

Perhaps you are the owner of an old house, once described as ‘lovely, well-maintained and full of period charm’ by the realtor, but now the reason for every little irritation in your daily life? What’s *your* pain? Is it the nail in the wooden floor that keeps popping back up, no matter how often you nail it in, causing swearing, socks with holes, and bloody cuts? Or perhaps the crack in the wall that keeps reappearing, no matter how many times you spackle and paint it over? Is it how you create a power outage every other time you turn on the electric room heater on the former faintly slanting deck, now unheated-three season’s-porch, causing every electric clock in the house to need reprogramming? Are you annoyed by the broom closet, which somehow counts as a third bedroom? Have you decided that the only positive feature of the upstairs bedrooms and a basement laundry is the built-in exercise routine of stair climbing, and you are willing to do without it? Would you like to be able to seat more than six people in your dining room? Or is it the haircut bequeathed to the tallest person of the household every time he/she walks under the kitchen ceiling fan? Whatever is irking you, you are thinking of fixing it by building yourself a new house, but the prospect of doing something that you know nothing about seems daunting, and you’ve heard the stories of horrible contractors and two-year constructions. I am here to tell you: It can be done, and the answer is: Legos – of a sort.

In 1908, the Sears & Roebuck Company started offering their Modern Homes line of pre-cut and fitted materials for home construction, thereby founding the concept of kit homes (known today as modular homes). Offering both standard models and customization options, customers had a lot of say in what they built. Between 1908 and 1940, more than 100,000 Sears & Roebuck homes were built coast to coast. The streamlining of the production process meant lower materials costs and quicker construction for the buyers, and the use of the newest

technological advances, such as balloon framing and drywall, meant lower manpower costs on site as well as modern amenities such as electricity and indoor plumbing.

When Sears & Roebuck ceased production, many other manufacturers took over. After a long period of time where modular (or pre-fab) homes were considered to be inferior to stick-built houses and typically offered very little customization, the modular housing producers who have survived the last five years of upheaval in the real estate market are the ones offering the same advantages that Sears & Roebuck did 100 years ago: State-of-the-art technology, lower cost and/or construction time, and customization.

It was against this backdrop that we decided on a modular home. We love our back yard and have great neighbors, so we did not want to move. Nor, however, did we want to be in a rental situation for longer than was needed. And so we decided to go with a modular home company, which offered 100% customization (within the constraints of the modular concept of (Lego) blocks), a great builder who would supervise the work that needed to be done on site, and a guarantee of three months maximum from the time the house was set on its foundation until we could move in. Adding time for the teardown and construction of a new foundation, the total time for us to be ‘off-site’ was calculated at six months.

Unless one is exceedingly wealthy, one eventually has to prioritize when building. After starting out with a design of about 3,800 square feet, which generated what seemed like a ‘bazillion’ dollar quote, we decided what features of the house were the most important to us, in the process cutting back to 2,875 square feet and a quote that was within our budget - if we did our own painting and landscaping. No wood stove, no fourth bathroom, a smaller living room, but also a laundry room, a master bedroom balcony, an office, natural light in the upstairs

hallway, and a support beam in the basement that would allow room for ping pong. Indeed, it all comes down to priorities.

As we threw away a third of our belongings, we simultaneously boxed a third to go into storage and took a third with us to our temporary ‘tall basement’- level apartment. Staying there felt like an extended camping trip – underground. Shortly thereafter followed the rainy teardown of our old house, which created a mixed mood of nostalgia and anticipation. As the huge digger claws took a large bite out of the roof, exposing a chunk of one son’s blue bedroom walls, memories of moving in twelve years earlier flooded my mind. The pensive mood dissipated when the other backhoe brought out the first chunk of the garage, making it very clear that I had left the third row bench for my van behind in the garage!

Two months after the teardown, we were ready for the five oversized Legos constituting our new house to arrive. The night before the set, our lot was full of the biggest Lego, already on site, a 16x50 foot behemoth, as well as a monstrous crane and the charismatic Vermont set crew, who arrived in their camper, lots of strong opinions and hardhats on hand. At 8 a.m., the first box was lifted into place. Looking logically at the process, it seemed impossible that the huge crane would be able to lift the considerably larger box, but it was a seemingly effortless, graceful air ballet. As the box was hovering over the foundation, a crew member tugged on a rope, and the oversized Lego swung into position and landed exactly where it needed to be, without a sound. Later, when the second story boxes were added, I would look on in horror, as the set crew scurried about under the suspended boxes, getting electrical wires dropped into walls, prior to putting the next one in place. At 2 p.m., all five boxes were in place; we walked through our new front door, into that indefinable scent of newness. 2 ½ months later, we moved into our new Lego home. It had been 5 ½ months since we moved out. Yes, it can be done.