

Homes fresh off the ship

Company reusing shipping containers for modular houses

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SARATOGA SPRINGS □u Bob Ferro looked out the airplane window and saw a jigsaw pattern of long metal containers piling up on the Port of New York and New Jersey.

"I thought that there's got to be a better way to be able to put those to use," he said, of that day in the mid-1980s when the light bulb of innovation went off inside his head

Shortly afterwards, he became the co-owner of a company on Long Island that converted those unused metal shipping containers into modular homes and offices buildings.

"We were the only people on the planet to be doing that at the time," he said.

Ferro retired a decade ago and relocated upstate with his wife, Sonya. The retirement, however, didn't take.

He went back to designing and perfecting the business of recycling and reusing the containers and transforming them into habitable "steel core" structures. Four years ago, Ferro and his wife started 21st Century Homes and Structures on Excelsior Avenue in Saratoga Springs.

Today, they employ a crew of about 15 workers inside the 25,000-square-foot factory, where those workers turn the 40-foot-long containers into four homes per week.

He expects the number of workers to grow 10 times over the next two years with contracts in place that total more than \$20 million in residential, commercial and governmental business during that time. A larger, 85,000-square-foot factory sits on Pruy'n's Island in anticipation of future growth.

Ferro designs the homes and created a patented locking system that secures the entire structure to its foundation. He said the structure can sustain winds in excess of 200 miles per hour, making them suitable for use as portable disaster emergency units.

"You can drive a car into the side of the home. The car will bounce off," Ferro said.

A crew inspects and selects specific containers for the purpose of reusing them. Ferro said he pays "less than \$3,000" for each container, which measure approximately 40 feet long, 8 feet wide and 9-1/2 feet high.

Each provides about 320 square feet of space. By using multiple containers, the finished structure can grow to specific proportions of the customer and can be built as high as seven stories.

Most of the work inside the Saratoga Springs factory is single-story residential, where crews cut spaces for windows, install cabinetry, plumbing, electric panels and deliver a turnkey modular home in about four days.

The rugged metal exterior is covered with insulation, which is then fronted by siding. A roof is placed over the top of the existing metal covering and the interior is fitted with sheetrock walls.

"Anything you can put on a house, I can put on this," Ferro said.

Once complete, the home is delivered to a site and fixed onto a foundation. The entire process from start to finish takes about six days. Plans range from 480 square feet to a 2,720-square-foot colonial style.

A 960-square-foot home with two bedrooms and two baths is priced at \$81,560. A 1,600-square-foot model with three bedrooms goes for \$115,200. Site work and foundation are not included.



The company is exploring a variety of applications for construction, from residential to commercial, transportable emergency housing units to low-income housing projects as well as prison cells.

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