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## A new modernist prefab cabin is set to head for the Canadian hills

# Cottage in a box

The cottage is the great Canadian dream. Building the cottage is the great Canadian nightmare: construction deep in the bush means big bucks, not to mention the headache of making decisions by phone.

Once you start going back to nature, you are going to become obsessed with leaving a light footprint on the land. (Unless, of course, you are one of the gauche types building a gaudy pile on Georgian Bay.) That means not just integrating your modernist masterpiece with the terrain, but not polluting the area with excess materials. And once you fall in love with the trees on your property, you are going to want to make sure you don't use one plank too many.

BlueSky Mod is a company that promises to put together your dream cottage and ship it boxed to the plot of your choice. The company is the brainchild of two Torontonians: lawyer and entrepreneur Hy Rosenberg and Richard Stark of Collaborative Ventures, a construction company.

The pair commissioned architect Todd Saunders, born in Canada, now based in Norway, to design their first sample cottage, the Prototype, which debuts at next week's IIDEX/NeoCon show in Toronto. (Saunders will be part of a panel on sustainability on Sept. 22.)

"Prefab housing is a dream in architecture," says Rosenberg, who has had many dreams in his time (he was the guy who brought Haagen-Dazs to Canada).

Now he's really into sustainable design. The cottage will require little site preparation; it will use off-the-grid technologies such as solar panels and composting toilets. Inside,



The BlueSky Mod Prototype cabin will be unveiled at IIDEX/NeoCon

the panels are of EcoColors, a new environmental particle board by Columbia Forest Products. And Toronto's Floorworks has designed the flooring of Fuse, a sustainably harvested tropical hardwood.

The BlueSky Mod Prototype that will be shown is a "sleeper cabin" of 125 square feet, made of Ontario red cedar. "The execution depends on what people think they need," says Rosenberg, who says the units' projected price will be \$70,000 to \$90,000. In modular fashion, the cottage can expand limitlessly.

Adding in name designers (or floating the possibility) speaks to the accessibility BlueSky Mod is trying to tap. "We are not

building little jewels. Nor are we doing cookie-cutter work. It lies somewhere in the middle. And it's about sustainable materials and systems."

The words "it's about" come up a lot in conversation about prefab theory. "Really," Rosenberg says, "it's about lifestyle choices."  
— Leanne Delap

*For information on the BlueSky Mod Prototype, call 416-691-1311. IIDEX/NeoCon takes place Sept. 22 and 23 at the National Trade Centre, Toronto, <http://www.iidexneocon.com>.*

## ARCHITECTURE

# A prefab cottage for the fickle urbanite

JOHN BENTLEY MAYS

Perhaps because it sounds more like property management than fun, I've never been tempted to own or rent a full-sized cottage somewhere up north. Camping out in a provincial park with a tent and a Coleman stove is definitely not my idea of a good time.

But, like other writers, I occasionally drift into a fantasy of a little getaway cabin in the southern Ontario countryside, well off the main road, yet not forbiddingly far from civilization. My ideal cabin would be small, but not pinched; plain, but not primitive; a place of rural peace and quiet, with enough sensible comforts to make it a good place to think and dream and work.

It was at a large, otherwise lackluster design fair, held in Toronto a couple of weeks ago, that I saw the full-sized prototype of a cabin that would make a very good writer's retreat, or a retreat for anyone wanting weekend solitude under simple circumstances.

Designed by architect Todd Saunders, a Canadian now living and working in Norway, BlueSky Mod (as this handsome prefabricated little building is called) is a blend of classic Modernist clarity – straight lines, boxy forms on a platform, minimal separations between interior space and exterior nature – and soft northern woods on walls, frames and deeply overhanging roof. Its low profile and warm materials should make BlueSky fit easily and politely into settings that range from a flat, lakeside rock and a secluded clearing in an old forest, to a sunny corner of a farmer's field.

But the architectural beauty of this year-round structure lies, to my mind, in its articulation of parts. Mr. Saunders' composition is in two modules. The larger is the main cabin, a small, comfortable room measuring 12 feet by 24 feet, with tall glass doors on three sides and horizontal glass slits on the fourth. The smaller unit, separated from the main cabin by an unroofed breezeway 9 feet wide, contains a wood-burning sauna, a composting toilet, and a bathroom and shower. The whole business sits on a wooden deck measuring 16 feet by 40 feet.

