
MAIL-ORDER MODERN: SUPERMARKET MAGAZINES, VACATION CABINS, AND MODULAR MEASURE IN THE 1950S

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SUPERMARKET MAGAZINE

In August 1958, shoppers at the local A&P supermarket could pick up the latest 10-cent copy of *Woman's Day* magazine with cover stories befitting the culture and season: "Summer Reading Issue" and "Frankfurter Cook Book." Along with these articles, the table of contents introduced another summer-themed story with equal enthusiasm. In what would become the first in a yearly series, the magazine presented a low-cost, do-it-yourself vacation cabin, "the answer to everybody's dream: a place to get away from it all for as little money as possible."¹ Just \$1,500, to be exact. While home-making magazines of this time routinely filled pages with glossy images illustrating decorating tips, dinnertime fare, and inventive recipes, it was not common for them to feature houses designed by well-known architects, much less offer the plans by mail-order.

Between 1958 and 1963, *Woman's Day* commissioned seven different architects to design cabins for summer issue feature. This was not exactly a novel concept. John Entenza's *Arts and Architecture* magazine had already initiated the Case Study House Program to promote modern residential design, industrialization, new materials, and prefabrication.² And by the 1930s, well-known architects such as Albert Frey had built designs for low-cost weekend houses.³ A couple of important factors, however, distinguished the *Woman's Day* program: the magazine, owned and marketed by one of the largest grocery retailers in the U.S., had broad popular appeal; and readers could purchase fully detailed plans for less than one dollar.⁴ The cabins were not just models, and unlike the Case Study Houses, they were designs that were within the financial reach of the average homeowner.

Viewed simplistically, the *Woman's Day* vacation cabin articles offer a nostalgic glimpse of 1950s lifestyle, but a more careful appraisal of the series reveals several important social and technological developments that influenced the cabins—and re-shaped professional architectural practice—several years to follow. In the decade following the war, a record number of houses were built to meet the demand of returning soldiers and their growing families. By the late 1950s, the suburban single-family house had become a symbol of improved social standing and financial stability. At the same time, architects were challenged with designing not just one-

off house solutions, but affordable, functional, and aesthetically appealing prototypes that would provide models for modern living. These attempts to address a massive housing crisis were socially responsible, but they challenged standard architectural practice that valued traditional architect-client relations and looked disapprovingly at mass-produced, repetitive designs. New materials and technologies which relied on mass production and prefabrication also drastically increased the speed of construction, and many architects were eager to propose new schemes based on modular building systems.

Increased house construction allowed huge numbers of people to settle rapidly in the city peripheries. By 1957, nearly 30% of the U.S. population lived in the suburbs (up from 15.3% in 1940).⁵ Levittown and Lustron were nearly a decade old, and the *Woman's Day* cabin articles shifted the discussion from high-volume starter homes for GI's to affordable leisure time retreats marketed directly to an ascending middle class.

The term "cabin" implies romantic connotations, and *Woman's Day* clearly marketed the designs in woodsy settings. But instead of touting rustic lean-tos, the magazine commissioned designs from architects who relied on new materials and employed novel techniques including modular coordination and prefabrication. War-born technologies had come to influence housing construction, and while automation offered a practical approach for developers like the Levitts and inventors like Strandlund, licensed architects were still discussing the broader technical ramifications of factory production while debating the ethical points of client-less design projects. In a time when advertising architectural services was considered taboo, the cabins were provocative, in small measure because of their designs, but more importantly because professional services were offered for sale in popular press magazines with tens of thousands of readers.

