

## JAPANESE PEARLERS' BATH-HOUSE, THURSDAY ISLAND, TORRES STRAIT

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The site of the former Japanese Pearl-ers' bath-house, Thursday Island, has been subjected to redevelopment since its construction sometime between about 1890 and 1910. Archaeological examinations at the site in 1998 revealed an intact bath. The unreinforced concrete bath was decorated with blue on white transfer ceramic tiles. The floral pattern of each suggested a possible Chinese origin. Each tile was concreted in place and surrounded by a 'grout' of similar substance. This paper describes the bath and places it in the social context of a period when Japanese pearl-ers were a major proportion of Thursday Island's population. □ *Pearling, Japanese in Australia, ceramic tile, bath, Thursday Island, Torres Strait.*

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During the height of the Torres Strait pearling industry the Japanese formed a significant proportion of the Torres Strait population (Ganter, 1994; McPhee, this volume). They brought with them many of their traditions and constructed a range of buildings on Thursday Island in what was then known as 'Little Yokohama' or 'Jap Town'. In 1997, during housing redevelopment on the island, a Japanese pearl-ers' bath-house site, dating to around 1890-1910, was identified. An archaeological investigation in early 1998 was on behalf of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Housing Programme (ATSIHP), Queensland Department of Public Works, at Lot 45 on T 2074, Parish of Kennedy, County of Torres. The aim was to examine the site for any artefacts relating to use of the site as a bath-house, to record any such evidence, and to document any subsequent analysis. This paper describes the bath structure and tiles discovered on the site in the context of the social role of bath-houses in Japanese culture and an historical background of Thursday Island's more recent history.

Mrs Phylis Ah Loy, a long time resident of Thursday Island, identified the site of the bath-house as being in the NE corner of Lot 45 (Fig. 1). The immediate area featured 2 large fig trees, an open flood drain (probably a remnant section of a natural streambed) and a dense carpet of leaf litter that reduced visibility to less than 1%. Other advice suggested that the bath-house had extended beneath the extant residential flats on the western boundary of the lot (Bill Shibasaki, pers. comm.). It was pointed out that

the bath-house would have included change rooms, at least 2 baths, and associated water heaters, thus requiring the larger area for total use. It was not possible, using standard archaeological excavation techniques, to verify the extent of the site. During the initial appraisal the existing buildings and a large concrete slab on the site were obvious constraints to archaeological investigation. Subsequent monitoring of the development indicated that major reshaping of the area had been effected, probably in the immediate post-war period. Attention, therefore, focused on a large block of concrete in a central section of Lot 45 where a resident had previously found a large blue and white transfer tile.

### JAPANESE BATH-HOUSES

Bath-houses, *Sento*, or public bath-houses, have long been a feature of Japanese life (Pro & Pro, 1995). Bathers first wash in a separate area before soaking in hot water tubs (Ah Loy, Shibasaki, Otsubo, pers. comm. 1998). In most bath-houses in the past, low wooden stools, basins of water, and soap were provided in an adjacent room for this preliminary ablution. Nowadays, shower facilities are usually provided for this purpose. Most users prefer to wash and rinse off first, soak awhile, and then repeat the procedure. It is crucial that the bath tub is used only after the bather has washed first and removed all traces of soap. Failure to follow this strict etiquette can be a major cause of consternation. The water is usually heated to about 45°C (Pro & Pro, 1995).

