

Green buyers find prefab fabulous

Factory-built homes create less waste than traditional homes, helping to shrink carbon footprints

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"We're trying to do it as green as the normal person can do. ... Do our part to lessen our carbon footprint." Jill Warner, whose planned prefab home is shown in the rendering above, from the angle visitors will see as they drive up (Special to The Denver Post)

Jill Warner is having a new home built in Salida that's as green as possible without "going overboard," she said.

Warner, owner of Denver furniture store Mod Livin', chose a prefab, or factory-built home, to meet her goal. And she may soon have company.

Prefab homes — custom homes that their builders insist are light-years beyond "mobile homes" — are inherently more

green than traditional houses thanks to waste reduction during the building process. Plus, prefab builders can incorporate the latest green advances directly into plans at the buyer's whim, giving earth-conscious home owners another way to shrink their carbon footprint.

Warner wanted to buy a prefab home from the beginning, but her early research revealed a stiff price tag — about \$320 per square foot using an out-of-state builder.

"Unless you absolutely want to do the green technology, why would you do it?" she asked. Then she dug deeper and found companies closer to home. That cut the price by more than half.

Cost comparisons between modular and traditionally built homes are difficult to nail down, according to Bret Berneche, chief executive of Virginia-based Cardinal Homes and president of the Modular Building Systems Council.

Anecdotally, modular homes are about \$10 per square foot cheaper than traditional homes. But that figure is simply a starting point, Berneche said, because buyers can opt for more advanced home features that improve the quality as well as bump up the price.

Warner's home, which is expected to take three weeks to complete, should be finished by the end of September. It will feature, among other green innovations, bamboo flooring and countertops made of recycled material.

Hollis Hunt, special-projects manager for Loveland-based Northstar Homes, which is building Warner's home, said people incorrectly assume going green means a sizable price tag. He says homebuyers can make choices that won't break the bank.

"At some point in the decision process, green features will start to compete with luxury items," Hunt said. Forgo that flashy granite counter, he suggests, and go with a paper-stone countertop made of recycled paper and non-petroleum-based resin instead.

Michelle Kaufmann of Michelle Kaufmann Designs in San Francisco said the time is right for prefab homes to multiply.

"We've been using automation in every other industry to bring technology to the masses," Kaufmann said, but the same rules don't apply in the housing industry.

The term "prefab" is misleading to some, Kaufmann said. It can include everything

from state-of-the-art home design to double-wide mobile homes. Manufactured or factory-built homes are not the same as mobile homes.

A new prefab home in Aspen that was designed by Kaufmann's studio typifies the green potential. It features galbanum, or gum-resin, siding; quartz countertops, which require less natural resources; and composite decking forged from recycled materials.

The process of prefab-home building naturally involves reduced material excess, Kaufmann said.

"There's so much less waste, so much more quality control," she said, citing precision cutting methods and the ability to reuse extra material as reasons why these homes result in 50 to 75 percent less waste than standard homebuilding.

John Stovall, vice president for business development with Eco-Broker, said prefab homes offer walls with foam insulation already built in.

"It's a very tight construction package," said Stovall, whose Denver-based company helps train real estate brokers in all things green.

Tony Gacek, program manager with the Building Systems Councils, a part of the National Association of Home Builders, said anecdotal evidence is showing an increase in interest in green-friendly modular homes nationwide.

Ultimately, the trend will continue if more people like Warner embrace it.

"We're trying to do it as green as the normal person can do. ... Do our part to lessen our carbon footprint," Warner said.