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DESIGN MATTERS

Creative Couple Brings Modularity to City of Somerville

By Jeffrey Stein

CHRISTINE CUTTITA AND BOB GILLIG: DESIGNERS, teachers, husband and wife, parents and the creative pair behind Cuttita and Gillig Architecture in Somerville. One day this past week – actually, it took about a day and a half – the pair built a house they designed on a lot they own on Harris Street in Somerville just behind their condominium home/office. It stands there now, 2.5 stories tall, sloped roof, three bedrooms, 2,600 square feet.

Cuttita and Gillig were able to perform this daylong feat by avoiding the usual construction inefficiencies, designing a building that needed very little work once its components arrived at the building site. They were able to do it by understanding how almost every other complex object (besides a building) is designed to be manufactured, both in the United States and around the world. They were able to shave an entire year and \$100,000 from the construction time and budget of their new house, and save thousands of gallons of gasoline and British thermal units (BTUs) of energy while ensuring high standards of construction by designing a modular building. In 2006, this is only the second one ever constructed in all of Somerville.

Let's face it: The best minds of our generation have not exactly turned their prodigious problem-solving skills to the housing industry in the United States; nor did the best minds of the past generation. There are critical issues surrounding housing in New England and the United States just now, among them the fact that so few people can actually

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A crane lifts one-quarter of Christine Cuttita and Bob Gillig's modular house – including framing, sheathing, roof, doors, windows, inside plaster, plumbing and cabinets – onto its site on Harris Street in Somerville. The husband-and-wife team is the creative pair behind Somerville's Cuttita and Gillig Architecture.

afford to build and own a house. Gillig and Cuttita have confronted this issue for both their clients and themselves. Working with contractor Sean Sweeney of Heritage Modular Homes in Needham, they have undertaken an experiment in America's densest city, custom-designing a modular house to fit both the space needs of their own growing family and to serve as a model of high design for low construction costs.

Housing in the United States is expensive primarily because of the archaic way houses are constructed. No matter if an architect has designed it or house plans have been retrieved from a magazine or a family has gone directly to a contractor, houses are designed to be custom-built by guys with nail guns

commuting to your site in trucks, rain or shine, winter and summer.

Compare houses to cars. If today we still designed automobiles to be put together the way most houses are constructed, we would all be taking very long walks to work. A century ago, the few cars that existed were designed this way: To place an order for a car, an erstwhile owner might sit with a designer and describe the look he wanted. Most car makers then – like most building-makers now – had at their disposal several different designers, so that no matter what the manufactured brand name, the automobile might look any number of different ways. But even then there was a certain sameness about

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cars: four wheels, engine in a certain place, steering wheel, seats, a roof. This, of course, is the reality of houses now – same kinds of rooms, windows, entry, countertops, flooring ... And yet most houses remain hand-built many years after the Industrial Revolution, and as a result their market prices are far out of proportion to their (mostly) copycat workmanship.

A Social Good

Lincoln achieved a certain cache among automobiles manufactured in America early in the 20th century, because it was the last one to be made by hand. Today, a Lincoln is merely a re-badged, factory-made Ford. Was it a better car back in the 1920s when it was hand-made? No, it was not: not in its mechanical quality, not in its materials, not in its comfort, not in its (lack of) individuality, not in how it burned fuel. And like the Lincoln, buildings that are made in climate-controlled factories, under optimal light, by a skilled

workforce who are warm, dry, safe and insured, and who live near the factory, are – in almost all categories that count – better-constructed buildings than those constructed by hand entirely onsite. Less expensive, too.

Pennsylvania is a state that is home to nine different modular building factories. Gillig and Cuttita worked with one of them, totally redesigning a standard modular house to fit their exacting specifications and modernist aesthetics, making sure to stay within the lines of modules 13 feet wide by up to 50 feet long. The resultant design is light, airy, with interior spaces that flow effortlessly into one another, not an easy condition to achieve with any house, factory or site built. After a lengthy and thoughtful design process, building the four modules that comprise their house – including plasterboard, cabinets, windows, doors, plumbing, wiring and ductwork – took just 10 days in the factory. Add another day for the trip to Massachusetts on four semi-trucks, as well as a day

and a half to crane the modules into place, a process called “setting.” There remains only trim work to be completed onsite. Gillig and Cuttita expect to move in by September.

Christine Cuttita and Bob Gillig arrived in New England several years ago in the traditional way. After graduating with degrees in architecture from the University of Tennessee, they moved to the creative culture of Greater Boston to allow Cuttita to attend graduate school. Since then they have designed a series of small and complex buildings, taught design studios in Boston architecture schools and educated groups of students visiting the Hub from the University of Tennessee. Their clients and their students have learned that architecture is more than the design of space – it is also the design of construction processes – and that housing affordability is not just an individual good, but a social good. This is how the creative culture expands; this is how to build a city. ■

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