

Tailored trailers: the return of the mobile home

Mobile homes are shaking off their bad reputation thanks to modern designs and chic features. Plus they're a smart choice for cash-strapped buyers, says Laura Latham

Wednesday, 12 August 2009

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The American term “trailer trash” is enough to put anyone off the idea of investing in a mobile home. However, in spite of sniping from across the Atlantic – and closer to home – mobile-home sites in the UK are often a great first choice for financially secure people keen to save money by owning a smaller property.

An estimated 200,000 people own homes on residential caravan sites, many of them are retired, having downsized from larger family homes. Cost is the main reason most people invest in a mobile home and, with starting prices as low as £40,000 for two bedrooms, the attraction is easy to see.

Joanna Ball of the National Association of Park Home Residents (NAPHR) has lived at her site in Warwickshire for 16 years and wouldn't go anywhere else. “I love living in a mobile home,” she says. “It's almost maintenance free and very warm, due to good insulation, which keeps costs down. They're cheaper than bricks-and- mortar properties yet offer as much space as a two-bedroom flat.”

You may not need planning permission to put a mobile home on your land – as long as there's enough space – though they're most commonly situated on dedicated park sites. These offer all the utilities you'll need and sometimes shops and recreation areas. Outgoings include a monthly rent to the owner of the site freehold, which averages around £1,200 per year.

Ball says mobile-home parks can be excellent places to live and offer a secure, ready-made community. However, it's not all rosy: **landowners wield a lot of power over their sites and, it's claimed, often harass and**



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Site for sore eyes: a summer's evening at a caravan park in North Wales

intimidate residents. "The Mobile Home Act of 1983 was supposed to give homeowners security but there's a need for more protection from unscrupulous landowners," says Ball.

Site landlords are also entitled to a 10 per cent commission on the sale of a home but many try to prevent residents selling on the open market. This, says Ball, is because they prefer to sell directly to new residents, getting a chance to renegotiate rents and profit from the entire sale.

Also, most sites are only available to the over-fifties and Ball thinks it's a shame that families and young buyers are so often excluded. "I'm sure mobile homes would appeal to younger people if parks were more accommodating," she says. "They're cheap, comfortable and have the potential to solve housing shortages, so why aren't the authorities exploring them as an option?"

One reason may be that it's impossible to get a mortgage on a mobile home. Instead, you need cash upfront or a bank loan to buy one. The styling of many mobile homes doesn't help attract a younger clientele either. Pastel colours and floral prints abound, as do old-fashioned kitchens and bathrooms. Even high-spec mobiles probably wouldn't win any design awards.

However, former graphic artist Dick Shone wants to change all that. "I became aware of how many people live in mobile homes and thought it might be nice to own one," he says, "but I found the designs very cottagey and retro. I'm 48 and they didn't appeal to me at all. My generation is much more design-savvy and I thought there might be a market for something with a harder edge."

Shone's design replaces traditional flower-boxed, gabled exteriors with sleek, wooden slats and floor-to-ceiling glass. Inside, it's all stripped wood and gloss surfaces, clean lines and contemporary fittings. The minimalist effect wouldn't look out of place in a city-centre hotel. "Contemporary style hasn't moved into the caravan industry," says the designer, who's aiming his product at the residential and holiday sectors.

Shone's homes, which sell through his company Boutique Caravans from £40,000, are also fitted with energy-saving technology and he says there's no reason they couldn't be designed to run off the grid. "These homes are comparable with living in a typical one- or two-bedroom flat," he adds, "once inside, you wouldn't know the difference, except they cost less to buy and run."

Similar work is being done by Guy Little of miniHomes, who sells properties that mix contemporary and traditional design from £50,000. "A large number of clients want to move away from off-the-shelf mobile homes," he says, "they want a caravan that delivers the wow factor."

Aswell as down-sizers, Little receives requests from customers using mobile homes as accommodation for elderly relatives. "Our properties comply to the same building standards as timber- framed bungalows," he says, "but you don't usually need planning permission for caravans."

For those wanting something extremely low-cost, mobile-home retailer Joal Leisure offers new and resale homes from as little as £10,000. Though, naturally, these will be of a far more basic design.

Like Joanna Ball, company MD Alex Jubb feels it's time the Government looked more seriously at the issue of mobile homes as low-cost housing.

"There's a stigma about mobile homes but they're ideal in terms of offering affordable accommodation for all age groups, they're also more sustainable than bricks-and-mortar properties, and in the current climate they make economic and environmental sense."

Boutique Caravans: www.boutiquecaravans.com ; NAPHR: www.naphr.org ; Joal Leisure: 0844 335 0843; www.joalleisure.com ; miniHomes: 01202 290881; www.minihomes.co.uk

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