

What's in a Name – Modular, Manufactured, Prefab, Offsite?

If you are like many home buyers today, you might be a little confused over the terms used to describe a “non-traditionally built” home. So let's start right there with the term “traditional” home. When you see a home described in this way, it simply means that the home was built the “traditional” way that homes have historically been built. A home buyer works with a general contractor to design their new home, the contractor gets the permits, hires subcontractors, orders the materials, the materials are shipped to the home site where the construction BEGINS. (We've simplified it a bit here for this article, but those are the basic steps). This method is also referred to as “site-built,” “stick-built,” or “conventional”. This is the way a majority of homes are built in the United States, but it is NOT the most efficient or effective way to build a home!

Unlike site-built homes, there are a full array of processes where the construction begins somewhere other than the home site. In other words, the construction occurs **OFFSITE**. So your home is either constructed primarily **ONSITE** (on the final site where your home is located) or **OFFSITE** (a nearby facility where the construction occurs in a controlled setting).

So that is the first distinction. If your home is built offsite, it can be constructed using a number of different processes – modular, manufactured, or panelized for example. Here are the key differences between these processes:

Modular means your home is being constructed in three dimensional boxes or “modules” at the factory. A modular home is built to the same local building codes (International Residential Code) as a stick-built home. The materials are shipped to the factory where construction of your home BEGINS in the form of larger components. These components (modules) are transported to your home site where your contractor will permanently attach them to each other and to the foundation. Once completed on your site, a modular home is virtually indistinguishable from a stick built home and meets all the same codes and requirements. It is important to note, there is no “modular building code” as homes built in this manner must meet the same local codes where the final home site is located, not where it is constructed.

Manufactured home – Unlike modular homes, a manufactured home is one that is built to the federal Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Code. This is a national code that pre-empts local codes. Homes built to the HUD code are sometimes referred to as “mobile homes” or by the slang name “trailers.” These homes are designed and constructed to meet a niche of buyers seeking “affordable housing” options. As such, a manufactured home generally costs much less than a modular or stick built home. **WORD of CAUTION:** If you want a modular home and facing budget concerns, be aware that some builders may steer you towards a manufactured home as a lower cost solution. There are several companies that built both modular and manufactured homes.

Panelized – similar to modular in that these homes are built to the local IRC code. But unlike modular, a panelized home is built wall by wall and shipped to the site, instead of in boxes

or modules. Transportation costs are often more favorable, but this method requires more on site work.

Prefab is a marketing or slang term, short for the word “prefabricated.” This simply mean that the home or parts of it were prefabricated before they arrived at the site. Roof trusses are a great example of prefabrication in homes. Many people in the industry, particularly in the west, have embraced the term “prefab” in an effort to move away from other terms they deem to be less desirable.

Summary: So if you are still confused remember this one key point to ask your contractor – what code will my home be built to? If the answer is something other than your local building code (typically a version of the International Residential Code), chances are you are not getting a modular home.