GEORGE MATSUMOTO AND THE FIRST CABIN

The first vacation cabin began as a collaborative partnership between *Woman's Day*, the Douglas Fir Plywood Association (DFPA), and a young architecture professor at North Carolina State College, George Matsumoto. While other architectural luminaries such as Frank Lloyd Wright came closer to achieving "household name" recognition, Matsumoto was gaining prominence and recognition

for his numerous competition entries and growing portfolio of award-winning modern houses. His selection by DFPA and *Woman's Day* was no doubt based on his successful private residences and the General Electric Demonstration House that he completed with Henry Kamphoefner. The magazine chose Matsumoto "because his approach to design is an outstanding combination of imaginative and realistic thinking."⁶

George Matsumoto taught and practiced architecture in North Carolina from the late 1940s to the early 1960s. Professor Robert Burns remarked that Matsumoto "helped establish at North Carolina State a design school of such heightened creative fervor that it quickly gained an international reputation. His constructed work of this period and prize-winning competition designs, widely published and acclaimed, added luster to the school's growing stature and marked Matsumoto as one of the post-war generation's brightest design talents."⁷ Matsumoto won numerous American Institute of Architecture and Progressive Architecture awards, most notably for his own house in Raleigh, North Carolina (Fig. 1).

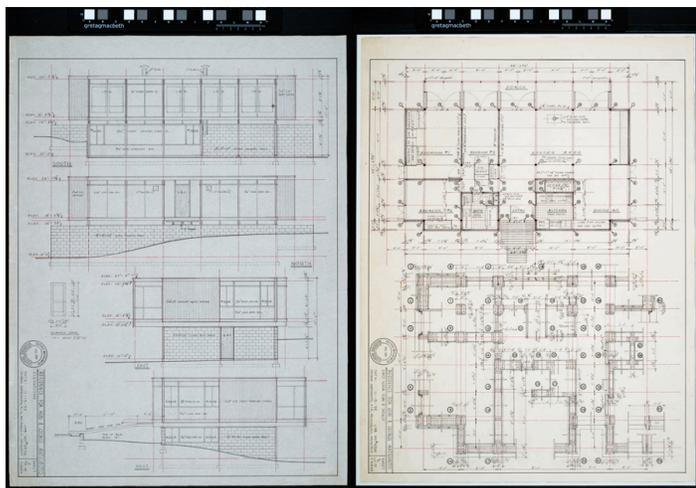


Figure 1. Matsumoto House construction drawings, 1952. Item number: MC00042-005-ff0013, Special Collections Research Center, North Carolina State University Libraries, Raleigh, North Carolina.

In addition to the General Electric project, he worked with other manufacturers such as Westinghouse and the Masonite Corporation to produce several model houses. These projects were part of a larger movement in America after the Second World War to address housing shortages by using innovative materials and structures. Many well-known architects and designers—including Richard Neutra, Marcel Breuer, Buckminster Fuller, and Ionel Schein—established relationships with construction industry product manufacturers, and they produced numerous houses to demonstrate technology's contribution to a better way of living.

Matsumoto's work portrays the optimism of mid-century residential design, and his buildings represent several modernist characteris-

tics: planar forms rather than mass to define spatial volumes, refinement of detailing instead of applied ornament, simple and clear ordering systems, and exposed structural elements. His houses were sensitive to context and local site conditions even as he advocated prototypical models.

Matsumoto shares an affinity with strict modernists such as Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (structural logic) and even Adolph Loos (distaste for ornamentation). His work, though, lacks Mies' machined aesthetic and the austerity of Loos' undifferentiated surfaces. Matsumoto's body of work provides evidence of a confident and resourceful designer, but not determined to entirely reinvent each new project.

Matsumoto's projects—the demonstration houses in particular—were imaginatively simple and conceived as products of more streamlined construction processes. Unlike Schein and Fuller, Matsumoto's work was considerably less utopian and more practical. Fuller, also an instructor at NC State and a self-proclaimed "comprehensive anticipatory design scientist,"⁸ often remarked that his designs were at least a couple decades ahead of practical reality. Matsumoto's projects, on the other hand, were imbued with progressive pragmatism, and they displayed an immediate realism, which invited craft and technology to coexist.

