REAL ESTATE

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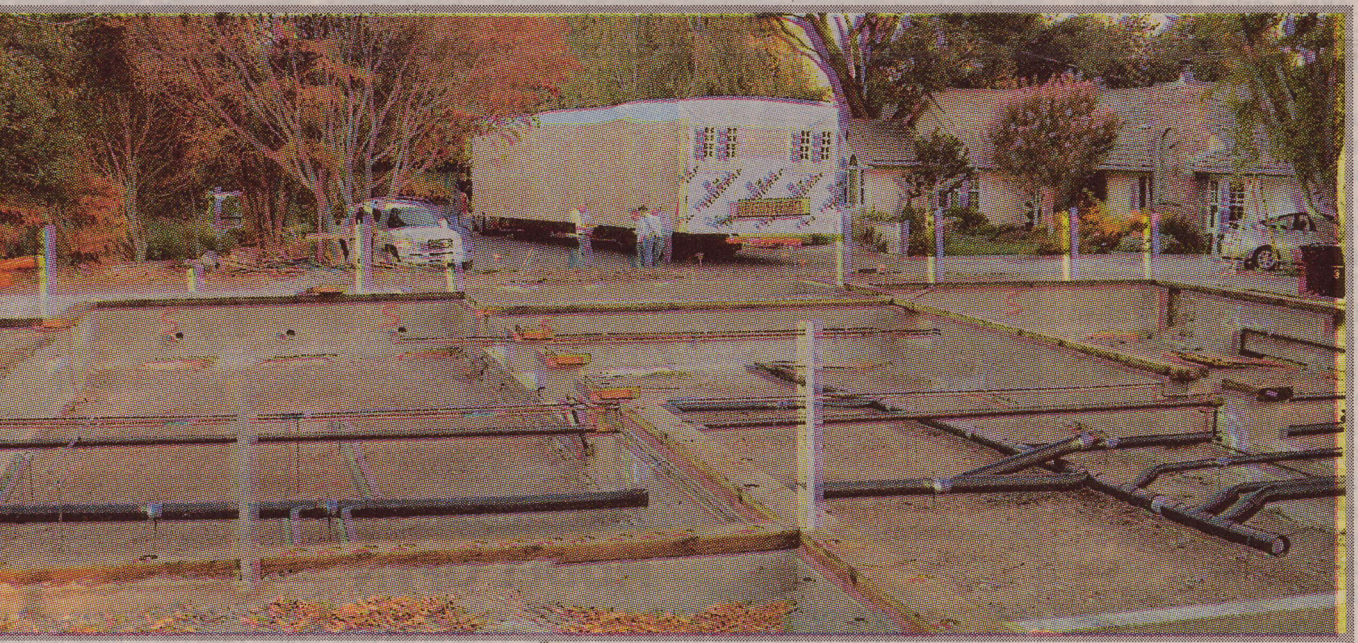
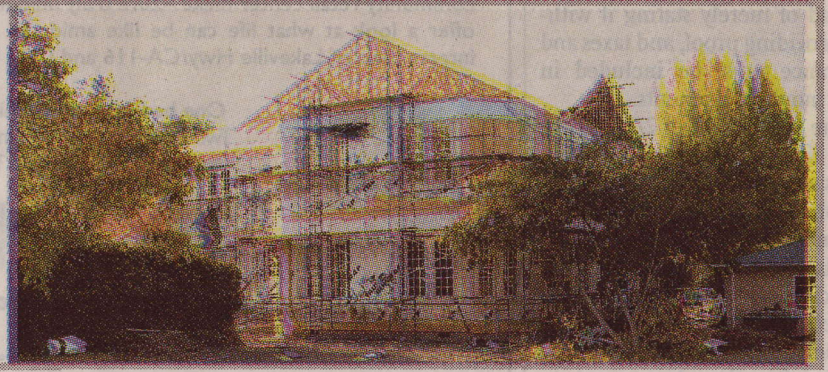
MODULAR HOUSES – HOW THEY STACK UP

For **Rachel Purcell**, who had her 5,000-square-foot dream home trucked to Alamo from Nebraska, they're pre-fabulous. **Page K8**



Photos courtesy of Rachel Purcell



Rachel Purcell's modular home was placed, piece by piece, on its foundation in Alamo. Right, after the modules were stacked, nailed and bolted together, prebuilt trusses were brought in for the roof.

MODULAR HOMES — HOW THEY STACK UP

By Heather Boerner
SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

Rachel Purcell is a determined type. An industrial systems engineer by training, Purcell is attracted to complex questions that require precise answers. So when she discovered during the inspection of her new Alamo home that it was full of toxic mold and asbestos — OK, yes, she flinched. But then she got to work.

The solution, it turned out, came rolling in from a factory in Nebraska on seven convoys of trucks. In less than three days, her new 6,000-square-foot house was stacked and bolted together. Within three months, the final work was completed — adding porches and other finish work. She and her family have been living in it for four

months.

"This is a $3 million property, and we didn't pay $3 million for it," said Purcell, who lives in the house with her husband Bill Purcell, and their children Lindsay, 18, Riley, 8, and William, 5. "I was told (by local builders) that I couldn't do anything with the level of quality I wanted for less than $300 (to) $400 per square foot. But I did this house for around $250 per square foot. And it's absolutely everything I wanted. I didn't have to compromise at all."

