

# Concrete homes generate buzz

Jennifer Campbell looks into why people are willing to pay more for this material.

Phoenix Homes Inc. is bringing a traditionally custom concept into tract housing. The builder is the first in Ottawa to offer concrete as a material option for any of its homes.

The homes will cost significantly more than those built with wood, but concrete's advantage is over the long term: It boasts of lower energy bills, a healthier living environment, fewer design restrictions and more durability. Concrete construction is even touted as a tool to help Canada meet its Kyoto commitment by reducing emissions.

While it's a niche market appealing particularly to European customers who are familiar with the concept, the builder hopes it will generate some buzz.

"We, as a builder, are always

looking for a new twist or niche in the marketplace," said John Montpetit, sales and marketing manager for Phoenix. "And in a lot of cases, it's not the number of houses we sell, but rather the exposure that it gives us. The concrete model will bring people to the Phoenix sales centre because it's new and different. And that gives us the appearance of being a different kind of builder."

Tapping this niche, which adds an estimated \$75,000 to the final tab, will not change the way Phoenix operates.

"If we do 10 concrete homes a year, that would be our quota," Mr. Montpetit said. "It's considerably more expensive than a conventional house, and it appeals to a clientele looking for quality and higher specs."

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DAVE CHAN, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

Like the stunning Stratford model in Stittsville's Deer Run, Phoenix Homes will build any of its homes using concrete. The homes will cost significantly more than those built with wood, but concrete's advantage is over the long term.

## Sturdy silence

The Barr family's concrete house is making the teen years bearable, Jennifer Campbell finds.

Don and Debbie Barr, guinea pigs of the high-tech home world, are finally getting settled in their brand new, ultra-smart concrete home.

Set on the far corner of a suburban Stittsville street, it's amazing how hush-hush the inside of the home seems. Suburban sounds of lawnmowers, motorcycles and the occasional ambulance are muffled by the strong walls, hidden well beneath the covering drywall that makes the home look like its modern wood counterparts.

"It's quiet," says Mr. Barr, who works from home as a software

support engineer for IBM. "When the crew came with the supplies for the swimming pool, I didn't even hear them."

The big difference for the Barrs, though, is the inside noise, which is kept to a minimum. The couple have seven computers, four DVD players and two hulking teenage boys, Matt, 14 and Alex, 16.

As their mother, a veterinarian who works for the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, puts it: "Our teenagers aren't small, and when they move, you can hear them."

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# Concrete: No difference in appearance from wood

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The company chose the Stittsville market, specifically its Deer Run development just south of Main Street, because the west end has a lot of high-tech engineer types who Mr. Montpetit believes will be interested in these homes.

"They'll buy into this because they can go on the Web and look into the advantage of this type of construction and realize this is a really neat

construction technique," he said. "It's actually built to a commercial specification, but in a residential application."

A visit to the model home Phoenix has at the Deer Run sales centre shows the concrete homes are no different from conventional wood structures, at least in appearance. But the more sound-proof walls make the home quieter, and there is a more solid feel to the house, especially on the upper storey floors. The

promotional material supplied by the Cement Association of Canada says the sounds of fire truck sirens, barking dogs and lawnmowers are reduced by as much as 60 per cent in these houses.

The walls are built using large sheets of 51-centimetre-thick pink

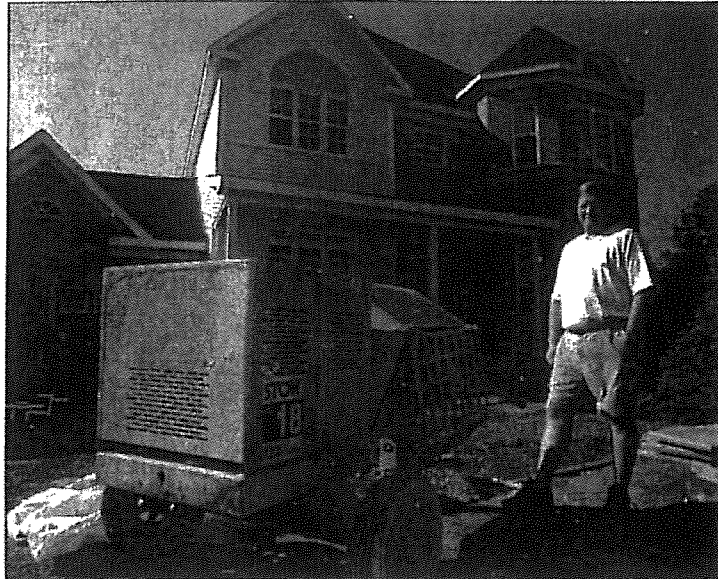
foam insulation. They stand the sheets up 20 centimetres apart, and then they pour in the concrete. Because the walls are thicker, it makes for deeper window wells and sills.

The heating system offers floor-based "radiant heat," which is installed in the concrete during con-

struction. The cement association boasts that there is no mildew or mould and significantly less dust thanks to their "air-tightness."

For information on the ICF (insulating concrete forms) Homes, check out Phoenix's Web site at [www.phoenixhomes.ca](http://www.phoenixhomes.ca)





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## Sturdy: 'Neighbours have staked out our home, in case of a tornado'

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Indeed, they're so lumbering, they were super-charging light bulbs in the kitchen of their modest, "temporary" townhouse, when they were on the upper floors. Wood constructs squeak and bounce at the best of times, but the concrete home, built by Phoenix Homes Inc., has concrete floors as well as walls and they do not move. Jumping on them is like jumping on the Queensway — there's simply no noise, no satisfaction.

Though the Barrs' concrete home was supposed to be ready by June 2001, more than a year after they first saw Phoenix's clever Millennium House in Kanata and the builder's plans for a new Stittsville community called Deer Run, they didn't move in until this April. Because it was the first live-in concrete home Phoenix had built, construction of the 2,750-square-foot monster, with an extra 1,000 square feet in the basement, took a little bit longer.

The family originally decided to move because they wanted a bigger house and more back yard room for a bigger, in-ground swimming pool. They were looking at traditional plans with many upgrades, including nine-foot ceilings in the basement, quieter floors and a finished basement.

The extra cost of those upgrades, they estimate, would have totalled about \$15,000 and, in paying an estimated \$75,000 extra for the concrete construction each of their desired upgrades were standard in the concrete plan. The nine-foot basement ceilings, for example, must be higher than normal because the wiring is snaked through dead air space between the floors. The radiant heating

system is also powered through the floors and, because of the stabilizing effect of the concrete, it promises to slash energy bills.

Aside from the compact heating panels, hidden away in the basement and laundry nook on the top floor, the home looks entirely conventional. But the concrete, while it limited their ability to change their mind mid-process (it's a real chore to change even the location of an outlet after the concrete is poured and set between pre-made insulating forms), gave them greater flexibility for the wall structures. Each of their stairways is open and inviting. One curves through the front foyer and up to the second floor, the other curves down to the basement.

"For some reason, it reminds me of the Museum of Civilization," Debbie Barr said.

Their kitchen and family room are wide open with no support beams chopping up the rooms. The basement family room has but one. The flexibility also allowed them to open up the master bedroom into what would be the fourth bedroom upstairs. Alex wanted his room in the basement, so they installed french doors from a smaller room, where their bed is, to the plans' master bedroom, which they'll use as a home-based spa, with exercise machines and relaxing nooks. The two-sided fireplace is ensconced in the wall between the rooms.

Indeed, the home has three fireplaces, one on each floor.

"After the ice storm, we learned our lesson," Ms. Barr said with a laugh.

"And many of our neighbours have staked out our home, in case of a tornado."