

Again, Architecture Discovers Prefab

By Craig Kellogg

The essential ingredient was a willing client. That was Nathan Wieler, 30, a former chief executive of an Internet company, who wanted a modular house but could not find one he liked. He and his fiancée, Ingrid Tung, also 30, a former mergers and acquisitions lawyer, planned to spend \$200,000 on construction.

The couple cut to the chase. They telephoned Allison Arieff after seeing "Prefab," a book she wrote with Bryan Burkhart (Gibbs M. Smith, 2002). Ms. Arieff, editor in chief of Dwell, a shelter magazine, had been hoping to organize an architecture contest for some time. And so she invited 16 architects to design attractive, economical and modern modular homes that would appeal to Mr. Wieler and Ms. Tung.

The designs would have to get the O.K. from four professional advisers Ms. Arieff had rounded up, including Joseph Rosa, the curator of architecture and design at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. But Mr. Wieler and Ms. Tung would have the final word.

On May 18, during the International Contemporary Furniture Fair in New York, Ms. Arieff announced the winning design, by Joseph D. Tanney and Robert L. Luntz of Resolution: 4 Architecture, a New York firm, for the house for Mr. Wieler and Ms. Tung, who were married last Saturday.

The exterior of the 2,260-square-foot house that the clients selected is wood; the roof is pitched. You could call it Costco Modern for the compact-S.U.V. set. Budgeted at \$87 a square foot for the basic shell and interior finishes, it is contemporary architecture for people who think they cannot afford architects. On the other hand, on paper it doesn't look like a cheap house. And it has the curb appeal and expandability to appeal to a young couple in the suburbs. Mr. Wieler and Ms. Tung plan to build it on a wooded seven-acre site in Pittsboro, N.C., near Chapel Hill.

Most architects have abandoned American middle-class housing. And modular design, though often viewed as an economical solution, has sometimes met with disdain. But Ms. Arieff believes modular housing could transform and improve American domestic architecture.

Prefabrication has long fascinated architects. Frank Lloyd Wright and Buckminster Fuller both experimented with it, as did the Case Study House Program, begun in 1945 by Arts & Architecture, a small California magazine. Among the modernists who built Case Study houses were Richard Neutra, Eero Saarinen and Charles and Ray Eames.

The Arts & Architecture program, a landmark in the history of contemporary architecture, inspired Ms. Arieff. Among the architects she invited to enter the Dwell contest was Ralph Rapson, creator of a Case Study project that was never built. Mr. Rapson, working with Toby Rapson, his son, updated his 1945 design with a two-story central atrium. The couple liked it. "It seemed like a place to escape or entertain, without going outside," Ms. Tung said.

Collins & Turner Architects, a firm in Sydney, Australia, offered an elegant block of floor-to-ceiling glass that recalls the Eames Case Study House from 1949. It scored well, but presented the usual concerns associated with glass houses. "Even though we are out in the middle of nowhere, I like to have some sense of privacy," Ms. Tung said. "I was worried about feeling exposed." She also wondered if a sunscreen curtain, designed to hang outside the windows, would be impractical in the woods, where dead bugs accumulate and trees fall down during ice storms.

Craig Konyk, a Brooklyn architect known for futurism, designed a house that looked as if it belonged in the carport of the Death Star. It had a steel chassis, power windows, tinted glass, a moon roof and styling taken from the low, long body of a 1966 Pontiac Bonneville, he said.

Ms. Arieff described the winning design as belonging to a category dreamed up by Raymond Loewy, the industrial designer: most advanced, yet acceptable. "You can push the envelope so far, but people have a comfort level," she said.

Just as products placed by manufacturers in the original Case Study Houses made them into billboards for new appliances and materials after World War II, the Dwell home has a close relationship with sponsors. A window company has pledged to donate 44 windows clad in black aluminum and 10 sliding glass doors, which the architects estimate would cost \$30,000. "We leveraged the windows," Mr. Tanney said.

Once the final plans are submitted to the manufacturer (which has not been chosen), the foundations will be poured. Walls and floors will be preassembled in sections on the factory floor. The winning architects will receive their standard fee for design and supervision of the prototype house, 15 percent of the construction budget.

Several developers want to market the winning design as a prefab product. Mr. Wieler, with no experience in the field, has said he would like to try. The architects in the contest are offering their designs for sale. And Dwell itself may sell plans. All 16 designs can be seen on the project's Web site, www.thedwellhome.com.