

Model of life in the urban wood

by Jouni Kaipia & Antony Radford

At a time when new houses are growing larger, what happens when we try instead to design for daily life to take place in a minimal space? Urban Huts are proposals for small huts in Adelaide inspired by the hut Henry David Thoreau built and occupied next to Walden pond in Massachusetts from 1845 to 1847. Thoreau was a pioneer in criticizing the values of a consumer society, the extremes of which, as we know them today, he could hardly foresee. In his celebrated book *Walden, or Life in the Wood*, he extols the virtues and pleasures of being self-sufficient, observing nature, being aware of the environment and the changing seasons. Even today, in spite of some moralizing idealism and occasional naiveté which now appear as anachronisms, Thoreau's powerful thinking offers inspiration for a responsible way to build and live in keeping with the limited resources of nature, and a lesson in timeless essentials in architecture.

A studio at the University of Adelaide's School of Architecture, Landscape Architecture and Urban Design explored the design of urban huts through a series of 1:20 scale models focusing on the mental and physical roles of "primary architectural images": floor, roof, door, window, stair, hearth, table and chair, bed and bath. The models were staged. First a conceptual model defined the boundaries of the hut, then a second model emphasized the mediators (doors, windows, shades etc) on these boundaries. Next, separate models showed 'settings for the scenes of life' (sleeping, eating, bathing etc). Finally a complete model made a cohesive whole of these parts. Remaking rather than altering the models kept a fascinating record of the way that ideas developed and changed. Some of their sites were conventionally rural in character, in park lands alongside the River Torrens, but others were unconventionally urban.

Designing for minimal space forces us to become bodily aware of the spatial dimensions around us, to experience the presence of the elements - to be mindful with architecture.

An exhibition of twelve of the Urban Huts will be held at the Royal Australian Institute of Architects, 100 Flinders Street, in August this year, in association with the Laminex Group. The studio was led by Helsinki-based architect Jouni Kaipia assisted by Antony Radford, Carolyn Wigg, Jane Monk, Greg Bond, Mike Sims and David Brown. Education to Thoreau and his book can be found at www.npr.org/programs/morning/features/pat/walden/index.html

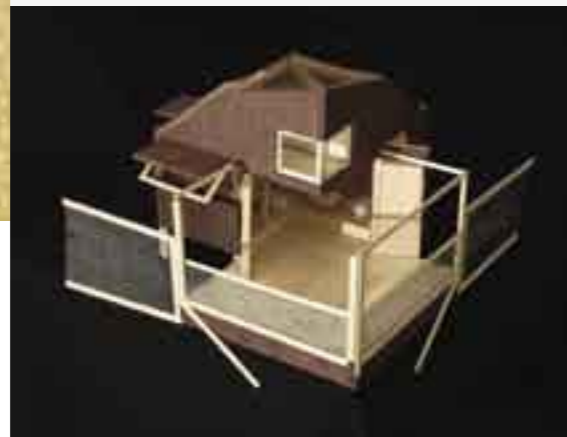
The text of *Walden, or Life in the Wood*, including an 'express edition' and commentary, can be found at <http://eserver.org/thoreau/walden100.html>
Student Tom Kakoschke (above left) and his model (above right)



Pictures James Knowler



Left Student and an exhibition organiser Catherine Skinner
Right Student Jean Ligadu and her models (above / below)



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An introduction to Thoreau and his book can be found at www.npr.org/programs/morning/features/patc/walden/ media

The text of *Walden, or Life in the Wood*, including an 'express edition' and commentary, can be found at: <http://eserver.org/thoreau/walden00.html>

Jouni Kaipia is a Helsinki-based architect. **Antony Radford** is Professor of Architecture at the University of Adelaide

Zesty variations on the theme of the 'rural hut'

by **Albert Gillissen**

There are few things as invigorating as coming face-to-face with the vitality of youthful creative endeavor. Or as Samuel Johnson put it when he said that youth is supreme: "towering in the confidence of twenty-one". That is particularly so with people engaged in the realm of the arts and, in this instance, more specifically an education towards architecture.

The three-dimensional models of Urban Huts demonstrates Johnson's credo. Challenged by a brief set by visiting Finnish architect Jouni Kaipia, these architectural students have dismissed the cultural cringe and have demonstrated that they can think outside the frame. They had to overcome their prejudices, and in a reversal of the current phenomenon of sea-change, but abiding by the other contemporary notion of downsizing, they have produced a remarkable range of designs for small, 15 square metre student pads. All of them are zesty and innovative variations on the theme of the 'rural hut', but this time as imaginatively worked out accretions to existing structures in the heart of our Adelaide urban area.

A valuable hidden benefit has been the requirement to delve into writing and the mindset of mid 19th-century US poet, writer and philosopher Thoreau who lived and worked for two years in his beloved self-built hut. With a deep awareness of the profound influence of the environment on human existence he once said "I never found the companion that was so companionable



Albert Gillissen outside the slightly more generous 'hut' he designed for himself at Aldinga

as solitude". This 'solitude' in the midst of urbanity thus became one of the parameters for the students' designs.

Carefully noting the locational differences, we find that some of the huts squat on rooftops, others cling precariously to the side of a building, quite literally hanging on with grim determination. One is suspended from a crane-like structure. And one has actually conceived of providing accommodation on three levels. All are imaginatively executed solutions to the physical requirements, each one adapted to individual modes of using the space available. All have come to grips with the need to organically integrate them with the existing fabric, free-spirited within an overall architectural discipline. Older architects may be reminded of the mostly unbuilt controversial designs of the Archigram group of architects in the UK or the Metabolists in Japan in the third quarter of the 20th century.

These students will be soon be joining the ranks of the architectural profession searching for their own niche in tune with their personality. That might encompass involvement in massive multi-million dollar schemes, many of them off-shore and for unseen clients. Or, at the other end of the spectrum they might be drawn to the more delicate problems of housing and similar small-scale and more personalised projects. This exercise will stand them in good stead for whatever lies ahead.

Albert Gillissen is a retired architect and University of Adelaide architecture academic who has mentored many South Australian architects

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