

(UN)LOVED MODERN CONFERENCE



Kevin Williamson and Helen Smith in front of a group of Nissen huts, Belmont North
Photograph Fay Jarvie 1962

“HISTORY GOES FULL SEMI-CIRCLE TO SAVE POMMY TOWN”

The conservation and adaptive re-use of a Nissen hut
by the Historic Houses Trust of NSW
through the Endangered Houses Fund Program

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Introduction

The concept of a Nissen hut as a single house under threat?

The Nissen hut may not seemingly conform to everyone's idea of great 20th century architecture that is worth saving but it is symbolic of a particular era in Australia's history.

The distinctive semi-cylindrical form of the Nissen hut that was once a common element in Australia's post WWII urban landscape has all but disappeared. This truly modern prefabricated mass produced building was used in the thousands to provide an immediate solution to the nation's post war domestic housing shortage and to accommodate the vast influx of migrants from war torn Europe. The efficient design of the Nissen hut was ideal being cost effective, economic in the use of materials, easily transportable and quick to erect using unskilled labor.

The Historic Houses Trust (HHT) controversially acquired a Nissen hut in 2008 in Belmont North, approximately 2 hours north of Sydney near Lake Macquarie, to be saved through the HHT's Endangered Houses Fund (EHF) program. The HHT is currently preparing the necessary documentation for the conservation and upgrade works to the Nissen hut after which the property will be sold freehold.

The acquisition of a Nissen hut was a major departure from the buildings currently in the HHT's portfolio which ranges from the World Heritage nominated Hyde Park Barracks, the early nineteenth century rural properties of Rouse Hill House & Farm and Elizabeth Farm to the splendour of Vacluse House. The sole twentieth century representative in the HHT's portfolio of house museums is the iconic Rose Seidler House, designed by the late Harry Seidler in 1948. Because the Nissen hut is not considered unique in the way of the Rose Seidler House, convincing the public the Nissen hut was of any lasting value and in need of saving has been a challenge.

The Nissen hut purchased by the HHT is one of a collection built by the Commonwealth after World War II to house migrants, mostly British, and the group was commonly known by the residents as 'Pommy town'. Of the 50 dwellings originally constructed, 17 have since been demolished and due to their modest size, the remaining huts are at risk of demolition to make way for large contemporary housing.

The appeal of this project was that by saving this single mass produced formulaic building the HHT has the potential to positively influence the outcome for the other 32 remaining huts in the collection by showing by example how the humble Nissen hut can be creatively upgraded to meet modern expectations for a family home.

This project has generated extraordinary media coverage both nationally and internationally. The Independent newspaper in the UK featured the project as a similar debate is raging in Britain over the merits of conserving of post WWII pre-fabricated housing. In Australia the HHT's purchase of a Nissen hut has been the topic of countless talk back radio programs and received significant coverage in the local print press.

This paper discusses the aims and unique issues faced in the conservation of this oft maligned example of twentieth century architecture and consequently by the HHT. Drawing attention to saving this single modest dwelling we are informing the debate about the need to appreciate and acknowledge the merits and significance of unloved modern twentieth century housing.

The Historic Houses Trust

The Historic Houses Trust is a statutory authority within the Department of Arts Sports and Recreation. It is one of the largest state museums in Australia and is entrusted with the care of key historic buildings and sites in New South Wales.

The HHT was established in 1980 to run Vacluse House and Elizabeth Bay House and has now grown to manage 18 diverse sites and properties including houses, public buildings, a farm, gardens, parklands, a beach and urban spaces. The HHT holds extensive collections in each of its properties and conducts a dynamic range of programs and activities attracting over two million visitors to our houses and museums each year.

The mission of the HHT is to inspire appreciation of Australia's diverse histories and cultural heritage for present and future generations by conserving, interpreting and managing, with integrity, places of cultural significance, in the care of the Historic Houses Trust.

The HHT is a leader in the conservation and management of historic places in Australia and has won many awards for its work. It is guided by the view that museums must be part of current debates in the community, open to new ideas as much as they are the repositories of important collections and the memories of the community.

