CONSERVATION OF RURAL TIMBER STRUCTURES

(Extract from Timber Rural Buildings on the Riverina: Conservation Issues)

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The rural timber buildings of the Riverina, particularly those built in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, are extremely vulnerable structures. Land ownership and land stewardship changes have meant that many of the large privately-held station properties have been radically subdivided, or have passed into corporate ownership with ensuing pressure for rationalisation and a minimum of station building maintenance. In short, several culturally significant homesteads, woolsheds, and farm buildings have been bulldozed out of existence. As an example, of the thirty extant homesteads documented in The Homestead: A Riverina Anthology,1 two have been demolished, five have been allowed to become derelict to such an extent that demolition is now inevitable, four have been changed irreparably, and one has been relocated.

The situation is more extreme for woolsheds and other larger farm buildings, for while large dwellings could always find occupants, the large woolshed would not necessarily perform efficiently for reduced sheep numbers. Of the twenty four woolsheds documented in The Woolshed: A Riverina Anthology,2 twelve are now only part used, and two have been demolished. Land ownership changes have greatly endangered these rural structures. Other threats are fire, flood, structural collapse, termite attack, and general lack of maintenance. Structural collapse, for example, is a major cause of building failure. The structures of the nineteenth century, based as they were on an untriangulated, unbraced post-and-beam format, were only as strong as their weakest part. Urangeine Station woolshed in the central Riverina, for instance, has partly collapsed because of the initial failure of a nave cross beam some fifteen years ago. ‘Mundarlo Station’ woolshed in the eastern Riverina suffered collapse in a lateral wool board beam, which caused progressive collapse throughout the shed, and it is now threatened with demolition.

The key to the continuing conservation of our rural timber structures is, of course, periodic maintenance. Ironically, the conservation of many Riverina timber structures has occurred ‘de facto’ because of the cladding of entire structures with corrugated iron sheeting. ‘Wallendbeen Station’ woolshed in the eastern Riverina, for instance, was built with a hardwood foot and beam frame, vertical log cladding, and timber shingled roof. Some fifteen years ago, the entire structure was clad with corrugated iron sheeting, and the timber structure consequently conserved.

Perhaps the most spectacular of the Riverina dwellings is the ‘Bishop’s Lodge’ in Hay. Our practice has been asked to act as conservation consultants in the conservation and re-use of this building. ‘Bishop’s Lodge’ was deliberately built of timber, to minimise problems with the heavily reactive clay soils on which the Lodge is sited. The conservation problems we are confronting are typical of the issues facing the architect dealing with rural timber buildings.3

Firstly, there was subsidence of the red gum stumps through periodic flooding (the site is adjacent to the Murrumbidgee River), and the deterioration of the stump bases due to dry rot had to be rectified. This involved the restumping of the entire building on a sequential basis, and the isolation of the buildings from moisture-related movement by providing a perimeter trench for both stormwater and groundwater reticulation. Secondly, the structure needed protection from fire (the house proper is built of cypress pine with sawdust insulation to the walls and ceilings). The Fire Board of the N.S.W. Heritage Council was consulted and an appropriate level of fire protection was agreed upon. Electrical supply and reticulation was also thoroughly renewed. Future work will involve securing external building fabric, and architectural conservation.

1 Peter Freeman, The Homestead: A Riverina Anthology, Melbourne, 1982.