

# THE ARCHITECTS

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DWELL PREFAB HOME WINNER  
NEARS COMPLETION

## Unpacking Prefab

Contemporary design has made its mark on almost every facet of mass-manufactured goods in competitive consumer economies—from toothbrushes to furniture to cars. The exception, of course, is the house, despite the efforts of progressive architects over the past century to devise the domestic equivalent of a Volkswagen auto or an Eames chair.

Architects and the general public have not given up on the promise of prefab. Just over a year ago, *Dwell* magazine organized a competition for a prefabricated house for a couple, Nathan Wieler and Ingrid Tung, who

pledged to build the winning entry. The only limits were a budget of \$200,000 and size of 2,000 square feet. The winning scheme, a 2-bedroom, 2.5-bath home by New York firm Resolution:4 Architecture, began design development last June and is scheduled for completion this July. True to type, the bulk of the house's construction—comprised of five modular pieces—required only two weeks in the factory to fabricate. Gaining familiarity with fabrication, complying with state and local building codes, and dealing with general contractors constituted the project's greatest hurdles, consuming nearly ten months of the process. The house's assembly on its rural site, in Pittsboro, North Carolina, began in April. The house is coming in on budget, though with concessions (like cheaper fixtures), which the clients and architects accept as part of the endeavor's R&D.

Resolution: 4 Architecture's winning *Dwell* home is made of five modular parts



Many of the *Dwell* contest's 13 other finalists have also had some success with their prefab designs in the last year though are grappling with the same issues that mass-production-minded architects tried to balance for the last century: function, affordability, and value.

Custom, architect-designed homes average about \$400 to 500 per square foot, compared the \$150 to 200 per square foot that many of these designer prefab houses are

hitting. Ron Radziner, partner in Los Angeles firm Marmol Radziner + Associates, whose design costs about \$200 per square foot, was quick to point out that prefab may not be for everyone. "It's certainly not the least expensive option, which is the manufactured home," he said. New York's kOnyk architecture devised two models of prefab houses, one at 1,200 square feet and \$250,000, and another at 1,500 square feet and \$300,000.

Naturally, the expectation is that prices will drop once the design/

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Marmol Radziner + Associates' Desert Home (left)  
and KOnvk architecture's UpiHouse (right)

fabrication processes become more accepted and implemented. *Dwell* client Wieler's eponymous company, which builds and develops architect-designed houses, is now marketing two versions of Minneapolis-based Ralph Rapson & Associates' Greenbelt home (another *Dwell* finalist), and has managed to find a factory in North Carolina to produce the units at \$100 to 125 per square foot.

Certainly, designer prefab has been steadily attention. Resolution: 4 Architecture has sold 13 of its

prefab homes, all following the modular design typologies explored in its original *Dwell* submission. Another finalist, Rocio Romero, based in Perryville, Missouri, sold three of his 1,150-square-foot LV Homes. And both Radziner and Konyk said they received hundreds of inquiries following the competition, including some serious possibilities. Observed Konyk, "Designer-prefab houses are a natural outgrowth of Internet commerce, where you order something today and have it on your doorstep tomorrow."



Despite the seeming spike in interest, however, architects have a long way to go to claim the 95 percent of the built environment that isn't designed by them. Hopefully the "design for the masses" attitudes of Ikea, Design Within Reach, Target, and *Dwell*, which have been raising design awareness among the general public and making designer items more accessible to a wider consumer base, will extend beyond the stuff that fill our houses, to our very houses themselves. **JAMES WAY**