The Endangered Houses Fund

The Endangered Houses Fund (EHF) is a new revolving fund program of the HHT that identifies significant at-risk properties and saves them from demolition or unsympathetic development by using the model of acquisition, conservation and resale. In this way, the funds can revolve and save more houses over time.

This approach to conservation will not create new public museums, but encourage the continued use of the built environment in private ownership for everyday domestic purposes. It is not a matter of acquiring more and more houses and operating them as museums. We needed to be more creative, both in terms of resources and methods of conservation.

The National Incentives Taskforce in their report '*Making Heritage Happen*', recommended that "the revolving fund concept is one of the most practical strategies available to positively influence the status of heritage places within the real estate and development environment."¹

The HHT through the EHF has recently conserved the C1817-1822 rural property known as Glenfield in Casula and is currently conserving a pair of early timber slab cottages in Glenwood northwest of Sydney.

Designer

The semi-cylindrical Nissen hut was designed for military purposes in 1916 by Major Peter Nissen, an inventor and former civilian mining engineer, serving with the British Royal Engineers in World War I. The steel-framed hut, clad with corrugated iron, and usually with timber infill at both ends, was prefabricated in different sizes but mainly 16' x 36' and 24' x 60'. Economical, portable and quickly assembled, Nissen huts were mass-produced in both world wars, and mainly used as accommodation for defense forces, the storage of provisions and munitions and as field hospitals and mess halls.

The use of Nissen huts for migrant accommodation

Following World War II, Australia embarked on a large-scale immigration program, intended to redress the labour shortage in all but the primary industries. Service camps and other establishments, surplus to current needs, were used to accommodate refugees from war-torn Europe and immigrants from Britain, who between 1947 and 1951 numbered over 280,000. With an acute shortage of building materials, and the need for speedily erected housing, in 1949-52, the Commonwealth Government imported thousands of Nissen huts from Britain to provide urgently needed migrant accommodation throughout Australia.

The Commonwealth Government instigated a substantial two-stage 'construction' program to provide hostel accommodation for immigrants. Stage 1 was the provision of temporary housing for 170,000 Displaced Persons brought to Australia under agreements the

¹ National Incentives Taskforce for the Environment Protection and Heritage Council
Revolving Funds for Historic Heritage – An Information Paper, April 2005

government had signed with the International Refugee Organisation in 1945 and 1947. Stage 2 was to be the housing of roughly 120,000 assisted British immigrants and others arriving under diverse migration schemes described as 'UK Free and Assisted', 'Empire and Allied', 'Maltese', 'Eire assisted', 'Dutch schemes' and 'Assisted Italian'.²

Stage 1. Hostels for Displaced Persons

Stage 1 for Displaced Persons involved the conversion of existing establishments such as service camps and wool stores to reception depots, holding centres and hostels

Stage 2. Hostels for British Immigrants

The authorities concurred that an improved mode of hostel accommodation would be required to attract British immigrants, whom it was considered would be unwilling to undergo the separation of families that Displaced Persons were enduring. These hostels were either

Community Hostels

Nissen huts were used for community (or conventional) hostels and accommodated whole families and comprised two or three bedrooms and living room with communal ablution, laundry and dining facilities. Many were the larger Nissen hut partitioned to house two families

Decentralised Hostels

Decentralised hostels were erected around country centres and the dwellings were completely self-contained units for individual families comprising living room, two or three bedrooms, kitchen, bathroom, laundry and toilet, with plasterboard lining and floor coverings. It was hoped this higher standard of accommodation would discourage immigrants moving to metropolitan areas.

The Nissen huts of Belmont North

On 17 April 1951, Harold Holt, Minister for Immigration, approved the construction of two decentralised hostels at Belmont to accommodate 100 families of British migrants recruited for the coal mining industry.³ The Department of Works and Housing completed the erection of the Decentralised Migrant Hostel Belmont No 1 on 18 December 1952 at a cost £86,042 5s 7d.⁴

The Decentralised Migrant Hostel Belmont No.1 was referred to by many names but most commonly as either the Commonwealth Cottages by their tenants or 'Pommy Town' by the local community (as virtually all other hostels that accommodated British immigrants were euphemistically known).

