

Showing its Metal

A 1949 Lustron House is Reassembled at the Museum of Modern Art.

By Kim A. O'Connell | *Online Only* | July 25, 2008



The Home Delivery exhibition at MoMA, July 20 through Oct. 20, 2008

Credit: [Richard Barnes/Museum of Modern Art](#)

On a June morning, with dust flurrying about like snow, Steve McLoughlin and Michael Leventhal are flanking a massive roof truss, jockeying it into place. "Everybody clear?" Leventhal hollers at a group of onlookers. After more maneuvering, the truss is finally in position, and the house begins to take shape. But this is no ordinary construction job: The crew is rebuilding an all-steel Lustron house in the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York.

Like an old-fashioned barn-raising, a dozen volunteer preservationists from across the country came together to reconstruct the Lustron as part of MoMA's exhibition "Home Delivery: Fabricating the Modern Dwelling," which opened last weekend. The highly anticipated show features a chronological examination of factory-produced architecture from the 19th century to the present, including the work of such visionaries as Thomas Edison and Buckminster Fuller, as well as five full-scale, contemporary prefabricated houses displayed in MoMA's adjacent outdoor lot. The intent, according to curators, is not only to showcase the history of prefabricated housing and bring it into the mainstream of architectural discourse, but to examine how its failures and successes might influence housing of the future.

Inside, the exhibition will include reconstructions of both the Lustron—a nearly mint-condition gray model from Arlington, Va.—and a prefab prototype by French designer Jean Prouvé. Both houses were originally built in 1949 and appear about midway through the exhibit.



A prefab house known as Burst 003, constructed in North Haven, Australia, and designed by architects Jeremy Edmiston and Douglas Gauthier.

Credit: © 2008 Floto + Warner.

"That date is of crucial importance," says Barry Bergdoll, chief curator in MoMA's department of architecture and design, "because MoMA commissioned Marcel Breuer's House in the Garden that year [now located on the grounds of Kykuit, a National Trust Historic Site], which was the first time the museum undertook an architectural exhibition by putting up a building. It was kind of the anti-Lustron house. So there's a kind of poetic justice in bringing back the Lustron and saying that, while it may not be a great piece of architecture, it actually was a very interesting technological experiment."

Built between 1948 and 1950 in a Columbus, Ohio, factory that once produced warplanes, Lustrons are porcelain-enameled steel houses that were designed to revolutionize the American housing industry. Led by creator Carl Strandlund, the Lustron Corporation marketed the houses as affordable, virtually maintenance-free, and weather-proof. About 2,680 Lustrons were built nationwide.



The Museum of Modern Art helped save this threatened Lustron by including it in its 2008 exhibit.

Credit: Jessica Faller

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Despite financial backing from the federal government, however, the corporation went bankrupt in 1950, leaving more than 12,000 orders unfulfilled. Today, the small two- and three-bedroom houses are vulnerable to teardowns, and fewer than 1,500 Lustrons may remain. All but three of the 60 Lustrons that once stood at the Quantico Marine Base near Washington, D.C., for example, were demolished in the last two years.

Yet the steel houses are garnering increasing attention within the architecture and preservation communities. In Arlington, where only four of the county's original 11 Lustrons remain, officials had accepted the donation of the gray Lustron in 2006 to prevent it from demolition, and it was carefully disassembled and placed in storage (see "[Loving Lustrons](#)," *Preservation*, July/August 2007). While the county deliberated over its future use, MoMA curators came calling, asking whether the house could be loaned to the museum—and whether anyone knew how to put it back together.

Michael Leventhal, Arlington's preservation coordinator, and Cynthia Liccese-Torres, a preservation planner, quickly assembled the nation's leading Lustron experts, who all had experience salvaging, disassembling, or reassembling the highly engineered houses. Often working 12-hour days, the team spent about a week in mid-June rebuilding the house, which contains some 3,000 separate parts and 13 tons of steel. (MoMA opted to leave off the back wall and keep interior spaces open to foster visitor access and expose the Lustron's construction methods.)

"There's an order to things in a Lustron, and if you follow the order, the house doesn't fight you," says volunteer Todd Zeiger, director of the Northern regional office of the Historic Landmarks Foundation of Indiana. "The house tells you how to put it together."

Arlington preservation staff and local advocates are hoping that the exposure given the Lustron at MoMA bodes well for its reassembly and reuse back in Virginia. Two years have passed since the house was disassembled, and the county still lacks any concrete plan for its future.

"This little metal house has now surpassed its original significance as the best-preserved Lustron in Arlington, Virginia," Liccese-Torres says. "From this point on, it will forever be known as the Lustron that went to MoMA."

For more information, visit www.momahomedelivery.org or www.lustronpreservation.org.

Kim A. O'Connell is a freelance writer and a board member of the nonprofit Arlington Heritage Alliance, which helped bring the Lustron to New York.

National Trust for Historic Preservation and Lustrons

The National Trust for Historic Preservation's Midwest Office launched an initiative to save Lustrons, creating a Web site, www.lustronpreservation.org, and helping to save the Arlington Lustron in the MoMA exhibit.