

Big White Boxes

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Walking down my dim street, flanked by symmetrical trees, I look at the bland and bleak houses that line the road; faceless people come and go walking up and down the coarse cement pathways, as wretched as the houses they live in. More people drive by, plain faced, resembling the plain rendered walls in which they reside. I turn a corner, another street, lined by colourful, rustic leaved trees. The heritage radiates from each house giving them an almost mystical sense of time and history. I stop at the first house and breathe it in; the house is perched atop a few wooden legs elevating itself from the earth; like a majestic curtain the veranda hides away the inner sanctum. Through the veranda, I can glimpse a long hallway, extending in a straight line into the depths of the house.

Since moving to Brisbane in 1996, I have been intrigued and fascinated by the 'Queenslander'. I find that living in a so called 'block house' all my life only emphasises my lingering interest. It is the 'Queenslander's' trademark architectural style that captivates me: the long and narrow verandas, the straight and deep hallways and the almost comical way it teeters above the ground, suspended by timber stumps.

Staring at the house around the corner, in a transient state, it is easy to see the identifiable characteristics which make the 'Queenslander' unique. The simple yet effective design elements, in which a core of internal rooms is arranged, are used effectively to create and maximise airflow. The straight hallway allows for breeze to pass through the house, dispersing any heated or stale air. The veranda conceals the house and is a major feature, easily the most distinguishable of a 'Queenslander'. The veranda provides a frame for the house. Often painted in mild pastel colours, it repels heat and provides the house with a gentle look. It can also include masterfully crafted timber slats and handrails that add a decorative touch. The veranda also has many responsibilities, such as protecting exterior walls from deterioration by impeding driving rain and harsh sun, providing shade, reducing the amount of heat entering the house through windows and walls and allowing doors to be left open during summer storms for good cross ventilation. Another feature easy to distinguish on the 'Queenslander' is the timber stumps that support the house. The stumps allow the house to adapt to uneven topography while also protecting it from floods and overland flooding, common in Brisbane during summer months. The stumps, suspended from the timber floors, also enable breeze to pass under the house and help cool the interior.

The 'Queenslander' has dominated the architectural style of Brisbane for many decades. However, the rapid influx of people to South-East Queensland in recent years has seen it being eliminated as a practical means of housing. This is because it is most commonly a large house built on a large block. To accommodate increased population many 'Queenslanders' have had to make way for terraced houses and apartments that maximise the area once occupied by an old house. This form of succession is almost industrial. The new terraced houses/apartments are built with little to no character, the main aim being only to accommodate a certain number of people, not to satisfy them.

As I sit on the couch at home cool air is being blown around the room unnaturally. I am surrounded by walls with no doors; most of the light is provided artificially and I feel trapped. Previously, a house was revived by cool air that blew down the open hallway, naturally revitalising its occupants. This is not the case these days; the air conditioner erases any need for the kind of airflow patterns typical of the 'Queenslander'.

It is clear that the revolution in technology has erased any need for many of the architectural characteristics found in the 'Queenslander'. Does this mean that the need for such houses has been lost to time? As Ernest Dimnet once said, 'Life is a succession of lessons enforced by immediate reward, or, oftener, by immediate chastisement'. This is seen in modern architecture in Queensland, where characteristics from previous eras have been used and built upon to better suit people. It is evident, for instance, where the prominent veranda from the 'Queenslander' has been transformed into the contemporary outdoor room. As Michael Hogg, architect from the well known Brisbane architectural firm Donovan Hill says, 'The outdoor rooms take the positive attributes of the veranda and build on them'.

The 'Queenslander' has been an effective design for over fifty years, given the climate, and available materials and technology. The contemporary 'Queenslander' retains characteristics of the old design while improving some of the minor and less useful features. A modern Queensland home must be aesthetically pleasing in the external façades, provide flow-through ventilation maximizing natural benefits, provide savings on energy costs and feature the major characteristic of an outdoor veranda. The contemporary 'Queenslander' diverts from the old style, maximizing benefits and comfort levels while also modernising looks, textures and feels. 'There is definitely an argument that can be made against "Queenslanders" being an effective design for our climate given the advancement of building systems over the last fifty years. [However] It was certainly an appropriate design given the materials and technology available.' (Hogg, 2008)

Can it be said that any house is truly new? Is it not just a combination of other architectural eras improved upon to give the house a chic new look and feel? As I take a walk down the streets of an outer suburb in Brisbane, surveying the new houses I see that each one is unique in its own right but also a rip-off of other architectural styles. I stop at one house; it stands out to me as an example of a new home embracing the characteristics commonly found in a 'Queenslander'. The modern house is elevated slightly and also retains the legendary veranda while bringing it into the current time, framing new materials, shapes and looks. The widely known 'Queenslander' has had a significant impact upon the history and culture of Queensland and is an icon that myself and fellow Queenslanders will hold dear for ever.