

PREFAB CLOUT

The factory-built homes of yesteryear are cropping up again — but this time they have an upmarket look, writes Fiona McGorán

It took two trucks to deliver Declan Cunningham's prefabricated home to his land near Loughrea, in Co Galway, in 2010. "It was 7am on Tuesday, September 28. I remember the moment well because I was so excited," he says. "By 2pm the whole house was erect and the roof trusses were being put on. All of the parts fitted together like a jigsaw — it was amazing to see how precise it all was. An hour later, I was handed the keys of the property."

Cunningham, 40, chose the home with the needs of his family in mind. "My wife, Sibéal, and I have two children, who are seven and four years old. We agreed on a four-bedroom, 1,800 sq ft house with a sitting room, kitchen and home office."

The Cunninghams lived at Knocknacarra in Co Galway before moving to Loughrea, but decided to relocate to

land owned by Sibéal's parents — and exchange city living for country life.

The couple carried out extensive research on the construction industry that included a 10-week course on building green homes at Galway Mayo Institute of Technology. They met an energy consultant before choosing to buy from Scandinavian Homes in Galway, a company specialising in pre-manufactured, low-energy and passive-energy timber-frame homes.

Cunningham, a technical support engineer for Oracle, the technology company, says his bank told him to be 100% sure about the amount of money he wanted to borrow when he applied for a mortgage because the level could not be changed.

"Thankfully, unlike the cost of a bricks-and-mortar build, the quoted price of a prefabricated home is almost always exact. I got great peace of mind

from that assurance." Two years on and Cunningham is still delighted with the result. "It's airtight and you don't hear any outside noises. There's a peaceful atmosphere and the heat efficiency gives it a great sense of comfort, not to mention the money we're saving on heating bills."

While prefabs are hardly new, recent improvements in the technology used and the logistics of building them have brought down their price, widened the choice available and reinvigorated interest among buyers.

Paul Kavanagh is a recent convert. The 36-year-old publican and father of newborn twins moved his family into their two-storey, 3,000 sq ft timber-frame home in Co Carlow in March.

"I had qualified as an engineer and worked in the construction industry up until 2009, so I was aware of the benefits of this type of house, such as its high

insulation rating and energy efficiency," he says. "I was also keen to design and build my own family home. I carried out a lot of research and settled on The Timber Frame Company in Wexford because of the quality of the materials it uses."

A three- to four-stage payment was required for the home, but Kavanagh was cautious because of the number of businesses in the construction industry that were going bankrupt. It was agreed that the money would be put in trust until the building was completed. "That gave me great peace of mind," he says.

As with Cunningham's home, it took two days to build the basic structure of Kavanagh's house. "On day one, the truck arrived with the walls, floors and roof. The crane picked them up and put them together. By the end of the first

day I was looking at a house. The second day was more about finishing the building."

Contractors were hired to complete the final touches, electricians and plumbers carried out work on the home, and the walls were covered in granite.

"We're in Ballon village and the house blends in perfectly. I'm looking forward to a cold snap this winter to appreciate how well it is insulated," says Kavanagh.

There are many differences between traditionally built homes and modern prefabs, but the most obvious one takes place during construction. When a house is block-built, using bricks and mortar, the housing parts are constructed by carpenters, bricklayers and plasterers on site.

By contrast, a prefab-housing company mass produces the parts in

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The Kavanaghs, left, say their prefab blends in perfectly with other homes in Ballon, Co Carlow

JOE O'SHAUGHNESSY

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its factory and transports them to the location, often at lower cost. Trucks arrive with a roof, floor and walls that contain windows. In most cases, these walls are made from high-grade plasterboard. Clients are often responsible for digging the foundations and the plumbing and electrics.

Prefab homes are popular in America and were most commonly bought by people who could not afford block-built ones. Typically, the houses were single-storey and the walls were made from thin plasterboard.

Over the past few decades, innovations introduced by German and Scandinavian upmarket prefab and modular-home companies, such as Huf Haus, have changed the industry. These businesses cater for a wealthier market and people in search of passive-energy homes. Many prefabs are airtight as a result of being built in a controlled process in a factory and often have timber frames which, if finished correctly, allow for good insulation.

Lars Pettersson founded Scandinavian Homes in Ireland in 1991 to meet the growing demand for low- and passive-energy properties. "The houses are factory-produced in a four-step process: four wall sections, two gable ends, roof trusses and roof," he says. "The walls are made out of timber frame with insulation within the frame. It's more expensive to build a concrete house and, thankfully, we don't need bulletproof houses."

Costs vary significantly depending on the size of the house and the materials used. Edvinas Cinga, the managing director of loghomes.ie in Wicklow, says three- and four-bedroom bungalows are the most popular models. The former has an average size of 800 sq ft and sells for €45,000. The turnkey version, which includes furniture, costs €65,000.

The houses built by Scandinavian Homes are erected in four days and are more expensive. The average home is between 1,500 sq ft and 1,800 sq ft, and costs €110,000. If the client hires the company to finish the house with electrics and plumbing, the price will rise to €180,000.

Prefabricated houses suit those who find the idea of building a house intimidating, says Celie O'Connell of O'Connell Architecture. "Buying a prefabricated home is similar to shopping for a large-ticket item in a catalogue.

Cunningham's heating bills have fallen since moving to the prefab, inset. Below, the kitchen; below right: the living area has views over Co Galway





Upmarket prefabs by firms such as Huf Haus have changed the industry

You are presented with a selection of designs and you choose your favourite," she says.

"Some companies allow you to make alterations, such as enhancing the square footage. Overall, it's a less intimidating experience than embarking on a new block-build, where you are looking down the barrel at a blank canvas. You are also lowering the chances of encountering any nasty surprises further down the line."

Prefabricated houses have a limited lifespan. Pettersson says Scandinavian Homes' properties last 100-plus years, while Cinga says his company's could exist for 400 to 500 in a sunny climate — something that Ireland lacks. "They will last a lifetime here," says Cinga.

"But extra precaution must be taken. The timber needs to be treated and the houses must be painted more often."

O'Connell warns that clients run the risk of lowering the thermal performance of a prefab if the job has not been done properly.

"It's important to be aware that many companies do not finish out the houses, and this last part of the process is what determines the effectiveness of the thermal performance," she says.

O'Connell recommends hiring the people who supplied the home to complete it. "Most offer this service for an additional cost. If it is finished well, the likelihood is you will be the proud owner of a beautiful house that perfectly matches the one in the catalogue."

I'M LOOKING FORWARD TO A COLD SNAP THIS WINTER TO APPRECIATE HOW WELL MY PREFAB IS INSULATED



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