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Pink Flamingos Not Included

By Chris Lavin



Jared Levy, below, and Gordon Stott, above, of Connect-Homes in front of a modular home in Orinda that was built customized for the family then constructed on site. Photo Chris Lavin

Long gone are the old days of plopping down a double-wide trailer and sticking a couple of plastic pink flamingos in the ground out front. Today's built-to-suit homes have clean lines and customizable features.

While prefabricated home trends have come and gone over the years, today's building materials, improved energy efficiency, and new manufacturing techniques all coincide with the newest addition to the pre-fab homes: the Internet.

"People can get what they want," said Ben Munday of Orinda, the proud owner of a prefabricated home purchased from Connect-Homes. Two homes, actually - Munday put the smallest model out back to use as an office, although it still has a bedroom, kitchen and bathroom. After Munday and his wife, Sara, decided which company they wanted to go with, they began selecting colors, fixtures and appliances by cruising through the website and clicking away.

"From my point of view, we loved Orinda," he said. But in many cases if you don't have \$1.5 million to spend, middle-class families are often priced out of the market. The Mundays' two-story modern home cost about \$600,000, with the smaller home, the company's cheapest model, running another \$230,000.

Perhaps the most mind-bending aspect of the new pre-fab homes is how quickly they go together. In the old days, a double-wide size home took up major highway space, often requiring a police escort, lead and follow-up cars, tons of flags and "wide load" signs. "It would cost thousands of dollars just for transportation, and then you couldn't just put it anywhere. A winding road or remote location was out of the question," Munday said.

The Mundays' homes arrived in - get this - eight shipping containers, "at a cost of hundreds of dollars, not thousands," Munday said. All the kitchen and bathroom fixtures had been connected at the factory. Connect-Homes builds its homes out of its own factory in San Bernardino, so the trucks packed up and left early in the morning, arriving in Orinda just off Moraga Way at 9 a.m. the day before school started in August for 6-year-old Max and 4-year-old Zoe, who started pre-kindergarten. The amazing thing: The homes were built by 2 p.m. - the same day.

"There were still some gaps, but you could walk through and see what everything was going to look like," Munday said. Lego models take longer to put together. Instead, their home construction was more like opening a pop-up children's book. A time-lapse video of the Orinda construction can be seen at <https://vimeo.com/147523892>. And the company's website will give you an idea of how pre-fab homes get sold at www.connect-homes.com.

The process goes something like this, or at least this is the way it worked for the Mundays. They found a piece of land they liked. They weren't sure it would work for the company and the house

they wanted, so while they were in escrow with the land, Connect-Homes representatives visited to see how the house would be best located, watching for views and sun exposure. Given the thumbs up, the Mundays closed escrow and spent three months building the foundation to specifications, worked with utilities to get pipes and electricity to the site, then waited for the arrival of the containers.

"It was surprisingly pretty easy," Munday said.

The result is a modern house with clean lines, and most importantly to Munday, no cost overruns. "Whenever you have new construction, or even a remodel, the contractors come back and say, 'this went over our estimate,' or 'this took longer than we thought,' and it ends up costing twice as much as they quoted you in the beginning," he said. "Frankly, I was shocked. They sent me a bill for exactly what they said it was going to cost."

Another thing he likes is that his choice is a safe one in earthquake country. "This is safer than a regular house," Munday said. "Each model has a steel frame and a slight bit of flex."

But alas, with all that metal and glass, pink flamingos are not included.



Modular homes can come with outbuildings that serve as laundry or guest rooms. Photo Chris Lavin

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