Model Homes for Americans
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
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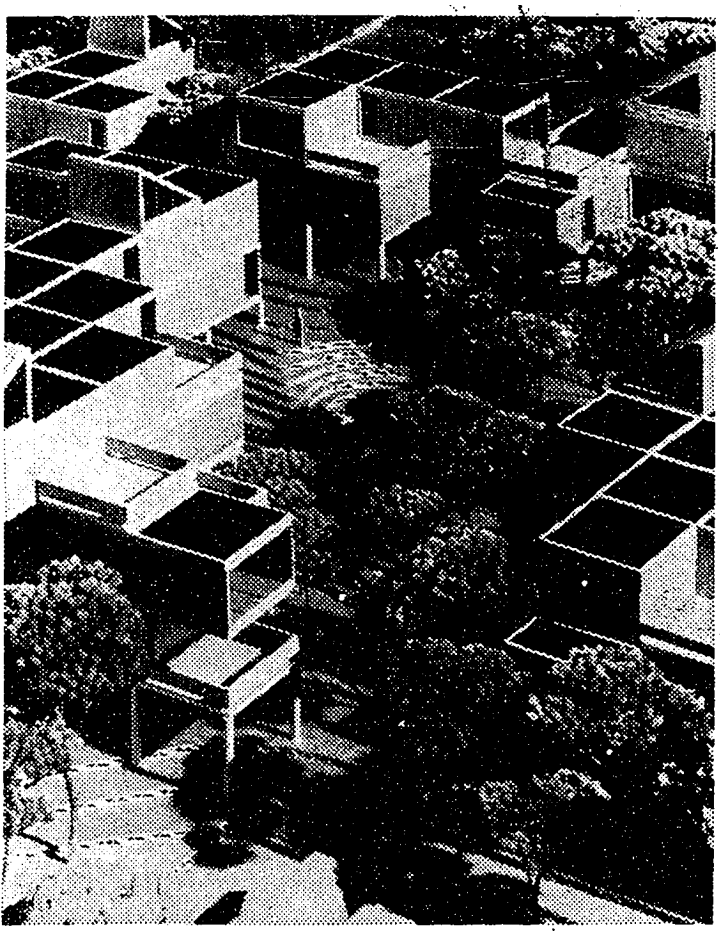
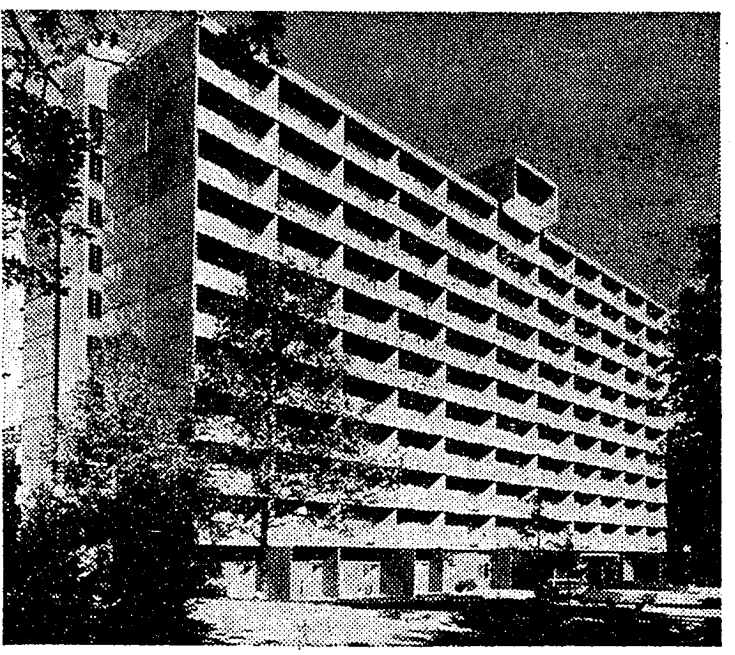


In Bloomington, Minn., Pemton, Inc., assembled stressed-skin plywood cubes. Boxes pose transportation problem.



Forest City Enterprises of Cleveland employed precast concrete panel walls and floors, brought from the factory.

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Operation Breakthrough, the Department of Housing and Urban Development's top-priority program to meet the housing shortage, has announced its choices for the American homes. The 22 designs released by the Government Thursday with the hope of mass production could revolutionize the American economy and the American landscape. These prototype designs, culled from 236 entries in a national competition, are all based on industrialized systems of prefabricated or factory-built components that could produce sorely needed housing in maximum amounts with a minimum of delay. In the opinion of the panel of Government experts that chose them, they represent the best the country has to offer.

An Appraisal

With any luck—meaning easier money and willing investors—the prototypes to be erected on about a dozen demonstration sites across the country this summer could be the beginning of a housing boom. H.U.D. may just have announced how a lot of Americans are going to live.