While some people may not fancy the short dash across the breezeway from main cabin to washroom or sauna – specially during a January blizzard or July rainstorm – it's a separation I find especially appealing and unexpected.

It means a brief step outside and an encounter with light and air and weather every so often, and a direct experience of nature in the architectural scheme of the cabin. And, at least for this writer,



The BlueSky Mod consists of two modules: a main cabin, 12 feet by 24 feet, with glass doors on three sides and horizontal glass slits on the fourth; and a small unit, separated from the main cabin by an unroofed breezeway, contains a wood-burning sauna, a composting toilet, and a bathroom and shower.

the two-part design would mean that staying inside and avoiding nature all the time, hunching unhealthily over a laptop – the great occupational temptation of home-workers, even in cabins – would be regularly interrupted by the simple need of having to use the washroom.

The BlueSky Mod is the brainchild of Toronto lawyer and entrepreneur Hy Rosenberg and custom house-builder Richard Stark.

"I had been looking into prefab and sustainable architecture generally, then I met people involved in the prefab renaissance," Mr. Rosenberg said. His practical interest in developing such a project was kindled when a small property in the picturesque countryside near the Ontario town of Mono came his way. Though the Mono project did not materialize as planned, Mr. Rosenberg was already on his way to assembling a team to produce small prefab structures for a market of get-out-of-towners who, like himself, did not want a conventional custom-built cottage. The idea was and is for the developers of this strategy to assemble the parts in Toronto, ship the kit to the desired location, and oversee the assembly on-site. Hence the involvement of Todd Saunders – "a designer," Mr. Rosenberg said, "who would fit into the landscape" – and Mr. Stark, who has 20 years of experience as a home-builder in Toronto. BlueSky

Mod is the first design in what Mr. Rosenberg and Mr. Stark hope will be a catalogue of prefab structures in various styles and sizes.

The client costs of putting up a BlueSky are probably comparable to other design-built houses of its size. The price of the structure, the developers told me, will run between \$150 and \$200 per square foot, or about \$127,000 for the basic BlueSky package. Then there is the land itself, foundation, plumbing and heating and electrical, hook-up to the power grid, transportation and building permits, upgrades and furnishings – all costs to be borne by the client. What makes BlueSky different from other off-the-shelf housing products, Mr. Stark told me, will be the close collaboration between builder and client from start to finish, "quality control, flexibility, the ability to set it in unusual situations. We are not architects doing plans in a vacuum, but actually builders."

Torontonians will have another chance to judge for themselves whether BlueSky Mod is the cabin of their dreams on Oct. 29 and 30, when the building goes on public display in Scarborough. For more information on this open house, see <http://www.BlueSkyMod.com> or call (416) 694-3475.

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## Innovations

# Cottage is pre-fab and eco-friendly

GEORGIE BINKS  
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

A Toronto-based manufacturer has developed a pre-fab cottage that can be built in just 10 days using sustainable materials.

BlueSky Mod unveiled the cabin prototype that features the latest in green building materials and design at last week's IIDEX/NeoCon, an industry-only trade show and Canada's largest design and construction expo.

"We're trying to achieve a balance between good design, adaptability of function and sustainability," explains Richard Stark, co-founder of BlueSky Mod. "We want to make it simple and accessible for people so they can look at it, modify it, adapt it to their needs, go to their site and put it together."

Stark says there are a number of people who would like a well-designed, ecologically friendly cabin, but rather than having to hire an architect, spend a year researching sustainable materials and then hire a builder, the company does it all for them.

"It's one-stop shopping for a well-designed cabin (where) people can feel they are being responsible about its impact on the environment," Stark explains.

The 640-square-foot prototype cottage, designed by Canadian Todd Saunders, consists of a main sleeping cabin surrounded by a deck, a 130-square-foot cabana and a breezeway between the two structures. Hy Rosenberg, the other founder of BlueSky Mod, explains the cabin is designed primarily for weekend use, but could be utilized all year round. It can be expanded into a full 1,100- to 1,200-square-foot cabin using a number of different configurations.

