

NEWS

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WALKER ART CENTER EXHIBITION **SOME ASSEMBLY REQUIRED: CONTEMPORARY PREFABRICATED HOUSES** EXPLORES THE MODERN MODULAR HOME



Rocio Romero, LVL House, 2004, Perryville, MO
Photo courtesy Rocio Romero

Minneapolis, November 11, 2005—The modern modular dwelling is the subject of the Walker Art Center's exhibition ***Some Assembly Required: Contemporary Prefabricated Houses***, curated by Walker design director and curator Andrew Blauvelt and on view December 8, 2005–March 26, 2006. The exhibition showcases a variety of homes employing a wide range of materials, processes, and scales that have challenged many of the preconceptions about “prefab” homes as cheap, cookie-cutter structures of last resort. Today's prefab movement has gained significant momentum over the past few years, capturing the spirit and imagination of a new generation of architects and home buyers. *Some Assembly Required*, featuring projects available in the marketplace, presents a variety of approaches to prefab from houses owners can build from a kit of parts to those that arrive fully assembled. On view will be photographic murals; drawings and assembly diagrams; interactive media, animations, and video clips; material samples; and three-dimensional scale models. In addition, several rooms of a full-scale house will be included.

One of the oldest forms of prefab is the kit home—a series of parts typically assembled on site by the buyer. Today, Rocio Romero's *LV* and *LVL Houses* (2003/2004) exist as kit homes and have been used for a number of purposes, from affordable primary residences to a remotely sited bed and breakfast. Taking her cue from such modernists as Mies van der Rohe and Richard Neutra, Romero first translated their language of structural simplicity and desire for the integration of the surrounding environment into her own design: a corrugated metal and glass-walled house for her parents situated along the coast of Chile. Merging modernist sensibilities with contemporary do-it-yourself attitudes, she has produced an inexpensive alternative, operating out of the heart of the Midwest in Perryville, Missouri.

Little to no assembly is required in homes that are built entirely within a factory setting, such as St. Paul-based Alchemy Architects' one-room



Alchemy Architects, *weeHouse*, 2003, Pepin, WI
Photo courtesy Alchemy Architects

version of *weeHouse* (2003), which was first conceived as a simple, modest, and modern cabin near Pepin, Wisconsin. This initial *weeHouse* represents the idyllic “primitive hut”—the most elemental form of shelter rendered in wood and glass. Their offerings have since expanded with a full line of not-so-wee brethren. Manufactured indoors, such homes can be made with great speed and efficiency since all work is coordinated on an assembly line, avoiding delays associated with conflicting subcontractors’ schedules or inclement weather. Overcoming the limitations that occur with transporting factory-built houses (such as length and height restrictions on roadways), house modules are often combined on site to add more space, sometimes with the option of stackable, or two-story, configurations. An example of such an approach can be seen in Oakland-based Michelle Kaufmann’s *Sunset Breezhouse* (2005), designed for *Sunset* magazine. It takes a particularly ecological orientation with its extensive use of small gardens, cross-ventilation, energy-efficient appliances and mechanical systems, and renewable and non-toxic materials. A major feature of the *Breezhouse* is its central breezeway—a living and dining space, which sits beneath a distinctive butterfly roof—which recalls Ralph Rapson’s *Greenbelt House* (1945) designed for the famous Case Study House program. In a twist of contemporary technology, however, the roof shape helps conceal the glare from its optional solar panels.



