

EASE IN A POD

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Say the word "pre-fab" and the image conjured up in most people's minds is either a building-site - usually painted a disgusting, yellowish minty green - where helmeted project managers take their tea breaks, or post-war emergency housing, most of which has now been demolished.

But a new kind of pre-fab is starting to adorn the capital's rooftops, which is about as far away from traditional ready-assembled boxes as you can get. And they bring a whole new meaning to the dreaded phrase "loft conversion".

A loft conversion is a simple way to increase the value of your home by up to 30 per cent and to add extra space without having to move house. But anyone who has had the bad luck to live in their house while builders are banging away upstairs, treading cement dust through the shag pile and drinking vast quantities of your best Yorkshire tea with four spoons of sugar, will know that the disadvantages of converting the loft can nearly outweigh the benefits.

But what if there were a better way? What if your extra room can be manufactured off-site and then installed in one day? No mess, no fuss, no ground-to-roof scaffolding to make it easy for burglars to get in.

Impossible, you say?

Enter the brave new world of modular construction, Scandinavian of course.

The idea of off-site, pre-fab. construction of rooms was used in the great race to get the world's largest sailing ship; Voyager of the Seas, finished in time. Cabins were constructed off-site, then simply craned in and installed, shaving off weeks of valuable time. Now a Swedish firm, First Penthouse, is using the idea to build ready-made rooftop 'pods' that are manufactured in Sweden, shipped over to the UK and then craned up on to London's rooftops.

Carol Thatcher has recently become the proud owner of one of First Penthouse's pre-fab pods, which she has added to her stylish, Piers Gough apartment at Bankside in south London. Mr. Gough, the last word in fashionable post-modernist architecture, described himself as very satisfied with Miss Thatcher's addition to his work, as did Miss Thatcher, who gained a chi-chi studio on top of her apartment for less than £50,000,

including all the fittings such as bathroom fixtures and a built-in stereo. More importantly, because it was prefabbed in Sweden and installed in a day, neither she nor her exacting neighbours experienced any of the irritation of having builders around for months.

"The idea that someone will do everything and build my flat elsewhere was too good an opportunity to miss" Another pod purchaser, retired author Jillian Becker has just signed her First Penthouse contract and is looking forward to her extra room, which will have glass doors opening on to a roof terrace with views over the Regent's Canal. Her pod will add an extra living-room and bathroom to her six-room, two-bathroom flat.

Her daughter, Claire, read about First Penthouse and telephoned her with the idea. "Having, over the years, had many a hassle with builders and endless frustration with architects, borough councils and artisans of all sorts, the idea that someone will do all that for me, and build my flat elsewhere was too good an opportunity to miss," says Mrs. Becker.

Although her children are adult, she needs the extra space for entertaining and occasionally

having her family to stay. "What could be more splendid for a woman whose children have all grown up and left home than a duplex penthouse with a wonderful view in one of the most elegant parts of London?" she asks.

First Penthouse is half way through a major project building five swanky penthouse apartments on top of Albert Court, a late-Victorian mansion block behind the Albert Hall in Kensington. These massive, three-bedroom, three-bathroom apartments took just one day to lift up and install, with a further four weeks to decorate, connect services and finish off. But even these four weeks pass peacefully: the company has invested in specialised quiet tools such as extra-sharp diamond-tipped drills, to minimise noise and disturbance. The only potential for mess - when the hole is cut between the existing top floor and new - penthouse- is negated by a special plastic seal which is wrapped around the area prior to cutting. To make the new flats blend in with the existing roofscape, the original tiles on the mansard-style roof were removed, shipped back to Sweden and put on the new modules.

A tour round one of the finished penthouses is enough to make you wish you had a few million to spare. Blonde wood floors, huge windows with views over Kensington, the latest in Scandinavian design -down to remote-controlled kitchen extractor-fan and hideaway ironing-board unit - make us ordinary mortals drool with envy.

"Everything is done over in Sweden before the modules - a maximum of four metres across are shipped over to the UK and transported in low loader trucks to the site," says Jimmy Pettersen, First Penthouse's UK representative, who shuffles around the new flat with plastic bags over his feet to prevent scuffing on the immaculate floor.

"All the bathroom and kitchen fittings are pre-installed, tiles are pre-laid and even the base coats are painted on the walls, to minimise the time needed for finishing off on site"

First Penthouse is the brainchild of Swedish husband-and-wife team Annika and Hakan Olsson, who decided to find another way of building upwards after experiencing the nightmare of loft conversion. The company has identified more than 700 potential sites in central London where its penthouses could be installed, on buildings with either flat, or mansard roofs. Of these sites, First Penthouse has been in touch with 40 and drawn up proposals to 30; several have agreed in principle "London is the perfect location for penthouses," says Mr Pettersson. "With the pressure on land so intense, it makes sense to add another floor to existing buildings.

Homeowners wishing for a hassle free addition to their houses should consult their local planning authority first. Although Westminster City Council has given permission for recent First Penthouse applications. the application for Albert Court, the company's first, was rejected on the grounds that the development was "inappropriate for the area" and was only granted on appeal to the Secretary of State. A spokesman for the council says that any future applications will be considered "very carefully".