

Recycled residences: Resistant to mold, termites and storms

By Robin Tierney
Examiner Correspondent

Most people see a shipping container; David Cross sees next-generation ecologically and economically sustainable homes.

To prove that retired cargo containers could be repurposed into an affordable, attractive, durable house, Cross's company, SG Blocks, did just that.

On the EcoBuild exhibition show floor mid-December at Washington Convention Center, four "blocks" (or containers) were assembled for a two-story, 1,600 square foot, three bedroom/two bath home in two hours; partially finishing exterior and interior took 34 man-hours.

How long would it take to build a fully executed home?

Cross estimates 48 hours.

"Architects are turning containers into haute couture vacation homes for affluent clients; we're designing prêt-à-porter [ready-to-wear] for everyday people," explained Cross, preparing for the concept's national rollout. Based on a 2004 prototype built in North Charleston, S.C., the SG ("Safe Green") system is architect- and builder-ready.

Resistant to wind, water, mold and termites, framing for these postmodern modulars can run \$20 to \$30 per square foot.

The "sustainable building sys-



tem" recycles steel cargo containers, some 300,000 currently idling in U.S. ports from Baltimore to Los Angeles.

At 40 feet long, eight feet wide and 9.5 feet tall, the containers are ideal for single- or multiple-story dwellings.

Choose one or more containers, cut out windows and doorways, clad

exteriors as desired, finish interior to suit taste, top with vegetation or roof trusses ... and move in.

To demonstrate mass appeal, the team chose a white composite-skinned conventional model over an ultra-hip industrial.

Parts of the containers and structural skeleton were exposed to reveal the construction process.

After graduating from the Maine Maritime Academy in 1986, Cross sailed on ships hauling cargo around the world.

He pondered how to turn containers into super-strong housing for disaster-prone areas — "something that nobody in the U.S. was pursuing."

Seaworthy doubles as storm-wor-

thy: Shipping containers are made of heavy gauge steel.

Corner posts are designed for 153,000-pound vertical load. The welded 14-gauge corrugated walls must withstand 15 long tons transverse and 7.5 long tons longitudinally.

Each unit can support 65,000 pounds when stacked nine high.

Then there's the resonance of recycling.

Cross brands his building block system as "value-cycling" — converting a manufactured item that has fulfilled its primary purpose to a "higher, better use" using minimal energy and resources.

"It takes 8,000 kilowatt hours to melt down 8,000 pounds of steel," explains Cross. "It takes only 5 percent of that energy to value-cycle containers into an SG Block."

The "proof of concept" demonstration home appeared to pass the hospitality test, judging by the crowds of EcoBuild conventioners camping out in the kitchen, living room and other parts of the model.

"You've got to put the house together for that 'Aha!' moment," said Cross. "You've got to give consumers the tires to kick, and that means a finished house."

As for that demo house, it will eventually be completed as a Gulf coast residence.

For more information, visit www.sgblocks.com.

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