

Innovative Thinking Gives Rise to Unity Homes

STORY AND PHOTO BY MELANIE PLENDIA

It's no surprise to anyone familiar with builder Tedd Benson or his Walpole-based company, Bensonwood, that his goal has long been to build structures meant to last not mere decades, but centuries.

Or about his thinking of how homes are so much the root of community and society.

What some may be surprised to learn is that in recent years, Benson has ventured into new territory with an eye toward making lasting homes in modular pieces.

"There has always been this desire to build high-quality buildings, but also this desire to make them accessible to a wide range of people," says Andrew Dey, operations director of Unity Homes (pictured), a spinoff company of Bensonwood dedicated to building modular homes. "There was talk even years ago about developing a product home or kit home that was predesigned at a fixed price that couldn't be changed. But it would be a lot less expensive than the custom homes that Bensonwood was becoming known for."

And by 2012, Benson was ready to make it happen, or rather try to make it work again.

Dey explains that Benson initially attempted to launch a modular home portion of the business in the late 1990s. The company imagined that if it could find a way to predesign everything, where nothing was custom, the repeatable cost of design and engineering could be avoided. Clients would be given a more affordable option, assuming they could live with the predesigns.

"It never quite took off," Dey says. "And I think the reason is people want to change things. ... And I think it's been hard for Bensonwood, which is really known for high craftsmanship and building these extraordinary houses and buildings."

But owner Benson wasn't ready to let it go and attempted a few times in the early 2000s to develop a division within Bensonwood. While Dey says all of these efforts ultimately led to the foundations of Unity Homes, it wasn't until the company rectified a fundamental flaw in its thinking that it could get this affordable bird off the ground.

"It's hard to ask these craftsmen who were working on these million dollar houses to shift mentality to start working on a \$300,000 home," Dey says. "It's a different mentality to think about: 'Okay, how can we save costs? How can we make this less expensive? How can we make this simpler instead of more complicated?' I mean the designers, who are upstairs, they just want to design, and that's not always the best way to keep costs down."

Eventually Benson came to realize that if he wanted the affordable, quality modular home to take off it would require starting a new company with its own focus and its own mission — a company separate from Bensonwood that could really focus on making these houses more accessible and more affordable, Dey says.

In the years since launching Unity Homes, the company has developed four basic platforms for homes. The homes are designed in such a way that they can be built simply or the new homeowner can add extra prefab components such as porches, garages, sunscreen overhangs or even a hip roof. The panels are also constructed in such



a way that they can easily be stacked on a truck and transported, as opposed to other modular homes that are typically hauled in large sections.

Dey says not only does the latter allow them to travel farther with these homes, but both the way the company has created simple platforms, and the way they are transported, help to keep costs down.

And the concept seems to be taking off, with the company going from building only one or two of these homes per year to the 15 they are on track to build in 2016.

While Dey acknowledges this still leaves Unity as a small company among some big players in the industry, he thinks Unity has found a way to scale up. The company was hired recently by the developer of Quechee Lakes, a Vermont developer, to stock its neighborhoods with modular homes. Unity created variations of its Värm design platform, which can be configured to look like a classic Colonial, country farmhouse, basic barn or a clean modernist home. The goal that Unity and the developer share is to complete 12 of the homes by the end of 2017, according to a press release. Dey says they are looking to do more of these developments going forward.

They are also planning on opening a dedicated Unity design shop in Keene by the end of 2017, says Dey.

"In my opinion, Tedd has the vision of saving the world, and he has very high aspirations for himself, the company, all of us," Dey says. "And for him, building these legacy homes that will be around for hundreds of years — that really hasn't been enough for him. He'd really like to have an impact. And not just for wealthy people who can afford these homes, but for everybody." ■

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