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Prefab: Don't Ask, Don't Tell?



Is this house part of what a recent *Wall Street Journal* article described as “the push to turn houses that come on trucks into objets d’art” or, as manufacturer Royal Homes suggests, is it just a house that responds to the belief that “not only the very rich should be able to afford a home designed with great flair and skill by a great architect”?

A few weeks ago my husband, Bryan, and I headed out of town for a quick weekend getaway. We’d driven by this place up north a few times while it was under construction and we wanted to see how things had turned out. The resort is comprised of a series of individual cottages grouped on the landscape; inside, each has the full gamut of the expected boutique hotel accoutrements: concrete fireplace, radiant heating, Frette linens, HDTV, and the like. We were of course happy to take all this in, but what practically brought tears of joy to our eyes was the fact that this place is prefab! Each cottage is a cute little factory manufactured module, a fact all but erased by the superior finishing work and quality materials. Here was a project that had achieved all that we’d set out to change with our book, *Prefab*, and with the Dwell Home Design Invitational. I couldn’t wait to get back to the office and write about this project for the magazine.

My inquiries, however, were met with awkward responses from the developer, publicist, and architect. Turns out they were dead set against me publishing the fact that the project—no matter how high end the finished product—is prefab.

I was taken aback by the resort’s response, though not entirely surprised. Despite tremendous advances in new

technology, the rapid expansion of an amazingly creative movement in prefab design, the continuing media blitz, and an eager market of would-be modern prefab homebuyers, the stigma of prefab persists.

But there are more and more exciting new projects emerging that do their part in reinventing what prefab is, and what it can become. In Toronto, Canada, the modular custom builder Royal Homes is launching the Q series of modernist modular homes this spring that offer “six hundred and twenty square feet of efficient, modern design with two bedrooms, tons of storage, all of the necessities and a few of the niceties of life.” The homes, designed by Kohn Shnier Architects, are a green product and can be factory built in just three weeks.

In Minnesota, architects David Salmela and Tim Alt and landscape architect Shane Coen have teamed up to design Mayo Woodlands, a 470-acre housing development on land owned by the Mayo Clinic family, which features high-end custom homes that incorporate prefabricated wall panels for cost reduction, environmental benefit, and speed of assembly. The first house was completed late last year. Kieran Timberlake Architects just published a mass-customization manifesto, *Refabricating Architecture: How Manufacturing Methodologies Are Poised to Transform Building Construction*, which celebrates “the ability to differentiate, to distinguish architecture based on site, use and desire . . . resulting in a more sustainable architecture.”

Our own Dwell Home, stalled by factory delays over the holidays, is back on track, with modules scheduled to be installed onsite in North Carolina on April 5. And the Dwell Home architects, Resolution: 4 Architecture, have nine new prefab projects on the boards. “We’re hearing from people who wouldn’t have even considered the possibility that they could get a modern home designed by an architect,” explains Res 4 partner Robert Lutz.

The question remains: Can custom modular construction and mass customization bring prefab to a higher plane, clearing the way for people to get the dream house they actually dream about? We’re optimistic. As *Architectural Record* reported recently, “There are problems to solve [with prefabrication] but they no longer appear to be deal killers . . . the force of a gathering storm of architectural talent and imagination does seem to have the makings of a movement.”

Speaking of that dream house, when I finally get my own modern prefab, the kitchen is going to have to be great. The kitchens in this issue have already got me dreaming about what it might look like and I hope it inspires you to do the same. ■

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