



As teardowns increase, so may modular homes

By Amanda McGregor / Staff Writer
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Sean Sweeney of Heritage Modular (foreground) helps guide the Kalamvokis family's new home onto its foundation Tuesday morning. - PHOTO BY DAVID GORDON

Modular homes are cropping up more in New England as people opt to purchase prefabricated, custom-made houses that can go up in less time than it takes to build a new home from scratch or to remodel an existing one.

John and Michele Kalamvokis and their three elementary-age children had outgrown their small West Street cape, but upon the cost analysis of remodeling, they decided that demolishing their existing home and going modular was their best option.

"The cost to add on was outrageous ... and we said, 'What are we really saving?'" said Michele Kalamvokis, as she stood outside her quickly materializing new home at 10 a.m. on Tuesday. "But we didn't want to move and leave the neighborhood, and it would have been hard for the kids to move from the neighborhood."

According to Sean Sweeney, owner of Heritage Modular and Heritage Builders in Needham, it can be more economical to tear down an existing house and then build a new modular home, rather than undergo an extensive remodeling process.

"Putting on an addition ends up being very expensive because you're trying to bring the rest of the structure up to code, and you're designing around existing issues," said Sweeney. "[A homeowner] would spend the same money or slightly more to tear the house down, but the good thing is that they don't have to live through that construction, your financing costs are basically cut in half if you're renting [during the process], and then a brand-new house is worth more in today's market than a remodeled old home."

Sweeney expanded Heritage Builders last year and started Heritage Modular, which completed two modular homes in 2003, and has 12 modulares scheduled so far for 2004, and an additional 16 projects in the planning stages.

"It's just amazing growth," said Sweeney.

For those who bought a home several years back with future plans to up-size, real estate cost inflation has in some cases presented a problem to the point where some families can't afford to purchase a larger home because the "move to a bigger house is a larger leap now" financially, according to Sweeney.

"When we bought our small cape 12 years ago, we said that someday we would have to do something, either add on or move," said Michele Kalamvokis. "But 12 years later, trying to buy in Needham was impossible.

"So this is kind of like buying the land 12 years ago, and building the house now."

Modular homes range from around 1,800 to 7,000 square feet. The process of replacing one's home with a modular, from tearing down the old house to moving into the new one, runs three to four months, according to Sweeney, which is about half the time for traditional on-site remodeling or construction.

"It's not like starting a house, where you are waiting for permits and good weather," said Sweeney. "The nice factor is that the manufacturing is in a controlled environment in a factory. All the dates are set by the manufacturer, and from the day it is delivered and we set the modular, within six to eight weeks the family can move in."

Home-demolition costs range from \$10,000 to \$15,000, while a new foundation costs roughly another \$15,000. A customized modular home ranges from \$250,000 to \$400,000, depending upon the size and the amenities, which is between 10 and 15 percent cheaper than a traditionally built home.

Though the initial purchase price is typically lower, the market value of a modular appears to be comparable to other houses.

"The only difference we would see [between modular and traditional homes] would be in market values, and we haven't seen any indication of a difference," said Jim Weidenfeller, Needham's administrative assessor.

Once delivered, the modular home is bolted and fastened together and is completely weather-proof after two days. The six to eight weeks of on-site work for a modular home includes completing the flooring, painting and custom millwork; hooking up the gas, water, heat and electricity; and passing the necessary inspections.

The Kalamvokises, who have been staying with family in Newton since the November demolition of their cape, doubled the size of their former house with the modular home, and also bought a modular two-car garage.

A new home "is obviously more expensive than an addition," said Michele Kalamvokis, "but the cost per square foot was probably 30 percent less."

There may exist a stigma that modular homes are boxy and not stylized, and that they look like mobile homes rather than a traditionally built house, but technology has enabled modular construction to advance by way of multiple stories and more complex designs.

"When this is all done, you won't be able to tell it's a modular home," said Sweeney Tuesday morning as he walked through the freshly planted first floor of the Kalamvokises' new modular. "A lot of people have the stereotype of a big shoe box we put together with a roof on it ... but in the past 10 years, engineered lumber has allowed modular homes to be fully customizable and help them meet the aesthetics of New England, because New Englanders love their homes and they love the style of their homes."

Modular homes can be purchased only through a builder, such as Sweeney, who is an independent builder associated with Excel Homes in Pennsylvania, from where the Kalamvokis family's new home came.

Any fixtures can be ordered through the manufacturer and pre-installed, including lights, bathroom cabinets, carpeting and cable hookups.

"Because we do such custom, high-end [projects], we do a lot of the treatments on site, like wood, vinyl, brick or stone siding," said Sweeney.

Modular homes are not assessed differently than traditionally constructed homes since assessments are carried out formulaically, taking into account information such as the number of bathrooms and bedrooms.

"A house is a house, as far as we're concerned," said Weidenfeller.

The demand is growing, but only time will tell if modular homes become the trend that Sweeney anticipates.

"I would say in 10 years, half our business will be modular homes," said Sweeney. "[Comparing] the cost to go the [traditional route], to within 5 percent of the same cost and you get a brand-new home, more people will be going that route.

"It's quite a phenomenon in this area because of whole tear-down concept."

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