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The Quonset Hut – Early Manufactured Housing

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At the outset of World War 2, Quonset huts were introduced as a solution for the United States Navy, which needed an all-purpose, lightweight building that could be shipped anywhere and assembled without skilled labor. Named after Quonset Point in Davisville, Rhode Island, Quonset huts are semi-circular buildings leveraging the structural strength of the arch, made out of corrugated or galvanized steel enclosing plywood walls with doors and windows on the ends.

The Quonset was based on the earlier design called the Nissen hut created by British Major Peter Norman Nissen in 1916. The Nissen was a different design than the Quonset but served similar purposes in World War I and into the second world war alongside the Quonset.

The standard measurements of the original Quonset hut included a base of sixteen feet by thirty-six feet that could be extended, with semicircular walls with an eight-foot radius. Their simplistic structures meant that assembly required little or no technical skill and made them extremely adaptable for many purposes. Quonset huts were easy to disassemble and transport to wherever they were needed.

Quonset huts appeared all over Morro Bay soon after World War II began, especially at the U.S. Navy's Morro Bay amphibious training base. About 65 to 100 huts were built, located primarily along the waterfront where the Morro Bay power plant stands today. They were used primarily as sleeping quarters and training facilities.

After the war ended, the War Assets Administration sold the huts to veterans, and later, to civilians. The Quonset huts often became solutions to the post war housing problem for veterans and the need for community public buildings. More uniquely, the members of the 4-H Club of Morro Bay in the fall of 1947 raised enough money to buy a surplus Quonset hut from the Morro Bay school district and convert it into a clubroom for their meeting and events.

The 4-H hut survives today in a renovated and repurposed building at 1141 Main Street in Morro Bay. After its duty as a 4H facility, the hut became an antique mall. Most recently, the 4,000 square foot building was meticulously restored by owners John and Joan Solu and reopened as The Q Inn, a modernized, spacious 10-room boutique hotel still preserving the interior views of the original steel trusses and arches. The owners intend to save this gem of Morro Bay history for future generations while at the same time fostering the hotel's ability to "tell a story inside."

Although most Morro Bay Quonset huts have disappeared, a few remain. In addition to the Q Inn there is a large hut on the southern end of the Embarcadero across a parking lot from The Shell Shop. This hut has had a varied postwar history as a storage facility for bags of dog food and as a school bus barn when Morro Bay didn't yet have a high school. Today the hut is used by The Shell Shop for merchandise storage.

Another familiar sight in Morro Bay is the Quonset hut on North Main a little south of Highway 41 that has an art deco façade. This hut has been used recently as an antique or 'previously used' retail space.

In this era of the housing affordability crisis, one wonders of something like the Quonset hut could help provide workable solutions. The usefulness has been proved under tougher conditions.