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The new face of prefabs

Can modular efficiency meet today's needs?

How fab is prefab: Very, if tailored to the times
Ready made: Where offsite construction works
Healthy option: The kit-of-parts hospital
Feel the heat: Timber frame under fire



PREFABULOUS – OR NOT?

THE PREFAB ARGUMENT waxes and wanes. At times, architects grapple visibly with the issue, then seem to retreat from it. Remember Nick Grimshaw's prefabricated bathroom spiral block for a student hostel in 1967, Richard and Su Rogers' 1968 'Zip-Up' house, or for that matter the Smithsons' plastic 'House of the Future' of 1956? Real post-war prefab houses, once despised, are now loved and listed. System-built panel-construction blocks from the 1960s, however, have yet to recover their reputation (nobody really thinks of London's classy, listed Barbican as being pre-cast, though much of it is). Meanwhile the coasts of Britain are covered with enclaves of cheap mass-produced tin-box 'static caravans', two and three-bed capacity, that exploit planning loopholes. You can buy a new one connected to services on site for £25,000 or less. But while some good architects and designers have engaged with this way of building, and their products look very elegant in comparison, inevitably they always come out massively more expensive than the standard offerings.

In this issue we discuss the whole business of prefabrication and efficient design, in the full knowledge that – from medieval times onwards – sometimes substantial elements of offsite construction have always been part of the building industry. The assembly-by-numbers frames of Tudor farmhouses and Elizabethan theatres have always appealed to architects with a yen for dry construction, as have Victorian flat-pack cast-iron buildings (the Crystal Palace prime among them) and the many and varied Sears Catalogue homes of early 20th century America. It's not as if this is a dangerous modern idea.

The truth however is that, fashionable or not, prefabrication marches on. These days, the lead is coming not from the volumetric, plug-in-room end of things, more from fast-track office-construction techniques. This all comes down to the basic armoury of the architect – refreshing your set of available skills. Here's a thought: if we battled the assumption that prefab is cheap and flimsy, and instead promoted it as a mark of factory-made high quality, then both public and architects would benefit.

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WIZARD OF OZ

DONGAS ARE THE basic prefab huts dropped into mining areas or construction sites. 'They are simple ugly buildings,' says Brian Donovan of Queensland-based Donovan Hill. The practice's Happy Haus shares their lineage: volumetric, craned onto site, dimensions defined by lorry transport. But the colours, and generous windows framed in

local timber mark it out as different – as on this module being delivered to North Stadbroke Island, east of Brisbane.

Once the steel-framed box has been fitted and the overhangs slotted into place it can be the first base for the subtropical outdoor living that Donovan Hill has explored since it started in 1992. 'Your grand communal

space is not inside,' Donovan explains. 'The Happy Haus just a support building – somewhere to sleep and wash.' His vision is of a work in progress: an inexpensive living/eating/sleeping box grows as extra bedrooms are added and modules create a courtyard.

Donovan points out the efficiency of the long 4.2m wide buildings compared to squarer

plans but admits he is still trying to persuade potential buyers that a long thin building is housey enough (five firm orders, with 20 under negotiation). The Bushfire Homes Service has also approved them for the rebuild following last year's fires. They are easily adapted with protection to the underside, heavy gauge window gauze and covered box gutter. **EY**