

Do-it-yourselfers find satisfaction and savings from KIT BUILDINGS

By STEPHEN M. WILLIAMS • *Courant Staff Writer*

Before retiring as an art professor at Connecticut College, William Ashby McCloy envisioned spending time quietly painting near his Montville home. Unable to afford to pay someone to build his dream studio, McCloy, 83, decided to go the do-it-yourself route and erect it himself.

With a few friends and a kit purchased for \$14,000 from a New Hampshire company called Shelter-Kit Inc., he built a studio and saved about \$16,000 in the process.

McCloy is among a small group of Connecticut residents who have built homes, outbuildings or additions from kits as an alternative to hiring someone to do the work. Like McCloy, most people who build from kits do it for the satisfaction, or to save money.

"Quite frankly, my salary wasn't big enough to have someone build it, so I had to do it myself," said McCloy, who said he had some carpentry experience. "You use a little bit of muscle and common sense."

No one knows exactly how many kit buildings are sold and erected each year in Connecticut or nationally. But fewer than 10 percent of single-family homes are built from do-it-yourself kits, according to the National Association of Home Builders in Washington.

Kit homes were popular in the 1970s, when the government was providing funding for a wide variety of housing experiments, an association consultant said. The trend never quite caught on in big numbers, however, and remains a small niche in the housing market.

Whatever the actual number, Andy Prokosch, president of Shelter-Kit, said his company's kits are designed to be completed by folks who don't know which end of the hammer to hold.

Other companies offer specialty kits such as log-home or post-and-beam kits. Prices range from as low as \$6,000 to as much as \$35,000—the price of a moderately equipped luxury car.

Typically, a kit consists mainly of the basic components needed to assemble a structure: posts, plywood and nails, along with material for the floor, roof and walls. Doors, windows and stairs are usually included, although some customers prefer to buy them elsewhere.

At Shelter-Kit, all of the wood is already cut and wrapped in bundles weighing less than 100 pounds.

"Not only do the pieces have to fit together, but the instructions have to be fantastic," Prokosch said.

Fred Hallahan, president of Hallahan Associates, a Baltimore housing consulting firm, said there will always be a market for kit homes.



■ Mary Ehrler uses this Barn-House, built from a kit, as a workshop on her property in Bethany.

"These are very much a niche market," Hallahan said. "They are dealing with a segment of the market that wants the individuality of that type of house and doesn't want to pay a lot."

Moreover, people who build from a kit derive satisfaction from the accomplishment, Prokosch said.

That sense of satisfaction was what drove Mary Ehrler and her husband, George, to use a kit to build a workshop at their Bethany home a few years ago.

After shopping around and finding it would cost about \$32,000 to build the workshop, the couple decided to buy a Barn-House structure from Shelter-Kit, which cost a little more than \$10,000.

"We made some modifications to it," Mary Ehrler said. For example, her husband wanted the structure to be about a foot taller than the standard kit size. The company accommodated them by customizing the kit.

The Ehrlers, who had some carpentry experience, were about to begin putting the structure together when George had a heart attack.

With George unable to do the work, the Ehrlers wound up hiring a pair of professional carpenters. Four days after the kit arrived, the workshop was finished, Mary Ehrler said.

"It's like putting a Tinkertoy together," she said. "They give you a book, and it tells you exactly what to do."

She said her husband, who has since died, loved the workshop, mainly because of the barn-like style.

The structure, measuring about 768 square feet, has electricity and a telephone and is heated with propane in the winter.

Today, Mary Ehrler, who often tinkers in the workshop, said she enjoys it as much as he did. "It's beautiful," she said.

According to Prokosch, three out of four Shelter-Kit customers use their buildings as a residence or a second home.

In 1995, one of its best years, the company reported annual sales of about \$250,000.

"We sell a variety, beginning from small cabins to year-round houses," he said.

McCloy combined two cabin kits to create his 640-square-foot studio.

Getting zoning approval was easy, he said. McCloy said he submitted the plans to town zoning officials, who also conducted a site inspection. Kit buildings are designed to meet standard building codes, the company said.



■ Ehrler, shown working in her Barn-House, says the kit saved her about \$20,000.

To complete work on the building, McCloy enlisted the help of an art student who was interested in architecture, a couple of fellow professors and other friends who occasionally pitched in.

The basic structure was completed in about three weeks, he said. One of the most difficult parts of the work, McCloy said, was completing the interior decorations and the wiring.

"Once you get the walls up," he said, "everything else moves fast."