

# ARCHITECTURAL RECORD

## Exhibition Puts Prefab Into Perspective

March 6, 2007

If any proof was necessary that architects are as prone to following trends as the average Joe, one need look no further than prefabricated housing. This construction method du jour has been suggested for everything from stylish vacation homes, to cozy replacements for FEMA trailers in the Gulf Coast region.

Prefab architects and their fans talk about the subject with the kind of enthusiasm and reverence reserved for just-hatched inventions. But newcomers to the party may be unaware that prefab construction predates contemporary architectural currents. At the New York School of Interior Design (NYSID), the exhibition “Prefabricated Homes in America: The Early 20th Century Mail-Order House” traces the trend as far back as 1912, when Sears Roebuck first offered consumers the chance to purchase house plans and all the parts necessary to build them.

Exhibition curator and NYSID professor Evie T. Joselow says that while early 20th-century prefab designs failed to corner the housing market, they did take root in the imagination of consumers. Companies including Sears, Aladdin, and Gordon-Van Tine offered middle-class Americans their first chance at homeownership—a strikingly Modern vision, too, that featured open plans, appliances, mechanical equipment, lighting fixtures, and built-in furnishings.

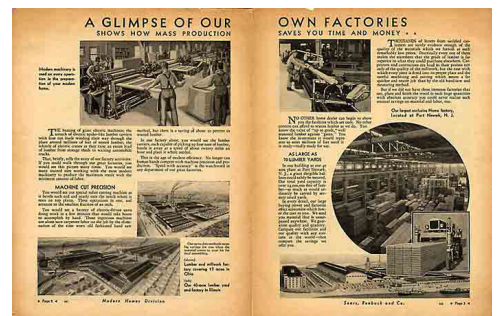
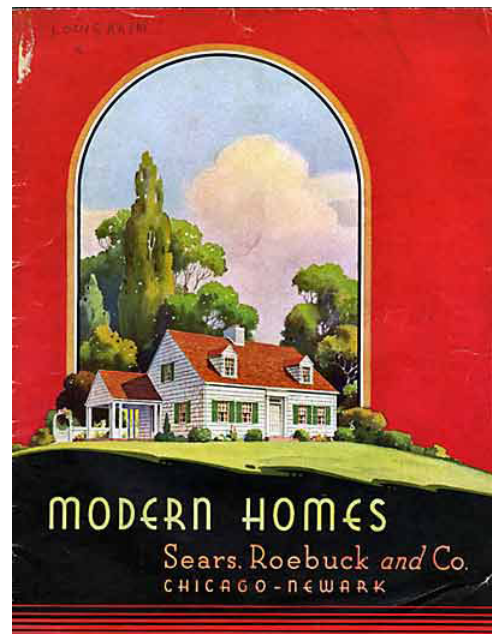
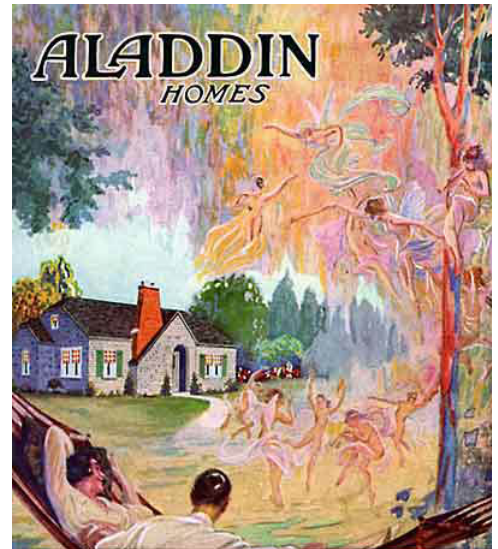
David Sokol, who writes for RECORD regularly, chatted with Joselow about this first wave of prefab design and gained some historical context for our current obsession. “Prefabricated Homes in America” runs alongside the show “The Home House Project: The Future of Affordable Housing,” through April 21.

**RECORD:** So, prefab housing isn't such a new concept after all.

**JOSELOW:** Actually, prefab was a part of very early American history. Houses were transported to the colonies from England. These were sectionalized buildings in which entire wall panels were shipped with the door and window frames already cut out. And at the end of the 19th century, materials for houses were often supplied already cut, but unassembled.

**RECORD:** What prompted that industry to pop up then?

**JOSELOW:** Building-supply companies had depleted the large timber around the Great Lakes, so they figured that they could use their remaining milling resources to offer house plans and cutting wood to match them. And since they were already selling stairs and moldings, they bundled these products into a menu for customizing a house. Also, you see the rise of mail-order business in the 19th century: Sears Roebuck mail-order clothing ultimately led to readymade housing.