Matsumoto's inclusion in *Architectural Record's* annual houses issue in 1957 solidified his reputation as one of the leading residential designers in the U.S., and through a series of international publications, he was gaining notoriety abroad.⁹ He recognized that post-war housing had to meet a new challenge: a reversal of capital labor-to-material cost ratios. He observed that, prior to the war, material costs on a typical house exceeded labor costs, but more current trends showed labor costs outpacing material by a 60-40 margin.¹⁰ Matsumoto also became more critical of outmoded practices in the construction and manufacturing industries. In order for modern residential design to flourish and remain affordable, architects, manufacturers, and contractors would have to embrace standardization and modular design principles. Working with dimensionally coordinated standardized, and pre-cut parts, Matsumoto believed that architects could eliminate unnecessary on-site tooling, and therefore reduce labor costs. These values made him an ideal designer for the first *Woman's Day* Vacation Cabin, but Matsumoto was not the only voice advocating for change in design and construction processes that would make projects like the cabin more possible.

MODULAR ASSEMBLY

A few months before the first *Woman's Day* cabin issue, *Progressive Architecture (PA)* published several articles under the cover theme "Modular Assembly."¹¹ By addressing a range of issues including aesthetics, industrial production, and architectural drafting techniques, *PA* contributors illustrated a growing fascination with modular systems, and they established two main factors in the future success of modular design and prefabrication: 1) manufacturers' willingness to produce standardized, dimensionally coordinated

building materials, and 2) architects' use of "Modular Measure"¹² principles in their schemes. Modularity and prefabrication were gaining momentum among several trade and professional organizations at the time, and the American Institute of Architects, the Association of General Contractors, and the Modular Building Standards Association agreed to promote the "Modular Measure" standard based on a 4" grid.¹³

PA warned that modular schemes risked sterility, but referred to Japanese architecture as an example of grid-based modular systems with variety and grace. A second generation Japanese-American, or *Nisei*, Matsumoto had already begun exploring this idea. He recognized the similarities between his architecture and traditional Japanese structures, and he maintained "we can learn a lot from Japanese houses, particularly flexibility and the relationship to the garden. But you can't imitate anything in Japan."¹⁴ His work also exhibited spatial clarity and material detailing reminiscent of traditional panelized Japanese architecture. The similarities were less a result of sentimentality than an appreciation for simplicity and order.

Other architects included in the *PA* article offered hopeful predictions about modular assembly. Ernest Kump claimed that "working to a dimensional module gave direction and discipline" to his work. Craig Ellwood even suggested that "within the next ten or fifteen years all houses will be prefabricated." In spite of these optimistic viewpoints, *PA* noted, "total 'prefabs' have never fulfilled the quantitative promise that they once made—and, in fact, as one builder has said, 'the word *prefabrication* is anathema to the average public.'"¹⁵

Matsumoto's cabin, and others and that would follow in the next six years, were presented as quaint, easy-to-build getaways. The cabins offered an ideal building type for combining simple on- and off-site construction—and perhaps they helped to dispel the "average public's" aversion to modular prefabs.

THE CABIN: SCHEMES 1 AND 2

The *Woman's Day* editors explained that "wistful thoughts about summer on a bitter cold day last winter started the planning of this [the first] vacation cabin. Would it be possible...to build a small carefree vacation house for about \$1,000? Perhaps, if the construction were simple enough for a competent amateur to manage and if the materials were low in cost and could be bought precut from a lumberyard, it might be done."¹⁶ Matsumoto's scheme addressed these goals with a steep-roofed design "dictated by the plywood module."¹⁷

The published scheme was actually the development of Matsumoto's second scheme, and drawings in the NC State University Special Collections Research Center (SCRC) show a significantly different preliminary design based on a diagrid plan and a hexagonal footprint (Fig. 2). The folded roof structure springs from three concrete pylons arranged at triangular points on the ground. The roof floats over the interior spaces, and valley beams carry the load so that walls can be free to align to the diagrid without supporting the roof.

