

More Than Just Military Shelters: Quonset huts

Quonset huts are a unique architectural phenomena, a revolutionary concept in temporary housing. Quonset huts are in basic terms lightweight structures that have been manufactured using iron that is galvanized and has a semi circular cross section. The design of Quonset huts was inspired from the Nissen hut model and was made popular by the British during World War I. Since the original design of the Nissen prototype was an intricate array of corrugated iron panels both inside and the thermal protection came from the space between the panel arrangements, the Government came up with a variation to avoid setbacks during shipping and reassembly. The name Quonset was derived from the initial site of manufacture, Quonset Point in Davisville, which is a village in Rhode Island. The first approved design had a surface area 5 x 11 m and was constructed from hemispherical iron rods with a 2.4 m radius, and these were then covered with ribbed iron panes. The doors and windows were designed off the side of the main structure with regular ply, and the insulated interior contained a wood floor.

The concept of this kind of temporary accommodation increased in use during the 1941 when the US Navy required a dependable housing facility. The solution was simple, and the Navy used the lightweight structures which could not only be effortlessly transported but also needed no skilled labor to set up the Quonset huts. In fact the building itself could be assembled just about anywhere, on concrete, iron pilings or even directly on the ground. The interiors could be used as needed and the open area could be concerted into residential units, military offices, storage structures or even be used as barracks. Quonsets instantly provided the US troops with better comfort than did other temporary shelters such as tents with wooden platforms, which were the common structures used then.

From its application as military shelters, many other contractors began developing their own versions of the Quonset hut for other uses. From its initial design, Quonset huts have seen many enhancements, and the last significant one was in 1943 when the Quonset Point manufacturing factory was taken over by the Great Lakes Steel Corporation and established as the Stran Steel Division. This modified Quonset hut was more stretched out and had a structure that used the original full arch rib. Versions of the Quonset hut model were manufactured to meet specific requirements, a prime example being the Pacific huts, which helped even conserve metal reserves. Some had heavy steel piping and these were specifically built to serve as air raid shelters. Other bulky Quonset hut structures and multi arched variants have also been built to meet specific Government orders as well as civil demands.

Although Quonset huts began as a product of a military necessity, it has rapidly diversified into an iconic symbol of sorts. Quonset huts have with time become a more accepted mode of housing and are a reflection of the American spirit of invention. Quonset huts are certainly an exclusive phenomena, where the novel and the extraordinary merge seamlessly.

About the Author

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