

Why a prefab can be absolutely fab

Set your prejudices aside, ready-made housing is elegant and energy-efficient, says **Jessie Hewitson**

There is a quicker, less stressful and potentially cheaper alternative to traditional self-building techniques — and that is a prefab house. Prefab homes, where a property is built in sections in a factory, then craned into position and stuck together, is a method of house-building where a property is delivered at a fixed price to be finished on a definite day. It is the ideal property for the energy-efficient control freak: the process is more predictable, easier to plan and a lot less wasteful than the traditional route (no skips of rubbish to be thrown away, nor trucks carrying goods to and from the building site).

All of these reasons persuaded Terry Rose, a structural engineer, and his wife Shirley, an art teacher, to opt for prefab when building their house overlooking a loch in Ullapool in the Scottish highlands. Sealoch House is a single-storey, highly modern property with three bedrooms, three bathrooms, larch cladding and a green roof. The large, triple-glazed windows look out to grazing sheep and the next-door neighbour's hens — whose eggs are available to buy for breakfast. Inside are wood flooring, brightly coloured furniture and a Soho House-esque bath in the bedroom.

"I wanted to build in an environment I could control, using the latest techniques to build something highly insulated and ecologically conscious," says Rose, who has recently sold his house in Hertfordshire and is letting out Sealoch House. He is also converting a guest house in the centre of Ullapool, where he and Shirley will live. "When you are



building a new home or doing up an old one there are unknown elements. I wanted known. Also, we wanted to build in Scotland when we lived in Hertfordshire, and it's almost impossible to project-manage at that distance."

The build for their new home, which measures 1,582 sq ft and was undertaken by Boutique Modern, a manufacturer of sustainable modular buildings, started in December last year. It took three months to design, then, in May, the seven sections were craned into position, with the kitchen and bathrooms plumbed and installed, and kitchen flooring in place. The total cost, including purchasing the land, haulage of the seven units, hiring the crane to position the units on site, sewage treatment plant, heat recovery system, solar panels, high-spec kitchen, three bathrooms and glass roofs, came to £288,000 (the land, which was owned by Sir Tim Rice, cost £62,000 of this; the haulage accounted for £19,000). It took two days to transport the seven units from Brighton to Scotland, and one day to crane it into position.

"We would go down to the factory to see how the building work was progressing — and then have a nice afternoon in Brighton," Rose says. "It was a far more pleasant experience than trudging round a building site. The building was far less disruptive for our neighbours: they had one day's disturbance, but they didn't have to put up with noise and trucks for six months to a year. I think they kept thinking Kevin McCloud was about to turn up. There was a local rumour that this was about to happen..."

Dick Shone, the managing director of Boutique Modern and builder of Sealoch



Modular homes built by Dick Shone. Above: Sealoch House, in Ullapool, Scotland. Right: the units are delivered. Bottom: inside Sealoch House. Below: Kevin McCloud, the presenter of the TV programme Grand Designs

House, has experienced an increase in inquiries from people wishing to buy a prefab — three to four of them a week. The cost of building this type of property, including kitchens and bathrooms, is between £1,000 per sq m and £1,500 for a higher-spec home (Sealoch House cost £1,550 per sq m, excluding land). As well as whole houses, Shone has built apartments — he has recently finished a two-bedroom, two-bathroom flat

that was craned on to the top of a building in Camden, north London. The house is owned by a developer who saw an opportunity to add another property to it. Another client, based in Hove,

wanted a kitchen extension built on a top-floor flat. "People are getting more open-minded now when solving space problems," he says.

As well as being a less stressful method of building, modular building reduces the financial pressure, Shone points out. "We can be exact about how much it will cost — it's all very plannable. Like anything else built in a factory, it's easier to be accurate, and there's no stopping for rain." It's also far less disruptive environmentally: the initial plan for the site was to have foundations 2.5m deep (Sealoch House is on stilts). "There is no throwing away — whereas in the usual building or refurb process there are skips of waste; in my factory if something isn't used on one home, it's used on the next."

Cost-wise, prefab is possibly a bit cheaper than traditional self-build, suggests Shone, but not much. There is the long-term running expense to factor in too: his homes are highly insulated and well-built, which should make them cheaper to run.

"People sometimes giggle about prefab: they associate it with postwar housing that was built very quickly with materials that were available at the time," says Shone. "Solid concrete, for example, which gets damp. But the 21st-century prefab involves many different materials and even the simplest one can outperform a traditional building."



Off the shelf

The history In 1942 the wartime coalition government built 500,000 prefabricated houses. Since then, manufacturers and designers have adapted the model, according to the Dream Lodge Group, which sells prefab homes.

Pros Built to extremely high standards. Quick, (almost) stress-free and energy-efficient.
Cons You have to find the land and sort out the drainage and electricity if it isn't already set up.

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