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Eco-friendly Americans like their wilderness bolt holes to go, says Jade Chang

FOR YEARS the word "prefab" conjured up images of shoddy council flats, tiny mobile homes and flimsy bungalow classrooms -temporary housing solutions that you couldn't wait to escape.

Today, thanks to a generation of young architects who have made it their preferred proving ground, prefabricated design has become more of an affordable luxury than a necessary evil. For the ethically minded wealthy in America it is a way to move into a piece of modern architecture that is a world away from the showy, oversized McMansions that are stampeding across the suburbs.

"We're trying to create homes in a timeless, efficient way," says Ron Radziner of Marmol Radziner. The Los Angeles architects recently made a splash with the Desert House, a high-end prefab showcase that stands on a site two hours' drive from the city. It has drawn thousands of people to its three open-house weekends.

Luxury extras such as Hansgrohe fixtures, Sub-Zero refrigerators and Bosch dishwashers are offered in the package, so well-heeled clients such as the actress Molly Ringwald have been lining up for the units, whose base prices range from \$215,000 (£ 114,000) to \$630,100.

Marmol Radziner already had a long- standing practice when it moved into prefab; the Missouri-based Rocio Romero started her career there. After designing a vacation home for her parents in Chile, Romero realised that she was working with a simple structure that could be factory-produced, if only she could find a willing factory. Ms Romero says: "When we started in 2001, we could not find another prefab person who was doing modern prefab. Kaufman and Kaufman was doing prefab in Europe and in the back of my mind I was thinking, well, people from Europe have taste and it might not catch on in the US."

It did -45 of the minimalist yet spacious glass-and-metal LV Homes, all with 9ft (2.7m) ceilings, have been sold at between \$18,000 and \$35,900, and Romero is introducing an even lower-cost Camp line this summer.

One of the hallmarks of the modern prefab movement is an awareness of the

outdoor world. Michelle Kaufmann Designs' modular homes take advantage of their locations by utilising solar panels, a geothermal or a wind-generator system -or a hybrid of the three -depending on the local climate. Ms Kaufmann, who worked in Frank Gehry's architectural office for five years before striking out on her own, advocates a "clean and green" style of living, where clutter is housed in a neat, streamlined storage bar and courtyards, terraces and decks straddle the line between indoors and outdoors.

Prefab houses also eliminate many of the frustrations of building a prestige second home in a location where the locals might be more used to building log cabins.

Linda Taalman, of the Los Angeles firm Taalman Koch, says: "You can get a very high-end architectural product without having to import all labour or train local labour." Taalman Koch's iT House is a lovely glass structure that is being installed in a remote town near the Sequoia National Forest, on a vineyard in Paso Robles (where the comedy Sideways was filmed) and in the California desert.

Taalman Koch solves the problem of living in glass houses, costing from \$175,000 for an 1,100sq ft structure, by wrapping their exteriors with large-scale graphics designed by Jim Isermann and the husband-and-wife team Liam Gillick and Sarah Morris, and other artists. Ms Taalman comments: "The iT house demands a very minimal life-style. To use it as your primary home, you really have to be post-acquisitional."

Most of the iT Houses are being used as second homes, but **Steve Glenn**, a California developer, is creating entire prefab communities with his Living Homes project. Working with the modernist architect Ray Kappe, Mr Glenn built a showcase home in Santa Monica and has bought land in Joshua Tree, a desert area a two-and-a-half-hour drive east of Los Angeles, for what he hopes will be a development of several dozen homes. His former career was as a partner in Idealab, an internet "incubator" that launched some of the dotcom era's most notable companies, so it is fitting that he sees a role for himself in the prefab craze.

He was meticulous about using recycled, sustainable and non-toxic materials, as well as employing low-energy radiant heating.

Though the modern prefab movement has taken off in America, and particularly on the West Coast, it is also gathering momentum in Northern Europe and Australia.

There is the UK-based company m-house, under its originator, Tim Pyne, and there are several Austrian and German firms that will deliver and build such homes in the United Kingdom.

Michelle Kaufmann Designs, www.mkd-arc.com; Desert House, www.marmolradzinerprefab.com; The m-house, m-house.org

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* The prefab's precursor was the House by Mail kit. From 1908 to 1940 the US company Sears Roebuck sold 100,000. With 30,000 pieces and a 75-page guide to assembly, they cost £ 390 to £ 1,500.

* Ikea is one of the biggest modern prefab vendors. Its BoKlok kit home has been

available in the UK since last July.

* The architect Michael Graves designed prefab pavilions, built by Lindal Cedar Homes and sold via the Target website. His homes sell for about £ 500,000.

* Bill Gates lives in an "ecology house" designed by James Cutler by Lake Washington. It cost £ 50 million.

* The financial guru Warren Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway company acquired Clayton Homes, in Tennessee, for \$1.7 billion. Clayton then acquired prefab-maker Oakwood Homes for \$373 million.

* The market researcher Freedonia Group says the prefab market will rise to \$11.8 billion by 2007 (including mobile homes).

* Everything costs more in London: First Penthouse is plopping high-end prefab penthouses on rooftops in the City. Cost? About £ 1.5 million for 2,000 sq ft.

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