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Hundred House won last year. Inset, Ilke homes in Manchester



Can modular designs help to solve the housing crisis? The Sunday Times British Homes Awards are looking for the best prefab solutions. By *Martina Lees*

In new factories countrywide, assembly lines and automation are taking the place of skips and shovels to build more of the homes we need. It's what the government hopes will be the Brexit-proof answer to Britain's housing crisis. Better homes, built faster – without bricklayers who often come from the Continent. But how can those homes be beautiful, not boxy?

To help answer that, as part of The Sunday Times British Homes Awards and supported by James Brokenshire, the communities secretary, we are inviting architects to design an

exceptional house that can be built off site in volume. A panel of judges will shortlist the best concepts; then our readers will vote for the winner.

Brokenshire believes that Britain has the ability to be a "world leader" in off-site housebuilding: "I am really ambitious about how we could harness this in a way that it becomes an export opportunity. I'm interested in how we challenge this perception that it's the prefabs of the 1970s. It's absolutely not. It's something that matters to me to get to those numbers [300,000 new homes a year by the mid-2020s], but equally

to think creatively about what building is."

About 15,000 (7.7%) of England's 195,000 new-builds were constructed in factories in the 2017-18 financial year, and analysts expect that to at least double by next year. The government wants to increase the number to 100,000.

The first homes built in Legal & General's modular factory near Leeds – the largest of its kind in the world – were delivered to a site in Berkshire in December. And a week ago, the first 3D units were slotted into what will be the world's tallest modular tower, of 44 storeys

in Croydon – built in a factory in Bedford.

"The previous versions of off-site housing were, 'You can have anything as long as it's a rectangle,'" says Simon Bayliss, managing partner at HTA Design, which designed the Croydon tower. He adds that new factories are making the sector "more versatile".

With Ilke Homes, which opened its 2,000-home-a-year modular factory in North Yorkshire in November, HTA has created a concept off-site terrace that won our previous design competition. Hundred House, chosen by half of the Sunday Times readers who

voted last year, has a double-height living room with skylights in its vaulted roof and can be personalised with 3D-printed stone reliefs. Its creators are now in talks to build a pair of these terraces by the end of the year. "It shows that modular can create a street scene that people not only can enjoy but want to live in," says Dave Sheridan, executive chairman of Ilke.

The firm says it can build a home for as little as £65,000 in just 36 hours, though Hundred House would cost about £85,000. Modules the size of shipping containers are driven on lorries, with ovens, radiators and even toilet-roll holders already fitted by factory staff, 85% from outside the construction industry.

So far, most off-site homes have been modular high-rises for private-rent developers, social and student housing. But Brokenshire wants to "flip that across" to the big private housebuilders too, which have mostly shunned factory-built homes. Next year, Berkeley Homes is due to become the first of these to open its own modular factory, in Kent.

Another trailblazer is Urban Splash, which builds modular townhouses in its

East Midlands factory. With oversized windows and high ceilings, they are 25% bigger than the average UK new-build. Now available on sites from Milton Keynes to Newcastle, its first 43 "hoUses", in Manchester, won an innovation prize in The Sunday Times British Homes Awards three years ago.

This year's contest is open not just to modular homes, but any off-site houses. They can include pods, such as for kitchens or bathrooms; panelled systems that slot together; or large prefab parts such as roof cassettes.

Apart from the conceptual off-site competition, the awards also include 20 categories for completed homes – from one-off houses to major schemes, interiors to landscaping, extensions to regeneration on a grand scale. The winners will be announced at a London ceremony on September 19.

As we try to build our way out of Britain's housing crisis, it's more than just a numbers game. Exceptional homes are far too often the exception. Instead of Identikit boxes on the edges of towns, these awards champion homes you'll want to look at, and live in, for generations to come.



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