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# Finding the Fab in Prefab



By Justin Davidson, *New York Magazine's* architecture and classical-music critic



**Clockwise from left:** SYSTEM3 (in the foreground), *Cellophane House* (tower at left rear), and a prototype for New Orleans housing, in MoMA's backyard; BURST\*008 and the *Micro Compact Home*, in their rural habitats. Photo: (Clockwise from left) Hannah Whitaker; Floto + Warner/Courtesy of MoMA; Sascha Kletzsch/Courtesy of MoMA

A couple of weeks ago, I ate takeout Chinese in the middle of an exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art. Barry Bergdoll, MoMA's chief architecture curator, and Peter Christensen, an assistant, joined me at a table in the lot next to the museum. Around us the five houses at the core of "Home Delivery: Fabricating the Modern Dwelling" posed in various stages of incompleteness. Each handcrafted structure had been at least partly assembled in the controlled environment of a factory or mill. As workers put the pieces together, we dug into handcrafted Asian salads that had been assembled in the controlled environment of a restaurant kitchen. The museum's collection of sort-of-prefab houses struggled to match the efficiency and

excellence of the prefab food. You can order in a splendid meal, and consume it the moment it arrives. Getting an architecturally distinguished home delivered and ready by dinnertime remains a lovely dream.

This sporadically exciting but ultimately diffuse show begins indoors, on the sixth floor, and sidles up on the present by way of the past. It opens, brilliantly, with both. Visitors are greeted by Marble Fairbanks's *Flatform*, an alluring metal sculpture made of two stainless-steel layers that a digitally programmed laser has riddled more delicately than a paper snowflake. The screen can't hold a roof up or keep out the weather, but it does intimate a fabulously digital future. In a 1920 film projected on the wall near the sculpture, Buster Keaton builds a house-in-a-box for his bride by following the enclosed directions and winds up with a whirling, slip-sliding, gimpy thing with a sieve for a roof and a front door that opens into the void. It's a tellingly ambivalent intro to an exhibit that can't quite decide whether prefabrication should be treated with irony or exuberance.

"Home Delivery" recounts the history of mass-produced shelter as a shaggy tale of standardized cottages and eccentric prototypes elaborated with hyperrational lunacy. Here is Thomas Edison's proto-Levittown of concrete mansionettes. There are Frank Lloyd Wright's drawings for houses that could have been largely factory-made but never were. Visitors can walk through one of Lustron Corporation's steel-walled locker homes from the forties. The space age brought fantasies of taking shelter in roving capsules such as David Greene's *Living Pod*, a modern nomad's tent shaped creepily like a giant heart. Buckminster Fuller makes an appearance with his *Wichita House*, a reminder to go see the Whitney's full-bore tribute. In the company of so many utopians and tinkerers, the current exhibit feels bereft of an agenda, lacking in loopy euphoria or any quixotic certainty about what's next.

For his first major show since coming to the museum last year, Bergdoll has assembled a chronicle of impossible futures. The masses were never going to live in molded plastic wombs or fancifully efficient cubbyholes. Instead, many chose trailers, or assembly-line units disguised as old-fashioned, stick-built ranches. Mass-produced housing exists, but the beautiful, original, and flexible varieties remain stubbornly in the realm of the experimental.

All this historical vamping doesn't so much set up MoMA's prefab village as make all five new houses seem variously retro. The most diabolically efficient is Richard Horden's Micro Compact Home, a sleek, silvery cube that occupies the minimum footage—inchage would be more accurate—that a medium-size human requires. The floor-level bed metamorphoses into a kitchen table; I squeezed myself onto a bench and found I could relax there for several seconds before claustrophobia set in.

The *Micro Compact Home* seems geared to clients who want a place to keep dry while their beach house—Jeremy Edmiston’s and Douglas Gauthier’s *BURST\*008*, say—is under construction. Their mayonnaise-colored pavilion on stilts has sunburst-shaped openings on one façade, a wall of windows oriented toward an imaginary ocean, and a set of bleachers from which to observe the dunes. It looks raffish in midtown, flashing a laid-back grin at Eero Saarinen’s dour Black Rock across the street.

The social agenda that drove so many prefab zealots is confined to KieranTimberlake Associates’ *Cellophane House*, a solar-powered four-story townhouse made of off-the-shelf brackets and plastic panels, and *Digitally Fabricated Housing for New Orleans*, by MIT professor Lawrence Sass. Sass hopes to democratize the manufacturing technique in which a laptop-driven milling machine cuts a stack of plywood into numbered puzzle pieces. The client can then recruit a team of cousins and in-laws to slap the thing together using a system of slots and tabs, going from software to housewarming in days.

The novelty in Sass’s otherwise ordinary shotgun cottage is the means of production. MoMA’s display actually distracts from the process that brought the houses together. Bergdoll urged me not to be seduced by the final product that is Oskar Leo Kaufmann’s and Albert Rüt’s SYSTEM3, a sleek wood-sided shoebox so pared-down that the toilet sits a few feet from the bed. To get a better sense of the performance art that yielded this item, I watched a high-speed film on the exhibit’s Website, showing the house being hoisted out of a shipping container and fitted together. Prefab aficionados will find this focus on packaging sublime. The rest of us are stuck looking at the thing itself.

Even the sober SYSTEM3 comes bundled with a fantasy. Each unit can be combined with others, stacked and staggered like Legos, with outdoor staircases connecting the floors to compose an instant housing complex. I stood on the roof of this urban kernel, daydreaming of apartments piled by the hundreds, vertical villages linked by elevators, shared pipes, and a sense of community. Imagine, so many people occupying the same little patch of land. That I would live in! Oh, wait: I do.

Home Delivery: Fabricating the Modern Dwelling

The Museum of Modern Art.

Through October 20.