

I saw a m-house

The new version of the mobile home is destined to be a low-tech, prefabricated, timber shell on wheels. What's new about that?

BY ALISTAIR WILLIAMS

'You can have your bricks and mortar. Prices or flats. But I live in a mobile home. And I'm very proud of that!'

So writes Mrs Pam Davies of Abbot Langley in the May edition of *Park Home & Holiday Caravan* magazine. Although failing to win the box of chocolates for best letter, Mrs Davies' poem goes to the heart of the mobile business' world. Simple, staid and static: the essence of the parked mobile home – as well, it must be said, of some of its clientele.

Try as I might to forget, I still remember spending a week at Hove Holiday's Boreick apartments. Two or three sites in a less-than-delightful, paper-thin, deluxe family suite back in 1995. It was hell on earth.

But the other thing of note about mobile homes, exemplified in most of the various site photographs in *Park Home & Holiday Caravan* magazine, is that they are premade: to be permanent to the extent that most have built brick walls to mask the wheel base, have been landscaped in, and have screened walls. The objective, it seems, is to look like real houses.



The interior sees nothing to conventional mobile homes

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Now though, at 100% Design on 28 September, a radical rethink of mobile home branding will be launched. From that day forth, says architect and exhibition designer Tim Pyne, there is no such thing as a mobile home; only m-houses. Promoted 'm-house' or 'm-home' depending on your preference; presumably the follow-on version might well be called the 'm-one' given that this looks like an attempt at a showy piece of marketing.

Living in a box

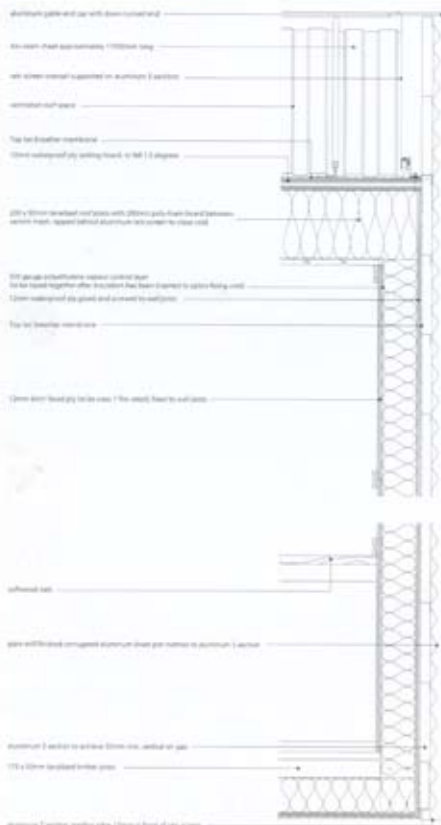
In essence, the m-house is a box for living in. Constructed in plywood on insulated timber studs, it is a relatively straightforward technology for low-skill, factory production. It follows the North American model of

split timber frame house assembly using two parts of a basic rectangular plan, built to the maximum allowable size (17 x 3m) so that it can be transported without notifying the highway authority. Once delivered to site, both halves are brought together to create the 17.6m whole. It is therefore slightly disingenuous to call it a mobile home since, in its mobile state, it comprises just three walls, with the open side temporarily propped and strapped.

The external framework comprises an internal face of 9mm birch-faced ply (to class 1 fire resistance) on a vapour control layer on 100 x 50 studs at 400mm centres with 100mm polybrominated urethane insulation and 12mm WBP plywood outer sheathing. This basic frame is then clad in a range of materials to suit individual specifications – from profiled metal cladding on steel battens (as shown in the detail) to cedar cladding. The roof is standing seam galvalume aluminium on vapour control layer on 12mm waterproof ply on aluminium slings.

The design team have been rigorous in making the structure compliant with all relevant building codes, and m-house, while still being referred to as a prototype, complies with Part L Regulations and DGA mobility and access requirements.

