

Bpd

Blueprint directory

Out of The Box Unpacking the concept of prefab
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FEB/MARCH 2006

ART + DESIGN + ARCHITECTURE + REAL ESTATE

NUMBER 1

THE ART OF CASTING SHADOWS

Kreon introduces Americans to a new way of looking at lighting

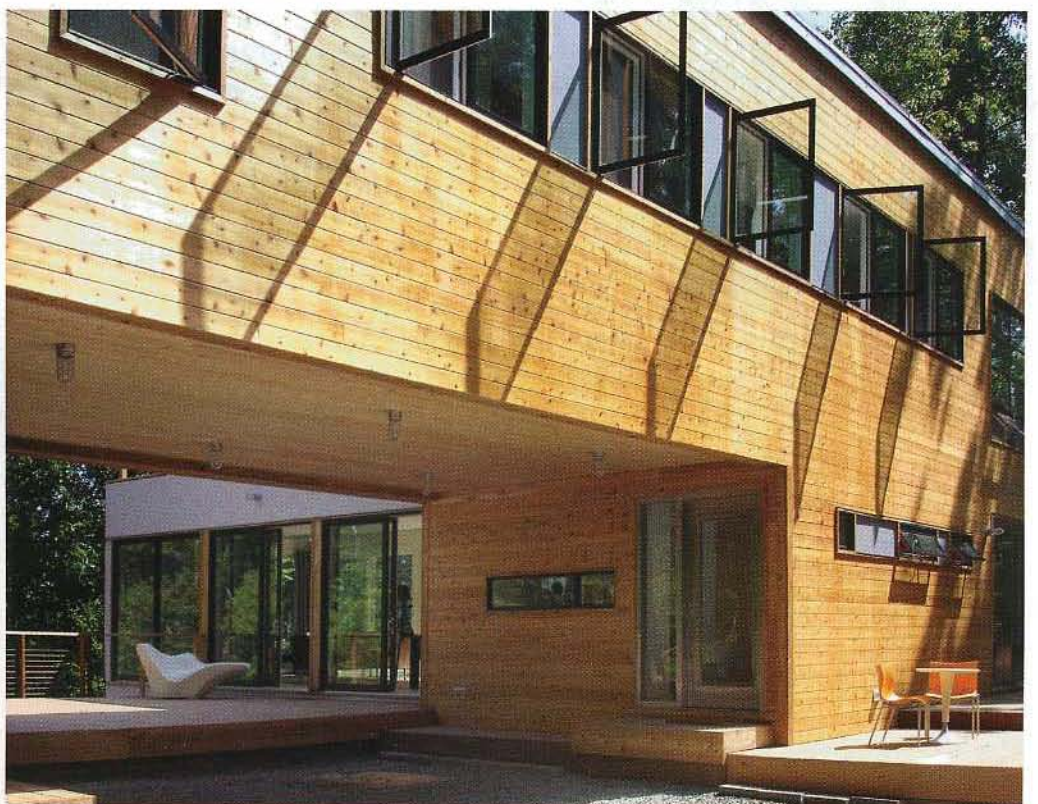
From 1908 to 1940, Sears Roebuck offered its House by Mail, a ready-to-build assortment of 30,000 pieces—everything from lumber to roof shingles to paint.

The search for the perfect prefab was not limited to middlebrow retailers. In the mid-1930s, Frank Lloyd Wright developed the Usonian House, an affordable, modern-style home that used prefab elements and was both environmentally friendly and cost-conscious: It was the first house to use steam heat radiating from steel pipes embedded in the foundation, eliminating the need for inefficient radiators; exteriors composed of glass, wood, and brick made paint unnecessary.

In the 1950s, near the end of his life, Wright introduced the Usonian Automatic, consisting of three-inch-thick modular blocks that could be assembled in a variety of ways and secured with steel rods and grout. Wright's do-it-yourself "automatic" house proved to be anything but—as assembly was so complicated that most buyers had to hire builders to do the actual construction, a concession that ate up any money that might have been saved by choosing a Usonian over a standard, "stick-built" house.

At the same time, other prefabs—most notably, the houses of Levittown, Long Island—were assailed as cookie-cutters that encouraged social conformity. Prefab became a bad word in the American lexicon (though not in Japan and Europe, where the practice has flourished since the post-World War II era). While there are still dozens of modular-housing manufacturers in the United States, they account for roughly less than three percent of new housing starts nationwide.

Can the current crop of prefabs overcome the stigma? Certainly, there are still some drawbacks to being the first on your block to own a prefab. For one thing, even the new prefabs still favor heartier, do-it-yourself types. (If you think assembling a stereo on Christmas morning is hard, you may want to think twice before tackling *a house*). For another, the mostly ultra-modernist designs don't exactly blend in with traditional neighborhoods; it is perhaps not a coincidence that Romero's



Resolution:4 Architecture's prefab home design, winner of a 2002 competition sponsored by Dwell magazine.