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Factory Direct, a Home Sweet Home

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Abstract (Document Summary)

"Typically, a one-family home has two modules," or floors, said Nicholas Lembo, the president of Capsys, based in Brooklyn. "A two-family might take three modules, and a three-family would have three or four." The 37 homes in Ocean Hill, for which ground was broken on July 30, will each have two stories: a three-bedroom owner's unit on top and a two-bedroom rental apartment below.

The homes will serve a mixed-income population, Ms. [Carol Lamberg] said: 12 homes for households earning \$24,000 to \$31,000; 20 for those earning \$32,000 to \$50,000; and 5 for those earning between \$51,000 and \$103,000, all to be selected by lottery.

Nicholas Lembo, president of the Capsys Corporation, in the Brooklyn Navy Yard with a big part of a house his company is building. Since 1997, Capsys has built more than 1,000 housing units, with most of them scattered about Brooklyn. (Photo by Edwine Seymour for The New York Times)

Full Text (842 words)

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From the rapid-fire zaps of stand-up screw guns (power tools that resemble skinny jackhammers) as the first wood planks are fastened to steel girders in a cavernous building at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, it can take less than three weeks for an entire floor of a 20-by-42-foot row house to be unloaded from flatbed trucks onto the sites of 37 mixed-income homes just rising in the Ocean Hill section.

And those floors arrive with everything -- wiring and plumbing, light fixtures and phone jacks, thermostats and kitchen tiles -- already in place.

With its modular, in-the-factory construction system, the Capsys Corporation -- its name taken from the Latin word

capsys, meaning boxes -- has carved a niche in the city's market for moderately priced housing. (Market-rate homes and dormitory and hotel rooms make up about 15 percent of the company's business.)

"I always wanted to build modular, just to keep costs down without sacrificing quality," said Carol Lamberg, executive director of the Settlement Housing Fund, the nonprofit housing group that is creating those 37 two-family homes on Saratoga Avenue, Dean Street and Sterling Place.

"Construction time is lower, and it happens in the factory," Ms. Lamberg said, "so it can be done even when it's raining" -- a significant advantage given recent climatic conditions.

Since 1997, when it rolled out its first module (a single story with walls, windows, doors and stairs in place), Capsys has produced 1,134 housing units in 965 two- and three-story attached buildings for subsidized housing projects scattered mostly about Brooklyn, including 700 for the Nehemiah II development in East New York.

"Typically, a one-family home has two modules," or floors, said Nicholas Lembo, the president of Capsys, based in Brooklyn. "A two-family might take three modules, and a three-family would have three or four." The 37 homes in Ocean Hill, for which ground was broken on July 30, will each have two stories: a three-bedroom owner's unit on top and a two-bedroom rental apartment below.

The homes are produced by 75 workers, in assembly-line fashion, as the modules are rolled along one side of the 350-foot-long former ship foundry at the Navy Yard, then back along the other side, pausing at one point -- if it is the top floor -- for the roof to be hoisted into place.

Mr. Lembo said he knew of no other prefabricated home builder in the city, and Ms. Lamberg agreed. "It's difficult for modular construction in the city." Mr. Lembo said, "because most modular manufacturers use wood-frame construction. We use steel."

Since 1968, according to Sid Dinsay, a spokesman for the Buildings Department, the city's building code has prohibited wood framing in attached homes, a precaution against fire spreading.

Capsys can also make bigger buildings. "If other manufacturers ship to New York on the interstate, they are basically limited to a maximum width of 14 feet," Mr. Lembo said. "Our modules are 18 and 20 feet wide and up to 45 feet long, because we don't go on the interstate."

In fact, while most modules produced by Capsys are hoisted onto trucks by a 70-foot-high crane inside the old ship foundry and are then inched along city streets (with escort vehicles), the company took an entirely different route last year, shipping 47 homes to the Rockaways in Queens by barge and tugboat.

Soon, by more conventional means, the newest modules will begin arriving for the \$11 million Settlement Housing project in Ocean Hill.

Of the financing for the project, Ms. Lamberg said, "It's the usual mix." The city's Department of Housing Preservation and Development donated the land for \$1; construction subsidies of \$3.5 million came from the city's Housing Authority; \$1.2 million was provided by the offices of Marty Markowitz, the Brooklyn borough president, and City Councilwoman Tracy L. Boyland; and other funding came from the state and federal government.

The homes will serve a mixed-income population, Ms. Lamberg said: 12 homes for households earning \$24,000 to \$31,000; 20 for those earning \$32,000 to \$50,000; and 5 for those earning between \$51,000 and \$103,000, all to be selected by lottery.

Prices will range from \$142,000 to \$232,000, formulated so that owners will pay no more than 25 percent of their monthly income, including what they earn in rent from the downstairs apartment.

The modular homes, Ms. Lamberg said, carry lower construction costs. "I'm not currently working on a comparable low-rise," she said, "but 10 blocks away, we're building 35 units in a six-story building. That one's close to \$200,000 a unit; this one's about \$150,000."

Most of her projects are not suitable for modular construction, Ms. Lamberg said, because they are more than three stories high.

Mr. Lembo said, "It gives us pride to be providing housing for working New Yorkers."

[Photograph]

Nicholas Lembo, president of the Capsys Corporation, in the Brooklyn Navy Yard with a big part of a house his company is building. Since 1997, Capsys has built more than 1,000 housing units, with most of them scattered about Brooklyn. (Photo by Edwine Seymour for The New York Times)