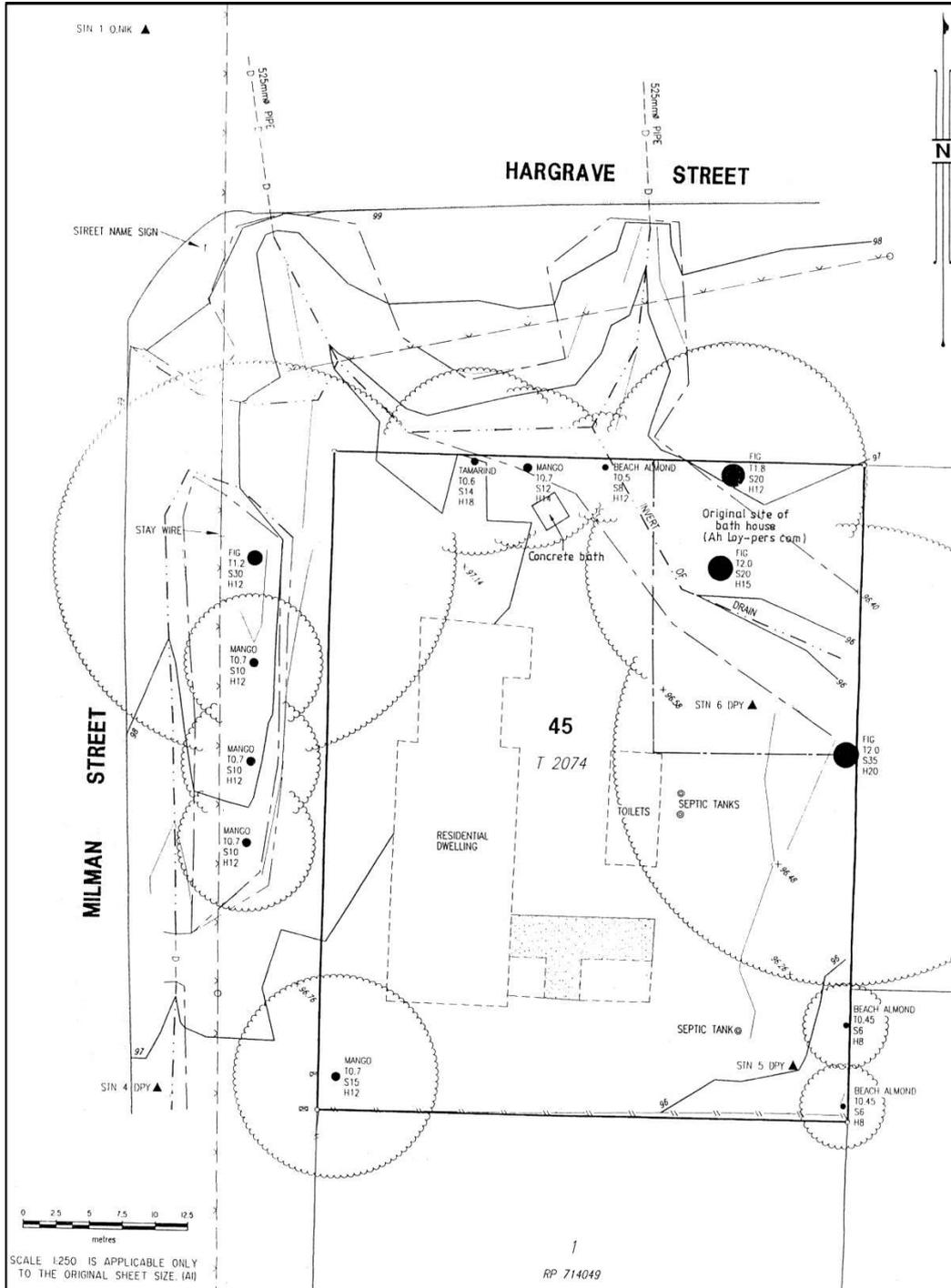


FIG. 1. Location and site plan.

The provision of public bath-houses was frequently a community response to providing a shared amenity for families or, in the case of Thursday Island, a particular socio-economic and ethnic group. Japanese baths are often lined with timber directly insulated from the fires burning below to warm the water within the tubs (Otsubo, pers. comm., 1998). On Thursday Island the practice was apparently to heat the water in wood-fired boilers from which water was piped to the baths (Shibasaki, pers. comm., 1998).

