www.prefabmuseum.uk

A short history of prefabs –building the post-war world

The Burt Committee (Interdepartmental Committee on House Construction) was a working party established in September 1942 by the wartime coalition government. The committee considered which methods and materials would be most cost-effective and efficient for providing houses after war damage in the Blitz and the unfinished work of slum clearance had left many people homeless and living in insanitary conditions. The committee favoured prefabricated housing as a solution to the problems, and their recommendations resulted in Emergency Factory Made Homes (EFMs), a provision of the Housing (Temporary Accommodation) Act 1944.

Winston Churchill declared that the government would produce 500,000 prefabs. In the event £150 million was allocated to the programme and 156, 623 ‘prefabs’ were designed, produced and erected between 1946-9, across the UK. Some were built on bombsites, others on parks and open spaces and some still survive beyond their intended lifespan of 10-15 years.

Where did they get inspiration?

Prefabricated farm buildings, houses and bungalows had been available since the early 19thcentury. From the turn of the 20thcentury Sears Roebuck supplied 'Modern Homes' mail order kit homes.

Several factors Influenced the Burt Committee:

- Mass production techniques to manufacture homes quickly, and economies of scale to reduce the cost.
- The Tennessee Valley Authority, created in 1933 under Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, to build dams across the Tennessee River valley. Temporary towns were designed and constructed for the workers.
- The Frankfurt 'fitted' kitchen designed in 1926 by Austrian architect Margarete Schütte-Lihotzkyfor architect Ernst May's social housing project in Frankfurt.
- Armaments production in the factories coming to an end when the war was over. The Aircraft Industry Research on Housing (AIROH) had begun to make plans to convert factories to house production as early as 1942.
- Shortage of skilled construction workers, and materials, and the need to provide semi-and unskilled jobs.

Prefab facts

These recommendations resulted in a prototype, temporary steel bungalow, known as the ‘Portal House’ named after the then Minister of Works, Lord Portal. The ‘Portal’ prototype provided inspiration to private firms who were then commissioned to design and produce their own versions, but within specific guidelines.

All approved prefab units had to have a minimum floor space size of 635 square feet (59.0m_2), the parts a maximum of 7.5 feet (2.3m) wide to allow for transportation by road, and to house a ‘central service unit’. Exhibitions of prefab types were held at the Tate Gallery, also behind Selfridges, at the experimental/demonstration site in Northolt, and abroad for example at Khasr-El-Nil in Egypt.

Initially costed at £650 each, prefabs turned out to be more expensive than traditionally built houses, mainly due to rising timber, steel, aluminium and other materials costs plus a shortage of labour which drove up wages.

The government owned the prefabs, and local authorities were given powers to purchase or acquire land (for example on parks and open spaces) and to install the infrastructure, roads and utilities. Local authorities applied for the number of prefabs they needed.

Prefab construction

Prefabs could be erected with little or no foundations. In some cases they rested on piles of paving slabs. More commonly a brick outline of 3-4 courses was laid, or a concrete plinth or raft. The prefabs were erected and assembled on top of these and the utilities connected to the central service unit.

AIROH prefabs were manufactured in four pieces complete with internal fittings, delivered by road, craned into place and bolted together.

Competitions were held to see how fast a prefab could be assembled and erected, and the record was 40 minutes!

German and Italian prisoners of war assisted with their construction.

Prefabs –where were they located?

Prefabs were everywhere, from the Western Isles to the Isle of Wight, from a few in the smallest village to large estates of 300-1100, one or two on a bombsite, erected on parks and open spaces.

The largest concentrations of prefabs were located where cities and ports had been heavily bombed; during the Blitz, subsequent 'Baedeker' raids (for example Exeter, Bath, Norwich, Canterbury, Ipswich, Lincoln), bombing raids on coastal towns like Deal, Hastings, Eastbourne and Grimsby, and in 1944-5 by flying bombs and rockets (V1s and V2s) which mainly targeted London. Prefabs replaced destroyed or damaged housing alongside railway lines, canals and rivers.

All mod cons

Prefabs were designed to include a fitted kitchen (with refrigerator, cooker and water heater), indoor bathroom with heated towel rail, toilet, fitted cupboards and a back boiler which provided constant hot water and a rudimentary vented hot air heating system. The bathroom and kitchen were ‘back to back’, connected by the central service unit. They were detached, and had gardens all round. Prefabs were prioritised for returning service personnel and their families.

Prefab types

11 types of prefab were selected for production under the Emergency Factory Made Homes programme.