The huts had chip heaters in the bathroom and a 'pot belly' stove in the kitchen. Unlike other Belmont North residents, hostel tenants had mains water, internal toilets and its own septic tank system. The residents called their huts Commonwealth Cottages and were delighted with their new homes, as some had never had an indoor toilet before. (However the chimneys of the chip heater disintegrated in time and resulted in fires.)

Although intended to house British migrants recruited for the coal mining industry, by the time the hostel had been erected, the scheme had faltered. Vacant huts were often leased to local families and many of the existing residents have been there for decades.

Proposed heritage listing of the Nissen huts by Lake Macquarie City Council

Recently Lake Macquarie City Council proposed to heritage list the remaining Nissen huts in the Belmont North group. This created considerable debate amongst the members of the community who were concerned about the implications of heritage listing and the perceived loss of development potential and property value.

Most recently the Hon. Robert Coombes, State Member for Swansea stated that if

² NAA, SP446/1, 50/3/166.

³ NAA, SP A445; 221/1/142.

⁴ NAA, SP A445; 221/1/142.

“heritage provisions were to apply, a very unfair and unjust penalty would apply to genuine, hardworking families. To put it bluntly, the residents of the Nissen huts are battlers and they do not deserve the unnecessary and unwarranted impost that having a heritage order will create.

It would in some cases destroy a lifetime goal of home ownership and basically condemn those affected to living in homes that are far inferior to the building codes and expectations of today. A heritage order would significantly reduce the value of the properties and prevent further refurbishment to make them more habitable and comfortable.”⁵

The HHT’s Nissen Hut



The Nissen hut purchased by the HHT is a 3 bedroom; 24’ span DB3 type. The building is in a ‘tired’ condition and is perched on concrete stumps on a difficult sloping triangular block. Not surprisingly the HHT was the only party interested in purchasing the hut.

One of the aims of the project was to support the efforts of the Lake Macquarie City Council in their bid to save the remaining huts in the collection by showing, by example, how a Nissen hut can be creatively conserved and upgraded to meet current expectations for a family home.

Community awareness and involvement

The approach adopted by the HHT was to increase the awareness and appreciation of the significance and potential of the Nissen huts within the local community.

⁵ Media Release by the Hon. Robert Coombes, Member for Swansea, May 2009.

The HHT held an ideas competition for the architecture students from the University of Newcastle. The purpose of the competition was two fold; to generate fresh innovative ideas to show the local community how a Nissen hut can be successfully upgraded and to generate ideas that may influence the design of the proposed works to the HHT owned Nissen hut. An exhibition of the finalists was then held in the Lake Macquarie City Art Gallery and the members of the local community and the council were then invited to attend.

This process created extraordinary publicity in the local media and talk back radio. The HHT was inundated with personal accounts of their life in the Nissen huts, both positive and negative.

The next stage has involved the HHT engaging the two winning students, under the mentorship of Linda Babic from Heritas Architects, to assist in the design and document the proposed works to the HHT's own Nissen hut. Construction is due to commence in spring 2009.

The design brief was to creatively transform the HHT's Nissen hut to become a family home that would appeal to the local market. This included accommodating three bedrooms, two bathrooms, and a single large open plan kitchen / living / dining space. For the project to influence the outcome of the other huts the design must be able to demonstrate that this can be achieved in a cost effective way and incorporates best practice environmentally sustainable design principles in such areas as construction type, insulation and water usage.

Conclusion

The conservation of this truly unloved icon of modern architecture has presented the HHT with a unique set of challenges. Whilst the focus of this project is on the single dwelling we hope that we are leading by example and that the HHT's conservation approach and fight for this unloved icon of 20th century post war domestic architecture and life will raise public awareness and potentially influence future planning decisions to help secure similar housing in the vicinity and in the state.