

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <http://www.djreprints.com>.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB109459309945811605>

ARCHITECTURE

Modernist, Modular but Not Yet Mass Produced

By Daniel Akst

Updated Sept. 8, 2004 12:01 a.m. ET

Pittsboro, N.C.

In some ways, the new house at the end of the zigzagging road deep in the woods of this town near Raleigh is like any other custom home. It cost way more than it was supposed to, is taking a lot longer to finish, and has been marked by some of the usual tensions and miscues.

Those similarities notwithstanding, to a certain group of architects and aficionados it looks less like a house and more like the Holy Grail. That's because, unlike the vast majority of American homes, this spiffy piece of modern design was built mostly in a factory, and at least partly fulfills the determination of its designers to produce modular housing that embodies modern design principles at a price middle-class families can afford.

Delivered in five big pieces -- plus two roof modules -- by truck and then wrestled into place with cranes, the house in Pittsboro is that rarest of creatures: an offspring of the enduring if one-sided love affair between modern architecture and prefabricated housing. In the words of Allison Arieff, who with Bryan Burkhart wrote a book on the subject, "every major architect you could think of -- Gropius, Eames, Frey -- had his own little fling with prefab."

Ms. Arieff is the editor-in-chief of Dwell Magazine, a determinedly modern shelter publication based in San Francisco. It ran a competition that challenged architects to design a 2,000-square-foot modern modular for Nathan Wieler and Ingrid Tung, a young couple in North Carolina. The budget was to be \$200,000. As reported in this space more than a year ago, the winning design was submitted by Joseph Tanney and Robert Luntz of Resolution: 4 Architecture in New York. Working within the constraints of the form -- in order to move by truck, modular home sections can't be any wider than 16 feet -- Messrs. Tanney and Luntz have developed a series of clever rectangular "modules of use" that can be combined into dozens of configurations to accommodate a variety of needs and sites.

From the outset, the project has generated a lot of interest among financially challenged devotees of modern design, folks who can find affordable furnishings at Ikea but often can't find a reasonably priced Modern house to put them in. Messrs Tanney and Luntz, for example, have

been deluged with inquiries, and a recent open house at the incomplete Dwell Home, which was expected to draw 300 visitors, brought 2,500. The Pittsboro project, in other words, isn't just a house. It's a lab experiment.

The results are in, and they are decidedly mixed. As a habitation, the house looks promising indeed. Although nobody was living there yet when I visited, the design appears to have many of modernism's virtues with few of its deadliest flaws. Clad in cedar freckled with knots -- the clear kind, originally specified, would have been thousands of dollars more -- the main volume sits comfortably amid the woods, met at right angles by a smaller, contrasting volume that contains a loft-like kitchen, dining and living space.

It's all pulled together by an embarrassment of decks -- some 1,500 square feet of them, seemingly surrounding many of the rooms and including, on the upper level, an outdoor fireplace. The perpendicular living volumes afford vast expanses of exterior walls, with the result that every room seems to have acres of windows -- I counted 80 in all. The effect is like being in a tree house without the vertigo.

But all those decks and windows highlight the problem with this particular lab experiment, which is the muddy test tubes that were used. Although the construction contract (excluding land, architect fees and site work) was for \$206,000, that figure ignores the contributions of a host of corporate sponsors who provided everything from construction materials to appliances.

These items account for another \$200,000 at least, according to Mr. Wieler, who says the sponsorships "are what made it work for us." Those windows, for instance, were provided by Loewen, a Canadian concern specializing in the luxury market. Trex, which makes low-maintenance decking from wood waste and reclaimed plastic, provided the planks for all those decks. Other sponsors include Artemide, Fisher & Paykel, Jenn-Air, Kohler, Lennox and Marmoleum. Mr. Wieler even got the use of a high-end Volkswagen Passat.

"It's an old-fashioned way of doing things," says Ms. Arieff, observing that while Dwell received advertising revenue from the sponsors, exhibition homes at World's Fairs and the like have often had corporate sponsors, a process that helps suppliers explore new ideas. Besides, she says, the off-budget products simply offset the Dwell home's lack of economies of scale: mass production certainly would have slashed construction costs. "This really was a concept car," she says, adding that more modern modulars, at more conventional prices, can be expected: "We're working to brand a series of Dwell homes."

Meanwhile, the Resolution: 4 architects are quietly proving that even in the absence of mass production, modular housing is a plausible response to soaring construction costs, the scarcity of skilled labor and the reluctance of many contractors to undertake modern design. Mr. Tanney reports that Resolution: 4 already has more than a dozen such homes in the works in locales including Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts, New York's Catskill Mountains and Long Island, Maryland, Tennessee and Virginia. Although they won't cost \$100 a square foot -- the ideal embodied in the Dwell contest -- Mr. Tanney says these houses can be built for about the cost of a quality

traditional home, instead of the much higher cost of building one of his modern designs on-site. Says Mr. Tanney: "We've been able to design some houses during an interview with a client."

As for the homeowners, they were still looking forward to moving in. Ms. Tung, a lawyer turned violin teacher, says she's delighted with how things turned out, but Mr. Wieler, an entrepreneur who is marketing a line of modern modulars of his own, observes that "everybody's put in a lot more time and money than they originally planned." He calls the venture "a learning experience," a rueful phrase that, applied to such a project, is probably one of the synonyms for success.

Mr. Akst last wrote for the Journal on James Rouse.

Copyright ©2017 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <http://www.djreprints.com>.