

New Ways of Thinking: the PATH Concept Home

By Susan Conbere, for PATH Partners

For a home truly on the cutting edge — a home that includes not just sustainable technologies and superior environmental design, but also the flexibility to grow with the family it shelters — where would you go?

How about Omaha, NE, which recently became the site for the first PATH Concept Home, a vision of the home of the future from the Partnership for Advancing Technology in Housing (PATH).

The effort behind that home in Omaha has been several years in the making. PATH spent two years consulting consumers, builders, manufacturers and architects to determine exactly what the ideal home would be before designing it and bringing it to reality.

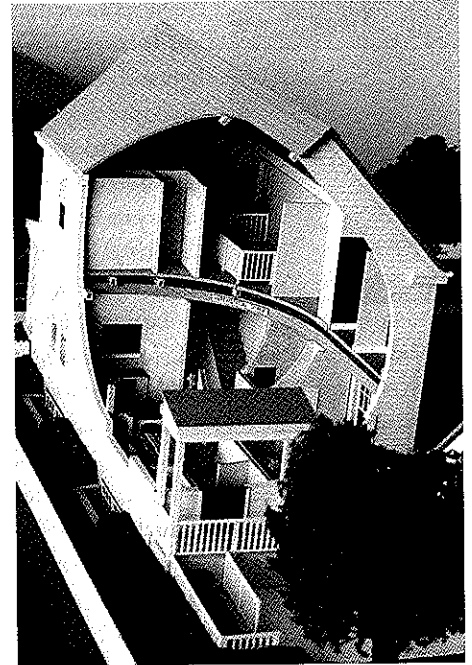
“The home is affordable, attractive and flexible,” explains Carlos Martín of PATH. “It is built with little waste and uses efficient, durable materials. And unlike any other home on the market, it adapts to meet a family’s changing needs.”

The home’s plan features flexibility that is entirely new in home design — it is easily adapted to new technologies and to changing

life situations. The home achieves this flexibility in part through thoughtful organization of utilities — running plumbing and wiring so they are easily accessible for repairs and remodeling. It is sustainable because it uses advanced building materials that reduce the impact of building on the environment.

To date, the concept home has existed as an architectural-scale model touring the country. Brighton

Construction broke ground in Omaha on the first constructed home in October — PATH hopes it will soon be followed by concept homes nationwide. (Schematics for a single-family home and an urban townhouse are available free on the PATH website: www.pathnet.org/concepthome.)



This cutaway of the PATH Concept Home model shows the home’s flexible components.

WHO’S MOVING: YOU OR THE WALL?

Homeowners go through a constant evolution of priorities and needs as families change and their “nests” become full or empty. Wouldn’t it be nice if their homes could evolve, too?

Such a home could easily and affordably adapt to changing lifestyles. In such a case, moving a wall to make a nursery for a new baby or a new, first-floor master bedroom for an older couple is no longer a remodeling job of huge proportions.

“We are trying to anticipate what an occupant might want to do differently,” says Brighton Construction’s Fernando Pages-Ruiz, also the author of *Building an Affordable House*. “Whether it’s moving light fixtures or non-load-bearing walls, we want to make it easy for the homeowner to do in a weekend, rather than a major project [they] have to pay a contractor a lot of money to do.”

In such a home, the flexibility is built into the interior walls so rooms can shrink or grow to match the clients’ needs. As a result, a “starter home” can expand to become a dream home

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— or accommodate reduced mobility and other special needs. So how does this flexibility work? The utilities in most homes — electrical wires, plumbing, heating ducts, telephone and data lines — are buried behind finished interior walls. To move a wall, a contractor has to move wiring or pipes, which makes the project difficult and costly.

The PATH Concept Home proposes a different approach. Partitions are moveable to readily reconfigure living space, and utilities are organized in one central location rather than in a jumbled mess behind every wall. In this way, interior, non-load-bearing walls can be moved, or removed, far more easily. Self-powered wireless switches eliminate the need for wiring. Suddenly, remodeling enters a whole new realm.

Maintenance also takes on a different light. When a contractor or a homeowner wants to replace or repair pipes or a duct system, there is no need to rip through drywall to search for the problem. All utilities are located in one place, and the central wall contains an access panel that makes these utilities accessible.

A SUSTAINABLE HOUSE

The concept home not only flexes, it uses materials sparingly, which means it cuts building costs and wear and tear on the environment.

When walls, doors, roof trusses and other components are pre-made in a factory, building crews lose no time in fitting — and refitting — building components. Standardizing the measurements of major building components eliminates the guesswork in product selection.

Traditional components also require additional cutting that generates waste. Nine-foot pieces of lumber are shipped to the site and then cut into pieces to make walls, leaving a small mountain of wood behind. Environmentally and economically, it's enormously wasteful. It's also expensive, since builders have to dispose of that small mountain. Wouldn't it be better if standardized components could be preassembled in the factory and "snapped in" on the job site, without producing any waste?

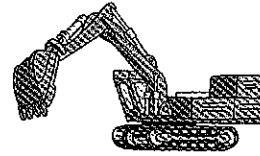
Some building components are already made this way. Walls and roofs for manufactured homes (which are homes built with prefabricated components) are made in factories, where materials can be precisely engineered, work can continue in any weather and building components stay dry. When the components are ready, they are shipped to the site and erected in far less time than any traditional stick-built home. This is a key concept behind the concept home, which ideally can be built, start to finish, in just 20 days.

For the home buyer, that adds up to a lower cost, higher quality and more sustainable home — delivered faster than any other home on the market. For the builder, it means more homes built faster at higher quality — and a significant marketing edge.

"In a tougher market, the ability to customize a floor plan on the fly, and without an up-charge for the buyer, represents a formidable advantage over the competition," says Pages-Ruiz.

Susan Conbere writes about better building practices on behalf of the Partnership for Advancing Technology in Housing (PATH). PATH is administered by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Learn more at www.pathnet.org. ■

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