



Factory-built, without the guilt

Back in the day, a pre-built cottage was not very desirable. These days, prefab might just be short for pretty fabulous

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For years, our family drove up Highway 400 to the cottage, passing the proverbial burger joint that changed its name each year and the not-so-antique furniture outlets. Also familiar was the roadside Viceroy Homes dealer near Barrie, symbolizing an approach to cottaging that held little appeal -- imagine having your picturesque, lakeside family cottage built in a factory!

Last year, we sold our century-old cottage and purchased a property with a tear-down cottage on a smaller lake. And, surprise, surprise, we're building a new place with the services of Viceroy. But we're not alone, as a growing number of cottagers in areas such as Parry Sound, Haliburton and the Kawartha embrace the ease, economics and improved designs of the pre-built approach.

Some companies, such as Viceroy, use a pre-engineered method, building the shell in the factory and leaving the rest to the consumer, while others, such as Royal Homes and Halliday Homes, take a prefabricated approach and do most of the core structure indoors. Either way, the pieces or modules are then trucked in, or barged if possible, to the property for completion.

This "package deal" sees the company taking care of design, engineering, regulations, delivery, construction, warranties and, if you like, interior decor, making for a turnkey operation, says Robert Parsons, marketing manager at Viceroy in Port Hope. "It's a much easier system than working with a contractor and designer and trying to pull it all together."

Despite the advantages, the manufactured housing industry is still trying to prove it offers the quality, customization, good taste and integrity sought by today's cottagers. "They're putting more emphasis on the factory-build as a method of construction as opposed to a specific type of house," says Kathleen Maynard, executive director of the Canadian Manufactured Housing Institute in Ottawa.

The range of factory-built cottages available is slowly widening to meet the different budgets and tastes of first-time purchasers or retirees. Royal Homes, for example, has expanded its offerings to include a line of traditional cottages, a selection of modern, cubic cottages designed by Kohn Shnier and a smaller, mid-range line called The Ideal Environment.

Developed by Brian Lee Architects in Toronto, the Ideal designs accommodate the practicalities and traditions of cottage life, says Marilyn Lake, a principal of the Ideal Environment, while being attractive and reasonably priced. "We make sure it looks like a cottage, not something built in a factory. That's often why people don't choose prefab, because it looks too boxy and modern."

Decades ago, these homes originated as an economical type of rural housing found in a catalogue, so many people still consider them as lower quality. Once you visit a model home, that perception quickly goes away, says Howard Sher, executive vice-president of Quality Engineered Homes in Kenilworth, whose model homes are at the Cooksville Mall on Hwy. 400. "We fight every day to change that because, in this day and age, there are very few features, designs and architecture that we can't build ... We've seen huge accelerations in design capabilities."

These days, the vast majority of factory-built work is easily customized to meet the needs and tastes of home dwellers. Plans and lifelike renderings are considered more as a starting point and an inspiration for consumers than a done deal.

Lloyd Alter, managing director of Royal Homes in Toronto, says 99% of the business is customized, but "the message hasn't got out. You don't necessarily buy from the plans, you do whatever you want. Our only limitation is the size of the box you can take down the road."

Unlike urban settings, the ruggedness of the rural landscape demands a tailored approach, he adds. "The architecture and design has so much to do with the site, the view, the orientation. No piece of land is the same so no response is the same."

A.J. Danis, general manager at Halliday Homes in Carleton Place, near Ottawa, says the plans featured on its Web site are a double-edged sword because visitors move on if they don't like what they see. In reality, most customers often prefer elements of A, B and C, resulting in a mix of many plans. "We use specific plans to capture the spirit of what it is they like."

But the renderings are a great help because "if people see something, it's far easier for them to grasp and understand than a two-dimensional plan," says Mr. Sher.

Many companies today provide long-term warranties on their products and service, along with an emphasis on energy-efficient dwellings and environmentally friendly elements. Dwellings can now feature formaldehyde-free insulation and VOC-free kitchens, says Mr. Parsons, along with high-quality windows and top-grade lumber.

There is also less waste, as unused lumber and materials are put aside for other projects in the factory and not hauled to the local dump. The factory-build approach also ensures greater control, says Mr. Alter, with the indoor environment protecting materials and ensuring greater supervision.

However, these modern enhancements do not mean cottagers have to give up

the treasured rustic elements, such as a mudroom and pantry, a gorgeous stone fireplace, wood-lined interiors, picturesque waterside windows, a stained-wood exterior and screened porches or shady verandahs with elegant posts. "Factory-built runs the full gamut of materials or house types. Anything you could produce on-site can be built now in a factory as well," says Ms. Maynard.

This can also mean reduced costs of up to 18%, she says, thanks to labour savings and process efficiencies. People often worry about cost overruns with on-site construction, but factory builds can guarantee price and quality for the materials.

A bustling cottage country has also meant a severe shortage of available labour, adding up to long waits before you finally throw a log on the fire at your custom-built dream cottage. But today's pre-built cottages can often provide a roof over your head in months, not years. Just imagine -- order now, and you can be in your new, customized cottage by Thanksgiving.

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