

"PRE-FAB" SHELTER: SOME POINTS TO CONSIDER

Direct Cost. Pre-fabricated ("pre-fab"), or modular, shelter units are typically quite expensive, both in absolute and relative terms (i.e., versus tents or locally-developed designs). As a consequence, it is difficult to purchase in volume as part of a disaster response.

Indirect Costs. "Pre-fab" costs typically do not include transport, customs, site and service preparation, and set-up costs. These indirect costs can easily double the overall cost of a pre-fab unit. Customs fees collection and processing, for example, are often quite time-consuming, costly, and highly variable. If "time is money," the cost of delay and uncertainty associated with customs and transport must also be factored into decisions on the use of pre-fab housing.

Capital Flight. Pre-fabs are often imported into a disaster area from another country -- and the money needed to pay for the pre-fabs goes in the opposite direction. Rather than benefiting from the investment, the local/regional economy affected by a disaster is robbed of important capital that could circulate within that economy, thereby aiding in the overall resurgence of that economy.

Economic/Employment Impacts. Related to the above, the homebuilding industry generates more employment per dollar invested than just about any other economic activity. This is true only if local materials and local labor are used intensively as part of the homebuilding process. Pre-fabs only require minimal inputs of local labor and materials, so the potential to generate local employment -- and local incomes -- is not achieved when compared to locally produced shelter. Quite the contrary: In many cases, specialized labor has to be imported to set up the pre-fab units. If this is the case, most of the income that specialized laborers earn is sent out of the country, again undermining efforts to revitalize the disaster-affected economy.

Cultural/Social Appropriateness. Use of pre-fab units negates an extremely important function of shelter: the need for family, community, social, and cultural expression. This is not insignificant. If pre-fabs do not meet these needs, they often are poorly maintained and abandoned at far higher rates than locally-based shelter solutions. This can result in higher management and maintenance costs, and additional costs for replacement shelter.

Functional Appropriateness. Given the high per-unit costs, pre-fabs cannot typically be introduced into a disaster area in large numbers. As such, they become a scarce resource relative to other shelter solutions, and one that is often perceived as "modern" and superior to more familiar shelter solutions. Scarcity, particularly in a disaster area, can often generate community-level friction/acrimony between those who receive (pre-fabs) and those who don't. This can often result in a range of complex and time-consuming political and social problems, and ultimately delay shelter provision.

If decisions are made to introduce pre-fabs, and where the potential for a "have-have not" situation is great, pre-fabs should ONLY be used for communal purposes (e.g. as health clinics, classrooms, daycare centers, showers/bathrooms, warming facilities, laundry facilities, eating halls, police posts, government offices, etc.), so that ALL community residents have access to a relatively scarce resource.

Standardization of Output. Related to the point above is the negative effect that pre-fabs have on standardization. By design, pre-fabs are different from several other forms of emergency shelter. In addition, for reasons noted above, they are not typically the standard form of shelter response. When they are introduced into a disaster area, pre-fabs have the effect of undermining the shelter sector standard of output, which can lead to significant and time-consuming discussions among donors and NGOs even before the "have-have not" effects of differential output reach the community level. This can undermine attempts to coordinate donor and NGO strategy, areas of responsibility, and other activities that require organizational coordination, and lead to further delays in shelter provision.