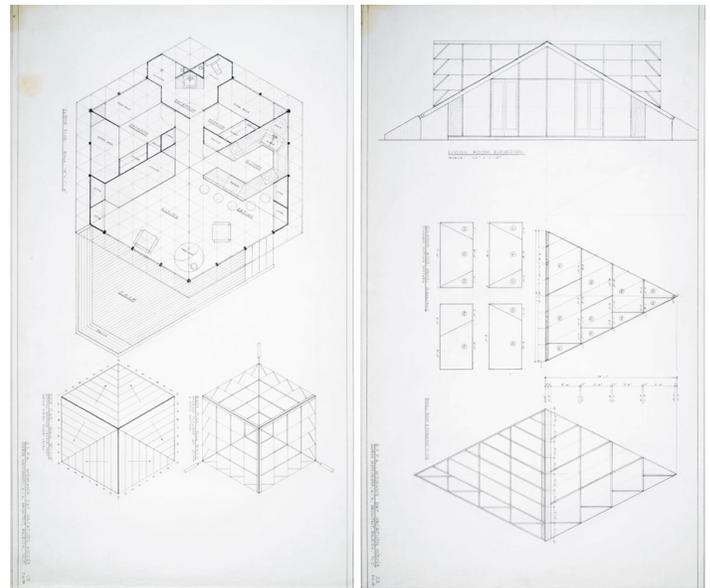


Figure 2. Woman's Day / Douglas Fir Plywood Vacation House, preliminary scheme, 1958. Item number: MC00042-005-ff0042, Special Collections Research Center, North Carolina State University Libraries, Raleigh, North Carolina.

Matsumoto suggested that the "total effect will be of a hexagonal plywood prism... hovering over a concrete slab and terrace."¹⁸ Ever vigilant to minimize waste, Matsumoto devised a clever cutting pattern that would divide full plywood sheets into trapezoidal panels to clad the irregular roof form. But the diagrid made the floor plan too complicated, and Matsumoto set aside this initial scheme and devel-

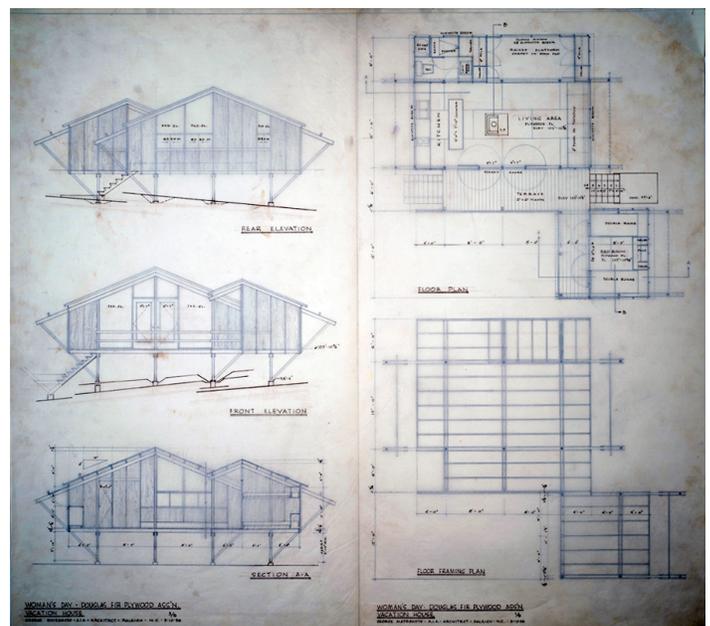


Figure 3. Woman's Day / Douglas Fir Plywood Vacation House, final scheme, 1958. Item number: MC00042-005-ff0042, Special Collections Research Center, North Carolina State University Libraries, Raleigh, North Carolina.

oped a more modular design with repetitive structural elements and a single-layer of rectangular plywood panel cladding.

Unlike the first scheme that rested on grade, the second scheme's structure—an inverted tripod—elevated the floors to allow for uneven terrain conditions. This provided flexibility within modularity that would simplify construction and enable placement on various sites.

