

LOS ANGELES BUSINESS JOURNAL

August 21 - 27, 2006

\$3.00

12 LOS ANGELES BUSINESS JOURNAL

NEWS & ANALYSIS

August 21, 2006

Ready Steady

Prefabricated homes making it big in L.A.

By JOHN ROSENTHAL
Contributing Reporter

Los Angeles would seem an unlikely place to be a hotbed for prefabricated houses. After all, prefab homes tend to be popular in places with short building seasons and with a lack of cheap construction labor — places unlike Southern California.

Yet in the past year or so, factory-built or prefab homes, especially modernist and environmentally friendly models, have caught fire in some L.A. architecture circles.

At CaBoom, the West Coast Independent Design Show, held in Santa Monica in March, the presenters included so many prefab architecture firms that for the first time they warranted their own "Fab Prefab" annex.

In fact, it was the first time so many prefab architects had ever been in the same place at the same time, said Charles Trotter, CaBoom's producer.

"The number of factory-built units is increasing," from about a dozen throughout California in 2003 to several hundred in 2005, said Ron Javor, assistant deputy director for the California Department of Housing. "We're anticipating a continuing increase."

What explains the surge in popularity? For starters, advances in computer-aided design have allowed just about any architect with a Web site to roll out a design for a prefab house and sell it directly to customers.

"The cost to enter the market has plummeted," said Michael Sylvester, founder and publisher of Fabprefab.com, an online community dedicated to modernist prefab architecture.

"Architects can now take an idea, design it, render it, and share it with the world for almost negligible cost other than their time."

Indeed, many of the companies selling prefab products have yet to translate their concepts into brick and mortar — well, glass and steel, anyway.

That can result in problems. Raul Saenz and Wendy Walwyn have explored the prefab concept with several builders in their quest to create a weekend house in Kern County. The couple warns potential customers to anticipate snags when concept meets real-world practicalities. Saenz and Walwyn had to switch builders in mid stream when their first builder couldn't meet Title 24, the state code that imposes minimum requirements for plumbing, safety, and energy efficiency on new construction.

"So many architects come up with flashy images and slick Web sites.

But then people start to work with them and they find out it's bad architecture," said Michelle Kaufmann of Michelle Kaufmann Designs, a big prefab firm.

Her first prefab design, Glidehouse, spent the past year on display at the National Building Museum in Washington, D.C.

Modernist design

One reason for the popularity is that a segment of home buyers is disaffected by the standard-issue options churned out by home developers. In the view of Kaufmann, "They're these crappy, thoughtless McMansions."

Many prefab buyers, on the other hand, are drawn to the bold, sleek lines of modernist design, which is an especially popular look in

Advances in computer-aided design have allowed just about any architect with a Web site to roll out a design



PHOTO BY JOHN ROSENTHAL

Assembly Required: Workers mount a LivingHomes house in Santa Monica.

Southern California.

"Look at what Apple has done for computers and consumer electronics. Look how Ikea has brought contemporary design to mainstream audiences," said Steve Glenn, chief executive officer of LivingHomes LLC, a local builder of environmentally conscious prefab homes.

Glenn erected his first LivingHome on his own lot in Santa Monica earlier this year, and said he has orders for six more. Designed by architect Ray Kappe, the house arrived on three flatbed trucks and was lowered, piece by piece, onto the site by a giant crane. That process took less than a day, although considerable time was spent laying the foundation beforehand and work on the interior continued for months afterward.

LivingHomes last week received the first-ever platinum rating in residential sustainable design by the U.S. Green Building Council.

A traditional advantage of prefab homes was that they were cheaper than their site-built brethren. But architect-designed prefab homes,

especially those with high-end materials and polished finishes, tend to be more expensive.

Glenn estimates the cost of a LivingHome at about \$250 a square foot, not including land costs, which is greater than the \$150 to \$200 a foot that a traditional site-built home costs. Still, he estimates that to build a home on site with the same finishes and upgrades would be more than \$300.

Whitney Sander, president of Sander Architects in Venice, is splitting the difference with a "part prefab, all custom" design he calls the Hybrid House. Its frame takes advantage of a prefabricated steel product normally used for sheds and warehouses. In all, the Hybrid House costs about \$100 a square foot, according to Sander, or about half the price of a typical site-built home. The money saved in framing can then be used to upgrade the materials and finishes used elsewhere in the home.

Ultimately, of course, the price depends on how much fab the buyer wants in a prefab house.