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Real Estate

With demand on the rise, prefab homes come to Baltimore

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A Baltimore company is building four prefabricated homes in the city's Morrell Park neighborhood, feeding what experts say is an increasing appetite for such housing across the nation.

Unlike traditional homes that are erected bit-by-bit on site, prefabricated homes are largely factory-built, a process that can yield a more affordable and quickly delivered unit.

The first of the Morrell Park houses arrived yesterday at 1424 S. Ellamont St., its sections driven in on a truck and assembled with the help of a crane.

"What this has done for us is given us a second market base and a product that we can offer," said Deni Tabor, chief operating officer of Ashley Custom Homes, employees of which are investors in the Morrell Park project.

"This takes a good chunk of the process out of the work and it outsources it, which enables us to do a little more volume," Tabor said.

Ashley has marketed prefabricated homes — also known as modular or systems-built — for six years. Aside from those in Morrell Park, the company has done 14 such units throughout Maryland as well as six now under construction in Pikesville.

"A customer orders it, we sit down with that customer, and we see what they want, and we design the house for them," Tabor said.

Ashley works with a manufacturer called North American Housing Corp., which has about 100 standard styles from which buyers can choose and tailor. North American then brings the designs to life, producing home pieces that are later assembled and detailed.

"The demand for this kind of housing is growing exponentially," said Michael Harris, president of Emphyrean International LLC, a prefabricated home builder based in Massachusetts with offices in Annapolis, among other East Coast locations.

"It's exploding because as people pay more and more for land, they are expecting a better and better housing product, and looking to control costs and enhance the predictability of a very customized product," he said.

With a prefabricated house, "they can touch all the pieces literally in advance," he said. "They can work with architects and design professionals without the design fees of houses designed from scratch."



Ashley Custom Homes began assembling prefabricated homes in Baltimore City's Morrell Park neighborhood yesterday.

Photo by Max Franz

The Manufactured Housing Institute, a Virginia-based trade group, estimates that such homes can cost between 10 percent and 35 percent less than a traditional home. However, Tabor would put that estimate closer to 10 percent, because the prefabricated designs require more lumber, she said.

The savings are derived from manufacturers' ability to buy products in bulk while streamlining the building process with an assembly line mentality.

Empyrean specializes in modernist design, a segment of the prefabricated market Harris said is most in demand. He describes modernist architecture as that which "celebrates the site," reflecting nature with minimalist structure and glass.

Harris' company last year paired with a home magazine, Dwell, to manufacture a now-popular modernist brand. Since September, Empyrean has built 40 Dwell designs and has attracted 10 million hits to the company Web site, Harris said.

"There's a whole world now opening up of people who are offering real, modernist design through the efficiency of building systems," he said.

Tabor is not sure if the homes in Morrell Park would likely be considered modernist. The one customer so far ordered a ranch-style home, she said.

"We build what the customers want, the layout that works best with how they use the house," she said. "You can really make it very contemporary or very traditional."

That versatility is why Tabor believes prefabricated homes are becoming more popular.

"There are more systems-built homes being built than people realize," she said. "Because if you don't see it delivered on the truck, you can't tell."