

Cape Cod style houses are common throughout Eastern Canada...

However, all-masonry construction has not always been the norm, even on this side of the Atlantic. Wood-frame construction used to be extremely popular, and there are many notable examples – such as Anne Hathaway's cottage – which date back to Tudor times.

Quick, efficient and easy to learn

There are many advantages to the wood-frame method of building in the UK. For one thing it is fast and efficient. The wall, floor and roof components are manufactured in factories to strictly controlled quality standards. Site assembly usually takes between two and four days, including the fixing of the roof trusses. Starting from scratch a crew of three carpenters, using only basic tools, can frame and sheath a house in just two weeks or less.

It is also a form of construction which is easy to learn. It therefore appeals to DIY housebuilders, who collectively accounted for nearly 14 000 new homes in the UK last year. In addition, it cuts down on labour time, and yet offers better standards of accuracy and finish than does masonry or concrete construction.

Wood-frame houses are also remarkably energy-efficient. Insulation placed in the walls and roof adds to the wood's natural thermal qualities, giving all-round protection from varying climate conditions.

British houses of this construction are reckoned to achieve a standard at least 33 per cent better than the building regulations specify for outer walls. They provide a warm and comfortable living environment, and at the same time keep heating costs low.

Another advantage of wood construction is that the structural frame is extremely rigid. This means that wood-frame houses are well placed to withstand hurricanes and even earthquakes. Moreover, the frame will remain intact in the event of a fire.

Architects enthusiastic about wood-frame construction

Architects involved in house design are as enthusiastic as builders about wood-frame construction. They find that wood is a flexible medium which offers tremendous creative scope.

The design possibilities are endless. And good

A traditional wood-frame house typical of those dating from the twenties and thirties. The decorative wooden 'gingerbread' is a familiar feature, and often quite elaborate.



Photo: Interhabs Ltd



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design is by no means confined to large and expensive, custom-built houses. Several low-budget projects have received awards for residential design from the Canadian Housing Design Council.

'The beauty of wood frame construction,' says a prominent Toronto architect, 'is that you can do almost anything with it'.

It is, for example, much easier to change plans during the course of construction than it is if you are building in stone or concrete. You can add or subtract different elements in order to get different effects.

Also, architects who are called upon to renovate or extend older houses usually find that the original timbers are still sound after 75 years or more and can be re-used.

Renewed interest in wood-frame housing in UK

In the UK, interest has revived in this method of house construction. Both Wimpey and Laing are increasing their output of wood-frame housing, often using timber imported from Canada; and suppliers such as Prestoplan in Preston are claiming an upsurge in demand for their products.

One reason for this renewed interest is a shortage of bricklayers and plasterers in the UK. To cope with an increased demand for new housing, builders are turning again to wood frame. Its all-dry construction, speed of building, proven durability and technical integrity offer significant advantages over other methods of construction.

Research findings suggest that house-buyers are also getting a good deal. The UK government's Building Research Establishment, for example, reports that in terms of fire safety, thermal and sound insulation, this type of construction consistently performs to a very high standard.

An apartment block in wood-frame construction.



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