

S H E D O L O G Y

Kurt Brereton

Shedology has suddenly popped up as a sub-discipline down the backyard of Australian Cultural Studies and Sociology. Film documentaries, conference papers, books and the *Good Weekend* magazine (23/9/95), have all helped turn the phenomenon into a hot topic for further study. A few of our more militant women students with a sharp sense of humour told me they were even thinking of starting up a Reclaim The Shed movement.

Why this sudden surge of interest in sheds? Are we scraping the bottom of the cultural studies barrel (having already done the dunny back in the 80s) or is it an instance of the ethnographic syndrome isolated by Baudrillard - that is, an object is only deemed worthy of study as it disappears before your eyes? Certainly, the traditional wooden shed is being rapidly replaced by aluminium kit versions. With more lenient council building restrictions during the 1980s and early 1990s 'granny flats' have also fuelled the demise of dad's shed retreat. Now, in the face of high density housing, the men's movement and sociological studies telling us that blokes need a special space to be blokes in, away from womenfolk, or else they're prone to die of cultural claustrophobia, the shed is making a comeback.

A study entitled *Sheds and Male Retreat - The Place to Go To And Come Back From* carried out by Professor Leon Earle of the University of South Australia declares that sheds are transmitters of male culture via a special "shed language" passed down (tool-like) from father to son. This 'language' turns on stoic silences as much as spoken words. In an Aussie version of a Buddhist mantra, the hum of the bar fridge, idle lathe or turned down trannie provide a sacred space in which blokes can send and receive vibes or messages outside the obscenity of verbal speech.

Sheds for heads

Psychologically, every bloke has a shed in his head if not his head in a shed. Sheds are psychic outhouses where men keep old memories, rusted hopes, and broken promises amongst the jam tin and fruit box inventions of their private fantasies. One Germanic etymological root of the word shed refers to the *scheitel* or the crown of the head where the hair is parted.

The word shed, referring to a built structure, comes from the 15th century English word *shadde* meaning shade. Traditionally a shed was an open-ended building where the animals were kept. Nowadays husbands are kept down the backyard in their sheds - hence the term animal husbandry (sorry!). The other meaning of the term of course is to shed or get rid of something.

In Australia, sheds involve both processes of protecting and losing things. We have shearing sheds where sheep are

protected from sun and rain while losing their wool; changing sheds at the beach involving a movement from terrestrial to aquatic selves; school weather sheds where kids lose their innocence and the backyard shed where men whittle away bits of their superannuation killing time.

Mateshed

The first stirrings of mateship in Australian culture were felt in lonely sheds on the edges of white settlement beyond the Blue Mountains of the 1820s and 1830s. Ex-convicts were posted in couples as shepherds and lived in rough house-sheds, sleeping under stinking sheepskins. The link between mateship and homosexuality had its origins in these bush "marriages". There was a prevailing reformist belief that the bush cleaned the souls of convicts and enhanced moral values, while cities were seen as the condensers of vice. So, living in a shed either forced you to find yourself or go mad.

Sheds are traditionally out of bounds to women and kids. The shed is the Anglo-Australian poor equivalent of the mens' tribal longhouse. At weekends blokes gather and watch footy, drink beer, smoke, talk, and enjoy each other's company. Special rituals such as initiation ceremonies or secret sexual liaisons traditionally take place in the backyard shed, without contaminating the moral stability of family homelife.

Displaced Office Syndrome

The latest shed 'condition' is the Displaced Office Syndrome whereby the retired man sets up his shed as a replica of his ex-office environment. This syndrome can be linked to a breakdown in familiar marriage routines: women resent invasion of men into their home environment. Japanese women call retired husbands who get under their feet *cockroaches*. Australian women prefer to use the psychological equivalent of Mortein - be it American romance soapies on TV at full blast or the vacuum cleaner under the nose. The more subtle approach is to buy a shed in kit form and have it delivered on a Saturday morning while you're out doing the shopping. The shed is therefore seen by both husbands and wives as an integral part of a good marriage where men's and women's business can be carried out in peace, without interference and judgement.

The shed can also be a solution to a bad marriage of course. A friend of mine was once thrown out of home by his wife who sent him packing with nothing but a kit shed under his arm. He moved into my warehouse and set it up in our living room for six months. If you don't have the luxury of a backyard shed, then a large outside dunny will suffice and if you don't have a dunny then a large tea chest. □