

Prefab 2.0

Is prefab housing ready for primetime?

BY HEATHER BOERNER

Judging by magazines, museums and word of mouth, you might think we were in a prefab housing Golden Age.

You'd be wrong — but not by much. Yes, prefab housing is getting more attention than it has for decades. And yes, beautiful prefab homes are on display at museums and design exhibitions. But just because they've built them doesn't mean homeowners are coming in droves. Instead, only about 100 homeowners live in prefab homes in the U.S., says Joseph Tanney, architect with Resolution: 4 Architecture, the NYC firm which designed the Dwell House, a custom prefab originally built for a *Dwell* magazine design competition.

Most of the homes that have been built belong to early adopters — “people who take pride in the fact that they overpaid for something that's slightly broken,” joked Michelle Kaufman, designer of the Sunset Breezhouse and of the Smart House on display now at the Chicago Museum of Science and Industry. “Kind of like the first iPhones.”

But that could soon change. Seattle recently approved construction of the first prefab apartments and Kaufmann has designed affordable prefab townhouses and single-family homes for projects in Denver and San Leandro, California.

To find out just who's living in prefab today, we talked to homeowners Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, Chicago and New York. All hoped prefab would be the design, construction and green solution for them. Was it? Read on. >>





PHOTOS: BOB COSCARELLI

The Academic

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

Prefab is an interesting idea and like any good academic, Chris Conley wanted to put the theory to a test. So when he and his family set out to build a weekend home in Libertyville, they decided to be their own guinea pigs.

Three years, a few architects and considerable research later, what Conley has ended up with is a loft-like home with radiant heat and concrete floors. Outside, Conley cultivates a vegetable garden. He's planning to tear out the lawn and replace it with more sustainable prairie grasses.

Everyone's favorite part of the house is a small room with a skylight and view through the awning windows that makes it feel like a greenhouse.

"It can be overcast and raining hard, or it can be sunny and cozy," says Conley. "You can watch the seasons change in that room, and with each change in season, the room has a different feel."

Because he started building before many of the prefab homes on the market today were available for manufacture and purchase, Conley went with his own design.

"Prefab is definitely still in the early adoption phase," says Conley, a professor at the Chicago Institute of Design and founding partner of gravitytank, an innovation consulting firm. "The prefab options are much better than they were four years ago. The LV house, Michelle Kaufman's designs, the Blue Dot flat pack, the weeHouse — these haven't come and gone. They've come and stayed. But it will take 10 years for them to really become established."

The Techie

VENICE, CALIFORNIA

If, as prefab designer Jennifer Siegal suggests, prefab homeowners are adventurers and innovators, Scott Lahman is the movement's poster child. A former video game designer and mobile technology buff, Lahman loves all things ingenious.

"Scott likes to be cutting edge, be in on the next big trends for building and business," says wife Lori Lahman. "Now that the house is done, he gets a lot of cache from his friends for living in a prefab house."

Today, the couple shares their 3,300 square foot Siegal-designed house with two children, two dogs, two cats and other animals Lori rescues. For her, the open design and flexibility are essentials. So, too, was another requirement: "It couldn't be so precious or so expensive that muddy paws couldn't run through it without making me panic."

The one-story house has turned out to be the home of their dreams. The house came out on time and on budget. They didn't want to destroy a perfectly good 1,000 square foot building on the property, so they integrated it into the house. They installed bamboo flooring and slow-drip faucets, and used low VOC paint.

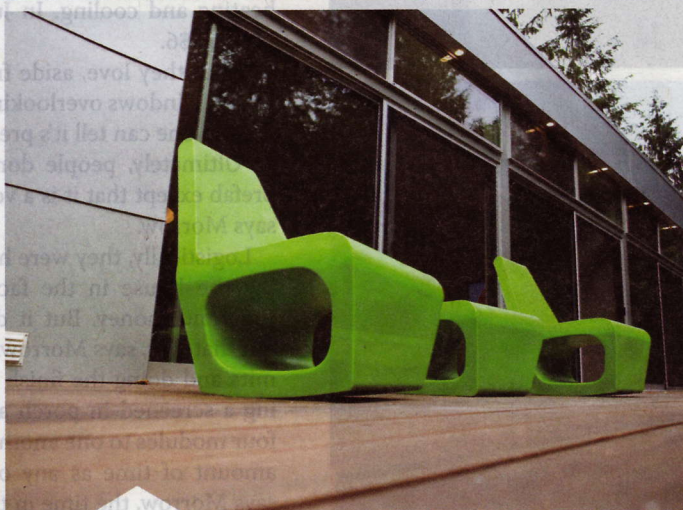
Now there are just a few green touches left.

