

Affordable flair

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Tim Young's residence in New York state

Tim Young, a freelance editor in Mahopac, New York, drew a sketch of his dream home on the back of a cocktail napkin. It would, he decided, be modern, with a loft-like feel inside. Next, he put his art school training to use and built a model of the house. The project stalled, however, when he worked out what it would cost to engage an architect to create blueprints, on top of the funds required to buy a plot of land and sub-contract builders.

Young's solution was to buy a ready-made home plan online. It cost him \$1,000 and, after a few modifications for the hillside site he had secured, he used it to build his new home, to which he is now putting the finishing touches. Surrounded by trees in a neighbourhood of predominantly colonial-style houses, the three-bedroom, "retro-modern" home should be ready to move into this month. Young estimates he saved \$22,000 (£13,750) on architect's fees. He paid \$325,000 for the land and the home cost \$650,000 to build.

Like any new-build project, Young's home had its share of challenges – securing permits, making 11th-hour alterations and handling negotiations with local conservation groups. He still can't quite believe he has achieved his vision. "The jumping off point was getting the home plan. I couldn't have done it otherwise," he says.

Building a new home usually involves two choices: you find a model you like on a residential development under construction and perhaps customise it before it is completed to make it more to your taste; or you hire an architect to design your home from scratch. The latter requires a considerable financial outlay, which puts the option out of the reach of most people. Typically, a client pays an architect 15 per cent of the cost of their home. In the US, less than 3 per cent of new homes are architect built.

There is a third way that is emerging as an option for the design-savvy. As with Young's case, it involves buying a pre-existing blueprint and a plot of land and putting up the house yourself or with the help of a builder.

Young bought his plan from Houseplans, one of a new breed of companies that is creating innovative home designs, some commissioned from well-regarded architects, and using the internet to market them. They are banking on tapping into a growing demand for modern, even modernist, homes from a generation that takes design cues from the likes of Dwell magazine.



The most well-known home plans are arguably those that were first made available in 1908 by US retailer Sears Roebuck & Company. Its *Book of Modern Homes* featured both plans and building materials and offered 44 house designs, ranging in price from \$695-\$4,115. Once a customer had chosen their style and placed an order – with a \$1 deposit – it was only a few weeks before their home, in 30,000 separate pieces, would arrive, packed into two train boxcars, at the nearest train depot. “A 75-page, leather-bound instruction book told homeowners how to assemble those 30,000 pieces,” writes Rosemary Thornton in her book *The Houses That Sears Built*. “The book offered this sombre (and probably wise) warning: ‘Do not take anyone’s advice as to how this building should be assembled.’”



Colin Smith's home in Kerr County, Texas

According to Thornton, the kit included 750lb of nails, 22 gallons of paint and varnish and 20,000 shingles for the roof and siding. Sears estimated in 1908 that a carpenter would charge \$450 to assemble one of the homes. Many were also assembled by the new homeowner along with friends, relatives and neighbours, in a fashion similar to the traditional barn raisings of farming families.

The Sears Catalogue homes have been enjoying a revival recently, with fans seeking them out and prices rising accordingly. But the concept of home plans on which they were based has lost its allure over the past few decades. This can mainly be attributed to the paucity of interesting designs on the market. There is no shortage of companies selling plans – the US has several dozen – but many of the homes on offer resemble the type of cookie-cutter suburban house that can be bought built and ready to move into. The motivation for acquiring a plan and orchestrating an entire construction project has been lacking – particularly if you wanted something out of the ordinary or uncompromisingly modern. Developers have been slow to offer genuinely contemporary designs too.

“There has been a stigma attached to home plans,” concedes Stephen Williamson, chairman of Houseplans. “They were seen as something cheap you might buy on the bottom shelf of Wal-Mart, and architects looked down at the idea.” Now, however, a significant number of well-known architects is signing up to create blueprints. The incentive can be financial: in the economic downturn many architects have seen their client base decline dramatically and home plans represent an additional, albeit modest, income stream. But the inducement can be more idealistic too. “For architects who strive towards the goal of affordable design for all – espoused by many modernists but achieved by only a few – home plans can be a way to put it into practice,” says Allison Arieff, author of The New York Times’s By Design column.

Hometta, a new online home plan company that specialises in modest, sustainable designs, opened in July. Founded by a builder and real-estate developer, Mark Johnson, and an architect, Andrew McFarland, and based in Houston, Texas, it says it wants to provide architect-designed homes for people who can’t afford architects. Its plans, most of which are for homes no bigger than 2,500 sq ft, sell for about \$3,000 and are all penned by architects or designers. The portfolio includes Doug Garofalo, of Chicago-based Garofalo Architects, Far Frohn & Rojas, which has studios in Cologne, Santiago de Chile and Los Angeles, and Kiel Moe, whose two-bedroom “stacked house” is raised above ground on a series of shipping containers.

“The people who shop at Target, Ikea and Apple who are looking for clean, modern design: that’s our target market. The age of the McMansion is declining – I hope,” says Johnson, adding that the biggest hurdle his company faces is convincing customers they can do it on their own. “Building a house on your own land is a long journey involving lots of work,” he says. Hometta hopes to pave the way by providing construction guides – which it recommends customers read before they buy a plan – and eventually introducing resources on its website such as a nationwide network of builders.

Philadelphia architect Greg La Vardera also believes there is an emerging subset of homebuyers interested in building modern homes. He offers plans through his own firm, LaMiDesigns, and via Houseplans. He was inspired by reading early issues of *Dwell* magazine, which launched in 2000, after which he started connecting with the magazine’s readers on its online forums. “From a design sense there’s a tremendous hole in the market and I saw home plans as a way of plugging that,” he says.

One of La Vardera’s customers is Colin Smith, a building contractor



in south-central Texas who specialises in interior remodels. Smith spent \$1,500 on La Vardera's Plat House plan and built the residence largely by himself with some help from his son, a carpenter. "I wasn't crazy about the idea of a home plan when my wife first showed it to me," he admits. But he's happy with the result: a 1,492 sq ft open-plan home with two bedrooms, two bathrooms and decks on three sides. Smith estimates he spent \$50,000 on construction costs and that the result is worth about \$225,000.



Pam and Colin Smith outside their self-built property

Home-plan company FreeGreen focuses on smaller homes and offers some of its plans free. As its name implies, it also has an eye on sustainability. It says its homes are designed to perform 30-50 per cent better than prescriptive building codes on energy performance. An Open Source section on its website allows architects to showcase home plans but very few have yet been bought, according to FreeGreen's own online counters.

Even plans that are purchased might end up gathering dust. "I can't help wondering how many people buy with a vision of one day building their dream home and then hold on to them without actually doing it," says Arieff.

At the moment, the renaissance in home plans appears to be concentrated in the US. Eighty per cent of Houseplans' online traffic is from the US and the lion's share of its business is there too, although orders have come in from further afield. A UK customer in Bicester, Oxfordshire, central England, bought a blueprint for a traditional-style, five-bedroom, five-bathroom home "with elements from the European, luxury, French country style". A master plan for such a house costs \$1,299. Another order came in from Bermuda, for a \$725 design for a 1,270 sq ft cottage with a wraparound front porch.

The home plan concept mirrors other current trends in home building – such as the revival of interest in prefabricated homes and the small-house lobby – which suggest there is a hunger for innovative ways to build homes. Customisation and sustainability often go hand in hand with these movements.

Arieff, for one, looks forward to a time when developers work together with home-plan companies. "Anything that brings the hand of the designer into home building is good," she says. "And it would help scale up the dissemination of well-designed modern homes."

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