Lazor Office, *FlatPak House*, 2004, Minneapolis, MN
Photo: Cameron Wittig

The claim that prefab results in homogenous designs is elegantly rebuffed in such projects as Resolution: 4 Architecture’s custom-designed residences that take full advantage of the trend toward mass-customization, which allows great variability in the design because of technologies like computer-controlled milling and cutting. Their competition-winning *Dwell* house (completed in 2004) for the magazine of the same name set the stage for many other homes such as *Mountain Retreat* (2005) situated in the Catskills of New York. Based on a set of bar-like forms that can be joined to make H, I, L, T, and Z configurations there are at least 35 variations in length, depth, and height. This idea of choosing among options is also embodied in the *FlatPak House* (2004) by Minneapolis-based Lazor Office. *FlatPak*, as the name suggests, evokes a do-it-yourself attitude by offering owners a wide range of material choices and a hand in the layout of their spaces. For instance, one could choose glass, wood, concrete, or metal panels to create a wall, depending on function and location. In this scheme the homeowner does not assemble the house but rather becomes an active participant in the design of the house, following the rules of the game.



Marmol Radziner + Associates, *Desert House*, 2005, Los Angeles, CA
Photo: David Glomb

The recent introduction of a prefabricated house offering by Los Angeles-based Marmol Radziner + Associates, a firm known for their high-end restorations of historic modernist residences and new designs for refined custom homes, incorporates a completely integrated system of prefab design and construction. By establishing their own manufacturing operation they can insure that the end product meets their highest quality standards for fit and finish. Their prototype *Desert House* (2005) is located in Desert Hot Springs, California, and incorporates a series of fully

enclosed and outfitted dwelling modules along with covered outdoor living spaces that unfold and frame the natural beauty of the surrounding environment.

Other projects such as Steven Holl's *Turbulence House* (2005), a glimmering metallic guesthouse designed for artist Richard Tuttle on a windswept mesa in New Mexico, utilize the techniques and methods of prefabrication to create one-off structures. The highly sculptural form is composed of assembled metal panels whose unique shapes were cut by outlines supplied to a computer-controlled machine. Although replicated a second time, the intention is not a mass-production of similar units, but rather an engagement with those technologies that allow for customized production.



Pinc House, Black Barn, 2005, Stockholm, Sweden
© 2005 Pinc House

Although most conventional, or "stick built," housing in the United States today utilizes some aspects of prefabrication, such as pre-engineered trusses or even standardized window frames, it is not something that has been expressly promoted. Until recently there was limited motivation to do so since preconceptions of prefab housing would have likely conjured pejorative associations with trailer homes (which are different and known as "manufactured housing") and images of shoddy construction and make-shift communities. In other parts of the world, prefabrication is the rule, not the exception, and seems to lack the stigma of its American counterpart. In Sweden, Pinc House offers two styles of prefabricated houses: *Sport* (2003), a wood clad, low-slung structure akin to a modern cottage, available in three sizes reflecting increasing square footage, and *Black Barn* (2005), a pitched-roof, modern adaptation of a Viking longhouse replete with exposed ceiling beams and black-washed wood exterior.

Unlike earlier attempts to reshape the entire field of residential construction, today's prefab adopts a more targeted approach. The increased variety and stylishness found in the marketplace for ordinary household objects and consumer goods can only increase expectations for houses that better parallel the lifestyles of their owners. Why not architecture? People desire more flexible living spaces, are no longer tethered to a single domicile, want their homes to reflect their personal taste—whether ecological or aesthetic—or want to speed the pace of the building process without sacrificing the quality of materials or construction. For more and more people, prefab meets the conditions that make the dream of owning a modern home a reality.

Promotional partner *Dwell Magazine*.

Related Events

Target Free Thursday Nights

Opening-Day Panel Discussion and Reception

Thursday, December 8, 6:30 pm

Gallery 8 Café

Free, but ticket required. Tickets available one hour before event at the Bazinet Garden Lobby desk.

Meet the architects and designers featured in the exhibition and join Michael Sylvester, founder of the Web site fabprefab.com and one of the leading proponents of modern modular architecture, for a discussion about contemporary prefab. Limited seating capacity. Cash bar.

Drawn Here: Contemporary Design in Conversation

Minnesota Modern: Prefab in Process

Thursday, February 16, 7 pm

Cinema

Free, but ticket required. Tickets available one hour before event at the Bazinet Garden Lobby desk.

