

# Warren Buffett to Offer a Fresh Approach on Modular Construction

DAN AVERY MAY 20, 2021

Danny Forster & Architecture is doubling down on modular: The New York firm has partnered with MiTek Inc., a construction company owned by Warren Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway, on the Modular Activation Platform (MAP), a system designed to clear away some of the obstacles to widespread modular construction. While modular can save time and labor, it isn't foolproof: Shipping ready-made rooms can be prohibitively expensive, and some finished buildings have reported leaks. In addition, the still-rare process runs up against zoning and bureaucratic red tape.

MiTek's solution is to develop flat kits with all the necessary elements that can be easily shipped and assembled on arrival by contractors. The technology could be particularly beneficial as many areas are experiencing a post-COVID real estate boom. "Communities across the country desperately need housing, and that is a need that modular can answer," MiTek vice president for modular Todd Ullom said [in a statement](#). MiTek can clear the red tape, Ullom said, "collaborating with municipal authorities and MWBE-certified contractors to get it done."



The company hopes to turn the construction of each modular home into something akin to Henry Ford's automotive assembly line.

The company intends to automate manufacturing in its Chesterfield, Missouri, factory, turning building construction into something akin to Henry Ford's automotive assembly line. MiTek says MAP will be easy enough for developers and architects, even those with no experience with modular construction, to operate "fearlessly," finally making modular mainstream "half a century after it was first touted as the next great thing." As part of the arrangement, DF&A will lead the design and research efforts alongside MiTek's R&D and new market growth teams.

"We've been at this for a few years," Forster, who recently got approval to build [a skinny modular tower at 570 Market Street](#) in San Francisco, told *AD*. "And not all the buildings we've seen over the last decade or so have always stuck the landing. We realized there needs to be a better, more efficient process." The problem is that while modular construction is intended to circumvent issues, its limited adoption means every project ends

up requiring bespoke innovation. “You’re not adding knowledge from project to project that way,” Forster says.



The space has a clean, minimalist feel to it.

“You find out real quickly there’s a lot of players—insurance companies, designers, lenders, materials testing people. And modular touches them all,” he says. “You have had enthusiastic endorsement in some areas, but not others. Developers are fairly risk-averse and want a good return on their investment. So you’ve got to limit the risk—you’ve got to get cities, testing agencies on board. We’ve got to get stuff standardized so it works for modular. I’ve spent a lot of years on this bumpy ride and right now we’re trying to fix potholes before we start chasing business.” Forster said MiTek would construct rooms for DF&A-designed hotels and apartments, including senior living and affordable housing.



A view of the bathroom leading to the bedroom.

He's eager for more companies to adopt modular construction: "If this is going to be the future, you can't just have one or two businesses do it." But he dismisses concerns that the industry embracing modular construction will lead to cookie-cutter buildings.

"The intent to create is a system for architecture, not an off-the-shelf box that will propagate all over America," Forster said. "[I am] a Harvard-trained architect. We go out of our way to create modular that doesn't look cookie-cutter. It's a system, not an aesthetic."