

SPLIT WEDGE HOUSE

Designer - Stephen Guthrie

Critique - Andrew Nimmo

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If you happen to be on the roads in Queensland between the hours of 2.00am and 6.00am, you may come across the curious site of segments of a timber house, complete with Police escort, slowly moving in convoy. Sometimes the house segments will be on route to a new site, and new owner. Sometimes they will be heading for the house park, (a sort of used car yard for houses). This is the versatility of the timber house. Once its usefulness on a particular site has expired, it can simply be cut up, moved to another site, and reassembled. It is quite a violent act, as it literally involves sawing the house in half - through joists, bearers, rafters and rooms. The reassembled house will appear normal, but a permanent scar remains where it has been rejoined - a new line of structure and lining knitted into the old.

Architectural graduate Stephen Guthrie bought a 1940's fibro house in suburban Tewantin, and wanted it relocated to a 3 acre heavily treed bushland site he had bought in the Noosa hinterland. The house removalists informed him that the house would have to be cut in half to be transported. It occurred to Guthrie that there was an opportunity here to introduce light and ventilation by siting the halves apart from each other. This act of opportunism has enabled Guthrie to reinterpret the found house spatially and connect it to the new site in a way that it never was. Guthrie talks about splitting the house and then filling the void with a wedge of space that sets up a forced perspective between the two halves of the house.

Photographs of the house show that it went through a phase during its relocation, where much of its suburban pretension had been peeled away and an underlying logic of construction was revealed. That, combined with the unpretty result of the partially repaired split, was the building at its most expressive. From then on it has been an act of taming the building by gradually 'finishing' it, and simultaneously stripping back other parts of the building in response to the new site.

Guthrie prepared simple plans to satisfy council, and then resolved much of the detail of the house during construction with the carpenters in a cost plus arrangement. Constructionally the project was divided into two distinct stages. The first involved the cutting up, transporting and restumping of the house. The two halves were placed apart as directed and new structure spliced in to span the wedge shaped split. The second stage involved the fitout of the wedge and some adjoining spaces and outdoor platforms.

The wedge is very much an ambiguous indoor/outdoor space. It is roofed with clear polycarbonate that is set slightly above the surrounding roof to allow rising hot air to escape. Under the clear roof have been fixed recycled timber battens to disperse the full effect of the direct sun. The floor of the wedge continues the shot edge timber decking from the external platforms allowing cool air from under the house to be drawn into the space.

One side of the wedge keys into the open cut of the house, whilst the other has become a curving wall element of varying thickness and a new ordering device within the modified plan arrangement. Whereas the rest of the house, both new fabric and old, has a clear tectonic quality of timber structure and lining, this new wall is plastic, abstract and scaleless. It reads as both an oversized piece of furniture or a miniature streetscape within the house. Its formality seems mannered amongst the spontaneity of the remainder of the house. What saves it from becoming an architectural 'set piece', is its simplicity.

Guthrie says that the project essentially was about providing him with a livable house. Two years later it has turned into an open-ended experimental house that is still evolving. This is an easy state to exist in Queensland. With such a forgiving climate, half finished houses can become a way of life. Providing you can survive the week of cold weather in July, the rest of the year can be reasonably pleasant.

Where the house has been 'finished', the palate of materials combines plywood, timber battens, timber boards, corrugated iron and exposed framing. It is very much the palate of what could perhaps be termed the 'south/east Queensland school' of architects. Guthrie works within the office of John Mainwaring and Associates who,

along with Lindsay Clare and Gabriel Poole, have been developing a regional approach to architecture that has become the defacto 'house style' along the Sunshine Coast.

Guthrie himself grew up in the Bahamas where both the climate and informality of the timber buildings parallel that of Queensland. His architectural study spanned the University of Tennessee, RMIT and finished with three years at the University of Queensland. He has worked at Mainwaring and Associates for three and half years. Construction is currently underway on Guthrie's second private project, a modest house in Noosa for a carpenter who has been involved in some of the Mainwaring houses.

For the architect concerned about issues of siting, there is something almost disturbing about the idea of buying a house from one site and relocating it to another. But many of the timber houses are, like the terrace houses of Sydney or Melbourne, speculatively built formula houses with no intentional relation to site or acknowledgment of aspect. In the case of this house, the opportunity to move has become the opportunity to site the house meaningfully. The house has been rotated 90° anti-clockwise to face the thick end of the wedge to the north\east. Here it steps down to another platform that opens the house to the rising ground line, and invites the site into the house. The thin end of the wedge marks a point of entry to the house at the lower end of the site.

Before locating the house, the new site had no legible history other than a natural one. Now it has a borrowed history which simulates both a house and a house renovation that, though realised together, appear separated by half a century. This raises the issue of what happened to the original site. It has been stripped of memory and is now occupied by nondescript townhouses. The opportunity to recycle may be at its most convincing with timber, yet the versatility of the timber house can in turn be the nemesis of historical continuity.

It is the spontaneity that is the great success of this house. Though the house removalists found the proposition not to put the house back together strange, it is really very sensible and logical. As a model for other relocated structures, it is easy

to imagine setting the halves at different levels or even the combination of previously unconnected structures.