A house of steel

Since the days when man was living in teepees and lean-tos, he has used wood as the primary support material for his dwellings. But the Age of Steel—which made its mark in office and industrial construction long ago—has penetrated the housing market.

A Lafayette firm, Alumawall Inc., claims to be on the cutting edge of the new era. Alumawall is not the first company to have homes with steel beams and uprights. There are at least three others in the steel-housing business (all based outside Louisiana). The concept itself—with several advantages over wood construction, its proponents say—has been around for at least 10 years.

But Alumawall boasts a design innovation that it hopes will increase the popularity of steel-supported homes and provide a nationwide market for the local firm. It has created a separate company, Dura-Bilt Corp., to take over the marketing of the product as well as the development of new designs and floor plans or refinements to the current design.

Until now, most steel-based home designs were tied to an A-frame-shaped structure—which was alright for those who liked inward slanting walls. Such a design, however, presented obvious problems. It made hanging pictures somewhat difficult and tended to waste space when a couch, for example, could be pushed back only so far toward the wall before crashing up against the slant.

With A-frame homes, “you’re fighting tradition,” says Roger Larivee, general manager of Alumawall and president of Dura-Bilt. “You know, my grandfather lived in a straight-wall house and my father did and who am I to go to something else? It was good enough for them; it’s good enough for me.”

So Alumawall engineers and designers began the search for a steel-frame house that would have a traditional look and a price competitive with other homes.

They churned out numerous sketches and models to find the uprights and beams with the proper size and strength to support steel-frame modules that could be fit together in various combinations: a one-story house, a two-story house, a module on top of another; a long ranch-style home, a two-story house (one module on top of another), a long ranch-style home (two modules beside each other), a townhouse setting, homes with carports, homes without carports and so on.

Over the steel frame can be fashioned most of the traditional building materials, like plywood, wood or vinyl siding, drywall and paneling. On top of the house goes a corrugated metal roof, replacing the traditional shingles.

The various non-steel building materials can be connected to the frame using either screws or nails driven by a power hammer.

Dura-Bilt, however, does not plan to do the actual