

It's a mod, mod world

Modular construction market growing locally

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Welcome to the new world of modular housing. The newest homes are about as far as one can get from the trailer-park image of Uncle Clem's double-wide. Prospective owners can design their own manse via computer---click in a new closet here or a breakfast nook there. One can order the units carpeted, painted, and go ahead, pick out your drapes while you're at it. They will be hanging in the windows of the modular unit when it is lifted from the back of a truck and swung onto the foundation. Because of the potential cost savings and precision, pre-inspected construction, modular sales are booming. Some in the industry think this form of construction could replace most traditional stick built housing within 20 years.

During 2004 about 206,000 modular homes and apartments were sold nationwide, accounting for some 8 percent of the housing market, according to an industry magazine, Automated Builder. In Annapolis, Maryland Modular Homes is juggling more than 40 projects, both residential and commercial. Jack Seisman was talking to a couple from Baltimore County in the company's office on Thursday, guiding them through the process to replace their home that was wrecked in Tropical Storm Isabel. "Our volume had quadrupled in the last two years. Isabel created work for us, but most of it came after people saw a new house in the neighborhood and look at the cost and speed," Mr. Seisman said.

Mod and Fab: One family in Edgewater that chose the modular house option to replace their Isabel-damaged home is impressed. "Our modular is just fabulous, you wouldn't know it's a modular to look at it," said Dawn Darr, who along with husband, Pat, acted as general contractors on their four-bedroom, two-story Victorian style house bought through MarylandModularHomes.com. "They gave me all these plans, and I went on my computer and cut and pasted features from different houses to get what I wanted," she said while sitting in her newly furnished family room. The room itself is as big as the government trailer her family lived in for nearly 18 months following Isabel's floodwaters. The Darr's house arrives on five trucks. Once it was set, a drywall man came in and covered the all the seams between the units. Next, heating and air conditioning, electrical and plumbing contractors came in to tie all the systems into the various utilities. The homes come pre-wired and customers can set where they want outlets for electricity, telephone and cable. All the electrician has to do is hang the electric panel and connect the wires. Running wires in the future is also easier between the modular sections because there is a one-inch space between them to fish wire in the walls. To save more money the Darrs installed their own floors. But modular contractors can order wooden floors installed, or pick out their carpet in a myriad of colors.

Strength, numbers: Modular construction is known for its strength and quality. The uniformity achieved by building the units in a factory setting has even been hailed by Anne Arundel inspectors. "These are well built and can be constructed quickly," county spokesman Pam Jordan said. "In the wake of Isabel they became a fast and viable option for families..." Several factors add to the sturdiness of the modules. Each unit had both floor and ceiling joists, so when they are stacked for a two-story home, there are two sets of joists between the first and second floors. Another advantage is the units are sealed up quickly on site, reducing, if not eliminating, mold problems that can plague a stick-built home exposed to the elements before roofing and sheathing. But the bottom line is, well, bottom line. The Darrs saved money. Mrs. Darrs thinks their upcoming appraisal will likely be \$100,000 to \$150,000 more than they spent on it.