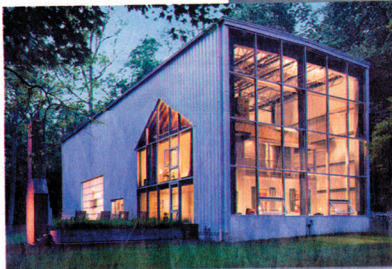


WEEKEND JOURNAL.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Upwardly Mobile Homes

Can a prefabricated house be 'architecture'? Nancy Ann Jeffrey and Nancy Keates on the push to turn houses that come on trucks into objets d'art.



WHEN PETER JELSMa and Julie Pena decided to build a new house, they wanted something out of the ordinary. So they hired a pair of award-winning Manhattan architects who designed a sleek wedge of a home with cool touches such as floor-to-ceiling glass walls and bedrooms that spill onto a terrace. "It's very modern," Mr. Jelsma says.

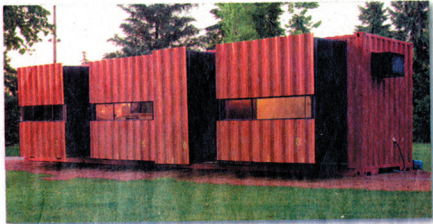
But he's keeping quiet about it with the neighbors, since the house is coming delivered on a truck. It's actually a "prefab" design, which Mr. Jelsma expects to raise some eyebrows in his suburban Nashville, Tenn., neighborhood. At some level, he says, "It's going to be a bunch of fancy mobile homes put together."

One of the biggest debates in architecture is whether prefabricated homes are the new

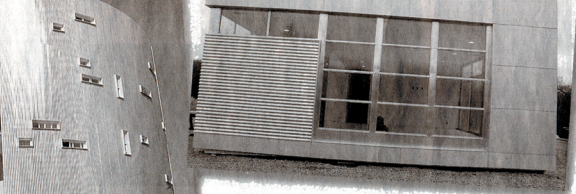
cutting edge of design—or a flimsy platform for aspiring Frank Gehrys to make their mark. Instant homes are increasingly going high-style with geometric shapes, flowing interiors and lots of steel and glass, in the process attracting some renowned young architects across the country. They include Jennifer Siegal (her "Swellhouse" has walls finished with recycled newspaper) and Rocio Romero, who offers a recreational "tree house" for grown-ups. Established builders are getting into this, too, with one hiring the architect who did Bill Gates's mansion.

Overall, upscale designs are now 10% of the \$8.5 billion modular-home market, five times the share a decade ago, according to Fred Hallahan, a modular-home consultant in Baltimore, with some selling for more than \$1 million.

The house-in-a-box push isn't entirely surprising in an era when Kmart is offering Martha Stewart bedding (indeed, Ikea has sold more than a thousand "BoKlok" prefab homes in Europe). But winning over the mainstream is another matter. At *Architectural Digest*, the bible for design mavens, editor Paige Rense (*Please Turn to Page W8*)



Upwardly Mobile Homes



David Neuman

Continued from Page W1
says prefab isn't on her radar. "Architects I talk with never mention it," she says. In New York, award-winning architect Alexander Gorlin says he hasn't been very impressed with what he's seen, citing many prefab designs to VW Bugs stylish but carrying the stigma of mass production. And for Robert A.M. Stern, dean of Yale's architecture school, the plans may be "witty and interesting," but the avant-garde details (corrugated, silver-toned walls, for example) make them a tough sell as real-world homes. People "like their houses to look handcrafted," he says. In fact, prefabs can look every bit as handcrafted as homes built with studs. While there are some limits (materials must be tough enough to endure those long truck rides), pre-

"I feel like we're investing in a new designer," says one buyer of a prefab home by Jennifer Siegal.

fabs can be styled as anything from Colonial to Mediterranean, with brick or stone finishes added on without much fuss. But the looks getting all the buzz tend to have boxy designs or space-age duds, and the explanation is simple: the architectural conceit of having structures honest about how they're made. They're "making a statement" by trying to reflect the high-tech building process with a sleek minimalism, says Sarah Susanka, author of the best-selling book "The Not So Big House." Still, many designers are trying to lose the downscale connotation by ditching the word prefab for fancier terms such as "modular architecture" or "modular construction."

Computer-Design Methods

Designers, of course, have been fascinated by mass-produced homes ever since the industrial revolution made them possible, and Sears, Roebuck's mail-order kit houses from the early 1900s still sit in the landscape. But even at first, they were associated more with a look-alike approach than sophisticated style. Indeed, one famous use of prefabs came in the planned community of Levittown on New York's Long Island, which for many is an emblem of the drawbacks to cookie-cutter developments. Even masters such as Frank Lloyd Wright and Buckminster Fuller (who wanted his round aluminum homes to be manufactured and easily shipped) have tried to instill great designs in premade products. But the concept has never caught on with the public. "Every generation tries it," says Frank Tinker, a computer historian at the University of Pittsburgh and author of "Falling-Water Rising." "And every generation fails."

But the new crop of prefab architects insists things are different now. For starters, in an era when constructing a house on time and within budget keeps getting tougher, instant homes can go up twice as fast and save as much as 30% compared with a traditionally built home. It isn't one-size-fits-all anymore,

Instant homes: William Massie's 'Big Sky' design in Montana (above); Rocio Romero's busy house (top right); interior of a home by Adam Kalikin on exhibit (below).

either, thanks to modern computer-design methods that let architects vary the prefab houses the way Lego blocks can be moved around. More than that, though, architects think the new avant-garde looks can win over upscale buyers craving a touch of high design for their abodes.

