

# The Kind of History That's Hard to Ignore: The National Homes Corporation, 1940-1986

Anne Greening

## ABSTRACT

The standard narrative of prefabrication in the United States is one of bold dreams, innovative architect-designed schemes, and eventual failure. Architects and architectural historians have simultaneously lauded the commercial failures of a few iconic architects while ignoring or belittling the commercial success of more stylistically traditional prefabricated house designs. Despite the almost universal domination of commercial prefabrication companies over those of well-known architects, architect-designed prefabs have been canonized in the history of modern architecture. In doing so, architects, architectural historians, and preservationists are repeating the mistakes of our predecessors: privileging high art and major names over. Histories that foreground the avant garde over the mass-market value of the hundreds of prewar and postwar prefabrication manufacturers ignore the historical importance of the prefabricated vernacular in America. By examining the literature on the history of prefabrication, as well as some postwar-era writings on prefabrication, this research builds on Colin Davies' work, arguing that the architectural and historic discourse surrounding prefabricated housing has foregrounded Modernist architecture at the expense of successful non-canonical prefabs which incorporated elements of Modernism and contemporary architectural innovation without the "skin" of International-style architecture. The study of the postwar prefabricated house adds necessary depth to the study of mid-twentieth century architecture in the United States and demands a reorientation of preservation efforts to include "conventional" prefabricated houses. The research also focuses on one conventional prefabrication company, the National Homes Corporation. National Homes was unusual in its success as the largest home prefabricator in America. Because National Homes and its prefabricator peers chose to focus primarily on "traditional" Cape Cod and Colonial styles rather than Modern-style homes, they did not fit into existing narratives of architectural innovation. Now, as architects and architectural historians have gained sufficient academic and temporal distance, the work of prefabricators such as the National Homes Corporation can be viewed afresh and included in revisionist histories of the 20th century.



Figure 1. A building crew constructs a panelized National Homes house. (Source: "F.O.B.: Fifty Houses a Day." Fortune, April 1950, 94.)



Figure 2. A 1952 ad in Better Homes and Gardens for National Homes' 1953 line and tours of the line's model homes. (Source: "Modern Living at its Best!" Better Homes and Gardens 30, no. 11 (Nov 1952), 49.)



Figure 3. A sketch of National Homes' modular, low-income townhouses. (Source: Reedy, Jerry. "A Promising Step Forward in Assembly-Line Housing." Better Homes and Gardens, February 1969, 52.)