Woman's Day described the 432-square foot floor plan as “a simple rectangular one, designed on a 4-foot module which accommodates standardized materials (Fig. 3). There are no partitions except around the bathroom. The sleeping area is defined by a raised platform and the kitchen is a wall-to-wall counter with a rolling counter separating it from the living areas.”¹⁹ Broad roof overhangs sheltered decks that provided outdoor dining and living space. Matsumoto designed an additional bunkhouse that he “purposely detached in order that children can go to sleep ahead of the adults and be reasonably separated from noise, light, and other disturbances in the living unit. Physical separation seemed the only logical answer with lightweight walls.”²⁰

PLAYING TO THE CROWD

Kirk Wilkinson, the art editor at *Woman's Day*, later claimed that Matsumoto “started something [big]” with the first cabin, and that reader response was enthusiastically positive. Wilkinson noted that the cabins had a “strong element of the unusual without being crazy,”²¹ and this proved to be popular with readers. The *Woman's Day* marketing approach was successful in capturing the attention of a broad audience, and the magazine's features contrasted sharply with presentation strategies employed by professional architectural journals.

Just three months after the *Woman's Day* article, *Architectural Record* included Matsumoto's vacation cabin in a feature entitled “8 Houses Designed and Built with Budget in Mind.”²² Playing to their respective audiences, *Woman's Day* and *Record* wrote and illustrated remarkably different stories about the cabin. *Woman's Day* published a five page, vibrantly colored spread, and an additional page showing how to construct the rolling kitchen counter. Thomas Sias, the publicity director for DFPA, was an advocate for a vivid color scheme and stated that the “ideal decorating scheme from the standpoint of livability is apt to be too subtle to come through with any punch in a photograph.”²³ *Record*, on the other hand, dedicated just two pages to the article, and it included a few of the same photographs – but this time in elegant, but more stoic black and whites.

The *Woman's Day* version offered more interior views that featured not just the architecture, but also the interior decorating work—drapes, cushions, lamps, and rugs—of its staff. They also include a clearly labeled and dimensioned large-scale plan whose diagrammatic style differed from the minimally noted thumbnail layout in *Record*.

Examined together, the two articles suggest some disparities: the differences in style and lifestyle, and the realities of costs versus the

myth of affordability. The imagery and text in *Woman's Day* presented optimistic depictions of costs and an idyllic way of life. The cabins, Wilkinson remarked, “give the impression of being fun houses where the owner changes his personality and loses his tensions.”²⁴

The *Record* article offered a more succinct description of the cabin, focusing on the basic organizational strategies and the flexibility of the bunkhouse. Even more directly, it pointed out that *Woman's Day* had understated the cost—not in small measure, but by more than \$5500!

Matsumoto and the contractor, Frank Walser, constructed the prototype cabin on a fairly remote lakeside site in the Piedmont region of North Carolina. DFPA provided material specifications and suggestions for waterproof coatings. *Woman's Day* staff designers outfitted the cabin with furniture and developed a photogenic color scheme. Noted architectural photographer, Joseph Molitor, drove from New York to take pictures of the completed structure. The entire production was scheduled to meet a tight publication schedule, and this necessitated material substitutions that increased costs. *Woman's Day* also excluded expenses for land acquisition, plumbing and electrical services, and contractor fees that might include up-charges for working on remote vacation sites. In reality, the \$1500 could buy a cabin, if only the basic structure and cladding materials.

