

PRE-FABULOUS

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June 22, 2003 — When Fox 25 news anchor Jodi Applegate and husband Rob Nikoleski, a sports reporter at the TV station, were looking for a home last year, they found the perfect lot in the perfect neighborhood in the perfect leafy suburb west of Boston.

What wasn't so perfect was the 1950s ranch-style house that it all came with. Applegate recalled it had a flooded basement, and a crumbling foundation, and had been "updated" in the 1970s. "It was long and low and dark," Applegate said. "It looked like a trailer."

So, the couple explored their options. A local builder told them he could repair the place and add a great room and other amenities they were looking for, but it would cost as much as building a new home from scratch.

"We decided not to do that because it would have been like putting earrings on a pig," joked Applegate.

She had always wanted to design her own home, so the prospect of building new appealed to her. After doing more homework, Applegate decided she wanted a modular or "prefabricated" house to be assembled on-site, to her specifications.

She had discovered that modulares are built in climate-controlled factories with higher-quality materials than typical "stick built" homes. They're more energy efficient, and are more conducive to being customized by the client. They are also completed in half the time, in most cases, of one-site construction. Best of all, materials don't sit outside in the elements for months, and construction schedules aren't subject to the whims of Mother Nature.

When she told Nikoleski, he, like so many others who hear the term modular, was skeptical.

"Jodi came up to me one day and said, 'Have you thought about this modular thing?' " he recalled. "And I said, 'What? Now you want to live in a trailer?' But we drove by a modular, and I said, 'Wow, this looks exactly like a regular house.' And it allayed my fears."

Applegate and Nikoleski tore down the ranch and designed a two-story Nantucket-style expanded Cape that Epoch Homes of New Hampshire delivered in six modular sections on six flatbed trucks. Cranes arranged the sections in place, local modular builder Paul Silva and his crew did all the finish work, and it was in move-in condition five weeks later. It has four bedrooms, three full baths, a family room with a cathedral ceiling, a gourmet kitchen, a two-car garage - and nary a trailer hitch in sight.

"This is the wave of the future," Applegate said as she stood on the grass outside her red-cedar shingled home. "It's optimization, not maximization. We wanted smart design, a house that really reflected how we live, and that's what we got, not some developer's idea of what good living should be."

Architects and home design experts would agree that modular housing is on the threshold of breaking into the mainstream housing market because home buyers are looking for more flexibility in design, a higher-quality product, and something that is decidedly not cookie-cutter.

Allison Arieff, editor of Dwell Magazine, a shelter publication, and coauthor of the book "Prefab," said people need to start thinking of modular housing in the same way that they do of automobiles.

"You wouldn't dream of putting a car together yourself, or leaving all the parts outside in all kinds of weather while it's being built, so why do we expect any less for our homes?" she said.

"Prefab housing is more conducive to precision building, to getting the exact result you want. On a purely technical level, it works. If we have no problem with our Lexus coming out of a factory, we have to change our thinking about our homes coming out of a factory."

Arieff said that although most people think prefab housing has been around only since the early 20th century in the United States, she has discovered that Thomas Edison did some experimenting with prefabs, and that in 1624 a panelized wooden house was shipped from England to Cape Ann in Massachusetts. The Japanese and the Scandinavians have been building modular homes for years, and the English have used modular apartment buildings to solve a housing crunch in London.

There are dozens of modular housing manufacturers in the United States, Arieff said, 10 in New England alone, and although stick-built construction continues to dominate the landscape, fans of prefab say it's simply a matter of time - and marketing - before the scales are tipped.

"It does seem to hold tremendous potential for 21st century housing," said Arieff, whose magazine recently sponsored a modular home-building contest. "And, hopefully it will bring middle-class housing to a new level. Why shouldn't a couple making a combined income of \$100,000 be able to live in the house they want, a quality house that fits into their budget?"

But prefab housing has not reached the point where it is less expensive than stick-built homes, experts say, because they are not yet rolling off of production lines in vast numbers.

Doug Basnett, president of Epoch Homes in Pembroke, N.H., said the savings for customers, for now, is in time.

"We think it's faster. Once the house is on site, there's a lot less work to do," he said. "While we're building the house, you can have the foundation done, or raze the existing house. Where stick-builts are just getting the framing up, we're delivering the finished modules."

Basnett, whose company has been building modular housing for 20 years, said business has quadrupled since he started. Epoch, he said, can design and build a second-story addition to a modest ranch, or, as it has done in Greenwich, Conn., build the 33 modules it took to complete a 15,000-square-foot estate.

They offer a CD-rom with 100 house plans on it, and have an open house one Saturday per month so curious home buyers can visit their New Hampshire factory, and see for themselves how assembly-line housing is done. Basnett said the company has produced 3,500 houses.

"We're extremely busy because word is getting out," said Basnett. "Once people are educated about modulars, or see one for themselves, it really changes a lot of opinions about what can be done when it comes to quality work and customization."

Epoch homes are built to withstand category 4 hurricanes, have a 7-inch, rather than the standard 4 1/2-inch center wall, and arrive as finished as the homeowner wants: with installed windows, complete kitchens and baths, hardwood floors, and roughed-out wiring and plumbing.

And, yes, they can be unbolted and moved, by flatbed and crane, Basnett said.

"It's not the most practical thing to do, but it can be done. You can just take it with you."

Architects are perhaps the most excited about the growing modular movement, since it brings them back into the home design market, and feeds their creativity.

Architect Sarah Susanka, author of the "Not So Big House" book series, hopes the modular movement - which she prefers to call "panelization," to get people away from the imagery of mobile homes - will "revitalize the architect as part of daily life."

"For years, they have shot themselves in the foot because they do largely avant-garde designs, which are interesting artistically, but it's not the type of stuff you would want for your house," said Susanka, whose book "Home by Design" is due in January.

"Architects can help people create houses that aren't as big as you thought you needed, but that really suit you and how you live. The panelization technology allows for builders and architects to team up beautifully."

But what about resale?

Silva, the Framingham-based modular builder who worked on the Applegate/Nikoleski home, said that in the past 10 years he's built 40 modulares, and they've withstood the test of time and taste.

"It's not a second-class-citizen situation anymore to say you own a modular home," said Silva, who left the world of stick-built development because he became disillusioned with the shoddy materials and craftsmanship he was seeing. "They appreciate the same way as the other houses beside them."

Realtor Susan Tsantes of Coldwell Banker Residential Brokerage in Framingham said that's true. She has sold six modulares in the past six years, one recently that cost \$270,000 to build and sold for \$470,000 a couple of years later.

She said that once people get over the misconceptions, their attitudes change.

"You cannot tell from the outside or the inside that they're modular," Tsantes said. "What people see are high-quality materials, interesting designs, and good construction."

"It immediately erases the typical '70s mobile home they had in their head."