Join us for a discussion about local efforts behind the new prefab movement—its potential and challenges—featuring Charlie Lazor, founder of Minneapolis-based Lozor Office and designer of the *FlatPak House*, and Geoffrey Warner, founder of St. Paul-based Alchemy Architects, designers of the *weeHouse*.

This ongoing series of conversations with Minnesota-based architects and designers explores the depth and breadth of the state's acclaimed design community. The February installment brings together local architects and designers who are developing designs for prefabricated housing.

Art Lab: Absolutely Pre-Fabulous

Thursdays, February 2, 9, 16, 23

Star Tribune Foundation Art Lab

6–9 pm, Free

A built environment is a type of framework in which people function and dwell. Examine the structures on display in the exhibition *Some Assembly Required: Contemporary Prefabricated Houses* and create art with the collaborative art team Tectonics Industries.

Target Free Thursday Nights are made possible by Target.

Architectural Tour

Pre-Fabs of Steel . . . and Glass, Concrete, and Wood: A Tour of Minneapolis Modular Homes

Saturday, February 18, 10 am–1 pm

Meets in the Bazinet Garden Lobby

\$30 (\$25)

A tour of historic and contemporary prefab houses in Minneapolis including the historic Lustron homes and the *FlatPak House*. Transportation and light refreshments provided. Very limited capacity. Some walking required.

Free First Saturday

Pretty Fabulous

Saturday, January 7, 10 am–5 pm, Free

Visit the exhibition and design a dream home of your very own.

Performance: Circus Juventas

11 am and 1 pm

Watch young acrobats from Circus Juventas stretch and assemble themselves into living constructions in the William and Nadine McGuire Theater.

Art-Making for the Whole Family: Be A Builder

11 am–4 pm

Customize your own prefab home-in-a-box with cardboard shapes, crazy colors, and playful patterns in the Star Tribune Foundation Art Lab.

Family Gallery Tour: Art of the Box

12 noon and 2 pm

Explore ways that artists and architects have used boxes to create sculptures, buildings, photographs, and paintings.

WAC-ky Tales: *Roberto the Insect Architect*

By Nina Laden

1:30, 2:30, and 3:30 pm

Although he's just a wee termite, Roberto has dreams of being an architect. Wood inspires new building ideas rather than the next meal in this story about a most ambitious bug.

On the Big Screen: *One Week*

2 and 3 pm

Newlyweds Buster and Sybil receive a house in a box as a wedding gift. It's supposed to take just seven days to build, but a do-it-yourself mix-up leads to some hilarious action! This 1920s short stars Buster Keaton.

Free First Saturdays are made possible by Coldwell Banker Burnet, Medtronic Foundation, and WCCO-TV.

Gallery Tours

Thursday, December 15

6 pm, Free

Friday, December 16

1 pm, Free with gallery admission

Saturday, December 17

12 noon, Free with gallery admission

Friday, December 30

1 pm, Free with gallery admission

Thursday, January 5

6 pm, Free

Friday, January 20

1 pm, Free with gallery admission

Saturday, February 4

12 noon and 2 pm, Free

Thursday, February 16

6 pm, Free

Saturday, February 18

12 noon, Free with gallery admission

Thursday, March 2

6 pm, Free

Sunday, March 12

12 noon, Free with gallery admission

Friday, March 17
1 pm, Free with gallery admission

Thursday, March 23
1 pm, Free with gallery admission

Sunday, March 26
12 noon, Free with gallery admission

Walker Art Center programming is made possible by its Premier Partners:
Best Buy, General Mills, Target, Star Tribune, and WCCO-TV.

**The Walker Art Center is located at 1750 Hennepin Avenue—where Hennepin meets
Lyndale—one block off Highways I-94 and I-394, Minneapolis.**

For public information, call 612.375.7600, or visit walkerart.org.