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No longer boxy, modular homes come with vaulted ceilings, custom windows

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If you think modular houses resemble boxy mobile homes, think again. Today's modular residences look like conventionally built homes and come in sizes from cottages to mansions. They are homes with roomy interiors, complete with decorative moldings, great rooms and custom windows.

Many of the modular manufacturers have realized that they have to build what the market wants, says Fred Hallahan, of Hallahan Associates, an industry consulting firm in Baltimore.

"Architectural enhancements and spacious-looking interiors are some of the driving forces behind the annual growth in sales for the last five years, which have been significant," says Hallahan. "The design of a modular home is like the auto industry in a way. The car may have the same structural frame, but there's lots of customizing and options."

Modular houses are much like conventional houses - except they are built in sections in a factory and trucked to a site, where the sections are attached to each other on a prepared foundation.

Angela Schapiro, co-owner of Trevitch Schapiro in Woodstock, N.Y., says 9-foot-high ceilings and two-story rooms were unheard of in modular homes more than a decade ago.

But advanced technology has allowed modular manufacturers to construct larger homes with vaulted ceilings and varying roof lines by fitting more sections and different types of sections together. Today the size of a modular home is only limited by the building code, which changes from area to area.

"Modular Mansion" by Sheri Koonen (Gibbs Smith \$39.95), profiles more than 20 modular homes and modular mansions across the country, all of which look no different than conventional site-built homes.

Modular homes are desirable because they can be built faster than on-site

construction. Schapiro says it takes about six weeks for a modular house to be delivered, or up to 2 1/2 months from selecting a place to moving into it.

The walls and roof can be built at the same time the foundation is being prepared. And because the construction is largely done indoors with kiln-dried timbers, weather delays, thefts and vandalism are less likely to occur.

Eric Fulton, communications director for the Building Systems Council, part of the National Association of Home Builders in Washington, D.C., says modular homes have always been popular in the Northeast, where fickle weather can make on-site construction iffy.

Today modular homes can be found in every kind of neighborhood, from cities and villages to rural settings and subdivisions.

"It is clear that modular homes are an increasingly popular housing choice for American families, particularly first-time home buyers," says Adam Glantz, spokesperson for the Department of Housing and Urban Development's New York state office in Manhattan. "However, these homes are appealing to all types of buyers. The industry's products have changed substantially over the past decade and, based on current offerings, so has its client base."

Nationwide, the Northeast is the leader in modular housing, says Hallahan.

Out of 120,000 new single-family homes built in the Northeast last year, 13,000 were modular single-family and attached-modular town houses.

More than two decades ago, modular homes were mainly ranches of less than 1,000 square feet, which could fit in sections or as an assembled unit on a flatbed truck.

To meet today's trend for larger houses, modular homes range from 1,344 square feet to 12,700 square feet. Some of the mansion-size houses require delivery on five to 20 flatbed trucks.

In addition to being larger, modular homes have become more sophisticated, featuring designs from traditional to contemporary and with custom interiors that include fireplaces, crown moldings, hardwood floors and a choice of appliances and cabinetry.

A Greek Revival style home might be customized with crown moldings, fluted columns inside and out and specialized windows. The theme can be carried through to the kitchen and bath tiles, says Larry Roux, of Greenfield, Mass., the architect for Vermont-based modular home manufacturer Huntington Homes.

Dealers feature a selection of modular styles depending on the manufacturer they represent. Because the engineering capabilities of manufacturers vary, the selection of styles also differ.

"Modular components are like working with Lego blocks or a series of enhanced shoe boxes," says Roux. "Some modular manufacturers have an in-house architect you can work with if you plan to embellish a set of plans or add modular sections. If

you wish to use your own architect, they have to think modular in terms of height and width, as all sections will have to fit on a flatbed trucks."

In addition to interior flooring and carpeting, counter tops, tile, moldings and hardware, customers also get to select the type and color of roofing shingles, exterior siding, doors and windows. Many manufacturers let customers get their own appliances and other upgrades beyond what they have to offer.

Once plans are finished and approved, they are translated into modular components. The manufacturer decides what will be done in the factory and what will be done on site, adds Roux.

At this point a price is established for the house, transportation and taxes. The more that can be done at the factory, the less expensive it usually is, because less on-site labor and craftspeople are required.

Large modular homes are comparable in price to conventional stick-built houses.

Bill Swift of Swift Builders Inc. in Bethlehem, N.Y., who builds both conventional and modular houses, says finding affordable land to put your house on is the hard part.

"The price of a modular home sounds like a savings, but don't forget to add in the cost of the land to put it on," he says. "Land can be 20 to 30 percent of your total cost, and it's tough to build a house when land is that high."

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