

# THE RADAR DESIGN

BY ALEXANDRIA ABRAMIAN-MOTT  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY EDWARD DUARTE

## SPACE CRAFTING

*A boom in backyard architecture has Angelenos angling for a piece of the prefab pie*

Don't even think about using the "s" word with Tom Sandonato and Martin Wehmann. The owners of Kithaus refer to their prefab, stand-alone modules as offices, guest rooms, pool houses, play areas, yoga retreats, meditation spaces—anything but *sheds*. "This goes beyond the idea of storage space," says Wehmann of the L.A.-based company's mid-century-minded micro rooms. "This is about backyard architecture at its most creative." The two founded Kithaus three years ago and are now part of a growing number of architects, designers and contractors delivering prefab spaces to square-footage-starved Angelenos.

Call it a quest for instant architectural gratification. In addition to Kithaus, which touts the portability of its featherweight aluminum structures, a number of companies are specializing in stand-alone structures that can be assembled in days. Modern Cabana's hyper-clean-lined rooms are all about sleek affordability (most units come in at less than \$100 per square foot), while Santa Barbara-based The Sacred Space provides clients with hand-carved, high-end Bengkirai wood huts from Bali.

Casper Mork-Ulnes, who quit his job at an architecture firm to start Modern Cabana in 2004, says most of his clients are women. "They make up 75 percent of our business," says Mork-Ulnes. Along with contractor Nick Damner, he creates "accessory architecture for the backyard"—eco-friendly rooms sized between 100 and 160 square feet. "Men get offices, but a lot of women don't get that private space," Mork-Ulnes says.

And it's not just for grown-ups. When Bonnie and Michael Kelly downsized from 6,000 to 3,000 square feet, the kids' play space got cramped

**THE ROOM BOOM:** Artist Steve Appleton uses his Kithaus prefab as a studio. The company's aluminum-framed rooms can be assembled with an impact wrench and drill.



in the process. So the couple plopped a K3 model—Kithaus' smallest and, at \$23,000 (excluding installation), most affordable unit—onto their Agoura Hills property. The 117-square-foot unit took two days to install, and *voilà*, all those Barbies and Bratz got a new Brazilian-hardwood-and-glass home. "They're installing a second K3 so both kids can each have their own playrooms," says Sandonato.

Modular structures can start as low as \$6,000 (not including installation) and rise into high six-figure territory once plumbing, electrical and other amenities are added. By going this route, prefab clients can avoid the messy details of traditional add-on construction—particularly the messy business of building permits. While most L.A. municipalities don't require a permit for structures less than 120 square feet (hence many units measure in at just shy of that size), many companies operate in a don't-ask-don't-tell gray zone, even when structures do require a permit. "Good quality construction to do an addition usually costs about \$500 a square foot," Kithaus' Wehmann says. "We're coming in well below half of that."

Best of all for some clients is the fact that the detached rooms are just that—detached. "Most of our clients live on an acre plus," says The Sacred Space's Jack Herschorn. "I have a billionaire client with one of our structures that is filled with emperor resting chairs, just for solitude. No matter how big your house, you need a place where you can get a little spot of serenity." **A**