

Factory-built house finds home in Belmont

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If two Belmont architects have their way, factory-built homes could be the wave of the future.

Erik Rhodin is building a two-family duplex right next to his home on Thomas Street. His wife, Taina, who is also an architect with Rhodin & Rhodin, is assisting with the project.

But this house is different from any other being built in Belmont because it's not being put together like a standard house.

The duplex was built in sections, completely designed to spec, at a factory in Sweden and then the pieces were shipped to the United States in five crates.

Rhodin was born in Sweden but has been living in Belmont for the past 21 years. Because his country has long winters, there is no other way to build housing than in a factory, he said.

"It keeps the workforce busy all through the winter," he said. "Then in the warmer months, they put the homes together."

Rhodin decided to try to build a model of one of those homes in Belmont after work was stopped on the lot in front of his own house.

According to Rhodin, the former owner of the site, Dante Muzzioli, had demolished the home that was there, and had planned on building a two-family at the site. But the work was stopped by town officials after Muzzioli proceeded to excavate the site without having a building permit.

"It was a technical violation," Town Engineer Tom Gatzunis confirmed. "We just hadn't finished approving the permits."

Muzzioli did not return calls from the *Citizen-Herald*.

After Muzzioli laid the foundation for the home, Rhodin and another partner, Samuel Knight,



PHOTO BY ANTHONY SCHINELLA

Architect Erik Rhodin points to pre-fabricated beams that were shipped from Scandinavia to Belmont.

offered to buy the lot from him. The sale went through in September 2000, with Rhodin paying \$373,000 for the property which Muzzioli had purchased for \$255,000, according to the town assessor.

Rhodin teamed up with Scanhouse Inc., a Milton-based company that first introduced the Swedish-style homes to the United States in 1984.

Since there was already a foundation at the site, the only prep work that had to be done was the first-floor platform, Rhodin said. After that was built, the first floor was put up, connecting all the sections together.

"The first floor was done in a few hours," he said, adding that

the base frame of the house was finished in about two weeks.

The walls, which are about 10 inches thick, are made with a new technology called Bitroc sheathing boards, a recycled wood product, which is 2 1/2 times more effective than standard thermal insulation and "100 percent green," Rhodin said. Wooden strapping placed on top of the Bitroc allows the wood to stay dry and eliminates moisture buildup and mold.

While Rhodin couldn't comment on specific cost savings for producing a pre-built house, he estimated the savings could be as much as 20 percent compared with a standard house.

This may be why affordable

housing advocates and big-city mayors, including Boston Mayor Tom Menino, have come to Belmont to see what is being built on Thomas Street.

Rhodin said the Thomas Street model is relatively upscale, with European-style kitchens, high-tech central heating and cooling systems, and a loft area in one of the duplexes. But if the Belmont model is scaled back, the factory-built homes could assist municipalities and developers in producing much-needed affordable housing.

"What we have here is a high-quality product that can be shaved down in design detailing to fit into an inner-city, affordable housing model," he said.