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In the Region | Long Island

A Modern Look for Prefab Housing

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ELLEN ZWALSKY and Martin Schepsman want to build a house with many windows on a lot they are buying in Atlantic Beach, [Nassau County](#), with a breathtaking view of the bay near Reynolds Channel.

Ms. Zwalsky's son found just the house on the Internet: a modern prefabricated home that is manufactured in panels of wood and glass as large as 9 by 9 feet, then transported in trucks to the building site and erected by a general contractor.

"We looked at the designs online, and we were blown away," Ms. Zwalsky said.

The home, a boxy minimalist structure with walls of windows, called a Dwell Home, is designed by the [Manhattan](#) firm Resolution: 4 Architecture. It represents the latest stab at marketing prefab housing in the New York metropolitan area — this time focusing not on low cost, but on modern design and production.

Michael Harris, the president of Empyrean International, which will manufacture and deliver the Dwell Home components, said the homes will make modern design accessible to more people.

"The idea is that you package the whole process," Mr. Harris said, from design to manufacture to delivery. "People are not exposed to huge variances from what their budgets are."

Empyrean, which was called Deck House before changing its name in September, has offices across the country and has been manufacturing traditional prefab homes for 57 years.

Dwell magazine, a publication that focuses on modern home design, started the Dwell Home idea with a design contest in 2003, and it selected the Resolution: 4 design from 16 entries. The magazine is now a business partner in mass-producing the homes.

"The Res: 4 house incorporates the essential tenets of modernism," Allison Arieff, editor in chief of Dwell, said in an e-mail message. "Clean, uncluttered lines, natural materials, open floor plan, and perhaps most integral to the success of this design, a merging of indoors and out."

By that, she means the windows. The typical Dwell Home has around 80 mahogany-framed windows, Mr. Harris said.

Since forming the partnership in September, Mr. Harris said, 27 clients nationwide have signed design agreements. About 100 more have expressed interest in the homes, he said.

On [Long Island](#), the homes would range from \$225 to \$250 per square foot, Mr. Harris said. Ms. Zwalsky's home is to encompass 3,000 square feet and cost about \$750,000.

There are three Dwell Home designs in all: the Resolution: 4 home, FlatPak by Minnesota-based Lazor Office and Next House by Emyrean. Each has standard configurations that can be customized at additional cost.

The price includes the design of the house, the components and building materials, and finishes like bamboo floors and stainless appliances. The buyer pays separately for site costs, including grading, a septic system or sewer hookup and a driveway. Typically, such work would cost \$30,000 to \$50,000 on Long Island, said Joseph Nangle, a project manager at Emyrean.

"We're not promoting this as a starter home; it's not for people of modest means," Mr. Harris said. But the homes make modern design accessible for less money than it would cost to have an architect design and contractors build a one-of-a-kind modern home from the ground up.

Since the homes are manufactured in panels in the controlled environment of a factory, Emyrean can give buyers an accurate cost estimate, Mr. Harris said. The firm also works with a network of contractors around the country.

"It's probably going to cost me the same as a stick building," Ms. Zwalsky said, having already discussed the cost with an Emyrean project manager who visited her Atlantic Beach lot. "Building costs are so high; that's the problem on Long Island."

But after living through a painful two-year renovation of the couple's former home in Hewlett Bay Park that included a "constant barrage of added costs" (it was supposed to take 10 months; the final cost was three times the estimate), she did not want to deal with contractors or delays.

"So we went prefab," Ms. Zwalsky said. "It's all done in the factory, so you don't have to hear 'oh, it's raining,' " when there are construction delays.

At a "meet the architects" gathering at Resolution 4's offices on West 28th Street in Manhattan recently to introduce potential clients to Emyrean's products, Dr. Karl Fossum, a psychiatrist with a home in [East Hampton](#), paid close attention to Joseph Tanney as he answered questions about the homes.

From the start of planning the house, Mr. Tanney estimated, it would take 12 to 18 months to finish the work.

That's not any better than building a home from scratch, according to local builders, but Mr. Harris said if a buyer wants a standard Dwell home configuration and could get building permits quickly, the house could be finished in about seven months.

Dr. Fossum, a Manhattan resident, wants to replace his conventional ranch in East Hampton with a modern home. The Dwell homes are still in the "early stages," he said, but he has had experience building a prefab cabin on land he owns in his native Norway.

"The quality was better than if we did a one-off kind of house," Dr. Fossum said of his Norway summer home. Echoing the claims of the Resolution: 4 architects, he added that he was impressed by "the planning that went into manufacturing the components by the company." He added, "You can't get that with one-of-a-kind houses."

But whether these modern boxy prefab homes or other more innovative shapes and styles, will become the "center hall colonials" of a future time is anyone's guess.

"Architectural contemporary design tends to have a problem in a conservative market like ours," said Robert Wieboldt, the executive vice president of the Long Island Builders Institute. "There's a limited number of buyers relative to the universe. So when you're thinking of reselling it, you're limited to those who want a contemporary house."

But for Ms. Zwalsky, who said she usually prefers more traditional homes with crown moldings and wood siding, the Dwell home's 9- and 10-foot ceilings, open floor plan and the wall of windows that would face the bay are what changed her mind.

"I thought it was so innovative," Ms. Zwalsky said. "I liked the way they use a lot of glass. We're building on the water and the views are very important to us."