Because the entire house was built indoors, and every wall in her home is insulated, the house is both quieter and more hypoallergenic than a site-built house might be. She also completely customized it, with high-end tile, a gourmet kitchen equipped with Wolf and Sub-Zero appliances, five bedrooms on the second floor, an exercise room, a mud room, crown molding in every room, a home office off the kitchen and high-end wood mullioned windows.

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Prefabricated housing is nothing new. According to Automated Builder magazine, modular homes were built in the 1930s. Today, more than 90 percent of homes have some factory-built components. But entirely factory-built homes are more rare. In 2005, more than 200,000 prefabricated homes were constructed in the United States, excluding mobile homes.

There are several kinds of prefabricated

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Photos by MARK COSTANTINI / *The Chronicle*

The modular home's kitchen, above, is fitted with granite countertops and high-end appliances and countertops, including a Wolf stove and Sub-Zero refrigerator. The living room, left, has 10-foot ceilings and crown molding.

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homes.

Purcell's home is factory built, meaning that the structure was put together at the factory in several modules. Then they were shipped to her property and moved by crane onto a foundation. Other modular homes have the walls, roofs and other structural pieces constructed in the factory and put together on the site. This often works better for more cramped locales, such as urban areas.

Purcell is in the process of establishing a business relationship with the company that built her house and she declined to give its name. But there are a number of companies that sell large factory-built houses. Among them: Epoch Homes (*www.epochhomes.com*), Admiration Builders (*www.admirationbuilders.com*), Genesis Homes (*www.genesishomes.com*) and Stratford Homes (*www.stratfordhomes.com*).

While statistics on the number of modular homes in the Bay Area are difficult to come by, anecdotal evidence suggests they are becoming more popular. Bay Area magazines Sunset and Dwell have both sponsored the construction of modular homes.

Perhaps capitalizing on Bay Area residents' desire for high-end design on a budget, prefabricated home companies are springing up around the Bay Area. Altamont Homes (*www.altamonthomes.com*) in Martinez was founded in 2003 and has built 60 custom prefabricated houses. San Francisco's CleverHomes (*www.cleverhomes.net*), a modern design and building company, has built a dozen homes in the past four years with 40 more in the queue.

"In California, people are attracted to prefabricated homes because of the cost efficiency," said Eric Peterson, president of Altamont Homes. "Since we're a relatively small industry, we tend to work together to promote the product."

The key to the appeal of prefabricated homes is greater bang for your buck, said Toby Long, co-founder of CleverHomes and an architect who specializes in modern panelized designs. It's not that modular homes are less expensive than any other house, he said. But for what you would have spent to get a typical house, you can get higher-end finishes and design.

"A new modular home is still a very expensive new home in the Bay Area," he said. "To go into this with the assumption that these construction methods reduce cost is flawed. I do think it's appropriate to go into it knowing that you'll get a higher quality product for the same money."

Purcell attributes savings to reduced labor costs in Nebraska compared with California. Predictably, local prefabricated home builders warn that the savings gained by building in Nebraska may be offset by the cost of gas to ship the home across the country. Altamont, which not only builds its own homes but also provides labor for other custom prefabricated homes, is opening a factory north of Sacramento.

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Think prefab may be for you? Be sure to read the fine print, warned Purcell.

"There are a lot of people who are over-promising, saying that anyone can do it, that it will only take six months," she said.

Of course, local companies are likely to strongly disagree with Purcell's assessment. Purcell took two years to move into her prefabricated home, between hiring an architectural designer, deciphering the building codes and hiring an engineering firm to make sure the house met California building code standards and could withstand earthquakes. She traveled to inspect the factories where her house might be built. It was important to her that her house be constructed entirely indoors and on an assembly line to ensure quality control. She was shocked, she said, when she found one factory amounted to "a handful of laborers working in a parking lot, totally unprotected from the weather." She spent months picking out colors for the house from color chips. "When the (bright pink color went up in her daughter Riley's bedroom) , I got a call from the factory asking, 'Do you know what this looks like?' " she recalled, laughing.

When the house was finally ready, she had to arrange for permits for each part of its trip from Nebraska to Alamo. She prayed that it wouldn't rain along the way. She had to hire a contractor

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willing to work with her and the engineering team to pour the foundation and do the finish work. She also had to find and hire a 265-ton crane to place the sections together.

And then she had to bite her nails as the final piece of her house arrived in Alamo during morning rush hour, blocking traffic.

"That was maybe the most stressful part," she said. "There were 20 people standing on the street with orange flags. For me it was just 10 minutes, but for my neighbors, it was rush hour. I didn't want to inconvenience them."

Now that the house is done, Purcell is thrilled. She sits in her huge family room at the back of her house, facing the grand mantle and basking in the warmth of the summer sun pouring in through the half-dozen windows, and smiles.

"This house is so me," she said. "It's perfect. Now, it's worth it."

Purcell's Web site, *www.purcellcustommodular.com*, has more information and photographs.

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