The 300-square-foot main sleeping cabin



**Toronto manufacturer BlueSky Mod has unveiled this cabin prototype, manufactured mostly from local and recycled materials.**

is a combination bedroom-living area. Interior finished panels consist of composite strawboard with a binding material made of non-formaldehyde material. The cabin has a number of large double-glazed sliding doors made from solid cedar, a quickly renewable resource. It's heated with a Danish-made wood stove with a rotating front so heat can be directed. The exterior of the cabin is coated with a phenolic resin core with a real wood veneer protecting it from UV rays and moisture.

"We've tried to minimize the need for any system that ties into the grid that draws electricity and end up with a product that would be as good if not better," says Rosenberg.

The bathroom has a waterless compost toilet made in Sweden, says Rob Davis, with EcoEthic, the company selling the product in Canada. Inside the toilet there's a peat moss and wood chip base, which

provides the composting material. A heating element evaporates the liquid and everything else is broken down in the toilet. Putting the lid down activates the system.

The shower and the sink faucets use low-flow fixtures, which conserve water. The cabin uses a renewable energy system that involves wasting as little water as possible. The flooring in the shower is Marmoleum, a linseed oil-based product. LED lighting is used throughout.

Rosenberg says the cost of a full-size BlueSky Mod cabin would be between \$150 and \$200 per square foot. It can be assembled in 10 days by the company at a customer's site on concrete piers sunk into the soil.

The company is taking orders starting next week for assembly next spring. Visit the website <http://www.BlueSkyMod.com> for details.

# ARCHITECTURAL RECORD

NOVEMBER 2005 # 228

## IIDEX/NeoCon Review

Canada's largest design-industry exposition and conference, IIDEX/NeoCon Canada, inspired attendees for the 21st time this September in Toronto. With a focus on design for adapting work and living space, the show featured product manufacturers from up north and beyond. – Ingrid Spencer



### Prefab dwellings made simply, flexibly, and sustainably

BlueSky Mod creates beautifully designed, ecofriendly modular living structures. Using new growth lumber and recycled materials, the company buys locally whenever possible and minimizes waste in its manufacturing processes. The structures are designed for placement in any number of settings, in a variety of configurations. The system includes interchangeable walls, windows, and doors, and a range of outside and inside material finishes. The BlueSky Mod system allows for transportation and assembly in remote locations using no large equipment. Every component can be carried and assembled by two skilled workers. BlueSky Mod, Toronto. [www.blueskymod.com](http://www.blueskymod.com)

## CANADIAN HOUSE & HOME

May 2006 Style Files



BlueSky Mod's prototype cabin, which can be customized in sizes ranging from 400 to 1200 sq. ft. (without decks), costs \$150 to \$200/sq. ft.

## PROFILE

Founders Hy Rosenberg (left) and Richard Stark.

## BLUESKY MOD'S PREFAB CABIN CREATORS TREAD INTO HIGH STYLE WITHOUT LEAVING A FOOTPRINT.

*Dispelling the idea that prefab housing is flimsy and unstylish, BlueSky Mod's eco-friendly designs have already impressed discerning design aficionados, generating considerable buzz at the IIDEX/NeoCon 2005 design and construction trade show in Toronto. "Our design appeal to a sophisticated consumer looking to make a conscientious choice," says Richard Stark, co-owner with lawyer and longtime associate Hy Rosenberg.*

**What is prefabricated housing?** It's built from pre-constructed modular components using standard materials. Each system is packaged in a factory, transported to the site and then assembled according to instructions. It doesn't require heavy equipment like cranes and backhoes — the cabins are engineered to sit on concrete blocks — so it causes less damage to the land.

**How do you address environmental issues in your designs?** The structures themselves have cedar exteriors, straw composite interior walls,

recycled wood floors and low voltage halogen lights. Buyers can choose how far they want to go: they can buy packages that include solar heating and composting toilets or they can choose a regular septic system and electricity (ecological choices are not always the most affordable ones).

**Why cabins?** The concept was more easily demonstrated in a natural setting so it was easier for people to get their heads around. We plan to start working on an urban application in the next year.

**Where does Canada sit in the world of prefab design?** While there's a lot out there in terms of ideas and plans, there is very little in production. That's what sets us apart: we manufacture the cabin's components and we have a show home that people can visit, not just see plans.

