'SQUARE WOODEN BOXES ON LONG LEGS'
Timber houses in North Queensland

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No feature of North Queensland's timber houses before the 1920s is unique to North Queensland; most can be traced to origins in other places, and many of them are evident in other parts of Australia. However, their frequent combination and repetition are distinctive to the region, giving rise to a building style which is unmistakably local in character. Visitors have frequently reacted in disparaging terms:

Almost the first thing that arrests the attention on going into Queensland is the style of the houses. They are nearly all of wood, and generally stand on high and rather unsightly, because exposed, studs ... the typical North Queensland house is seldom much to look at, even when the architect has evidently done his best. At their worst they are square wooden boxes on long legs.\footnote{G.E. Terry, Unknown North Queensland: a trip to Cairns, Cohuna 1933, pp.47-48.}

I believe that distinctive characteristics of North Queensland's timber housing can be attributed directly to the nature of settlement in the region, and that cultural, economic and political influences played a greater part than the physical environ-
ment in shaping it. These distinctive characteristics of the North Queensland region are as follows:

1. It was at first remote from earlier European settlement. Thus labour and overland transport costs were high, and most goods and services cost much more than in other parts of Australia. However, sea freight was relatively cheap, and thus distance from the point of origin added little to the total cost of imported goods. This economic climate was ideal for the proliferation of prefabricated buildings.

2. It has a tropical climate, hot and wet in summer, cool and dry in winter. Rapid fungal decay and wind damage from tropical cyclones in this climate shorten the lives of timber buildings. However, the most dramatic influence on house design is the absence of a cold winter, so that insulation to conserve heat can be disregarded.

3. It was settled relatively late in white Australian history. The first permanent settlement in the region was at Bowen in 1861. This is ironic, for North Queensland was the first part of Australia sighted and described by a European explorer, Willem Jansz, in 1606. The explanation for this irony lies in the curiously myopic land policies of the New South Wales administration until the 1850s, which artificially retarded the outward expansion of pastoral settlement.

4. It was settled very fast. When Queensland became a separate colony late in 1859, there was a surge of European occupation throughout the north and west of the colony; nearly a sixth of the Australian continent was opened to lease-holding by the new administration between 1860 and 1864.

5. Its economy was dominated by the mining industry. Prospectors followed rapidly in the wake of the pastoralists, and sometimes showed them the way. Gold dominated North Queensland’s economy in the 1870s and 80s, and, with other minerals, played a major part until the 1920s. The effects of mineral settlement on the building industry were to raise costs in an already inflated economy, and to bring an even more ephemeral character to the new towns, because the closure of mines and the decline of settlements is inevitable; the only unknown factor is how long it will take to happen.

To sum up - North Queensland was an expensive place in which to live, had a warm climate, and was settled very late and very quickly by people of British origin who did not expect to stay there for long.

Let us look at the buildings that were erected in those circumstances. The North Queensland house typically has several distinctive characteristics:

1. Its form is simple, usually symmetrical, and highly standardized. The two common nineteenth century plan forms, the two-roomed cottage, and the four-roomed house, predominate. The principal variations are the addition of side verandahs and rearward extensions.

2. Almost all houses until very recently were built of timber, and iron-roofed. Brick, stone and earth constructions are numerically insignificant.

3. The structure of most houses is the stud frame, lined with boards on the inner face, and left exposed externally.

4. Construction of houses was highly industrialised and centralised, the majority being prefabricated, or at least precut, at builders’ yards.

5. A large proportion - about 40 per cent - are elevated to two metres or more above ground on timber stumps.

6. There are characteristic regional styles of embellishment in fret-sawn timber and sheetmetal. Decoration, however, is generally subdued.

The historical origins and development of some of these features can be summarised as follows:

The most common nineteenth century house form was the two-roomed cottage, with a symmetrical core about three metres by six in plan, and verandahs at front and rear, the latter usually enclosed soon after construction if not at the time. The form derived from English rural houses, adopted in Australia for urban use. Cooking and washing were done in detached structures at the rear. The core roof is either gabled or less often hipped, and frequently enlarged after construction by the addition and subsequent enclosure of one or two side verandahs. Extension to the rear is quite common, sometimes to a considerable distance. The oldest dated example surviving is a cottage in Townsville, built in 1884, but there are undoubtedly
older undocumented ones. Cottages are usually low-set.

The four-roomed house is larger, the core about seven metres in plan, and is subject to the same range of variations as the cottage. It is commonly found with encircling verandahs, and is often high-set. Early examples were frequently built with gabled core roofs, but during the 1880s a pyramid core roof became usual. The first substantial house built in North Queensland, in 1864 at Townsville, was four-roomed with verandahs all round. The oldest example known to survive is the Ravenswood school residence, built in 1873, although subsequently much extended.

Larger and more elaborate house forms were rare, for example, only one two-storied masonry villa was ever built in the region: 'Thornburgh,' at Charters Towers in 1890. Grand dwellings usually took the form of enlarged and elaborated four-roomed houses, and there was strong resistance to the intrusion of metropolitan architectural styles. No Federation or Edwardian influences ever reached the region. 'Rosebank' and 'Warringa,' two Townsville houses built in 1885 and 1912 respectively, are very similar in form and appearance.

The materials and structure of these houses are likewise highly standardised. By far the most common building method is the stud frame, which forms the external walls of at least 70 per cent of houses in the region. The stud frame is also English in origin, although it is rarely, if ever, found in domestic architecture in Britain, but occurs in light utilitarian structures requiring little insulation.

One of the most conspicuous features of timber houses throughout Queensland is the practice of
leaving the frame exposed on the exterior of the wall. This has three main variations, with a distinct regional distribution, although the boundaries are not clear-cut; some examples of each can be found in all parts of the State.