Unlike many North American prefabricated site assembly houses, which are joined along a pitched roof ridge, m-house is to be joined along



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the fall of the standing seam mono-pitch roof. Even though this relies on a perfect seam joint, and a difficult procedure of dropping one half of the building exactly into place over the other, this roof design means that rainwater drainage occurs along one elevation only. By building up the parapets on the three high sides, the flat appearance is intended to mark it out from traditional mobile homes.

Like Howe, of *ma*, who has worked on the design details, says that even though there is nothing particularly new – in terms of technology – in this building, 'people are often suspicious of the new and we always look to inspiration from the past. We have detailed a cheap, simple and effective box – an enclosure of space, but we have attempted to challenge the language of mobile home parks.'

Even though Howe asks 'why invest in an expensive hot-dip galvanized channel' the application of a horizontal push-down will effectively hide the underside of m-house more attractively, and safely, than a plywood skirt.

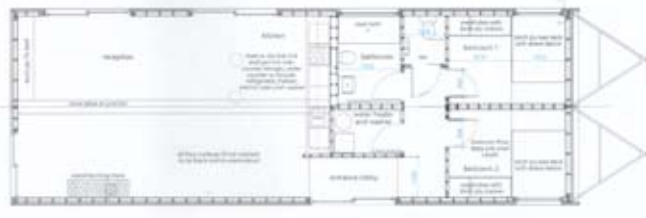
Loft living

The main difference in m-house, and something which cannot be over-estimated, says Howe, is the 'facility of the interiors'. By that he means that this building has a substantial structural framework in line of the finer partitioning of many standard mobile homes. It feels different. Gone are the creaky floors; the embarrassing, badly acoustically separated b/c partitions; the 'caravan-style' door furniture; the acres of formica. 'Instead, we want the interior to feel like loft living – although I use the term advisedly,' he says.

'For instance, we have gone for domestic timber windows purposefully because we wanted to avoid the language of the caravan. Even though the building might have aluminium cladding, we don't want it to be thought of as hi-tech. We feel that it should be honest, but ordered.'

The interior will include long-span and grooved ceilings, insulation floor coverings, a woodburning stove, carpets, storage, wardrobes, a white bathroom suite, a utility room with drying facility and underfloor heating. It might seem that the designers

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M-house can be located on a flat roof as extended living quarters (top left), in the garden as a granny flat (bottom left), or on a patch of land as a temporary office. The designer envisages locating it on pontoons on the river (bottom right), or even on marshland (top right)

are making something of a nod for their own back by bettering to market this as a rebranding of mobile homes. Why not just sell it as a cheap and cheerful prefab?

Apart from the 'personal challenge' for Pyne and the marketing benefits of the modern fad for re-branding, there are other opportunities and benefits accruing from the 'inside' label. Mobile homes are not subject to stamp-duty or VAT. Buildings that fit the legal definition of a mobile home are easier to site than your average house,' says Pyne. 'Imagine, for instance, if you take the cost of land ownership out of housing. Pay just a ground rent and sell your own home. It all sounds quite appealing.'

Pyne is happy to pay tribute to Cedric Price, with whom he met early in the design development to talk about the concepts of architectural mobility that Price

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experimented with in the 1960s. Pyne has also surrounded himself with other experts in the field – exhibition contractors ('to ensure that the product is built on time'), financial advisers and even with one of the few experts in mobile home planning law. Through the brainstorming process of rethinking an old concept, it seems that Pyne and his cohorts have managed to expand the boundaries of possible applications more than might have been the case if they had simply considered prefabricated housing.

As with many domestic profiles, it can be located on flat roofs as extended living quarters, in the garden as a granny flat or on a patch of land as a temporary office. So far so good, but this type of application could equally describe a Portakabin as much as m-house. However, Pyne envisages locating m-house on pontoons on the river, or building them on flood

plains. He himself has bought a patch of marshland in Essex and is soon to locate (rather than build) one there.

Taking prefabrication to its logical conclusion, Pyne will be marketing m-house as a turnkey product to such an extent that his team will provide all inclusive advice on financing, specialist planning, insurance, legal, and will even prepare landscape designs. Total fixed costs are estimated to be in the region of 1,000,000 (or 11,000/m²) irrespective of location in the UK.

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