

Modular Mansions

Prefabricated Houses Find A Home In Luxury Market

By MEREDITH CARLSON DALY
Special To The Courant

At first, Marilyn Brown was reluctant to tell people she was building a \$2 million modular home in Fairfield County's Gold Coast. "People would say 'Oh, prefab,' and I would say, 'No, it's modular.'"

So Brown adopted the expression "custom-built modular home."

It is a term that has caught on throughout the industry where the modular construction market — from ranch-style homes priced at less than \$100,000 to multi-million-dollar mansions — is thriving.

Brent St. John, the co-owner of the company that assembled Brown's 20-room mansion, challenges anyone to pick it out among other traditional homes in New Canaan, one of the wealthiest towns in the country.

"In a million years, you would not be able to tell the difference between her house and the neighbors," said St. John, of Winchester Modular Homes Inc., based in Barkhamsted.

Modular homes are gaining popularity in this unusual niche — upscale communities — for one key reason: the state's tight housing market has left people waiting months for an available builder. And going modular can mean moving into your new house in half the time and being able to blend fine details on site by local firms.

But first, home buyers must get past the decades-old perception that modular homes are "trailers with the wheels deflated," as St. John puts it.

That concept is changing, he said. Now, buyers, such as Brown, overlook the stigma of a ready-made box and find the benefits: cost savings and quality con-

struction.

Brown researched the design she wanted and after ordering the specifications from Winchester Modular, she added finishing touches, such as granite kitchen counters and marble-tiled bathrooms, which were installed on site. A front porch and a sloping stone wall also were built by local contractors.

Brown's 6,500-square-foot Georgian style mansion was delivered from a factory in Pennsylvania in 11 modules, complete with four fireplaces, five bedrooms, four full bathrooms and two half-bathrooms.

It was the largest house Winchester Modular had ever assembled in its 20 years in business. Yet the home only took a few days to put together.

Brown's white clapboard house with green shutters looks like a stately traditional New England colonial. Although modular homes used to be mainly ranch style or the simple square plan, recent advances in computer-aided design allow buyers to customize their modular homes in all shapes and sizes.

Modular builders argue that their homes are sturdier than traditional construction be-

cause they are factory-made and have to withstand traveling.

"The lumber is closed in a factory and doesn't see the weather. There is greater quality control," said Ray Kelley, a sales consultant for Westchester Modular Housing in Bethel.

Some real estate agents believe that because the homes are manufactured inside factories, they not only hold their value as well as any traditional home, but last a little longer.

"Because of the environmental conditions, they are



THE \$2 MILLION modular mansion blends easily with its neighbors, the builder says.



ALAN CHANIEWSKI / THE HARTFORD COURANT

DETAILS LIKE this stairway give modular homes a custom look, although they are largely built in a factory. Brown's 6,500-square-foot Georgian style mansion was delivered in 11 modules, complete with four fireplaces, five bedrooms, four full bathrooms and two half-bathrooms.

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more fire retardant and hold up better," said Joanne Carroll, president of the Homebuilders Association of Fairfield County.

Many of the modular materials are similar to traditional construction materials, said Ryan Bish, general sales manager for New Era Building Systems Inc. in Pennsylvania, a factory that produces houses for Winchester Modular Homes.

"We have better control over making sure that things are placed properly, that the job is done right," Bish said. "You can't cut corners."

Modular, or prebuilt homes, save time — and about 10 percent of the cost — because factories produce them in bulk, Bish said. "You have the buying power of the factory."

It's also a controlled environment, he said. "We have less chance of things like theft, damage from the weather or construction loan costs. It's savings in time."

Ralph Stanizzi, founder and co-owner of Winchester Modular homes, estimates modular homes cost about \$50 to \$60 per square foot — about \$10 to \$20 less per square foot than traditional construction.

A basic midrange home — about 2,000 to 3,000 square feet — takes four to six weeks to deliver and often is assembled in two days. The company constructs about 25 houses a year.

One modular convert is a non-

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profit agency in Wethersfield that builds homes for the disabled. The Corporation for Independent Living ordered two modular ranch-style homes, one in Watertown, the other in Farmington.

For Nomathemba Shepard, the agency's executive vice president, one of the biggest advantages of the modular homes was the efficiency — the lack of delays from weather.

The six-bedroom home in Watertown was assembled in two days, Shepard said.

"Are my workers going to show

up? Is it going to be raining?" Shepard said. "All of that you don't have to worry about."

Ordering a factory-built home allowed the agency to specify accessibility features. The homes have wide hallways, doorways and bathrooms and roll-in showers that make it easier for residents with walkers or wheelchairs to move about.

The modular industry is reaping the benefits of its resurgence. Kelley, of Westchester Modular, said his company was the No. 1 builder of homes of any kind in Greenwich last year, assembling 20 modular mansions.

In the past three years, he said, his company's volume has doubled. The company serves all of Fairfield County and portions of New Haven and Litchfield counties.

"We're doing one home per week," Kelley said.

Richard Maloney, director of trade practices for the state Department of Consumer Protection, said there have been no complaints filed against modular home companies. Customers who have ordered modular homes advise home buyers to use a reputable manufacturer.

In the past three years, Winchester Modular Housing, which does most of its business in the north-

west corner of the state, has nearly tripled its volume in the past three years, from \$1.2 million to \$3.1 million, said Ralph Stanizzi, co-founder and co-owner of the company.

And the factories that produce the homes also are seeing a spike in sales. New Era Building Systems, which serves 19 states, including all of New England, jumped from \$12 million in sales to \$36 million in the past three years.

The growth has spurred competition. Kelley, of Westchester Modular, was quick to tout his company as building "the BMW of manufactured homes." He claims that his New York state factory produces superior-quality modular homes because, among other things, the lumber doesn't travel as far.

"If you're looking for a Yugo," he said, "go to Pennsylvania" factories.

Marilyn Brown strongly disagrees. She researched several builders before choosing Winchester, who arranged the local crafters. She camped out on her 2-acre property to watch the house parts lifted off the truck and bolted together like Lego toy blocks.

"We would do it again in a second," she said. "I really do feel that we're getting a good value."