

## Prefab homes a cost and energy efficient alternative

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Say the words "modular" or "prefabricated" and a definitive image comes to mind: mobile home. But contemporary prefab homes are more than that. Depending upon the homeowner's inclination, prefab can be a way to minimize construction waste, create an energy-efficient environment, make a bold architectural statement and keep building costs in check.

Prefab has been around for decades, perhaps most famously in the Sears, Roebuck and Co. factory-built homes constructed in the beginning of the 20th century for budget-minded home owners, though architects as storied as Frank Lloyd Wright have also experimented with prefab. And with homeowners increasingly concerned with building green and staying on budget, prefab could be making a comeback. In metro Atlanta prefab homes take the shape of a regal Colonial in Marietta to an industrial-chic residence constructed of steel shipping containers in the Old Fourth Ward.

Just what does prefabricated mean? Joel Turkel, an architect who specializes in prefab, divides it into three categories:

**Kit-of-parts.** Homes are delivered in pieces to a home site where the contractor assembles it on site.

**Component/Panelized homes.** Factory-constructed parts, such as a 40-foot wall complete with windows, insulation, dry wall and siding, are shipped to the site and assembled.

**Modular homes.** The entire residence is shipped intact to the home site.

"This came down in four and a half trailer loads," said Ron Simblist of his panelized Serenbe home completed in 2007. A good architect and contractor are key when buying a prefab home, said Simblist who hired Turkel to design the home and Karl de Santos of Moon Bros. Inc. to build it. "They can correct anything that is askew in any kit that you buy," said Simblist.

"A puzzle," is how contract de Santos described the shipment of materials for Simblist's house. "Joe Blow contractor couldn't have built this thing," he said.

A popular concept in Canada and Scandinavia where homes factory-produced homes are an economical option, prefab housing is just catching on in the United States, driven by a combination of economic and environmental concerns. "In my mind the only thing holding up prefab is a really good marketing program," said Simblist.

"It is a really viable way to control project outcome," said Turkel. "When you're employing a [prefab] system you have a much better idea of what it costs to create something than if you're just building it from scratch."

Simblist was inspired to build his prefab home when he came across a book dedicated to the design movement and fell hard for the modern, clean lines of the structures. He eventually found prefab architect Turkel through a Google search and the two designed the Simblists' dream home together. A self-described "amateur architect," Simblist was thrilled to play a part in the conception of his home. "We had a collaborative effort and came up with this incredible house that every time I drive up I feel, 'My gosh, look at that. That's where we live.'"

A metal shipping container that once hauled cargo around the world might not be everyone's idea of home, but it is yet another manifestation of the prefab phenomenon in Atlanta. Glen Donaldson's home in Old Fourth Ward is built of stacked shipping containers.

"What attracted me is the permanency of it," said Donaldson. "It's made of steel instead of wood. It's a very sturdy structure." In June, Donaldson built a second container home next door. Included in Modern Atlanta's 2011 home tour, the house is on the market for \$425,000.

George Runkle, a structural engineer in Lawrenceville who helped construct Donaldson's houses, first worked with recycled shipping containers while serving in the Air Force Reserve in Uzbekistan. His residences typically run from \$200,000-\$250,000. "I like the fact that we can fabricate in a shop and haul them anywhere," said Runkle. Not unlike LEGOs, building a home from storage containers requires working within the confines of the material, said Runkle. "To build them cost-effectively, you're stuck with building with that 8-by40 [foot] module."

Poised to make a significant play for the Atlanta prefab market is Sandy Springs-based New World Home. Creator of "Country Living"

magazine's 2010 House of the Year, New World Homes is an innovator in energy efficient, affordable prefab homes, many of which have achieved LEED platinum status.

Steven Fader, president of business development at New World Home, said his company has already built two modular homes in Marietta, a model home in Reynoldstown and has plans for additional developments in Marietta and Smyrna. The Reynoldstown home, built in conjunction with the nonprofit community development corporation Atlanta's Resources for Residents and Communities, is part of a housing development of highly energy-efficient, affordable homes featuring dual flush toilets, low or no VOC interior wall paint, formaldehyde-free wall insulation and other green features. Called Legacy Pointe, the project is currently in the pre-development phase with an anticipated 2012 groundbreaking of homes that will range from \$154,000-\$196,000.

Prefabricated homes might seem like a hard sell, but real estate agent Vanessa Reilly, whose domoRealty specializes in modern and mid-century modern homes, said they appeal to a specialized niche of the home buying market.

"Traditional homes and cookie cutter construction are a dime a dozen throughout Atlanta," said Reilly, "Modern homes are still selling quickly and for top dollar."

### Things to consider when building prefab

"Prefabulous + Sustainable" author Sheri Koones advises anyone thinking about building prefab to consider the following tips.

Check out all of the prefab companies in the area. Keep in mind that, just like stick builders, quality and experience with green building will vary from company to company. Modular manufacturers that ship to the Atlanta area include Nationwide Homes ([www.nationwide-homes.com](http://www.nationwide-homes.com)), Ritz Craft ([www.ritz-craft.com](http://www.ritz-craft.com)) and New World Home ([www.newworldhome.com](http://www.newworldhome.com)).

If possible, look at houses the companies have built and talk to homeowners about their experience with the companies.

Ask manufacturers to recommend builders certified to construct their houses and check their references. Make sure they are people you will enjoy working with and that they are reliable.

Get a detailed explanation of the products they will use and the efficiencies that will be built into the house.

Familiarize yourself with the company's warranty.

Find out early on how flexible the company is in customizing plans to meet your needs, or better yet, willing to work with your own plans. After all it's your home, you should build what you want.

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