SEVEN OTHER CABINS

The original vacation cabin proved to be such a successful feature for *Woman's Day* that they continued the series for several more years with six different architects before inviting Matsumoto to design the eighth in the series. Following the standard set by the first cabin, the next two employed modular design strategies based on 4' modules. *Woman's Day* also gave a clearer accounting of the costs, stating that materials and labor for Burton Bugbee's 1959 cabin would approach \$5000.²⁵ The 1960 cabin by E.H. and M.K. Hunter made use of folded roof panels that could be constructed off site and delivered flat.²⁶

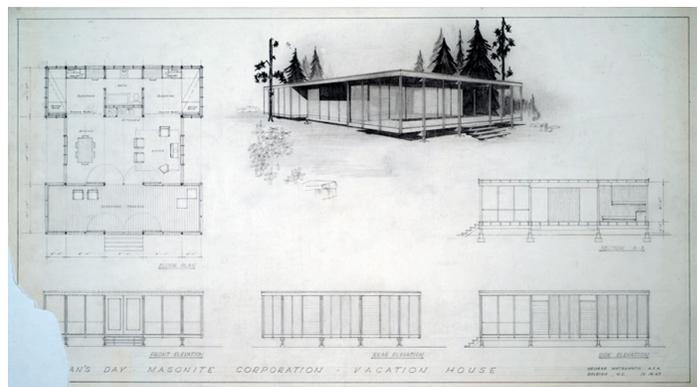


Figure 4. *Woman's Day* Vacation House, preliminary scheme, 1960. Item number: MC00042-005-ff0046, Special Collections Research Center, North Carolina State University Libraries, Raleigh, North Carolina.

Rufus Nims topped his cabin roof with a decorative cupola that made it less modern than the previous three. The article featuring this scheme is also the first that did not mention modularity as a design feature.²⁷ Later in 1961, Campbell and Wong returned the cabins to a more modern aesthetic with a flat roof and a boxy form with battens which expressed the hidden cross bracing on exterior walls.²⁸ The two cabins in 1962 (designed by Herman York²⁹ and Marshall Perrow,³⁰ respectively) exceeded the square footage of previous schemes, and the material costs grew to between \$4,000-\$5,000.

Matsumoto designed a pair of new schemes for the 1963 cabin,³¹ but like the 1958 house, the initial iteration was set aside for a noticeably different scheme. Both relied on 4', 8', and 12' modules, but the preliminary rendering and plans show a flat-roofed, Miesian scheme with exposed structure (Fig. 4). The final scheme, built on Cape Cod, was organized in a L-shape, again separating the living and sleeping spaces (Fig. 5). The structural module is less obvious in the built version of this cabin, but Matsumoto exposed a portion of the roof rafters over the deck, and applied battens to interior walls and ceilings at 4' on center that indicated structural and modular spacing.

All of these cabins were marketed as examples of low-cost, easy-to-build, carefree structures with nearly as much outdoor leisure space (decks and patios) as indoor spaces. Each structure was built in a different part of the country depending on the location of architects and material sponsors. *Woman's Day* continued to partner with manufacturers such as the Masonite Corporation and the Western Pine Association, and the costs for full sets of plans never exceeded 35 cents by mail order.

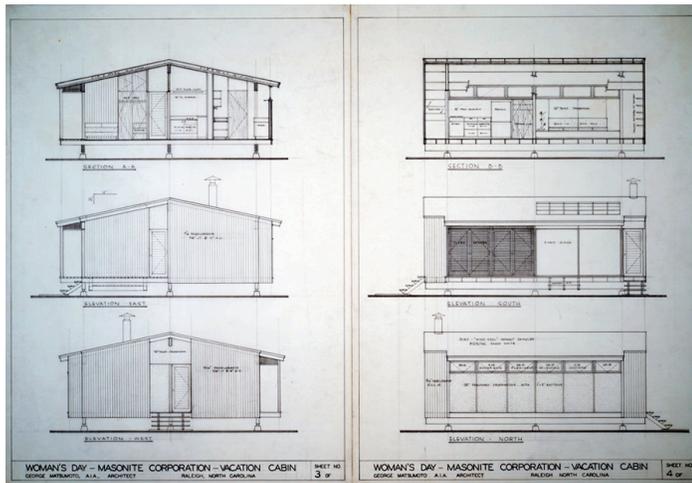


Figure 5. Woman's Day Vacation House, final scheme, undated. Item number: MC00042-005-ff0046, Special Collections Research Center, North Carolina State University Libraries, Raleigh, North Carolina.

