



(Left) Five Oaks Homes in Colorado uses modular construction to build its prefab homes. Using this method, the homes are actually an assemblage of “boxes,” each containing its own wiring, plumbing and windows. (Middle and right) Sherie and Monte Pitt commissioned Deck House to assemble this prefab “custom” home for their hilltop Oregon property so it would highlight the surrounding mountain vista.

SHERIE AND MONTE PITT HAD A BEAUTIFUL SETTING FOR their dream home: 72 acres of rolling land, a third of which they had planted with grapes to launch their Patton Valley Vineyards.

Thirty miles west of Portland, Oregon, overlooking hills and pinot noir vines, the Pitts wanted to build a new house for themselves and their two sons.

But they had trouble finding an architect who shared their vision of a contemporary, elegant home that took advantage of the gorgeous views yet wasn't mansion-sized in appearance or budget.

“We wanted the feeling of a large home, but I didn't want the house to be too big to take care of,” says Sherie Pitt. “We live in a rural area and we didn't want to be ‘the rich people on the hill.’ So thank goodness for the Internet. We stumbled upon Acorn.”

That's how the Pitts came to own a 3,300-square-foot prefabricated home by Acorn, a division of Deck House Inc. The Massachusetts-based firm specializes in “component” home construction, in which almost the entire house — walls, windows, staircases, even kitchen cabinetry — is designed and built in a factory and then shipped to a home site.

Component construction is just one of several types of prefabricated, or “pre-engineered” home construction. Prefab homes generally cost less per square foot than traditionally built (or “site-built”) homes and take less time to construct.

Prefab homes have been around for a long time, from the Sears, Roebuck & Co. kit homes of the early 1900s to double-wide mobile homes.

Today they can be built to custom specs and feature touches like floor-to-ceiling Pella windows, granite countertops and built-in sound systems.

LEFT PHOTO BY JACOB ANDERSON/FIVE OAKS HOMES; MIDDLE AND RIGHT PHOTOS BY MICHAEL CARROLL FOR DECK HOUSE, LLC

Custom Built Homes

Straight From The Factory

“The architect never even came here but drew out a house that is almost perfect for our site. We have incredible views out of every room. It’s like living outdoors.”
— Prefab homeowner Sherie Pitt

Companies such as Deck House — which built Home & Garden Television’s 2001 Dream Home giveaway overlooking Penobscot Bay in Maine — can offer upscale homes for less by buying building supplies in bulk and by using precise measurements to design and manufacture components.

And buyers like the idea of getting a custom-designed house for less than what it would cost to hire traditional architecture and construction firms. (Deck House homes range from \$160 to \$225 per square foot, whereas custom site-built homes typically start at \$225.)

Although prefabricated home builders use the same building supplies in every home, buyers can tweak design choices and select upgrades.

“We have a design department with 30 architects, designers and engineers,” says Michael Harris, president of Deck House. “About half of our clients use one of the houses in our brochure as a starting point, and then we drastically modify the house based on every idiosyncratic lifestyle need that they have.

“We place a tremendous amount of value on the cues from the site, like the solar orientation, the topography, the views, the direction of the wind, where the utilities need to be. We design the house to look like it grew out of the ground rather than was forced onto the site.”

Sherie Pitt says that’s just the home her family got, complete with four bedrooms, three baths, huge windows, plus touches like a mahogany deck and an oak staircase.

“We love the house,” she says. “... We have incredible views out of every room.”

Nels and Patricia Cary are living in a prefab home in Norwood, Colorado, which they love just as much, although it was built differently. Their 3,800-square-foot house was made by Five Oaks Homes, a builder specializing in modular construction.

“Modular homes are relatively completed houses,” says Dennis Anderson, owner of Five Oaks. “We want to deliver a house that is 95-percent livable when it’s delivered. If we do our jobs correctly, the owners can live in it two to three weeks after it goes on site.”

Five Oaks does this by constructing each house at its Colorado facility using a series of “boxes” that fit together like Legos. Each box is complete with windows, plumbing, wiring, cabinetry and most other needed components. When the house is finished, it’s disassembled and trucked to the site, where the boxes are re-assembled.

“While Dennis built the house, we did all the site preparations,” says Nels Cary. “Then one Saturday they delivered the house, and we set it up in one day.”

The Carys were living in their home four weeks later.

The Carys bought a set of building plans and Anderson adapted them to modular engineering. Because of cheaper labor costs, the Carys were able to get a custom western-style ranch home, featuring cedar siding, a steep-pitched roof, wraparound porches (built on-site) and loads of personal touches — for less.

“We were able to take a design and make it fit us,” says Nels Cary. “We were able to make it fit our lifestyle.”

— Heather Graulich