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Students breathe new life into “Pommy Town”

To the outsider they are a group of quirky, round shaped houses found in the Lake Macquarie suburb of Belmont North, but for thousands of people a Nissen Hut was their first home in Australia.

Named after the British Colonel Peter Nissen in 1916, the distinctive houses with their curved roofs provided an immediate cost-effective solution to Australia's post World War II housing shortage. While far from luxurious, they are an important time capsule of our social history.

The Historic Houses Trust recently purchased a Nissen Hut in Belmont North through its Endangered Houses Fund, which identifies properties at risk of demolition or unsympathetic development.

As part of the project the Historic Houses Trust asked architecture students at the University of Newcastle to enter a competition and take up the challenge of designing innovative ways to adapt it for modern living.

The designs go on exhibition at Lake Macquarie City Art Gallery tomorrow with the winners to be announced by Historic Houses Trust Chair Jill Wran and Lake Macquarie City Mayor Greg Piper at the official opening at 2pm.

Fifty Nissen Huts were built in Belmont North to house British migrants in the 1950s. Seventeen of the huts have been demolished over the years and the Historic Houses Trust wants to show the potential of these historically significant homes.

Most of the original residents of these Nissen Huts came from the United Kingdom resulting in the Belmont North collection of Nissen Huts becoming known as ‘Pommy Town’.

Richard Silink, Manager of the Endangered Houses Fund at the Historic Houses Trust says, “The students have come up with some incredibly innovative solutions for how a humble Nissen Hut can be transformed into a contemporary family home.”

“They’ve enjoyed a fair bit of creative free rein in coming up with their designs, but they’ve also come up with practical solutions that show the endless possibilities and potential for these homes. We’re looking forward to incorporating some of the students’ ideas when we start conservation works next year,” he said.

When work on the Nissen Hut is finished mid 2009, there will a number of opportunities for people to come and see it before it is put back on the market.

The finalists in the design competition are in the running for \$5000 in prize money generously provided by the Foundation for the Historic Houses Trust.

A free exhibition of the student designs is on display at Lake Macquarie City Art Gallery until 27 October. Visit www.hht.net.au for more information about the Endangered Houses Fund.

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