*For more information or to see the Toronto show home, visit [blueskymod.com](http://blueskymod.com) or call (416) 694-3475.*

# True believers bolster their pitch for prefab



A prototype of BlueSky Mod's prefab sleeping cabin, left. Inspired by Nordic architecture, it features angular cedar detailing. The compact design can accommodate a bathroom with attached sauna, as well as a queen-size bed. Cedar plank exterior finish blends with the outdoors.

Builder Richard Stark says a cost of about \$200 a square foot – versus as much as \$500 for custom work – is achievable

JOHN BENTLEY MAYS  
THE PERFECT HOUSE

Prefab getaway housing is one of those topics that pits sensible people against each other like plucky roosters, each side bristling with opinions. Just mention it among folks who talk about architecture, and watch the feathers ruffle up.

A couple of weeks ago, for example, I reported in this column on the strongly anti-prefab views of Graham Smith, principal in the Toronto firm Altius Architecture Inc. Mr. Smith thinks the last thing needed by rural areas and cottage country (where most prefab is headed) is more factory-built housing. What's appropriate out there, instead, are custom-designed cottages of the kind done, as it happens, by Altius Architecture.

The appearance of Mr. Smith's views in these pages was quickly followed by a little blitz of e-mail from people for and against. One of these spirited responses came from Toronto builder Richard Stark, who, with business partner Hy Rosenberg, went to market last autumn with a handsome, well-designed prefab cottage called Blue Sky Mod.

Mr. Stark, a 20-year veteran of construction industry, found especially objectionable the claim that an architecturally significant prefab unit and a basic custom-built house will both cost the consumer roughly the same – about \$300 a foot – at the end of the day.

"Graham may well be able to place a finished product, all in, for \$300 per square foot. My experience working with other architects on custom-designed cottages is that construction costs alone start at \$300 and range up through

\$400, \$500 or more at times. In addition to this, the owners have design, engineering, survey and permit costs."

On the other hand, there's Blue Sky Mod. "(W)e have been looking at costs upwards of \$200 per square foot for our structures, including all servicing costs. There are no additional design or engineering fees."

In an interview at Mr. Stark's Leaside office, the builder and Mr. Rosenberg stood fast by their projected estimate of about \$200 a foot in retail costs for their prefab projects. And cost apart, they believe, with evident zeal, in the overall prefab advantage.

Modular housing, in their view, frees clients from the decision-making involved in doing a custom-built house.

"People can walk through, touch and feel what they are buying, somewhat akin to buying a car. They do not have to rely on an architect's vision, transferred onto two dimensional drawings or a miniature three dimensional model."

And prefab saves time. For an off-the-rack house, "we estimate two months in consultation, rather than seven months of design and anywhere from four to 18 months spent in construction."

It's housing for buyers "who don't want to be bothered" with the fees and artistic opinions of architects.

The goal of Mr. Stark and Mr. Rosenberg is to sell 20 units a year, at \$200 a square foot – an objective they believe to be entirely attainable, despite the technical backwardness (when compared with Europe) of Canada's factory-built housing industry. (Though they have received numerous inquiries, the team has yet to get more than "serious interest" from a couple of potential clients for Blue Sky Mod, and is

now gearing up to market other prefab options.)

"Over the winter," Mr. Stark said in an e-mail, "Hy and I have been speaking to several (Canadian) factory builders as potential fabricators for our products. What I have found, which is particularly surprising to me, is that they, in fact, can provide economies on the production side. Previously, like Graham, I believed (this) was not possible."

"The part of the equation that makes this so, is that the process is engineered to reduce the thinking part on the production side, allowing for lower-skilled workers to perform what is now largely mechanical labour. Since the labour component is very high in construction, this more than offsets the overhead costs of the factory environment... It turned my thinking around and we are now seeing the potential for significant reductions in the cost of producing our products."

These entrepreneurs insist that what they are doing is a complement, not a black-and-white alternative, to one-off homes created by architects.

"There is a whole class of people who don't want a mobile home, and who don't want a custom-built house, and that's our market," Mr. Rosenberg said. "They want to feel comfortable, but they don't want to make a statement." The designs under development by Mr. Stark and Mr. Rosenberg will be, they believe, attractive to "the loft mentality, minimalism – all very hip right now."

The two men are wagering that the recent strong pulse of interest in prefab by a few architectural designers heralds the emergence of clientele for chic modular housing in cottage country. It will be interesting to watch the progress of their venture in a largely untested sector of the housing market.

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