

# ELEMENTS

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# A MOD, MOD WORLD

ON PREFAB HOMES: HOW, HOW MUCH AND WHY. KAREN W. BRESSLER



Walk through the sales lot and check out the model homes. Choose the one you like (ranch, colonial, split-level, multiple stories), decide which options you prefer (flooring, countertops, appliances, siding, roofing), arrange the financing and place your order. The scenario might seem overly simplified, but it's not. You get the house you want in a relatively shorter time and for a reasonable investment.

"You know what you're getting," explains Jim Alvarez, a co-owner of John A. Alvarez and Sons in Hudson, NY, which builds full-time and vacation modular homes from Oneonta to Poughkeepsie and from Massachusetts to Albany. "The time and costs are set the day you order the house. There are no changes due to weather, since everything is done at the factory. And you don't have to deal with months and months of construction; once you build the foundation, the house is delivered and, after a few minor adjustments, you're ready to move in."

In the past few years, modular homes have been gaining in popularity, especially in the northeast where customers have to schedule their building around the weather forecast. "We

can do anything that's possible for a stick builder to do," assures Alvarez, referring to the industry term for homes built on site. "In addition, modular homes are held together more securely and are very well insulated, so they do better with heating and air conditioning. And, since the price of labor and materials is constantly going up and good labor is hard to come by, a modular home is a great way to control your price."

"Architects have become interested again in the efficiency and economy of prefabrication," says Joseph Tanney, a principal of Resolution: 4 Architecture in NYC. "They feel they can bring a higher level of design to existing levels of modular building. There has also been a resurgence in the popular notion of better designed homes for better value." The result? Cleaner lines, more glass and fewer walls, a greater connection to the exterior, planning efficiency, spaces that are more open and flow better and compositions that are increasingly abstract, thus reflective of the method by which they're made.

On the eastern end of Long Island, where labor rates are high, a modular home can prove to be more beneficial, in terms of expense,

than a home on site. Tanney, whose company has built houses from Brooklyn to Montauk, says the average modular house on Long Island costs \$125 per square foot at the factory and \$125 per square foot for local general contractors on site, not including 15 percent for architectural services, while a stick built home costs about \$400 to \$600 per square foot, not including architectural fees. Some clients have even put a different spin on the issue by using modular systems not for their main houses, but for a handful of supplemental structures like guesthouses, pool houses, caretaker houses and garages. "By going modular for these types of structures, the required initial investment will be reduced," explains Alvarez.

At one time, modular homes were looked at in the same class as mobile homes, probably because some companies used to produce both. The difference today is evident, and modular homes are gaining status. "People are looking for better quality and efficiency of design," says Tanney. Adds Alvarez, "They want upscale designs and materials, such as solid surface and granite countertops, top-of-the-line appliances and tile and oak flooring. They can