HOUSE & GARDEN

Get it fast!

197 Places to Call When You Need—Chic New Curtains (tomorrow) An Elegant Sofa (in 2 days) A Cozy Guest Room (this weekend)

*Special Pullout Map The New York Botanical Garden
Far Horizon, the first of Lindal Cedar Homes' prefab houses designed by Cutler Anderson Architects, at Innisbrook, a resort community near Wright City, MO, was so carefully positioned that very few trees needed to be cut down.
America's supreme architect, Frank Lloyd Wright is esteemed as the creator of one-of-a-kind masterpieces. But throughout his long career, Wright also championed the affordable prefabricated dwelling, which he called "the house of the future." If mass production could put well-designed automobiles within everyone's reach, he argued, why couldn't the same be done with houses? By 1911, he had started to produce plans for the ambitious American System-Built Houses, but only a few of those bungalows and duplexes were erected. During the mid-1950s, Wright's new series of prefabs for another entrepreneur met a similar fate.

That gap between artistic vision and commercial reality has deterred developers and top-tier architects from joining forces in the ready-made market. There are many low-cost do-it-yourself kit houses available today, but for those who want an architecturally distinguished prefab, there is little to choose from.

An encouraging breakthrough comes with the recent collaboration between one of America's most admired architects, Jim Cutler, and Lindal Cedar Homes, the largest prefab cedar house manufacturer, both based in the Seattle area. Lindal could not have found a more convincing exponent for its top-of-the-line cedar houses, which require an average of eight months to complete, about half the time it takes for Cutler's made-to-order
schemes, which are also considerably costlier. But Lindal is by no means cheap, either. Speed you’ll get; a bargain you won’t, unless you reckon added value through exceptional design.

Cutler Anderson Architects’ ecologically sensitive architecture takes many of its philosophical cues from Wright and his most influential disciple, E. Fay Jones, who died last summer. Cutler keeps their faith with his reverence for natural materials and deep knowledge of how to bring out the innate qualities of wood through clearly exposed construction.

The 55-year-old Cutler, soft-spoken and earnest, shuns the star architect circuit, keeping his Bainbridge Island office small, priorities focused, and integrity intact. Though he’s no brand name like Michael Graves (whom Lindal has also hired to produce a line of prefabs), the company was attracted to Cutler not only for his talent, but also for one very marketable fact.

As noted in Lindal’s glossy in-house magazine, Cedar Living, “Cutler made news for his work on Xanadu, Microsoft mogul Bill Gates’s $97 million, 40,000-square-foot residence on Seattle’s Lake Washington.” Though that was the ultimate custom commission of the dot-com boom, fame by association with the world’s richest man might at last dispel the somewhat déclassé aura of prefabs.

Three years after the Gates mansion was completed in 1997, Cutler’s Schmidt house in Sequim, Washington, sparked huge interest when it was published in Sunset magazine. Lindal asked Cutler to replicate it for a prefab, and though the Schmidts were willing to have their house imitated, the architect at first demurred. Then Cutler began to reconsider the persuasive case made by Lindal’s marketing director: “You have all this knowledge,” he told us, “all these beliefs about respecting and revealing the nature of materials and places. You should ethically try to bring that to a larger market.”

Cutler agreed only after Lindal accepted several extraordinary conditions. He was adamant that his houses not be plunked down just anywhere. “We want to fit our buildings into their natural context in a way that offers the best connection between the dwelling and the place in which we’re putting it,” he says.

To disrupt the land as little as possible, concrete foundations are limited to a small basement beneath the main portion of the house, with concrete piers underpinning the rest of the structure. Existing trees must be preserved, and Cutler insists that potential customers provide photographs and a contour map of their property. “If we think that’s the right place, we tell them to go ahead and do a tree survey, and then we’ll try

A glass breezeway “hinge,” top, connects the two-story central pavilion with one of the single-story wings. The limestone base recaptures the color of rock outcroppings nearby. The master bedroom, above, overlooks the double-height multiuse living space, left, and Alpine Lake beyond.
to do a house," he says. "We are trying to raise the bar nationally for how we deal with landscapes."

To adapt to specific environments, Cutler's Lindal designs are highly flexible. Each is anchored by a core containing the kitchen/living/dining/master suite, joined to bedroom/office/garage wings on fixed glass breezeways, "hinges" that can be angled to adjust to the particular landscape. Customers have the option of combining elements from the two basic models, Far Horizon (which Lindal dealers sell at a base price of about $300,000) and Early Leaf (which is about 20 percent more expensive but three-quarters larger). Final costs depend on the price of the land as well as labor costs in different parts of the country.

The only one of Cutler's Lindal houses to be completed thus far is the Far Horizon prototype, erected on spec by Innsbrook, a 7,000-acre resort development 50 miles west of St. Louis. Rising beside a shimmering lake and crowded by graceful sycamores, the house is so romantically sited and architecturally superior to anything else in this upscale enclave that I was surprised to learn it remained unsold when I visited in early spring. That is, until I found out how much it cost.

This first Far Horizon is priced at $979,000, which, although about what an average house goes for in certain coastal markets, is 30 percent higher than comparably sized (though architecturally mediocre) lakefront houses at Innsbrook. A sales brochure for the model tries to soften the blow by itemizing an additional $192,000 in construction and landscaping extras included free of charge.

Beyond local sticker shock, sales resistance may be attributable to the supersize phenomenon that has inflated so much of American life, from food portions to cars to domestic architecture. "The size of houses has become more important than the quality of the space," Cutler laments. "It's the same with everything. How much more consumerist can we be without honoring anything?"

At 2,890 square feet, the three-bedroom Far Horizon feels plenty big to those of us who grew up before mandatory great rooms, separate bedrooms for every child, spalike master bed-and-bath suites, his-and-her home offices, fully equipped gyms, vast entry halls with never used spiral staircases, and multi-SUV garages. Though the dimensions of Cutler's rooms (and his nice but less than drop-dead bathrooms) may underwhelm the McMansion crowd, the house doesn't feel cramped to me, thanks to its generous ceiling heights and intelligent placement of large windows, which often turn corners and frame beautiful views.

The focal point of the Far Horizon is its prow-shaped cathedral-ceilinged central pavilion with the kitchen/dining/living room on the entry level and a loftlike master bedroom suite on the second-floor balcony overlooking it. Glass-walled and timber-framed, the core bears a striking resemblance to Cutler's Grace Episcopal Church of 2003 on Bainbridge Island, closely resembling the exposed-beam wood-and-glass sanctuaries of E. Fay Jones, including his celebrated Thorn-crown Chapel of 1981 in Arkansas.

Notwithstanding the anomaly of his Gates colossus, the typical Cutler interior is sensibly proportioned, marking a return to the humane scale favored by modern American masters like Wright, Richard Neutra, and William Wurster, all of whom rejected ostentation. As the public housing advocate Catherine Bauer Wurster boasted of her husband's deceptively simple houses for the rich, "No matter how much it costs, it will never show."

But at a time when so many people do want it to show, how will Cutler's lowkey ethos sell nationally? To be sure, his warm, inviting, unpretentious houses will appeal to a broader audience than the demanding one-off designs of the avant-garde. On the other hand, those who want to pig out on their newfound wealth may find Cutler too granola for their cravings. However this worthy experiment pans out, many will be glad there's now something nourishing on architecture's fast-food menu.