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Prefab houses get designer touch

By Patricia Ward Biederman
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Nancy Hanover and Gerardo Reyes had obtained permits to add a conventional bedroom/retreat to their 1923 bungalow when they happened to read a newspaper article last spring about a prefab called Glidehouse.

Taking its name from its gliding glass wall, the environmentally sensitive design by San Francisco architect Michelle Kaufmann is made of 14-foot-wide factory-built modules that come with plumbing, wiring, storage and wooden screens in the Japanese shoji style.

Hanover and Reyes, California elementary school teachers who say they are modernists at heart, loved the "economical beauty" of its design, at a price - about $200 a square foot - that they could afford.

"We're very interested in spaces, but we are also working people," Hanover says.

They chose the unorthodox, building a 573-square-foot modern prefab add-on to their classic craftsman-style house.

Dozens of architects and designers are experimenting with prefab, helping rid it of its associations with double-wides and the look-alike boxes of Levittown.

Modern prefab housing has been popular in Europe for decades (increasingly so, thanks to IKEA and other sponsors), but the new surge in interest in the United States can be traced to January 2003.

That's when San Francisco-based Dwell magazine announced a competition, inviting 16 architects and designers to design a forward-looking prefab house with a budget of no more than $200,000. This summer, the prototype of the winning Dwell home, designed by Joseph Tanney and Robert Lutz of the New York firm Resolution: 4 Architecture was unveiled in Pittsboro, N.C.

"We ended up buying every bottle of water in the county," says Dwell Editor-in-Chief Allison Arieff, who expected 500 visitors at the sweltering site and got 2,500.

Visual literacy

Michael Sylvester, an architect and business consultant who created a Web site, www.fabprefab.com, sees the prefab frenzy as a function of growing visual literacy in the United States.

Trained by exposure to modern objects such as the iPod and the reborn Volkswagen Beetle, people want reasonably priced houses that reflect their tastes and reflect well on them.

"There are a lot of people out there who are wide-eyed and excited about this idea," Sylvester says. "They feel like they're design-savvy and design-aware" but see little, if anything, they want and can afford in the conventional real estate market.

Popular culture reinforces their craving for products that reflect midcentury modernism.

"Look at commercials and films today. You see the visual language of success at the moment is modernism," Sylvester says.

'Not a new idea'

Prefab housing in the United States is "not a new idea," says Jennifer Siegal of the Office of Mobile Design in Venice, Calif., an architect who created the two-story Swell House, fashioned from prefab steel modules. "It's an idea that's been out there, but it's being reinvented."

Prefab predates the Declaration of Independence. Seventeenth-century religious dissenters sailed from England with Bibles, black clothing and houses that had been taken apart to be reassembled in the New World.

House kits were shipped to prospectors in California during the 1849 Gold Rush. Thousands of people ordered kit homes, even apartment buildings, from the Sears catalog and other sources during the first few decades of the 20th century.

The mail-order house was delivered to the closest railroad station in thousands of pieces, and owners could put it together themselves, piece by numbered piece.

Today's prefab has its roots in the Airstream trailer, World War II Quonset huts, the Case Study houses and such quirky attempts to streamline construction and shelter the masses as the metal-clad postwar Lustron homes.

"It's very in keeping with the [Machine Age] ideal of Modernism," says Virginia Postrel, author of The Substance of Style (HarperCollins, 2003), "using technology and manufacturing innovation to produce good design that is available to a mass market."

The Target discount store chain has entered the fray. Designer Michael Graves is offering three prefab "pavilions" of varying degrees of modernity through the chain. Costing $10,000 to $26,000, the customizable kits are produced by Lindal Cedar Homes and can be used for such things as offices and guest rooms.

On a smaller scale, dozens of young architects are beginning to market prefab dwellings to buyers starved for good, affordable, environmentally sensitive designs, an audience that can be characterized as having more taste than money.

The design of Kaufmann, the San Francisco architect, has such amenities as concrete counters, bamboo floors, low-organic-compound paint and an on-demand tankless water heater.

Artist-designer Michael Jantzen created what he calls M-vironments. He is finishing a steel-and-concrete house near Gorman, Calif., with a frame consisting of seven 8-foot interlocking steel cubes on which he has hung rectangular panels of different sizes, some containing insulation.

Jantzen's M-house looks like a gigantic futuristic toy. He sees it as a playful, habitable sculpture that is more puzzle than traditional residence.

The structure, which can be reconfigured, is a possible prototype for a kit of recyclable parts that "could be put together a thousand different ways. As I change, I may want my space to change as well. That traditionally has been very hard to do."

Even the high-end architecture firm Marmol Radziner and Associates is experimenting with prefab. Partner Leo Marmol is building a vacation house for himself out of prefab steel modules on 5 acres in Desert Hot Springs, Calif. It could be the prototype for a prefab house that the Los Angeles firm might be able to offer for less than $200 a square foot.

"There's no question that there's huge local interest," says Marmol, who has received many phone calls from eager potential clients.

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