CHALLENGING PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

Professional architectural practice was, in many respects, still a gentleman's profession in the late 1950s. The value systems and ethical standards prohibited advertising services, and the AIA expected its

members to administer proper contractual agreements between architect and client. But new technological developments had been challenging the professional practice status quo for several decades by the 1950s. Industrialization and prefabrication were providing new opportunities for architects to test the boundaries of typical architectural practice, and many architects used technological advances to broaden their roles in building design and production. Buckminster Fuller had already broached the topic of mass production with a disapproving AIA in 1928,³² but the post-war design culture was changing rapidly, and professional standards of practice were sure to evolve as well.

In spite of its modest scale, Matsumoto's original cabin generated a public response that, at times, overwhelmed his design office. He counted "on the vacation house alone, [his office] had to answer 168 letters" by August 1959. He received "countless requests" from those who purchased the plans "for slight modifications, clarifications for details after they got into construction, etc." While he acknowledged the "terrific publicity," Matsumoto admitted that "it's a lot of work and I know it's still costing me quite a lot."³³ For all of his work with non-contractual customers, Matsumoto was not receiving any consulting fee or royalties from the sales of the cabin plans.

Revised contractual arrangements became a point of discussion when *Woman's Day* invited Matsumoto to design the eighth house. He politely suggested that the magazine consider a new approach to compensating him and other architects for their work. In a letter to Thomas Sias, Matsumoto wrote:

There is one other item which may require investigation. This is matter [sic] of selling plans without the architect getting any compensation. I believe this is against the American Institute of Architects code of ethics. I'm presently working with Westinghouse on the design of some experimental houses, and in addition to my fee, we have a royalty clause in it for any sale of plans... I don't think the amount matters as much as the fact that the architect does not sell plans for nothing.³⁴

Beyond contract and compensation matters, Matsumoto discovered some unexpected and troubling consequences of selling mail-order plans in popular press. While visiting Southern California in August 1960, he discovered in a newspaper article that another architect and Homestead Supplies, Inc., were mass-producing and marketing his cabin under the title, "Leisure Lodge."³⁵ They were doing so without gaining permission from Matsumoto or informing him. Even worse, the Los Angeles Home Show that month featured a full-scale construction of the "Leisure Lodge" in the L.A. Sports Arena. The company acknowledged Matsumoto as the original designer, but then made alterations that cheapened the quality.

MADE-TO-ORDER

Companies like Aladdin popularized mail-order house kits in the early twentieth century, and Sears demonstrated that mass marketing on a national scale could generate interest and sales.³⁶ From the outset, these kits relied on pre-cut materials and techniques such as balloon framing to simplify and speed the construction process.

The *Woman's Day* vacation cabin series continued in this tradition, but it also included established architects in its design and marketing. Most of the schemes were based on modular dimensions and simple details that the amateur contractor could assemble. Neither fully site-built nor factory-produced, the cabins made use of readily available, pre-cut and standardized materials that could be easily delivered to isolated sites and assembled rapidly. The cabins were convincingly presented as simple and affordable enough for the average homeowner to build as a comfortable and modest retreat.

Standardization and modularity were changing design and construction practices, and they were giving architects new opportunities to have their designs built, perhaps by anonymous purchasers rather than familiar clients. Some architects saw this as an affront to the profession's dignity, but hindsight reveals how these examples from the mid-twentieth century were actually quite radical even as they sought mass appeal.

The cabins broadened public consciousness of modern design and challenged the architect's professional conscience. In these projects, the architects explored new possibilities for practice and modular/prefabricated systems. These designs are the precursors of today's wide range of made-to-order house kits, plans, and modules. They provide an early example of architects working with manufacturers and mass media in partnerships that promoted modern residential design and—perhaps less intentionally—modular construction to a growing post-war suburban audience.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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