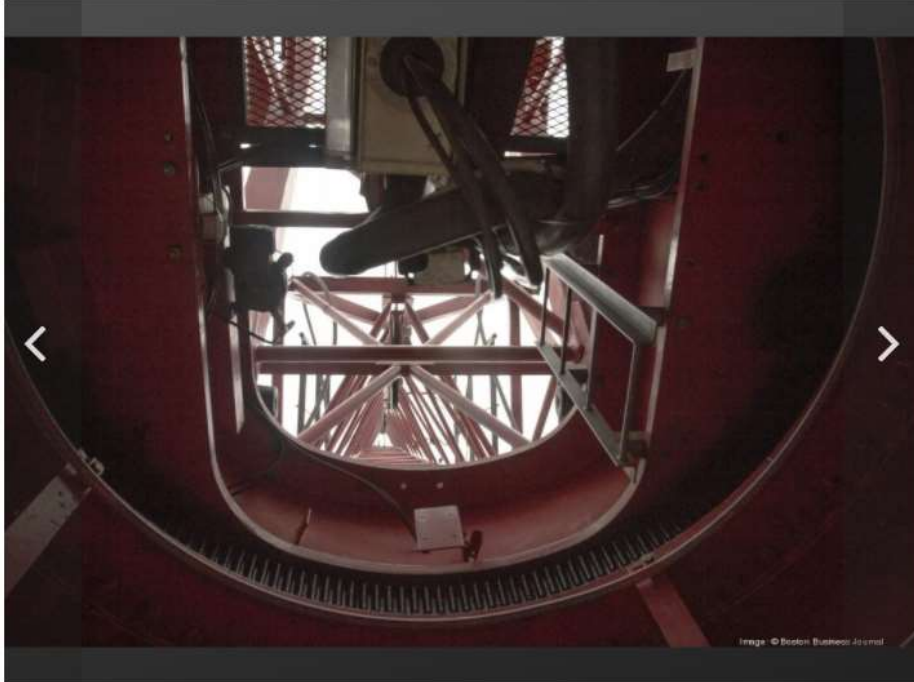
Tower Crane 2 is locked into a stand embedded in a concrete foundation secured eight feet in the ground.



Mike Sheehan with Iron Workers Local 7 is the “tag man” on the ground who communicates with the crane operators above.



Tower Crane 2 overlooks companion crane, dubbed Tower Crane 1 (or TC1 and TC2, for short), as well as the future headquarters of Alexion Pharmaceuticals and technology company PTC at 121 Seaport Blvd.



Just below the cab of the crane at the EchelonSeaport construction site. The turntable alone weighs 29,000 pounds, the crew says.



Crane operator Charlie LaLond sits atop TC2 every day. He apprenticed for four years before he was approved to sit in the bed of the crane, he said. But sitting in classrooms every Tuesday and Thursday evening was nothing compared to the real-life experience he got on the job.



Crane operator Charlie LaLond's view straight down from 232 feet up in the air in Boston's Seaport.



View of Boston's skyline, TC1 and 121 Seaport Blvd. from TC2.

Each metal ladder has 20 rungs, located about a foot apart, located between landing platforms. It's an unusual sensation to traverse space that would typically only be open to those in Seaport offices, or on the planes taking off from nearby Boston Logan International Airport. The wind hits when you reach 180 feet, but luckily it's not too blustery a day. The tower, mercifully, does not sway the anticipated four feet.

Perhaps the most difficult maneuver is shimmying out from beneath the turntable, a piece of equipment that weighs a whopping 29,000 pounds, on which the bed of the crane sits. From behind hangs the counterweight, large blocks of steel that are used to balance both the weight of the crane itself as well as the weight of whatever is picked up. Moving from the somewhat cramped base beneath the turntable, up another metal ladder and onto the final platform, all fitting between a space about two feet wide, requires some contortion.

At the top of the crane is Mike, the oil man, whose job is to lubricate the equipment up top — different metal pieces of machinery that are all required to be in smooth working order to keep crane loads safe. Mike is apprenticing to be a crane operator.

The crane bed is essentially a glass pod with a single black chair and two blue arm rests, from which extend two levers, which look like joysticks. In the chair sits Charlie LaLond, the bearded crane operator, who wears a Red Sox hat and a blue Under Armour sweatshirt. He apprenticed for four years before he was approved to sit in the bed of the crane, he said. But sitting in classrooms every Tuesday and Thursday evening was nothing compared to the real-life experience he got on the job.

The two levers control different pieces of the crane's operation — the hook's swing left to right and the angle at which the 164-foot arm of the crane (called the "jib," or the "boom") extends from the turntable — while others control functions like windshield wipers and a heater. Immediately behind him is a daily checklist for oil-man Mike to work through before the crane can be operational.

A normal day can have between four and five dozen lifts, LaLond says. On the EchelonSeaport site, the heaviest lift he's had so far is 23,000 pounds, or 11.5 tons.

The coolest part of the job, LaLond says, is working with fellow crane operator "Big City" Joe, with whom he apprenticed for two years.

The days can be stressful, and LaLond never knows what exactly the day will bring. But, he said, there's something beautiful about seeing the world the way no one else has quite gotten to see it yet.

"You get beautiful days, sunrises, sunsets. You get your good and your bad," LaLond says. "Where else can you have a view that people will pay millions of dollars for?"