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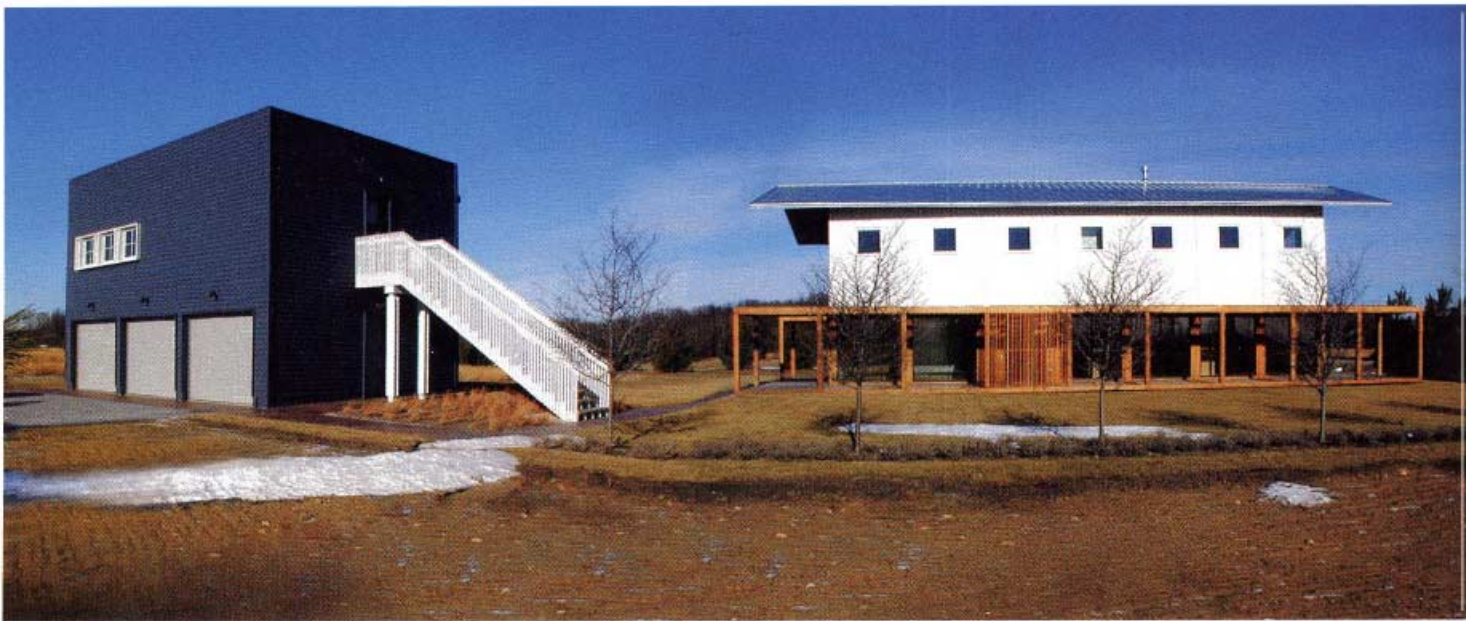
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Kitchen Gadgets We Love



The Mayo Woodlands development was structured around the idea of three distinct neighborhoods—the Village (a large open field), the Prairie (a secluded meadow), and the Woods (a forested street)—which would be identified by differing landscape and architectural expressions.



Tim Alt on the Mayo Woodlands

In 2003, a collaborative design team consisting of landscape architecture firm Coen + Partners, Altus Architecture + Design, and Salmela Architects was commissioned to create Mayo Woodlands, a community in Rochester, Minnesota, developed by the heirs of the Mayo Clinic as a model for innovative residential planning and design. Working within pre-existing site conditions that conveyed the typical American suburban design approach, the Mayo team incorporated landscape and architectural strategies that sought to overwhelm the infrastructure and define a new community identity and experience. Prefab was part of the overall strategy, as architect Tim Alt of Altus Architecture + Design explains.

How did prefabrication play a role in the Mayo Woodlands concept?

The progressive direction of Mayo Woodlands lent itself to incorporating prefab strategies that would further extend the innovation of the development. There is also a social and economic benefit to these systems that we felt the Mayo family would identify with and embrace as consistent with the legacy of the Mayo Clinic—doing something for the greater common good. So we developed architectural concepts that incorporated houses with 20-, 22-, and 24-foot widths, allowing a free-span structure. This enabled the houses to have no interior structural walls (and remarkably flexible floor plans). And, most importantly, it allowed natural light to flow through the ▶

Dwellings

depth of the entire plan—light being the quality (or spiritual food) that separates architecture from mere building. We also adopted a modular order to the plans that would relate to the order of the trees in the landscape and establish a relationship between the houses that is both modern and classical at the same time.

People fear that prefab homes cannot have context. How does Mayo Woodlands prove that assertion wrong?

Prefab houses typically present a preconceived image in [our] collective minds that they are merely fancy mobile homes. This stigma takes a great effort to overcome. [With] MW we did not start the design problem with prefabricated architecture as a goal. It emerged as part of an overall architectural strategy that was an outcome of the landscape strategies we employed.

I believe it was your intent originally to market the MW development as prefab. What has happened since then?

We felt that with the progressive nature of the Mayo Clinic, and the fact that people come from all over the world to work there, the market would embrace our comprehensive design objectives. So far it has been a big challenge to convey the truth about what we are doing for the community in general. Most agents, builders, and owners want to buy a lot and do whatever they want with it. That phenomenon exists throughout the U.S., not just in Rochester. It is our challenge to demonstrate the variety, site sensitivity, and wisdom of our design approach through the current owners and welcome people to experience how great these houses live and feel. The prefab aspects are secondary.

How do you think the public can be better educated about the benefits of prefab?

The public first needs to understand that houses and how they are built are one of the last holdovers from the age of the guilds. Virtually everything else you buy has been manufactured. The emergence of prefabrication as a methodology for housing is only a natural evolution of building components integration catching up with every other thing we purchase. The best way to illustrate this idea and educate the public is to design and build great projects. If the public can see and feel good examples of this approach, the collective perception will change and so will the marketplace. Who wouldn't want to have a house that was better and cheaper? ■



"I believe architects should lead by example through developing processes or protocols that demonstrate flexibility and creativity, not predictability," says architect Tim Alt. "If we can do that, consumers and builders will be drawn to the process."