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MAKING CHOICES

Factory-Built Housing and the Politics
of Rural Survival

By Nick Mitchell-Bennett and Dr. Daniel Elkin

FOR GENERATIONS of colonia residents in South Texas, homes were not built. They were assembled out of necessity. A camper trailer became a bedroom. A pallet wall, an expansion. A blue tarp, a roof. Families did what they could with what they had, left out of local planning because their communities were never part of a plan.

Across the country, not being part of the plan is a reality faced by many rural communities. Decades of prioritizing resource extraction over people has left underdeveloped infrastructure and severe housing shortages. Conventional construction methods offer little more than delay, debt, and red tape.

Drawing on our roots, cdcb embraced the adaptability of colonia communities to confront the rural housing crisis. The result was DreamBuild: a volumetric modular housing construction system designed to expand, grow, and flex as needed to meet the needs of the family it houses.

Built to Adapt, Not Just to Code

DreamBuild (formerly MiCASiTA) is a housing system, not just a house. Born out of disaster recovery work in Texas, it evolved from an early “core” design (a single module with the basics: kitchen, bath, sleeping space) into a flexible, modular approach that meets families where they are, and grows with them as finances or family size change.

Homes are built off-site at our manufacturing facility, “The Farm,” then delivered and installed on land owned or secured by the family. Additional modules, like bedrooms, flex spaces, and living rooms can be added later. Everything is built to be energy-efficient, climate-resilient, and designed with community context in mind.

These homes aren’t generic boxes. They are tailored to the land, the lot, the climate, and the culture. The goal is to let families start with what they can afford and expand without being forced into new mortgages, predatory financing, or leaving their community. The flexibility in both form and finance respects the fact that life is unpredictable and that stability should not be a luxury.

Innovation Requires Infrastructure – and Organizing

Because DreamBuild is not a one-off construction, but a system of housing delivery or, even better put, an entirely new infrastructure for the development of housing, we’ve had to fight for every inch of implementation. Done correctly, this process aligns builders, buyers, regulators, and funders around something new. Meaning: The permitting systems had to change. The appraisals had to evolve. The local officials had to think differently about what counts as a house and who counts as a homebuyer. The barriers have been numerous: Zoning codes that ban small homes. Regulations that don’t account for “grow” models. Local contractors unsure how to build off a factory line. We had to retrain the system, and sometimes the workforce, to make room for a new way of doing things.

Texas has been hospitable to industrialized housing and state law protects many of DreamBuild’s innovations by deferring to International Building Codes. That helped, but it wasn’t enough. We needed inspectors willing to come to the factory floor. We needed local governments ready to accept phased growth. That took trust, patience, and a lot of walking people through the model, one box at a time.

Choice, Power, and the Myth of Affordability

Too often, affordable housing means limited choice. You get what you get. A box someone else designed. A floor plan chosen by a developer who never asked your



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opinion. That's not just undignified – it's disempowering. DreamBuild turns that on its head. Through our DreamBuild Designer tool, families can see their options, make choices, and stay within budget. That interaction alone shifts the equation: Rapid intake + rapid development + design choice = affordability and agency.

This isn't just a nicer process. It has real-world effects. People feel ownership before the house is even built. They understand the cost. They plan for growth. And they take pride in what they helped create. We've also worked hard to decouple housing from heavy subsidies. By starting small, we reduce upfront costs. By phasing expansion, we avoid debt traps. In a world where public funding is drying up, this adaptation is essential. It means more families can buy homes with less help, and more of the help that exists can go further.

Not a Prototype. A Movement.

DreamBuild isn't staying put. It's already expanding to Pine Bluff, Ark., Dallas, Tex., and Morehead, Ky. We're building through partnerships with local governments, community organizations, and residents. Each place is different. The permitting laws change. The architecture adapts. But the principles don't.

- **Affordability.** Meet families where they are financially, physically, and emotionally.
- **Resilience.** Build for the climate, not the code.
- **Choice.** Give people the power to design their own home.
- **Dignity.** Stop assuming the poor should be grateful for scraps.

We know the need is massive. We see it every day, not just in South Texas, but across rural America, in every pocket of

persistent poverty this country would rather not talk about. And we know the market isn't going to fix this. Developers chase returns. Banks avoid risk. Traditional builders stick to what they know. That's why models like DreamBuild matter. They give communities a way to build for themselves – faster, smarter, and without waiting for someone else to save them.

Final Words: Shelter and Sovereignty

We don't build homes to check boxes. We build them to shift power. To give people control over their land and their future. To create shelter that reflects who they are, not just what they can afford. To take a system built on exclusion and force it to bend toward a greater good.

There's a political project here, even if we don't always say it that way. When you give people choices about their home, you give them a say in their future. When you cut through permitting delays and predatory loans, you aren't just helping someone buy a house, you're disrupting an entire structure built to keep them out.

DreamBuild is a modular housing model, yes. But more than that, it's a refusal. A refusal to wait. A refusal to settle. Because the people who live in the colonias – and places like them all across rural America – deserve more than a roof. They deserve a future. We're building it.

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