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Prefabs Sprout

Instant suburb hits New York.



ST
ART

✦ **Tourists press up** against the construction fence on the corner of 53rd and Sixth, staring speechless as a giant crane lifts an entire bathroom into the air and deposits it in what will be a master bedroom. Cellophane House is five stories tall, with floor-

to-ceiling windows, translucent polycarbonate steps embedded with LEDs, and exterior walls made of NextGen SmartWrap, an experimental plastic laminated with photovoltaic cells. Its aluminum frame was cut from off-the-shelf components in Europe, assembled in New Jersey, then snapped together in 16 days on a vacant lot next to the Museum of Modern Art—joining four other full-size houses onsite through October as part of the exhibit *Home Delivery: Fabricating the Modern Dwelling*. It looks

as if a suburban cul-de-sac took a wrong turn at the Holland Tunnel.

Prefab is “modernism’s oldest dream,” curator Barry Bergdoll says. Since the industrial revolution, architects have been in thrall of the idea that houses could be built in factories, like any kind of widget. But reality hasn’t been extremely cooperative.

Whether because of conservative public tastes, unachievable economies of scale, or designers’ less-than-stellar business acumen, their utopian visions have mostly remained fantasies.

Frank Lloyd Wright, Buckminster Fuller, and Charles and Ray Eames each had compelling concepts of housing for all, most of which turned out to be housing for a few. Modernist masters Walter Gropius and Le Corbusier were among hundreds who patented replicable designs that never materialized. Thomas Edison eked out a hundred units using his “single-pour concrete system”—which formed whole houses, down to the bathtub, from a single mold—before his company folded. Prefab’s only success stories have been far from museum-quality: Sears, Roebuck sold more than 100,000 kit houses between 1908 and 1940, and the steel half-moons of World War II’s Quonset huts stubbornly squat on military bases worldwide. (To say nothing of the nearly 100,000 >



JARGON WATCH

✦ **Green crude**

n. A new kind of crude oil harvested from genetically engineered algae. The dark-green syrup thrives on CO₂, which could be funneled from coal-burning power plants, and can be made into gasoline or diesel in conventional refineries. The results burn cleaner than petroleum fuels.

✦ **Popcorning**

v. A chain reaction in which the accidental explosion of one nuclear warhead causes others in the vicinity to detonate, releasing lethal radiation for miles in every direction. Newly declassified documents reveal that dropping a Trident missile while loading it onto a submarine could ignite a Jiffy Pop Nagasaki.

✦ **Edupunk**

n. Avoiding mainstream teaching tools like Powerpoint and Blackboard, edupunks bring the rebellious attitude and DIY ethos of '70s bands like the Clash to the classroom.

✦ **Hairy blobs**

n. pl. Prickly prehistoric microorganisms that once lived in acidic, saline lakes chemically similar to ancient Martian waters. The recent discovery of fossilized hairy blobs in North Dakota lake beds could help in the search for microbial chia pets and other exotically hirsute life-forms on Mars and beyond. —Jonathon Keats jargon.wired.com

“manufactured”—i.e., mobile—homes shipped last year.)

But the strange subdivision next door to the museum suggests that prefab's time has finally come. The difference now is bits, not bolts. “Digital fabrication has become one of the key flash points for architects thinking about the way things are made,” Bergdoll says as we tour the houses. On an upper floor of Cellophane, two riggers saw a crossbeam amid a flurry of sparks. (It was fabricated too long.) Nearby, a team of MIT students hammer at a cottage made of computer-cut plywood with grooves and joints ready to be fit together like puzzle pieces.

At least we can now observe prefab's evolution in years, rather than decades. Twenty-two months ago, I stood near Chesapeake Bay watching a precursor to Cellophane House being screwed into place (“Plug+Play Construction,” issue 15.01). Dubbed “Loblolly” by its Philadelphia-based architects, KieranTimberlake Associates, it had a similar aluminum scaffolding system, but back then the firm's engineer believed its strength would max out at two floors. For MoMA, the structure has been reconfigured to support five. “A lot of architects think everything's gotta be new and advanced, and they leave stuff behind,” partner James Timberlake says. “We keep refining.” Cellophane is more prototype than production model, but simpler KieranTimberlake houses are available from manufacturer LivingHomes (starting at \$219,300).

In other words, the exhibit is sort of like an open house. “Maybe the general public won't go to an architecture show,” Bergdoll says, watching a chunk go up by crane. “But they'll always go to a show about other people's houses.” —ANDREW BLUM



ESCAPIST POD

Ready to make your reality TV audition tape? Head to the garden.

Ah, the mall. Department stores, food courts, a 5 x 6-foot room where you can make Web videos of yourself singing “Fergalicious” in a tropical setting. Not familiar with that last one? Then you have yet to experience MyStudio, a self-contained recording booth popping up at galleries in Phoenix, Arizona, and New York. For \$20, aspiring artists enter a kiosk that looks a little like the metamorphosis machine from *The Fly*—if it had been designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. The \$300,000 pod comes equipped with hi-def video and audio equipment, allowing users to sing, tell jokes, or beg for someone (anyone!) to go on a date with them. All accompanied by one of more than 1,000 animated backdrops—from the Eiffel Tower, a placid waterfall to the downright inexplicable (a man's face stuck to a wall). Once your demo is complete, you get a DVD, and your performance is uploaded to MyStudio.net, a social network combining the ease of YouTube with the unpopularity of MySpace. Will the system unearth heretofore undiscovered stars loitering by the Orange Julius? Visit the Web site to judge for yourself. Just remember: You don't get to vote anyone off. —Brian Roush

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