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PREFABULOUS

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THE NEW FACE OF PREFAB

BY JANE ELLISON

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JIM BARTSCH



A view from the rear patio toward Brian Andreas's studio highlights the drought-tolerant plants and natural pathways emphasized in the landscape design. The back and front patios are sheltered by a roof of operable louvers that provide shade and reduce the need for air conditioning.



ARCHITECT MICHELLE KAUFMANN of Michelle Kaufmann Designs (MKD) hinted at the history of prefabricated housing during a recent conversation about the Andreas/Rockne home, a prefab addition to Santa Barbara's upper eastside.

"Smart Home: Green + Wired, a recent exhibition that featured one of our homes at Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry, represents the first time the institution exhibited a building of this type since Frank Lloyd Wright's Usonian House, which shares a similar vision of good design for the masses, using alternative organic materials," notes Kaufmann. The

Usonian House has also been described as the first residence to explore the possibilities of prefab construction.

The story of modular buildings in the United States lies in the 70-plus years between these two exhibits. Once the stepchild of the housing industry, today's widening acceptance of prefabricated construction is evidenced on neighborhood streets and backcountry roads.

Riding a wave of interest in sustainability and green technology, prefab construction is becoming a desirable alternative for a growing number of homeowners who are learning that



factory-built houses can be as tailored to their needs as the iPhone they hold in their hands. "The public's increasing comfort with new technology has also been a major reason for this surge in interest," Kaufmann points out.

As evidence of their commitment to all things "green," Brian Andreas and Ellen Rockne own only one car and use their home as both living and work space. Rockne, a self-described "lover of architecture" with a penchant for perusing websites on the subject, discovered MKD's prefab homes during one of her searches. Soon after, the couple toured a model of the Sunset

Clockwise from left: The library off the BreezeSpace—the home's central living area—creates a quiet environment for solo projects. The entry to the Andreas/Rockne home is planted with citrus and is adjacent to the kitchen. Serving as the "hub" of activity for family and friends, the kitchen also connects to the BreezeSpace.



The Prefab Process

A) Prefabricated homes are constructed offsite in accordance with local building codes and transported to their final locations. B) The BreezeSpace for this home arrived as floor and roof modules, with finish work and installation of flooring, heating systems and folding French doors completed by Allen Associates. The firm was also responsible for site preparation and construction of the foundation onto which modules were set. The members of mkConstructs are the "secret sauce" in the delivery and setting of the prefab modules, making informed decisions onsite as projects are completed. C) Front view of finished house.





Right: The BreezeSpace opens to the front patio through large, folding glass doors. The louvered roof structure creates a changing pattern of light and shadow throughout the day.

BreezeHouse and ordered one on the spot. They knew it would be a perfect fit for the Santa Barbara property they had purchased after a move from Decorah, Iowa. Two years later, their custom version of the home became part of the neighborhood fabric—and legend—of Pedregosa Street.

Local contractors Allen Associates—specialists in green construction—had been consulting for some time with the family on a remodel of the existing 1950s-era home that was ultimately determined to be unsalvageable. “We did salvage what we could and gave much of it to Habitat for Humanity,” Andreas reports. With this change in direction, Allen Associates prepared the site for the arrival of four prefabricated modules from MKD’s factory in Washington state. The modules arrived 90 percent complete with interior finishes that included electrical, plumbing, flooring, cabinetry, countertops and even towel bars. Allen Associates completed site preparations by bringing utilities to the site and constructing the foundation for the modules. Much to the surprise of the many onlookers, setting the modules in the foundation was accomplished in just two days.

Of the four modules, three were the basic components of the home. One module now houses the master bedroom, bath and library. The remaining two comprise the two-story wing that includes kitchen, office, bath and upper-level bedrooms. The final module is Andreas’s stand-alone studio.

Clients come to MKD with varying degrees of knowledge about prefab. Some may be looking for sustainability or a shortened construction schedule. Others are searching for more predictable costs. “Comparisons must be made between apples and apples,” Kaufmann cautions. “Location, site constraints and local labor all affect final costs. However, predictable time and cost can be found in the factory-built modules. My mission is to make it easier for people to live greener lifestyles. No one should ever feel that it’s too expensive, too complicated or just too difficult to go green.”

Andreas and Rockne customized the BreezeHouse by replacing the butterfly-shaped roof with a flat roof and clerestory windows. The addition of a two-story wing—also a custom feature—accommodates private space for sons Gabe and Matthew. “We were drawn to MKD’s focus on sustainability and green technology





The master bedroom is open to lush outdoor spaces via two sets of double doors. As in all other rooms in this home, Brian's paintings adorn the walls. Far right: Thoughtful landscaping by Grace Design Associates leads visitors from the house to Andreas's studio by way of a firepit, amphitheater and hot tub.

and the ability to modify the design to meet our specific requirements," says Rockne. Those requirements primarily focused on artistic endeavors and the couple's love of entertaining large numbers of guests.

Andreas, the force behind the popular stories and art works of StoryPeople, is an accomplished painter and writer, while Rockne is both a singer and songwriter who performs nationwide and is best known for her role as Cosette in *Les Miserables*. The couple's design decisions were influenced in part by these passions.

The altered shape of the roof, for example, not only made the

home more compatible with neighboring properties, but also created a gallery for Andreas's paintings where natural light floods the breezeway through the large folding doors and clerestory windows illuminate the ceiling. "Michelle is not only an architect, but a light sculptor," notes Rockne. "No matter where you are in this home, natural light adds a special quality." The operable louvers that shade both front and rear decks keep direct sunlight from reaching the paintings and, most importantly, are a simple method for reducing the need for air conditioning.

For Rockne, performance space where large groups could

gather was an important consideration. The resulting amphitheater appears to have formed naturally over time, in keeping with Andreas's desire to recognize a "history of habitation" in the landscape. Grasses—a reference to the native landscape of the Santa Barbara foothills, as well as the Iowa prairie—add movement and capture a beautiful low-angle light. They are also a major component of the ideal garden, described by landscaper Margie Grace of Grace Design Associates as meeting the owners' request that it require attention just once a month for only half a day with no application of chemicals or use of saws or blowers.

"Blending the prefabricated home into its surroundings was the team's job," Grace says—referring to the coordination required among the architect, landscape designer and contractor. "That collaboration always begins with a focus on site considerations and the client's wish list."

After a year of living in their home, Andreas and Rockne are thoroughly enjoying the experience. "During our life together, Brian and I have moved 33 times—like rolling stones," Rockne laughs. "But this home we intend to have for many years, even if we are called to spend some time away from Santa Barbara. Our sons love it, and it meets our family's requirements of being cozy for the four of us, yet a wonderful place to entertain 60 or more guests. It's everything we hoped for." ❄

Jane Ellison's professional background in urban planning and with architectural firms informs her writing. She is former Editor in Chief of Santa Barbara Seasons magazine.

Facts and Resources

- **Prefabricated** (also known as modular) homes are not to be confused with manufactured homes. The former are factory-built to meet all site-built codes, while the latter are not.
- Every prefabricated home designed by Michelle Kaufmann Designs incorporates the firm's five "**eco principles**": smart design, eco materials, energy efficiency, water conservation and healthy environment.
- Benefits of factory-built homes include shorter onsite construction period, 50-75 percent less waste than onsite construction, fewer trucks visiting the construction site, less impact on neighbors and sustainable aspects that resonate with local jurisdictions and design review boards.



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