



Rodney Lamkey Jr./The Washington Times

John Del Sesto, president of J.A.C. Enterprises of Arnold, Md., oversees construction of a custom-designed prefab home being built in Annapolis for Andy and Michael Smull. The 2,800-square-foot, three-story home should be ready by October, three months after its six modules arrived at the site.

House on a shelf

Prefab homes save time, money



Photographs courtesy of Resolution:4 Architecture



By Ann Geracimos
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Prefab has gone mod, and modular is in a whole new mode. Take, for example, the basic components of the Smulls' house in Annapolis — six modules atop four flatbed trailers — which arrived at the couple's Harness Creek Road site early one rainy morning in late July. By nightfall, walls and a temporary roof were in place atop a previously laid foundation. Andy and Michael Smull — she is a photographer, and he is a consultant in the mental retardation field — expect to move into their three-story, custom-designed 2,800-square-foot modernist prefab home on two-thirds of an acre in late October.

A module containing the master suite, two studies or dens and 2½ baths awaits removal from a flatbed trailer, is lifted into the air and finally is placed on top of already-placed modules at the Smulls' home site on Harness Creek.

That's almost instant by modern home-building standards, according to contractor John Del Sesto, president of J.A.C. Enterprises of Arnold, Md., who says a "stick built" house of the same dimensions — trade talk for a building constructed entirely on site — would take at least a year. In conjunction with the New York firm of Resolution:4 Architecture, responsible for the original design, Mr. Del Sesto is overseeing the extensive interior and exterior features Mrs. Smull has ordered for what she calls her "dream house."

Her choice of Resolution:4 was inspired by the firm's winning entry in a competition sponsored by San Francisco-based Dwell magazine for an affordable modern prefab prototype design that could lend itself to mass production.

Affordable, of course, is all relative.

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The kitchen area of Andy and Michael Smull's prefab home in Annapolis will give the couple plenty of light and close-up views of Harness Creek. Prefab homes can cost up to 20 percent less than standard stick-built homes and take four to six months less time to complete.

PREFAB

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The Smulls' house is a variation on the so-called Dwell Home, which drew more than 2,000 visitors in a single day when it went on view in Pittsboro, N.C., last month. The Dwell Home is a far cry from the more modestly priced, modestly sized mail-order "kit" homes sold by Sears in the early decades of the 20th century. The Sears catalog homes sold for \$9,000 to \$80,000 in current dollars.

The Dwell Home had an original budget of \$175,000, or \$125 a square foot, which Joe Tanney of Resolution:4 estimates to be a savings of half or more in cost over a conventional home of a similar size. This estimate excludes what he refers to as "typical site costs" that can vary greatly, depending on location.

The terms used vary, too, and easily can confuse people. Prefab, for prefabricated, is anything factory-made and can include mobile homes, although these most often are referred to as manufactured housing. Professionals prefer the term built or building systems.

The main difference is that the two forms — building systems and manufactured housing — have separate building codes and are marketed to different buyers, according to Charles Bevier, editor of the Colorado-based Building Systems Magazine.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has said that modular home structures, in the category of building systems, made to withstand the stress of travel and lifting by crane, are stronger than site-built housing.

Prefab panel or modular housing styles associated with a predictable cookie-cutter design still are being turned out by factories that offer limited design options and seldom involve architects.

Because of its association with mobile homes in most people's minds, prefab has had a negative connotation, says Fred Hallahan, a Baltimore-based housing consultant who focuses on factory-built housing.

He reports a modest increase in modular styles — 40,000 homes nationally were put up last year, a 2 percent increase over the previous year, generally located in the District north through New England — where field construction costs are higher, therefore making it cost-efficient to have fabrication work done in the factory rather than on site.

"Ninety-five percent of American homes being built don't involve architects," Mr. Tanney says. "We looked at flat-panel televisions and iPods — the gadgets that are becoming cooler while our domestic space hasn't made any improvement — and speculated about how to supply a relatively affordable model for the housing market."

Arlington stockbroker Bryon Fusini was going to renovate a

farmhouse on 4½ acres he owns in The Plains, Va., when he realized the expenses involved in bringing a 1909 house up to code. Intrigued by the flexibility and aesthetic of modular design, he contacted Resolution:4, which agreed to oversee the razing and construction process along with a local contractor.

Mr. Fusini's prime consideration, he says, was having "something sensitive to the site . . . a structure that would have lots of glass and help us enjoy the outdoors."

"Industry building is pretty standardized stuff," notes Allison Arieff, Dwell magazine's editor in chief, who says positive reaction to the magazine's competition "illustrates the housing industry is not serving [the] segment of the public [interested in modern architecture]. The majority of the population probably do not want to have modern architecture, but there are enough people to make it worthwhile."

Changing tastes as well as changing technologies are responsible for much of the innovation. Ms. Arieff points to "more design-savvy consumers" in today's marketplace, such as those attracted to Target store products designed by architects such as Michael Graves.

"This is a computer-built house," Mrs. Smull says knowingly of the architect's use of CAD, or computer-assisted design, which is then handed over to a structural engineer. "The technology is in the factory."

Her own aesthetics will figure

greatly in her home's final look, but, even so, Mr. Del Sesto estimates the choice of prefab components saves 20 percent of the final cost and four to six months' building time.

The main hitch is finding manufacturers willing and able to work with architects in supplying the parts that make up custom modular designs.

Penn Lyon Homes Corp. of Selingsgrove, Pa., shipped the Smull modules according to the architect's specifications. Excel Homes of Liverpool, Pa., works with Falls Church architect Thomas Hemphill to supply modules for second-story additions on typical rambler-style houses for owners who find skyrocketing land costs make a move to a bigger house prohibitive.

The Dwell Home concept is echoed locally by the plan of local architects Todd Ray of the District's Studio 27 Architecture firm and Eric Jenkins, assistant dean of the school of architecture at Catholic University.

They have been hired by a Texas businessman, whose company is called Nu-Sonian, to do a prototype of a modular prefab house costing around \$150,000 that will be manufactured entirely off-site. The idea is to allow for mass manufacture and sale around the world in the future.

"The choice of materials and efficiency of the system remove [the cost of] labor in the field," says Mr. Ray, who expects to see the project completed by the end of the year.