"In LA, front yards aren't used," says Lahman. "The nice setback on the house leaves a tremendous space for gardening — planting tomatoes, basil and garlic."



To check out more of the Venice prefab home, go to LIME.com.





The Developer SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

As a commercial real estate developer, Jim Bowen has an eye for construction trends. He was so convinced prefab was the future that he and his partner Bill Shepherd bought some land on Whidbey Island to try one out.

But if his experience is any example, prefab may not yet be ready for prime time.

It wasn't the manufacturing of the LVL house by Rocio Romero that was the problem. Indeed, the kit to build it came quickly and efficiently. But when it came time to hire local contractors to put the house together, costs nearly doubled.

"The windows, the roofing, the framing, the plumbing, the electrical — every single area went over budget," says Bowen. "We thought, all in, the cost would be around \$250 per square

foot. It's probably now closer to \$350 per square foot. It may be even be as high as \$400 per square foot."

Local labor, a hot real estate market and permit delays dragged the process out for three years. Then the couple moved to Singapore for Shepherd to take a job. Bowen has been commuting to China for work. They've only spent two weeks in the house.

Still, Bowen is in love.

"It's incredible," he says. "It's 10 acres surrounded by a 200 acre property. You really feel like you're alone in the woods. It's such a great feeling to be totally connected — I can sit there with my cell phone and wireless Internet and have a video conference call with China on my deck using Skype. That was the idea, to remain connected, work remotely and get away from the cities."



The Modernists

NEW YORK CITY

If Tim Morrow and Kevin Callahan were going to build their Hamptons vacation house, it would have to be as open as their Manhattan loft and as headache-free to construct as possible.

With their newly constructed prefab second home by Resolution: 4 Architecture, they're certain they got the former. But the latter? They're not sure.

"The big thing we were looking for was that modern look," says Morrow. "That's what I think separates these new prefab homes from older iterations."

Indeed, their home, completed in July, is a sleek two-story dwelling with a green edge. The house features solar and geothermal heating and cooling. In July, their electric bill was \$6.

What they love, aside from the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking Peconic Bay, is that no one can tell it's prefab.

"Ultimately, people don't sense that it's prefab except that it is a very simple space," says Morrow.

Logistically, they were hoping that building the house in the factory would save time and money. But it didn't quite work out that way, says Morrow. Getting the permits and doing the finish work, like building a screened-in porch and attaching the four modules to one another, took the same amount of time as any other house. But, says Morrow, the time in the factory makes the house stand out from its stick-built neighbors.

"I've observed stick-built houses in our neighborhood that started sooner than ours, and they're still under construction," said Morrow. "But in the end, I don't know. I'd have to do it all over again to really know if prefab is anything unique."



The High-Style Connoisseurs

SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA

Glenn Haney, 80, and Wing Yu, 47, are used to not sparing any expense to make their home beautiful. Three years ago, the couple had just renovated their Twin Peaks neighborhood house completely. So when they decided to build a Sunset Breezhouse, they knew they'd go all out.

"We wanted high-quality and enduring style," says Haney. "What we weren't prepared for was the quality of the house. I have built several houses and this is by far the best qual-

ity home I've ever lived in. It's fabulous. When you build on-site, there's little quality control. The individual contractors are all supposed to do their jobs, but the overall aesthetic is almost left to chance. In a factory, you have quality control at every step."

Perched atop a hill in San Geronimo about 45 minutes from San Francisco, the house has all the bells and whistles you might imagine. Added to the Michelle Kaufmann prefab is a wine cellar, a cobblestone driveway, decks, courtyards, a three-car garage and a kitchen built and imported from Italy.

What pleases Haney most is how living gen-

tly on the environment can be beautiful. The kitchen's countertops are made of recycled material, the floors are bamboo, and solar is built into the roof.

"We didn't compromise on any beauty or aesthetic at all to go with a green home," he says. "We haven't gone green and said, 'Oh, it's different because it's green.' Going green has turned out to be aesthetically pleasing." 🍁

Heather Boerner is a freelance writer living in San Francisco. When she's not writing about health and housing, she's checking on the veggies in her garden.

