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TheRecord.com - - Old shipping containers used to build more and more homes



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STE-ADELE, Que. - A house made out of shipping containers is probably not the first thing that springs to mind when one thinks of home, sweet home.

But a handful of Canadian entrepreneurs are hoping the eco-friendly construction trend becomes the norm.

Quebec architect Bernard Morin and his wife, Jocelyne Labelle, transformed seven such containers destined for the scrap heap into an intriguing-looking homestead in Ste-Adele, north of Montreal.

Labelle estimates the house would have run them about \$400,000 if constructed with traditional materials. The 3,000-square-foot container home cost just \$175,000.

The couple hope the live-in prototype will inspire others to turn to their company, Maison Idekit.

"People are surprised because they think the space is only the size of a single container, but really the amount of space to play with is infinite," said Morin, who stacked the containers in a Lego-like design to fit his clan of six.

After years of living in traditional homes, Labelle and Morin took nine months to build their luxury container residence on a hill overlooking a stream.

While each container has its own roof, a traditional roof covers the home to provide extra safety during Quebec's winters.

Morin was inspired about 20 years ago working on a project in Baffin Island as a student.

"They would transport items in containers and then the containers were converted into homes," Morin said.

"But it was a bit Utopian and it wasn't particularly popular then," he said.

Maison Idekit has two other projects in Quebec slated to begin in the coming weeks.

The entrepreneurs behind container projects admit it might take a little while for Canadians to buy into the concept.

In Victoria, B.C., Keith Dewey has been designing container homes for a few years and lives in one in a small downtown lot.

So far, his own home is the model for his company Zigloo, a residential design firm.

"Generally, people are sort of surprised at first, but then they're encouraged," Dewey said of his own home, eight containers transformed into a three-storey, 2000-square-foot residence.

Each container has a life story. In Dewey's case, the ones he used were destined for India to be cut apart, melted and turned into other steel products.

"But that's a huge carbon footprint and a lot of energy used for something that still has structure and something left to give," Dewey said.

"Stacking them on our foundation and turning them into a house was a much greener solution."

Using shipping containers as low-cost housing is not new. In some hurricane-prone areas such as Jamaica and the southern United States, the sturdy steel structures are considered the best defence against the elements.

Some U.S. states have embraced the idea of fashioning cargo containers into affordable accommodation to help tackle their housing crunch.

Dwight Doerksen of Toronto-based Ecopods, which builds single and multiple space units, said he's received a lot of interest, largely from south of the border.

"California seems to be really the biggest and the leader in forward thinking in these kinds of green-building techniques," Doerksen said.

Doerksen said governments and jurisdictions have been slow to embrace projects and added that amending building codes could help streamline the process.

Dewey said the other obstacle is getting people to consider the idea of living with less space.

"It's going to take people a little bit of time to wrap their head around that little bit of space being functional," he said. "It's just unfamiliarity but I think people, and the world in general, are looking in that direction."