

PREFAB FABULOUS

Forget trailer parks. The new wave of factory-made housing is high-tech, stylish and eco-friendly.

IGNORE THE FACT that some of these homes look like the high-school portable where you failed calculus. This could be your future. At least that's the hope of a handful of architects and home builders bent on modernizing "prefab"—factory-made housing that failed repeatedly in the last century to push aside standard, site-built homes in North America.

Made mainly of glass and steel and equipped with eco-friendly technologies, these houses are nothing like the mail-order home kits once sold out of Sears, Roebuck catalogues or the cookie-cutter Victorians and Tudors most prefab manufacturers peddled in the past. "A major strike against prefabrication has always been aesthetic," says Avi Friedman, an

architecture professor at McGill University and a high-profile advocate of prefab. "Unfortunately, in North America, the trailer was the largest prefab success, so that's always the first thing people think of."

Recently, however, some Canadian and American designers have finally managed to marry style and substance in prefab homes aimed at people who seek both sleek looks and modern convenience. Royal Homes Ltd. has been building modular housing for 32 years, but the Wingham, Ont., company is now taking its first stab at modernist style with the Royal Q series, designed by Toronto's Kohn Shnier Architects. The 620-sq.-foot unit (there will also be an 850-sq.-foot unit), with a price tag of \$140,000, is built entirely in the company's state-of-the-art factory. "By keeping production indoors, the materials stay dry," says Martin Kohn, the project's chief architect, "and measurements are much more precise." Theft, damage and waste during assembly are also eliminated by the controlled environment. "Our homes are driven to the site in one or more pieces, lifted from the truck by a crane and hooked

up to utilities like water and electricity in a day," says Lloyd Alter, an architect who manages Royal Homes' Toronto office. All of which, he says, translates into higher quality and better value for the buyer.

One of the key selling points of the new wave of prefab is the attention to environmental sustainability and energy efficiency. Consider the Glidehouse, designed by San Francisco architect Michelle Kaufmann: its choice of flooring includes bamboo (which is more plentiful and easier to grow than hardwood) and the home can be powered by solar panels or a wind generator. Royal Homes, which markets the Glidehouse here, has yet to sell a modern prefab in Canada, but the category is so new the company is still working on a demo model.

Considering their good looks and reasonable prices, why haven't style-conscious urbanites been clamouring for such modular designs before? For starters, you need to find land on which to put the units, which range in size from bachelor-apartment size to more than 2,000 sq. feet, and that is both tricky and very expensive in cities. For that



Look, ma, no wheels! Clockwise from top left: Glidehouse is all sliding doors and windows; Dwell Home, a contest-winning modular house; weeHouse can expand with extra modules; the two-bedroom Royal Q.

reason, they are primarily being marketed as cottages or country homes.

Then there's the negative public perception of prefab—a kind of trailer-park backlash. The latter is something Allison Arieff, editor-in-chief of *Dwell* magazine and co-author of a book on the new prefab style, has trouble understanding. "A Porsche is built in a factory and no one says, 'Oh God, my Porsche is factory-built,'" she says. "This is the best way to build a home. In Japan and parts of Europe, there is no stigma attached to prefab—it's all about economies of scale and efficiency."

Friedman agrees that North Americans could learn from how Sweden and Japan, two of the world's prefab heavyweights, do things when it comes to housing. "In Japan, they assemble homes wearing white jackets and white gloves," he says. "They regard homes as industrial-design products. We view them as construction products."

In the end, money is the determining factor for most consumers, and Friedman's own research indicates there are currently no savings to going prefab because the slow sales on this continent are depriving manufacturers of economies of scale. Still, he thinks record-high housing prices may result in a spike in prefab buying over the next decade, predicting a jump from the current 5 per cent to 10 per cent of all homes in North America to upwards of 35 per cent. If that happens, next time you move you may be able to take your house with you.