The designs will come in three models: high-rise, low-rise, and a combination of the two. Multistory apartments will be built only in the centers of large cities. The commonest types will follow the established suburban pattern of attached row and town houses, garden apartments and the single-family home.

Something for Everyone

These models will come in three styles: promising, mediocre and dogs. H.U.D. appears to have bent over backward to adhere to the principle of "market acceptability," hedging at either end of the design and structural spectrum.

There is something for everyone. At the same time that two of the most progressive European building systems are offered, buyers may also have their advanced technology in pseudo-Franco-American colonial or the lowest common denominator speculator ranch house. It is difficult to square these two, by Scholz Homes of Toledo, Ohio, and the Home Building Corporation of Sedalia, Mo., with the kind of total environmental design that is a basic principle of the large-scale and modular concept of systems building. Obviously, anything can be built in a factory. But even in a democracy, it hardly seems necessary to pick the worst.

Among the best selections are the "box" buildings. The Shelley System of San Juan, Puerto Rico, piles up factory-made concrete boxes in staggered patterns of room-units and open spaces. Pemtom, Inc., of Bloomington, Minn., uses stressed-skin plywood for cubes assembled in Habitat fashion. Perhaps the competition sleeper is a box system for National Homes of Lafayette, Ind., for which Edward Durell Stone, better known for fancy lacework, was the contributing architect.

Box systems are the most dramatic technologically, but they pose problems of bulk and easy transportation. "Panel" systems are more flexible.

Panel examples have been proposed in concrete, wood and plastic. An apartment house prototype by Forest City Enterprises of Cleveland uses precast concrete panel walls and floors, brought from the factory and set up on the site for a well-proportioned slab structure with a handsome balconied facade. Module Communities, Inc., of Yonkers employs a similar system for a more routine commercial look.

The two precast concrete panel systems already in use abroad are the proposals of the Henry C. Beck Company of Dallas and of Rouse-Wates of Columbia, Md. The first is the Balency system used successfully in France and Britain, adapted with spectacular design success for the New Town of Thamesmead, near London. The Rouse-Wates system has been franchised by the developers of the American New Town of Columbia, Md.

All systems, whatever their components, use standardized modular elements in varied ways. All proposals are the work of "consortiums," or coordinated teams of design, production, management and marketing experts meant to handle the whole housing process.

At the one extreme, the Keene Corporation of New York, with 12 groups of experts, including the architectural concern Warner, Burns, Toan & Lunde, and a multiracial advisory body on urban environment, has come up with a "life style" concept including "streets and yards" above ground, in a standardized, lightweight building frame.

At the other extreme, two of the country's largest manufacturing corporations, General Electric and Alcoa, with as many as 14 consortium members, have labored and brought forth mice. These corporations have been considered the hope of housing in terms of production and management expertise and capital resources. Both use prefabricated panels and preassembled services for the kind of middle-of-the-road mediocrity that has become a corporate product cliché.

One of the most curious developments has been the translation of the wood vernacular, a beloved American housing tradition, into factory production. The result will probably meet with the greatest popular approval.

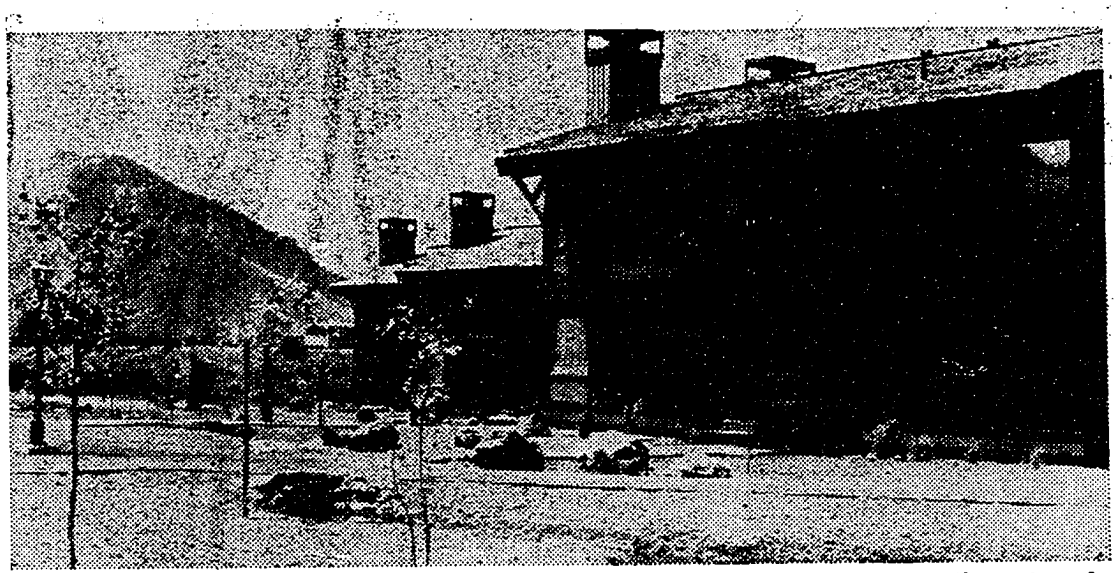
Levitt Technology of Lake Success, L.I., banks on a modern version with tasteful touches of kitsch. The Boise-Cascade Corporation of Boise, Idaho, and Cristiana Western Structures, Inc., of Los Angeles, offer attractive versions that suggest the famous California house style and look as if they had never seen a factory. The answer is shop-fabricated, wood-framed panels for walls, partitions and roofs.