The AIROH prefab was manufactured by aircraft industries using surplus and recycled aluminium. It was the most expensive to produce at over £1600. 54,500 manufactured

The Arcon MkV had a steel frame, designed by Ove Arup , with asbestos cement sheets, and the MkV exterior design was by EdricNeel. £1200. 38,859 manufactured

The Uni-Seco Mk 2 & 3 had timber frames with asbestos cement sheets and was manufactured by Uni-Seco structures, suppliers of huts to the military. £1130.29,000 manufactured

Tarran Industries of Hull manufactured the heaviest of prefab bungalows, the sixteen tonne Tarran. £1000+. The Tarran had a timber frame with pre-cast concrete sheets. 19,000 manufactured.

Prefabs were imported from the USA and Sweden.

Prefabs –where did they go?

Prefabs were scheduled to last for 10-15 years by which time it was anticipated they would be dismantled or demolished and replaced with permanent housing. This took longer than anticipated, sometimes much longer…

Ten years after the end of the programme, prefabs were offered to local authorities at £150 each. Some were bought, others dismantled or demolished within this period, but many stayed put for decades longer and some are still standing. Dismantled prefabs were sold as holiday homes or farm buildings, and sometimes went 'missing'! It was stipulated that people who bought prefabs privately could not live in them permanently.

Large numbers of prefabs were demolished in the 1960s and 1970s.

Post-post-war prefabs!

Terrapin, Atlanta and LCC mobile homes were commissioned by the London County Council and developed in the early 1960s. Sometimes they directly replaced post-war prefabs or were co-located in the same street!

Paladin Sun Cottages were a later development. Little seems to have been written about them.

These pocket sized homes once housed Marc Bolan's family in Tooting.

What is happening to the remaining prefabs across the UK?

Currently only 2 groups of post-war prefab bungalows (22 in total) are listed Grade II in Wake Green Road, Birmingham and PersantRoad, Catford, London. Several Wake Green Road prefabs are falling into disrepair as the council re-houses the tenants in preference to maintaining or repairing them, and does not re-let them. Tenants of the remaining Catford prefabs are being decanted (re-located) prior to redevelopment. The future of both is uncertain. There is a listed Swedish timber semi-detached prefab.

Hawksley permanent aluminium bungalows were included as part of Lincoln Townscape Heritage Assessment (but not listed). 127 Tarran bungalows were refurbished in 2013 by Ipswich Council. 104 Hawksleysin Ellesmere Port were refurbished in 2014 by Plus Dane and Chester Council to last another 50 years.

Prefabs have been relocated to museums of buildings: Arcon MkV at Avoncroft Museum and the Rural Life Centre; Universal at the Chiltern Open Air Museum; Uni-Seco at Imperial War Museum Duxford and an AIROH at St Fagan's Museum in Cardiff.

How many prefabs are left, still lived in? We don't know, but we estimate between 1000-2000. Where they have been refurbished and re-clad they are often indistinguishable from traditional bungalows.

Where can you find prefabs, past or present?

Our pilot Prefab Locations map can be found through a link on our website. From information that people send us and our own research we are mapping where prefabs are and were.

The red markers show where prefabs once stood, green for still standing, blue for unsure, and brown for prefabs in museums. Every week we are told about more locations!

Why do residents love their prefabs?

We adored our prefab, I was born in ours and still have a soft spot for it although not living in it for more years than I did.

I love seeing photos of these prefabs. This is just like the one I grew up in at Brookers Close in Ashtead, Surrey. My bedroom was on the window to the left of the door & the two windows on the right were the sitting room. I loved it and was heartbroken when we had to move because they were being demolished.

End of the war, we were put into 'huts', consisting of living room 2 bedrooms off, and kitchen, toilet outside. 2 years on, we were given a prefab, joy! The integral fridge alone was fantastic, the warm bathroom too, what I could never understand was why no one ever built houses like them! They were the best ever!

Further information

Prefab Museum website www.prefabmuseum.uk

Prefabs –Palaces for the People on Facebook

Prefabs UK on Twitter

Prefab Homes by Elisabeth Blanchet (Bloomsbury Books)

Prefabs to see in museums

Rural Life Centre, Farnham, Surrey

Chiltern Open Air Museum, Chalfont St Giles, Buckinghamshire

Avoncroft Museum of Historic Buildings, Bromsgrove, Worcestershire

St Fagan's Museum, Cardiff

Imperial War Museum, Duxford, Cambridgeshire (exterior only)