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A Prefab Utopia

By JOHN LELAND

On a rainy afternoon in Helsingborg, a coastal town in southern Sweden, a young couple were moving into a BoKlok development so new the grass hadn't grown in around it yet. You could tell something about their world by the capitalized names on their boxes: the BONDE entertainment unit, the EKTORP sofa, the LEKSVIK hat-and-coat rack, the pax wardrobe. Sophia Stringer, 28, an athletic-looking woman who manages a local soccer team, brought up the back end of one box. She and her partner had won a lottery, competing with 400 people for the 30 apartments in the development. Priced about 25 percent below comparable apartments in the area, the apartment features polished oak floors, high ceilings and a loft-style layout, with a small living room pushed against an open kitchen. The closets are deep, the rooms small. Bright new Ikea fixtures -- natural beech cabinets in the kitchen, closet organizers in the bedroom -- added just a dollop of conspicuous design, a modernist Scandinavian take on the generic and ready-made.

BoKlok represents the new frontier of Ikea's design ambition. Instead of just selling furnishings, the company is trying something much bolder: actually building homes. Groups of homes, in fact -- housing developments built according to the same principles that guide the design of Ikea furniture. The homes are small modernist units, prefabricated and mass-produced to minimize the price and organized to maximize interaction among residents. "I don't think we're creating communities," said Joakim Blomquist, one of the five members of the BoKlok team, measuring his words. "It's up to people to create their own. But this is not only housing."

"This is very consequent," said Alexander von Vegesack, director of the Vitra Design Museum in Weil am Rhein, Germany. "If you do the entire living environment, then of course you should end up thinking of cheap, well-designed houses as well. I don't know if it really will happen on the same scale that they are developing furniture. But what I saw in the south of Sweden was very positive. It was a new way of housing that looked interesting and was functional. And it was very light, with natural materials -- very appealing for human use."

The scale of the houses and the way they are arranged are largely a response to the high Scandinavian divorce rate. The big houses of the 20th century didn't fit the micro-families of the 21st. Madeleine Nobs, one of the architects, saw the project in an overtly missionary cast. "So many architects are making houses for their own way of how they want to live," she said. "We started with research, not just making beautiful drawings."

Like a typical BoKlok resident, Nobs is a single mother with two children. To her, one of the big problems for such singles is isolation. With an Ikea faith in design solutions, the architects tried to fix this problem. They constructed the buildings in an L shape, Nobs said, to force greater contact among building residents, and dug a small, communal garden in front, so neighbors would be joined in a small project: better living through geometry. "The BoKlok idea is that you have to be close to your neighbors and have dialogue. That means so much."

To cut costs, the company expects the residents to manage the development cooperatively, taking two-year turns

on a governing board. The boards can be instruments in what the writer Roland Huntford calls benign Swedish totalitarianism. When one woman in Helsingborg wanted to build a wall behind her apartment to keep the wind off her patio, the board turned her down, saying that the units had to be uniform. Other neighbors who wanted to put up satellite dishes to watch foreign television were similarly rejected. In some developments, everybody gathers twice a year for a huge cleanup and repair of the grounds. Neighbors in each unit take turns tending the grass and hedges -- the equivalent of the do-it-yourself assembly at Ikea. "We meet all six together and have coffee and discuss lawn work," said Therese Henriksson, 32, who shares a ground-floor apartment with her 2-year-old daughter, Maja. "So you know you get that piece of paper in your mailbox every six weeks. Yippee! It's my turn to cut the lawn."

Ikea is not the only design company trying to extend its reach to cover the whole domicile. Michael Graves is developing a prefab house for Target. In 1999, Philippe Starck and a partner, John Hitchcox, started a company called Yoo to build high-end homes that reflect Starck's design, from the layout to the lemon squeezer in the kitchen. Customers choose one of four design palettes -- Classic, Minimal, Nature and Culture -- each corresponding to a lexicon of portentous and expensive attributes. The first American venture, with condos selling from \$330,000 to more than \$1 million, is in motion for South Beach in Miami.

Blomquist says that there are no plans to build BoKlok housing in the United States, where higher land prices might dilute the cost-cutting measures. But the project has expanded into Norway and Finland; the company is "close to a decision to start in Denmark" and is researching the feasibility of BoKlok England. And in Sweden, there are currently more than 1,000 BoKlok units.

The problem with trying to conceive ideal housing, even on a small scale, is one of overweening ambition, said Ruth Eaton, an architectural historian and the author of "Ideal Cities: Utopianism and the (Un)Built Environment." "You build little pockets of them, and a lot of them work quite well," she said. "The idea of building an ideal little street is quite laudable. But you can't put the same thing everywhere. That's where utopias go wrong. They say, 'I've worked out the perfect solution -- this is applicable anywhere.' You can't take over the world, because conditions are too different, calling for different solutions. Yes for Stockholm, no for Timbuktu." John Leland

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