An Impressive Advance

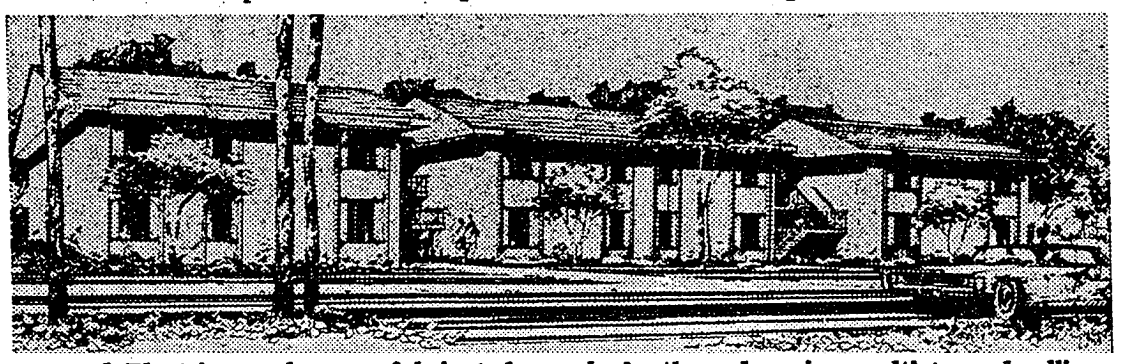
What all have in common, whatever the bows to style, is an impressive amount of efficient, technological advance over traditional building processes.

The proposals, in general, are better than anything we are doing now, but not as good as they should be. How to build an environment, while providing housing, how to create community and a way of life through the processes made possible by modern technology, is a challenge that has scarcely been acknowledged by what are, on average, pedestrian results.

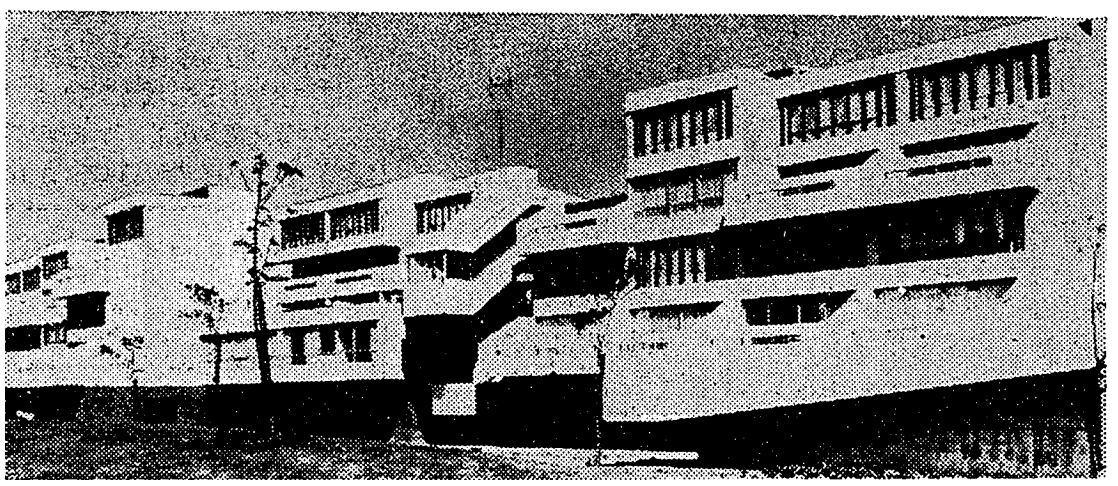
The problems ahead, in addition to setting up and financing a massive housing industry, are union and consumer acceptance. The potential is mass production of housing, and a low- and middle-income product. It may be born in a factory, but there's no place like home.



Boise-Cascade Corporation uses shop-fabricated wood-framed panels for walls and roofs



General Electric employs prefabricated panels in these low-rise multistory dwellings



Henry C. Beck Company of Dallas proposed precast concrete system already in use abroad