



AMERICAN PREFAB

A SHOPPER'S GUIDE

The American consumer has struggled with the question of how to best go prefab since at least 1906, when the Michigan company Aladdin offered the first proper kit house. Sears, Roebuck & Co. followed suit in 1908, offering sets of mail-order plans and numbered pieces, and selling nearly 100,000 by 1940. In 1921, Hollywood (a decent indicator of when an idea starts to stick) contended with prefab in the short Buster Keaton film *One Week*. In it, the elastic slapstick master wrestles with a recalcitrant build-by-the-numbers kit of parts in what might be the first (and only) prefab comedy.

Some 90 years on, odds are good you'll fare better than Keaton did, but the first-time prefabber still has a few things to sort out. For example, do you want the new manse trucked to your lot in two big modules and screwed together over a long weekend? Maybe you and your architect want to design the place using a kit of parts. Or perhaps it's the predictability and efficiency of a one-off custom job made in a factory that gets your motor running.

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So you're building a house. You've done a little research, and, after a hazy half-calculation of your carbon footprint and liquid assets, you think that prefab is the way to go. Here's the bad news: You haven't decided much.

As the stigma that "prefab" is code for "trailer park" continues to fade, an ever-expanding array of options is hitting the market. But how do you know which is the quickest, greenest, cheapest path to your future front door?

Is a Rocio Romero LV home right for you if you live on the Upper Peninsula? (It's got a snow load of 20 pounds per square foot.) Should you build an E-Space System if you can't tell a socket wrench from a cat's paw? (It bolts together easily and can take as little as two days to erect.) Where does an architect come in if your house is arriving in pieces that need only to be welded together? (What you really need is a welder.)

We at Dwell have been singing from the prefab hymnal for a good decade now, and this handy guide is designed to help make your prefab dreams a reality. Read on for a carefully edited mix of builders, architects, and kit makers and to discover both the methodology and the firm that are right for you.

By Aaron Britt, Diana Budds, Jaime Gross,
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This design for a zero-energy house in Brooklyn, the Koby Cottage (top right), and scores of houses for the US Border Patrol (bottom right) all rely on factory-built modules to save time, money, and resources in construction.



GARRISON ARCHITECTS

Location: Brooklyn, New York

Cost per square foot: Construction on residential projects averages \$250.

Methodology: Custom design using prefab construction and modular housing

Timeline: About four months

garrisonarchitects.com



"Prefab is bubbling up in all kinds of buildings," says New York-based architect James Garrison, principal of Garrison Architects. "People who build all the time have become so frustrated [with conventional construction] that we want an alternative."

Though the 20-year-old practice wasn't founded as a prefab-only shop, Garrison is increasingly moving in that direction. At present, the architect reckons that about a quarter of his work is prefab, though his firm treats it as a "technique rather than a product."

Garrison Architects has embraced prefabrication on a variety of scales: Large civic projects such as a childcare center at Lehman College in the Bronx were built quickly using prefabricated pieces, and a handful of exciting residential projects the firm has underway promise high degrees of sustainability and offer consumers a chance to avoid

the curveballs that onsite construction can throw.

One such spot is Koby Cottage, a guest house for troubled teens and their families on the Albion, Michigan, campus of Starr Commonwealth. The firm describes this steel-framed structure as "a welded, factory-produced frame chassis akin to the trellis frame on a Formula One racing car," and it was erected in just a day. In Red Hook, Brooklyn, Garrison is in the midst of a zero-energy building made from a stack of four prefabricated modules.

Perhaps the most exciting prefab work the company has on the boards, however, is a legion of green modular homes for the United States Border Patrol. "We've got two housing prototypes for the federal government for our north and south borders that are prefabricated, high-performance residences built to LEED platinum certi-

fication requirements," Garrison says. The houses' solar and climatic orientations differ based on whether they're strung along the Canadian or the Mexican border, and agents will rent them for the length of their tenure. Any unique design challenges in meeting the needs of these very particular clients? "Big garages," Garrison says. "Those guys drive huge trucks."

Though scores of homes for the Border Patrol may well be Garrison's most ambitious residential project, at bottom he sees a host of efficiencies, such as predictability, speed, sustainability, and affordability, as prefab's *raison d'être*. "For us prefabrication is a tool, one which is extremely important and needs to be developed." Many conventional architects are starting to agree. —A.B. ▮