



home LIVING

Absolutely prefabulous

It's a kit house, but not as we know it: Italian-designed modular homes for the super-rich are coming to Britain. **By Karen Robinson**

At their company HQ in Rome, the architect Enzo Pagano and his brother Paco watch video feeds from the countryside near Naples as men unload the lorries that have brought sections of a house built in the Paganos' factory, then begin to fit the pieces together on the concrete foundation.

The elaborate 10,000 sq ft villa, for a gaming software entrepreneur — “the only nouveau riche in Italy” Paco jokes — was designed by their team of architects and technicians, who fed the plans into patented computer programs. These controlled all stages of the two months of work needed to fabricate the pieces, fully finished, with services and wiring inside the iroko-veneered Douglas fir frame, along with flooring, kitchens and bathrooms, open fireplaces and whatever else the client specified.

With the help of cranes, it will take only a month to complete on site: by day two it's already up to the second storey, with whole staircases and bathrooms slotting into place. Meanwhile, 50 lorries have just trundled onto a site in Russia to start the same process on an oligarch's dacha — and soon an enterprising developer will be bringing Pagano houses to Britain.

Michael Rhode started his career putting up wooden A-frame houses in California, then moved to Scotland and built in brick, before constructing hundreds of concrete-block homes in the Saudi desert for expert energy workers. Whatever



Pagano houses are made from large wood and glass sections, built in a factory and assembled on site in as little as one month.

materials and methods local conditions dictated, Rhode has always been a fan of “system building”: creating and finishing as much of a house as possible in a factory before transporting it to the site for rapid final assembly. When he found out what the Paganos were doing, the developer saw the opportunity to introduce system building to Britain at a level never seen before.

“Because the services don't run through the walls, but through the posts and beams, you can have huge spaces,” he says. “This is something exceptional.”

Fortuitously, Rhode has an interest in an estate called Rockwood, near Godalming, Surrey, which once belonged to the Pakistani Bhutto dynasty. This is where he plans to build the first Pagano house in this country: 15,000 sq ft of glass and wood, with all the latest smart-home lighting and entertainment technology, an indoor pool and energy-saving heating and insulation systems.

The dramatic modern mansion, with 10 bedroom suites, double-height party spaces and private nooks, will be created in segments in the Paganos' factory in Abruzzo before the lorries set off for the Surrey hills.

The concept uses three key

elements, Rhode explains. The first is veneered wood, with a maximum length of 45ft dictated by transport logistics. The second is glass — vast sheets of state-of-the-art triple-layered glazing, set into frames in the factory. Finally, there are giant wall panels, made from a “sandwich” of materials that provide heat and sound insulation — and cut out the need for a plasterer.

He thinks planners here will welcome the concept, because it fits the demands of Planning Policy Statement 7, which allows for “exceptional” houses to be built in areas where development would normally be banned. “It's innovative and sustainable,” Rhode says.

The costs are roughly comparable to those for traditionally built bespoke mansions for the wealthy, at just under £300 a sq ft — but, with the prefab approach, you would be able to move in at least a year sooner than if you did things the old-fashioned way. Once Rockwood is finished, it will be put up for sale on a 100-acre plot for £15m.

That should be just the price and location to attract passing Russian oligarchs, who are already big fans of the Pagano product. A member of the Yeltsin family has one near Moscow, and Roman Abram-

ovich has visited the Pagano show home — where Enzo and his family live. “Russians don't like anything that's made in Russia,” Paco says, a tradition that dates back to the shockingly shoddy days of Soviet manufacture. So a whole mega-mansion that can be made abroad and brought to your estate has become a must-have for the plutocrats of the former communist empire.

It's probably not how the brothers' grandpa Biagio saw his family's future panning out. Their father, Vincenzo, who began his working life as a lad in postwar Rome, repairing wooden cart wheels with Biagio, graduated to making furniture, but found “there was a moment when it cost too much to make a wooden house. So the thing to do was to optimise production. In the factory we can control time, cost and quality”. He developed the systems that now produce 30-40 projects a year, including a ski resort and tropical Caribbean hideaways. “It's a bespoke service for clients, but it has to be made to industrial standards,” Enzo explains.

And they are always working on refinements. Vincenzo tells me about a new format for flooring: “It's like a yacht deck, but much cheaper. We can deliver this floor from the factory now.”

Rhode has formed a company called LVO Systems to market Pagano houses in Britain. “When I talk to housebuilders in the £20m-£50m category — remarkably, there are quite a few — they're all building super-traditional homes,” he says. “Why not do something with more pizzazz? We want to get the message out to the high end that there is an alternative to bricks and mortar. After all, our era shouldn't be known for copying Queen Anne architecture. This is breaking the mould.”

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