

The Very Model of a Modern Modular House

By Daniel Akst
New York

Joseph Tanney is an intense young man with big shoulders and a buzz cut who looks more like an English soccer fanatic than the high-end architect he happens to be. But looks in this case are not altogether deceiving. Mr. Tanney may not care much about Manchester United, but his obsession is in some sense equally proletarian: designing better factory-built housing.

Despite a thriving New York practice whose clients include trendy ad agencies and rich people with gaping lofts, Mr. Tanney's firm, Resolution: 4 Architecture, has poured itself into a series of designs for manufactured modules that can be combined into three- or four-dozen modern homes. All are striking departures from the choices available to most home buyers today, and all, at least theoretically, are buildable in a factory for something like the price of the banal tract homes gobbling up farmland across America.

A few months ago Mr. Tanney and his partner, Robert Luntz, decided to put their designs on a Web site, www.the-modern-modular.com, and thanks to the magic of the Internet, their phones haven't stopped ringing since. Two inquiries came in while we were chatting in his office a few blocks south of Penn Station – even though it was Memorial Day. Mr. Tanney's phone will start ringing even more often when word gets out that his firm just won a competition sponsored by Dwell, a three-year-old shelter magazine for the Ikea set, to design a way-cool modular house for a couple of newlyweds near Chapel Hill, N.C., on a \$200,000 budget.

"We believe that prefabricated architecture is a terrific – and feasible – option for home building in the 21st century," says Dwell's editor-in-chief, Allison Arieff, who is co-author of a book called "Prefab" that traces the history of the genre and explores its more interesting world-wide permutations.

Pre-fab and fabulous: A computer-generated drawing of Resolution: 4 Architecture's Dwell Home, which according to preliminary estimates can be built in a factory for \$200,000.

The idea is not as radical as it sounds. Sears started selling prefabricated home kits as early as 1908, and today these old homes are so coveted that real estate ads boast of their prefab heritage. The idea of factory-made houses had natural appeal for modern architects, long interested in what Le Corbusier called a machine for living. "Every major architect you could think of – Gropius, Eames, Frey – had his own little fling with prefab," notes Ms. Arieff. The Case Study houses of Southern California – also instigated by a magazine – and Frank Lloyd Wright's Usonian houses were efforts to ennoble affordable housing that might be mass-produced.

At this point a distinction should be made between what most people call trailer homes – which have also generated a lot of interest among architects – and the modular housing that is expected to capture an increasing share of the U.S. market. Trailer or mobile homes are small, inexpensive boxes often separated by zoning and custom into their own areas. Modular homes look pretty much like regular houses, but are made in a factory and delivered in large segments by truck.

Nobody sneers at a Lexus because it came off an assembly line. But for some reason modular houses still carry a stigma, which may be why 97% of new American homes are built on site by hand when almost everything else – cars, clothing, even many foods – comes from a factory. Yet the quality of modular houses has improved dramatically in recent years even as the quality of traditionally built homes remains mired in mediocrity. When it comes to housing, low construction standards, haste and ever-more-scarce skilled labor have given new meaning to the axiom "they don't make them like they used to."

Unfortunately, in the eyes of modernists, modular homes are still made to look like they used to, which is what Messrs. Tanney and Luntz, both in their early 40s, hope to change. When a friend asked them to design a modern house out of prefab modules, they studied the subject, learning, for example, that the home site can't be more than 500 miles from the factory because it complicates delivery. They also found that modular factories could produce a much wider range of houses than they currently do, as long as the parts are no wider than 16 feet – the maximum that can be trucked.

Drawing on their experience with the rigid constraints of New York lofts, Messrs. Tanney and Luntz came up with a clever series of rectangular "modules of use" that can be combined in different ways to accommodate radically differing sites, needs and budgets. In the Dwell house, they mounted one of these units atop another but at right angles, adding various decks to connect the structure to the outdoors. The result was a 2,260 square foot house that, according to preliminary estimates, can be built in a factory for \$200,000. They hope to have the house in place by early next year, but of course what they really hope is that this will be just the beginning.

"We want the opportunity to aesthetically transform the American landscape," Mr. Tanney says, proving that while he may not look like an architect, he does sometimes sound like one.

It remains to be seen if he and his partner can break out of their profession's idealistic culture to produce interesting, affordable, mass-market houses. What we do know is that, at least among a certain class of Americans, there is a strong appetite for just such a thing. Ikea has made its name selling modern design at a price, and clever design is one reason Target has flourished while Kmart ended up in Chapter 11. Interesting design saved Apple Computer a few years back and still gives the company's products cachet, while daring automotive design – as in Chrysler's PT Cruiser – has sometimes proved rewarding for those with the gumption to undertake it.

Dwell has made itself something of a bible for this tribe, discussing costs frankly and showing youthful people in modern houses in such unglamorous locales as Kansas. The question now is whether the Dwell house will go the way of the Case Study houses by becoming a cherished specimen or whether, like Henry Ford's Model T, it will become a mass-produced vehicle for taking at least some of us where we want to go.

Mr. Akst, the author of The Webster Chronicle, a novel, lives in a modern house in New York's Hudson Valley.