

Prefabulous!

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Prefab homes are modern marvels of manufacturing technology



Photo courtesy of Guerdon Enterprises

A worker at the Guerdon Enterprises factory at 5556 Federal Way, Boise, checks the alignment of a wall that will be part of the Cahill Park development.



Photo courtesy of Guerdon Enterprises

A giant crane lifts housing modules off a truck and in to place at the Cahill Park townhouse project in San Jose, Calif. The modules we built in Boise.

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The three-story townhouses built over garages come with granite counter tops and hardwood floors. Located in the historic Midtown district of San Jose, Calif., the 1,500-square-foot units sell for between \$400,000 and \$600,000 — practically a bargain by San Jose standards.

You wouldn't think of them as "prefab" homes, but they are.

And they were built in Boise.

They're part of a new push to create affordable modern designs that can be reproduced for multiple customers — a movement some architects are calling mass customization.

Only a few architects in the country have started designing for modern mass customization, and only one or two dozen single-family homes have been built. But Guerdon Enterprises, a manufactured home business in Boise, is among the industry leaders.

Guerdon partnered with The Castle Group, a San Mateo developer, to build the San Jose townhouse project. A week ago their Cahill Park project won a national award from the Manufactured Housing Institute at its annual convention in Las Vegas.

And rather than hide the prefab origins of the townhomes, The Castle Group brags about them.

"The homes of Cahill Park utilize state of the art manufacturing technology in their construction. Entire components of each home are engineered in a manufacturing plant, shipped to Cahill Park and assembled into townhome buildings on-site," the company says in its Web site.

"Why do we build this way?" the Web site asks. "Would you buy a new automobile that was put together in a muddy field, with a pile of materials left to the elements rather than one engineered in a modern factory? Then why would you purchase a home built that way? The manufacturing facility for the Cahill Park homes is a climate controlled, well lit environment that utilizes steel jigs, laser alignment tools and quality-controlled processes at each stage of manufacturing."

Jon Moon, director of development for Guerdon Enterprises, said the use of modular homebuilding techniques is "definitely a trend."

"We're working with more and more architects every day," he said. "In addition to the 160-unit Cahill Park project, we're looking at a project in Hailey this fall that will include more than 100 single-family homes."

In the Treasure Valley, where high-volume builders like Corey Barton and Hubble Homes build subdivisions with dozens, sometimes hundreds, of homes, Moon said factory-build homes can't compete on price.

But prefabs are more attractive in rural areas where skilled workers are hard to find and in areas with short building seasons, Moon said. With about 85 percent of each house built at Guerdon's plant on Federal Way in Boise, it normally takes less than a month from the time the modules are delivered to the site to the time the purchaser can move in.

New prefab code matches code for site-built homes

The high-end modular approach has gained in recent years as prefab outfits shift their building standards away from the traditional HUD building code to a new International Housing Code, or I-Code, which matches the requirements used in site-built homes. Homes built to the HUD code are often precluded from urban areas by zoning ordinances or restrictive covenants. I-Code home can go anywhere a site-built come can.

Gub Mix, executive director of the Idaho Manufactured Housing Association in Sun Valley, agreed that high-end prefabs are catching on, but said few have been built in Idaho.

"I think you'll see growth in this segment," Mix said. "It makes a lot of sense."

Joe Tanney, a New York architect says one problem he faces is convincing factories that there is a market for such products.

Tanney said many manufacturers, fearing they would become known as makers of glorified trailer homes, refused when his firm approached them.

"Most modular manufacturers don't believe there's a market for a modern American home," Tanney said. "We have more potential clients than we do manufacturers in their locations to turn to."

Industry insiders say the reason manufacturers are reluctant to invest in high-end homes is that they question whether there is enough demand for them among homebuyers.

Fighting the image of mobile homes, vinyl siding

The word "prefab" rarely inspires excitement from among buyers like Christa Walker and her partner Ami McElroy, who admitted the term initially conjured up images of mobile homes and vinyl siding.

But Walker and McElroy are among a small but growing number of homeowners who are interested in design but unable to afford the exclusive services of an architect, and who've turned to prefab homes.

"We really couldn't afford a custom house that would meet our style and our sensibility," said Walker, whose 1,510-square-foot home on Vashon Island, Wash., is scheduled to reach the site this month.

Michelle Kaufmann, the San Francisco architect who designed their home, on a model she calls Glide House, said her goal was to create affordable modern designs that can be reproduced for multiple customers.

Allison Arieff, co-author of the book "Prefab" and editor of Dwell magazine, said the majority of homes and offices in the United States are already prefab to some extent.

"What has changed is the introduction of design into the mix," she said.

Kaufmann started her career with the architect Frank Gehry, best known for his twisting buildings made of sheets of metal, such as the Guggenheim museum in Bilbao, Spain. She started considering prefab when she and her husband were looking for a home in the San Francisco Bay area and found nothing that met their budget — or their style.

What they ended up building, she said, was a "clean, green, modern box" — something that was environmentally friendly, modern and relatively inexpensive. Friends and others who saw their house wanted something similar, and she began casting around for a way to replicate the process. She is under contract for 40 additional homes.

Charlie Lazor, formerly of the Minneapolis furniture and design company Blu Dot, had a similar experience when he wanted to build a home for himself. He turned to manufactured housing; his new firm, Lazor Office, launched a design using flat panels,

leading to its name: Flatpakhouse. Lazor has five more homes in the works and expects the market for the industrialized design to grow.

"We all know there are many people out there for whom design is important. And they love good design but they are only able to access it at the level of the toothbrush or the computer or the car," he said. "But that same group of people would also like to have a well-designed living room."

Many in the industry are 'still pretty skeptical'

Tanney, whose New York firm, Resolution: 4 Architecture, won a competition by Dwell to create a prefab, architect-designed home for \$175,000, said many factories that build homes for developers hesitated when they saw his designs. With a background in apartment loft renovations, Tanney gravitates toward straight, clean lines and 90-degree angles.

The Dwell house, finished last fall, went over budget but Tanney and Arieff said was primarily because it was a first attempt. As the firm expands its relationship with manufacturers and becomes more accustomed to the process, the task will grow easier — and less expensive, they say.

"All the systems are in place for these factories to build the kind of homes that we're talking about," Arieff said.

"A majority of the industry is still pretty skeptical."

Tanney is now working with two factories who understand what he's looking for — high-end materials, careful craftsmanship and consistent work. With one house planned this year for Martha's Vineyard, Mass., several in upstate New York, and another in Annapolis, Md., his long-term goal is to create an entire community of mass-customized homes.

Inquiries from Idaho, but no sales yet

Tanney said he's had six inquiries from Idaho residents in the past three months, but no firm sales to date.

"We're still pretty much centered on the East Coast," he said, "but we'd like to see our homes go up in Idaho and across the West."

For now, cost of the homes — not including the price of the land — ranges from about \$130 a square foot in places where labor and materials are relatively inexpensive, to about \$170 a square foot on the coasts. That translates into \$260,000 to \$340,000 for a 2,000-square-foot house, not far off the \$273,500 national average price for a home in 2004, according to U.S. Census Bureau figures.

"It's never going to be as cheap as people would like," Arieff said. "Cost is not the only reason to build prefab."

For Walker and her partner, whose prefab home will have bamboo floors, slate countertops and bioradiant heating, it was the design that counted the most.

"We thought a lot about why the prefab is important. It's not one particular thing, other than it gives us something to root for," she said. "It's an underdog in this world of McMansions and houses that all look the same and that all feel soulless to us."

Lori Hinnant of The Associated Press contributed to this report.