

---

## *Introduction*

---

In the United States, at the end of 1941, two architects in exile from their native Germany began to collaborate on a project for industrialized modular housing, later known as the "Packaged House." For both men, Walter Gropius, then at the height of fame, and Konrad Wachsmann, a rising star, this was the culmination of many years of experience in the field of prefabrication. Both saw in it an unparalleled opportunity to bring their long-cherished dream of a factory-made house to fruition. This, their only major collaborative effort, resulted in a system both architecturally promising (with an inherent flexibility and capacity for variability) and of great technical virtuosity. As a result of its intrinsic virtues, vigorously promoted by the persuasive advocacy of Wachsmann and the powerful leverage of Gropius' international reputation, the Packaged House received wide publicity in the professional and lay press and quickly achieved not inconsiderable fame. Funding for its development was forthcoming, modestly at first through private initiative and then on a much more substantial scale through governmental loans and guarantees. An elaborate corporate structure was set up in New York and California, whose management included many prominent men rich in technical and business experience. A large war-surplus factory was acquired and a highly sophisticated automated plant installed, with a single-shift capacity to produce 10,000 houses per year. Government

approval of the prefabricated house's structure and performance capabilities ensured access to mortgage financing, and the National Housing Administration promised a letter of intent to guarantee the market of the first 8,500 houses. At the end of a decade of development, not devoid of struggle and frustration nor free of crisis but always on an ascendant curve of hope and promise, the venture seemed poised on the brink of success. But only a small number of these immaculately conceived and engineered houses was actually produced and sold, and by the 1950s the entire undertaking had collapsed "not with a bang but a whimper."<sup>1</sup>

That this was a grievous personal disappointment to Gropius and Wachsmann need hardly be stressed. More important, it was a grave setback to the whole movement for industrially produced housing to which both men had for so long dedicated so much thought, effort, and creative energy. Few architects were better qualified to attempt the creation of a system of factory-built houses. In Germany, in the crisis-ridden but intellectually stimulating era of the Weimar Republic, each, independently of the other, had tenaciously pursued the idea of the prefabricated dwelling. With faith and with intelligence, each in his own way had promoted the goal of industrialization. In young Wachsmann's case, the contribution to the theory and practice of prefabrication had been significant; for the more eminent Gropius, it was of monumental importance.

Now, in America, Gropius and Wachsmann represented a formidable combination of ability and experience. Their product, moreover, was conceptually sophisticated and technically impeccable, and the 1940s was a period in history perhaps more propitious than any other for a venture in industrialized housing. All the auguries were favorable, but the bold undertaking failed completely, at least in a material sense. That failure had not only the elements

of personal drama, as far as the chief protagonists were concerned, but consequences of much more general significance, whether it is with the technology of industrialized building that we are concerned, or with the processes of the housing market, or, more deeply, with an understanding of the meaning of "dwelling." In this book we trace the history of the factory-made house, especially as it related to the contributions of Gropius and Wachsmann. The facts of the case are interesting in themselves. They illuminate the characters and professional careers of these two eminent architects, and on analysis, they contribute to our understanding of some of the central concerns of the architect in his confrontation with technology and social forces.