**RECORD:** The prefab advertisements exhibited here look quaint, but these designs were in fact quite modern.

**JOSELOW:** For many people this was the first house to have the modern bathroom and kitchen included. More generally, prefabs parallel the new interest in American homeownership—this was the time when home economics was born.

**RECORD:** So the efficiency studies associated with early home economics explains the seamless flow between rooms?

**JOSELOW:** Yes, but when we walk in these places today we notice the small size of the rooms. We don't realize just how ingenious the floor plan was.

**RECORD:** And yet, on the outside, these houses didn't push the envelope at all.

**JOSELOW:** Consumers had no interest in concrete or glass. This is not novel taste. It's comfortable, quaint, cozy, cute: it's the California bungalow, or Cape, or foursquare farmhouse you see in your dreams. This was trickle-down taste. The public was not yet ready for the modern look we associate with innovative prefab today. Still, in the 1930s you start finding shiny surfaces and some pared-down houses. So the middle class was looking to Europe somewhat and demanding styles that originated there. Companies also introduced new materials like aluminum-protected lumber, asbestos, new roof materials, and paint solvents. Some of these things are just lethal, but back then they were modernity. Aladdin even compared its homes to the Woolworth Building.

**RECORD:** How big was prefab back then? Outside of conventional manufactured housing, today's modern stuff, as new as it is, captures just a sliver of the market.

**JOSELOW:** Sears said it sold more than 100,000 homes. Aladdin has other claims, possibly more or less. There are few archives nowadays, so we'll never know exactly many houses were sold. But if you look at government statistics, it's not a huge portion. Magazine coverage and ads made it seem huge, but the carpenter-built house was predominant.

**RECORD:** What forced these businesses to close?

**JOSELOW:** Aladdin didn't stop operations until the 1970s, actually. Sears ended its modern home division in 1936, because they got into the mortgage business and the Depression caught them in a big way. However, they leased their factories to other developers who began to build these Levittown-type communities using the Sears name. The company's appliances came with every house sold—the lure of those houses was the modern equipment.

**RECORD:** Despite this early, positive history, prefab did have a bad name for itself in the latter half of the 20th century. At what point did our understanding of prefab change?

**JOSELOW:** Well, the word "prefabricated" itself didn't come around until the 1940s with the rise of industrial housing. Aladdin and Sears had separate divisions that provided industrial housing—shed-like buildings—to different

**The Standard \$1,187.50**

Living Room - The Standard

Kitchen

**The Detroit \$989.90**

Living Room

Kitchen

**THE SPRUCEWOOD—Typically American—\$1057**

Living Room

Kitchen

THE SPRUCEWOOD

Plan A and A1... \$1057

Plan B and B1... \$1110

Plan C and C1... \$1173

Plan D and D1... \$1236

20'x30' Porch... 125

Full-Flowering, Wall-Flowering and Hanging Plants... 174

For 20 Plans... 130

Wood Lath for A Plans... 85

Wood Lath for B Plans... 98

Asphalt Strip Siding for A Plans... 23

Asphalt Strip Siding for B Plans... 27

Photos courtesy Evie T. Joselow

corporations. Sears worked with Standard Oil, and Aladdin had a connection with Dupont, building towns for their gunpowder plants. These divisions continued to configure after the war effort, and ultimately materials and focus shifted.

**RECORD:** What about today? How is the promise of the modernist prefab different?

**JOSELOW:** Architects are offering the same thing: The newest manufacturing methods, modern style, a new way of living. Today that means, say, eco-friendly interiors. But declarations of “up-to-the-minute construction efficiency” come straight from an Aladdin catalog.

**RECORD:** So does that mean our present crop of architect-entrepreneurs are bound to make the same mistakes as their mail-order predecessors?

**JOSELOW:** Even if they’re advertising these homes as affordable, they become more expensive with delivery and with actual construction. That’s just like the past. I’ll bet a lot of architects don’t know that this early prefab movement even existed. I think they would be absolutely amazed to read the literature and make the connections.

**RECORD:** If early-20th-century prefab was a short-live phenomenon, are you implying that history could repeat itself today?

**JOSELOW:** I do see an outlet for these architects’ work, and we do need more affordable housing. It’s surprising to see the faces of the people living on the edge; in today’s world, those faces belong to you and me. I would say that while most architects have done the great design work, they’ve done it without understanding who they’re really doing it for and how affordability can be accomplished. We need wider support for their vision, government support, to make that leap.

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