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Even Some Contractors Are Choosing Modular Homes



Susan Stava for The New York Times

Diane and Louis Del Pizzo plan to move into this 3,450-square-foot \$1 million modular house in Thornwood, N.Y., soon.

By BARRY REHFELD Published: September 30, 2006

LEE SPENCER makes a living fixing other people's mistakes. A general contractor, he replaces doors that don't lock, windows that won't open and pipes that leak, so two years ago when his home in Florence, N.J., was destroyed by fire — a result, he says, of faulty wiring — he knew exactly what he would put in its place: his first modular home.

"It's better built than a stick home," he said of his new 1,300-square-foot house, using the industry term for homes built on site. "Nails don't pop, and the wood never got wet from lying on site. It's more efficient, too. Costs less to heat and cool."

Accolades like this are hardly common. Modular homes make up a mere 3 percent of the single-family houses in the nation and have long been regarded as being in the same class as mobile homes.

Chances of shaking the stigma don't seem to be improved by the fact that some modular manufacturers produce mobile homes, too, and belong to trade associations representing them, as well as those representing traditionally built homes. Still, modular homes are gaining mainstream respect and popularity, and not just with buyers who know building inside out.

Home shoppers are finding out how fast the homes can be put up, as well as how strong they are. They are also seeing that they cost 5 percent to 15 percent less than homes built on site, that buyers can get what they want and, perhaps most significant, that the designs can be as expansive and attractive as those of any home built on site.

For example, a modular mansion in New Rochelle, N.Y., measures in at 20,000 square

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feet and a Florida modular home was chosen as the house of 2006 by Country Living magazine.

All this is making more sense in the Northeast. Last year, according to the [Census Bureau](#), 15,000 modular homes were built in the region, tops in the nation, and nearly double the 8,000 total of 1999. Of all single-family homes built in the Northeast, modular homes represented a record 11 percent last year, up from 7 percent six years earlier.

Certainly, they will never be for everybody, if only because modules cannot be shipped down every road. And many buyers and builders still seem to like the way site homes are built.

“There’s more flexibility with them,” said Michael Lipman, a Port Washington, N.Y., modular builder. “Once a modular is delivered, they’re so wide, so long, you can only work around that so much.”

The rest of the country is not quite following along with the Northeast. Modular building has chalked up decent gains in the South, while slowing in the Midwest. It is rare in the West.

The Northeast is the historic heart of the industry. Its modular homes are made in factories that operate year-round — a decided advantage where cold weather limits on-site building time. Also, transporting the typical modular home, with its four to six 60-foot long modules, is easier because the leading manufacturing center — Pennsylvania — is relatively close to a huge number of potential Northeastern customers.

Finally, buyers stand the best chance of saving the most in the Northeast because of the top dollar that new single-family homes command in the region (a median \$343,000 last year). While prices around the country have softened lately, Northeast housing costs have been increasing at a rate faster than that in other regions in recent years.

Three years ago, [Berkshire Hathaway](#), which is controlled by [Warren E. Buffett](#), bought Clayton Homes. Based in Knoxville, Tenn., Clayton is a large manufacturer of low-end modular and mobile homes. Mr. Buffett got in just before builders began bemoaning the rising cost of traditional labor — carpenters, electricians, masons, plumbers — and the dismal prospects for finding the next generation of highly skilled workers. Modular home builders, on the other hand, don’t lose much sleep over those issues.

“There is a big difference in pay from a Greenwich, Conn., electrician and a factory worker in a rural area connecting a wire from A to B,” said Andrew Gianino, president of the Home Store, a modular home manufacturer in Whately, Mass.

The growing acceptance of modular homes, however spotty, means buyers don’t have to worry about being the next Buckminster Fuller to get the job done. As with any home shopper, they can readily find builders — plenty of whom got their start with sticks — to show them catalog designs and model homes or to work with the buyer’s plans. The plans must meet the same structural standards and go through the same approval processes with local governments.

“The towns where we work know them now,” said John Hopkins, a modular builder in Wading River on Long Island. “They are approved the same as any house would be.”

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