That was a big draw for television producer Michelle Nader and her screenwriter husband Matthew Drake. They pride themselves on their sense of style (she wears Marc Jacobs and shops at Fred Segal in West Hollywood), but in months of house-hunting saw one ordinary design after another. Then they spotted a photo of a prefab house by Ms. Siegal, who favors angular, glassy styles and has been honored by Harvard, among others, for innovative designs. Ms. Nader and Mr. Drake were sold, opting for a three-bedroom model with a big, open living space that will go up in the Los Peñas section of Los Angeles. Total cost (including the land): \$900,000. "I feel like we're investing in a new designer," Ms. Nader says.

A lot of architects are counting on that kind of allure. Because most prefab homes aren't actually built until a customer places an order,

The Fabulous Prefab

Below, a sampling of architects across the country who have begun offering prefabricated homes.

NAME	FEATURES	COMMENT
Resolution: 4 Architecture New York www.r4a.com	Floor-to-ceiling glass, rooms that merge into open-air decks.	At \$250,000 to \$500,000 for a 2,000-square-foot home, these are some of the pricier prefabs. It takes two days to assemble one, but three months before it's move-in ready.
Jennifer Siegal Office of Mobile Design Venice, Calif. www.designmobile.com	Use of dyed, environmentally friendly bamboo flooring.	Ms. Siegal's work is on display at the Smithsonian's Cooper Hewitt, National Design Museum in New York. Her 720-square-foot "Turtleneck House" arrives fully assembled.
Rocio Romero Perryville, Mo. www.rociromero.com	Rectangular box shape.	The 32-year-old architect built her first prefab home in Chile for her parents. Latest project, "Fish Carp," is a \$20,000 back-to-nature retreat.
William Massie Log, N.Y. www.massiearchitecture.com	Curving lines, building on an around rocks, mountains.	Next project: A "challenging," 3,000-square-foot home to be built within the rim of a canyon in Wyoming.
LO-EX New York www.lo-ex.com	Use of large-scale industrial objects such as water tanks.	Talk about a tight fit: The "mobile dwelling unit" is a 550-square-foot house made out of a shipping container. (It does include windows.)
Adam Kalikin Barnardville, N.J. www.architectadam.com hygiene.com	Use of discarded shopping containers in Quik-Build kit.	An architect with a sense of humor, Mr. Kalikin is an artist whose Web site features a \$1-a-minute telephone confession. His work appears next month at New York's trendy Design Project Gallery.
Cutter Anderson Architects Bainbridge Island, Wash. www.cutteranderson.com	Lots of glass; energy-efficient.	James Cutler, known for his work on Bill Gates's home, insists that prefab manufacturers guarantee architects can customize each side. Assembly time is expected to fall between five and nine months to accommodate clients.
Anderson Anderson Seattle, San Francisco www.andersonanderson.com	Striped, modular design; rectangular shapes.	Architects started diving deep in Japan a decade ago. Price range varies widely from \$100,000 to \$1 million.



putting out a design can be a relatively cheap way for ambitious architects to make a splash. They are seen likely to get sucked into contractor hustles, either, because relatively little work is needed on-site—one architect supplies an in-house video for workers. And with Michael Graves selling his designs as Target (no-brainer), but the chain does offer a Graves gazebos), there isn't much stigma for playing to mainstream consumers—quite the opposite, in fact. Architect Peter Anderson, of Anderson Architecture in San Francisco and Seattle, says he first got into prefab when clients in Japan wanted cost-saving methods, but after seeing more interest in the U.S., the firm began selling them here. "I'm excited about how it opens up new design options," he says.

But not every architect working in the field

is so enthusiastic. For James Cutler, who designed the famed abode for Mr. Gates, Microsoft's chairman, a deal with a company called Lindal Cedar Homes to design a wood-and-glass modernist house for prefabrication has been a "struggle." Mr. Cutler says the idea of prefab goes against his belief that every building should be generated in response to its setting and then fitted to mesh with the landscaping. He compromised, allowing his name to go on the project only if his firm had an opportunity to ensure each site was customized. Homeowners can wind up enduring some bumps, too. For one, buyers need to have somewhat adventurous tastes, because most high-end architects' designs can be pretty eye-catching. The wait to hire in-demand architects can be months. Then, for all the sup-

posed convenience, it isn't unheard-of for those in-a-box jobs to run late or over budget. The prefab route also means giving up a lot of the flexibility of building a traditionally built house, though architects are finding some ways to accommodate clients.

'Like a Grand Plan'

Donna and Christopher Evans of Jeffers, Mont., wanted to architect William Massie after a professor friend told them it was going to change architecture as much as Frank Lloyd Wright, "but they didn't like his first design. He went back to the drawing board, and he came back with a winner: a 2,500-square-foot addition to their existing homestead with a curving side and roof that swoops from 26 feet high to just 6 feet. "From the front, it looks like a grand plan," says Mrs. Evans, an artist who works in stained glass.

Even if some designers aren't convinced, more high-end prefabs are on the way. At the residential architecture firm of architect Donald Rattner is working on designs for high-end modular homes in Fairfield County, Conn. And in one sign of how the movement is playing to a high-tech sensibility, Microsoft recently recruited Ms. Siegal to appear in an advertisement for sleek tablet computers. Mark Podiasack and his partner, Steve Bryant, are already sold. Mr. Podiasack, a 46-year-old researcher for International Business Machines, and Mr. Bryant, a 34-year-old doctor, wanted a prefab design that would look distinctive in their Connecticut neighborhood. They found it in a home by Mr. Massie with a funky, V-shaped roof that "reels like a Salvador Dali" clock toward a nearby rocky outcropping. Says Mr. Podiasack: "It's extraordinary."