The distinctive frame of the north is the plain stud frame, braced by only a few light diagonals near the corners. In the south of the State, and especially the south-east, the more common form is the x-braced decorative diagonal frame, of heavier, widely-spaced studs, boarded either horizontally or vertically. By 1885, the Colonial Architect's office had not only accepted exposed framing for government buildings, but was even specifying appropriate regional variations, reflecting local practice. A third form, commonly adopted for external walls in the early twentieth century, is a partition brought outside: vertical tongue-and-groove boards used structurally, secured by one or two rails and light braces. This is found everywhere, but is not common in the north.

The practical explanation for the adopting of exposed framing in Queensland is obviously that it saves a third or more of the wall's cost, in a region where insulation is not essential. The divergent regional preferences of north and south are more difficult to explain. It is tempting to look for antecedents of the southern frame in romantic European imitations of half-timbering, or in the American 'stick style.' Don Watson has drawn attention to the role of architect Richard Suter in popularising the technique in the 1860s.1

In North Queensland the question of stylistic motivation hardly arises; the stud frame is entirely utilitarian. Its exposed form can be found in light structures in Britain, and throughout Australia, although the exposed face is usually inside. However, it is interesting that its time of adoption in the north corresponds exactly to the appearance of the x-braced frame in the south. J.M. Black's house in Townsville, built in 1864, had exposed studs on its rear wall only. Four years later Townsville's new hospital was built with exposed stud framing on its front verandah: the first example in the region to be recorded in a photograph. No very early examples of exposed stud framing are extant; the earliest known is Friedrich Pfeiffer's house in Charters Towers, built in 1881 or 1882.

1 D.Watson, The Queensland House: A report into the nature and evolution of significant aspects of domestic architecture in Queensland, 1981, pp.5.5-5.8.
The building industry that supplied these houses was highly organised and competitive. In the early years of settlement, sawn timber was supplied principally from Maryborough. The oldest known prefabricated building standing in the region is the Cardwell telegraph office, erected by a Brisbane contractor in 1870. By the 1880s, each major North Queensland port had one or more sawmills, and served as the centre for prefabrication of houses in its hinterland. The pre-eminent northern firm was Rooney Brothers, based in Townsville. However, their timber supply was not necessarily local. Timber was regularly imported from Maryborough, Tasmania, New Zealand and even California, and sold at competitive prices on the local market.

In the early twentieth century there was increased competition from Brisbane-based building firms. James Campbell & Sons and Brown & Broad had established a foothold in the region by 1910, and dominated the domestic building industry by the 1920s. The new generation of prefabricated houses was simpler in appearance, with straight roof profiles, tongue-and-groove verandah walls and external boarded weather walls. Regional diversity in Queensland houses virtually disappeared with the First World War.

The practice of elevating houses was adopted in North Queensland from 1870 onward, and apparently spread from there to the south. The early use of the practice is particularly evident in the sugar-growing flood plains of the Herbert, Burdekin and Pioneer rivers. The earliest documented reasons given for the practice are to do with avoiding ‘fever’ by sleeping well above ground level. Elevation of houses had become common throughout the north by the early 1880s with the added discoveries that it assisted the detection of termite activity, and provided considerable roofed space at very low cost. The earliest known surviving high-set house is John Moffat’s in Irvinebank, built in 1884. In that year the practice received official acceptance, when the Colonial Architect’s office specified an elevated building for the Georgetown Post Office.

Embellishment of the North Queensland house is usually confined to balusters, fret-sawn verandah brackets and internal ventilating panels, and sheet-metal roof ventilators and acroteria on guttering. Cast-iron is rare. All these decorative elements were available in mass-produced forms from commercial suppliers in the region, and certain designs are commonly repeated. Although there was a tendency for details such as fret-sawn brackets to become simpler and thus cheaper with the passage of time, there was also great conservatism in their selection. The bracket design on Pfeiffer’s 1881 house, for example, appears with only slight variation on a Townsville house built in 1910. Elaborate fretwork was in use from the 1860s, but seems to have reached its greatest popularity in the 1880s. The last known example dates from 1915.

Thus from early settlement in the 1860s until the advent of the First World War, there existed in North Queensland a distinctive regional building tradition. Some might call it a vernacular tradition. I do not. The Oxford Dictionary defines ‘vernacular’ in the architectural sense as ‘native or peculiar to a particular country or locality.’
Ronald Brunskill has defined the term more comprehensively, as:

Designed by an amateur, probably the occupier of the intended building, and one without any training in design; he will have been guided by a series of conventions built up in his locality, paying little attention to what may be fashionable on an international scale. The function of his building would be the dominant factor, aesthetic considerations, though present to some degree, being quite minimal; tradition would guide constructional as well as aesthetic choice, and local materials would be used as a matter of course, other materials being chosen and imported quite exceptionally.¹

Let us test the application of this definition to North Queensland houses by selecting Matthew Rooney's house, built for his own family in Townsville about 1885 by a prominent contractor; surely a building at the very heart of the regional tradition in its period of maximum distinctiveness. Rooney's house was built by a man born in Ulster, and trained in his father's Portadown building firm. He made regular business trips to both Britain and the U.S.A. His house was built of Oregon pine imported from San Francisco, using a stud frame adopted from English practice, and ornamented with motifs derived from Classical Greece. The roofing iron almost certainly came from Bristol, and the verandah balustrades from Glasgow. Is this a vernacular building in Brunskill's understanding of the term?

The North Queensland house is simply a distinctive composite of materials and techniques selected from among the building practices of the English-speaking world, to suit the special circumstances of the early decades of settlement in the region.

Note:
This article is derived from Peter Bell's *Timber and Iron: Houses in North Queensland mining settlements, 1861-1920*, St. Lucia, 1984, which was the basis for his conference paper.