Soaking in the bath has always been a communal activity, and although males and females are usually segregated, it is common to share the tub with others. It is also a process where social order dictates who would use the bath first. Senior members of the household have priority, while householder's children have priority over servants (Otsubo, pers. comm., 1998).

Water was not changed between users. One informant recalled that as a young girl in Japan her grandparents insisted that the bath should not be emptied at the end of the day as the water could be used to extinguish possible night fires. In normal circumstances the water was discharged next morning (Otsubo, pers. comm., 1998).

Bath-houses continue to fulfill an important social role in addition to the more obvious one of hygiene. At Mogi, near Nagasaki, is an old bath-house built in 1901. 'Fishermen use the public bath for more than just washing off the day's sweat. It is an important networking spot, where they can exchange information about fishing, the weather and other pertinent matters' (Machida, 1997). In addition, public facilities ensured optimum use of scarce natural resources. Wood, once the principal source of fuel for heating baths, tended to be scarce along coastal Japan. A single bath-house helps to maximize use of such limited resources. It seems that the facility on Thursday Island fulfilled similar social/hygiene functions.

#### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Thursday Island (*Waibene* as it was originally known by Torres Strait Islanders) was permanently settled by Europeans in 1877, after Somerset on the eastern tip of Cape York to the immediate SE proved unsuitable. In December 1876, a government reserve had been declared on the island and H.M. Chester appointed as Government Resident. Thursday Island was chosen on the basis 'that the channel south of the

island was the only reasonable anchorage in the vicinity' (Singe, 1989: 88).

Private enterprise on Thursday Island was discouraged for the first 8 years. John Douglas's arrival as the next Resident heralded significant changes to that policy. Japanese pearl-ers were among the first to settle on the island and the pearling industry proved the mainstay of the island's economy for many years. 'Little Yokohama' developed in the area beneath Milman Hill and the population of Japanese divers reached 120 by 1895 and peaked at 331 in 1899 (Ganter, 1994: 103).

The bath-house for Japanese divers was built on the corner of Milman and Hargrave Streets around the turn of the century. As it was then illegal for 'aliens' to own land in Australia, the property was leased from the owner, Mr Salter. Sometime around 1910, it was sold to E.B. Cullen (Foley, 1982: 35). By the 1930s the bath-house was closed (Ah Loy, pers. comm. 1998). Around World War II the bath-house appears to have been demolished. This is consistent with an historical account of the area prepared by Japanese historian and teacher Shuji Kyuhara:

Jap town [was] at the foot of Milman Hill on the eastern part of the island. ... Except for the boarding houses of Wakayama prefecture, here stood a boarding house of Iyo [Iyo means the old name of Ehime Prefecture of Shikoku Island of Japan] ... [A] Japanese interpreter's house, a bathing house and a brothel also stood here. When the Pacific war broke out, and all the Japanese were sent to the concentration camp of Hay on the mainland of Australia, the Jap-town was burnt by the Australian troop [sic]. So there remains now nothing of Jap-town, but the barracks built during the wartime remain and have been used as native abodes (1977: 4).

However, physical evidence of the bath-house was still visible in the 1960s (Shibasaki, pers. comm. 1998). It was described as being 'within a timber frame corrugated iron building in which were 2 baths each about 1.8 × 1.8 × 1.5m deep. Each bath was tiled with square tiles with a blue and white floral design on them' (Ah Loy, pers. comm. 1997). Bill Shibasaki recalled a large building on the site, part of which was taken up by a changing room and a boiler in which water was heated for the baths.

By the 1960s, the then 'vacant' land on which the bath-house stood had been acquired by Mr Hocking, proprietor of one of Thursday Island's pearling companies. The flats he subsequently built were for Okinawan divers brought to the island to revive an ailing industry. The building passed to York Davies and his wife who sold it to the Department of Family Services to house

Islander families. Following government reorganisation, the property passed to the control of the ATSIHP that undertook major redevelopment of government housing on Thursday Island in 1996. The Milman Street site was to be redeveloped with 4 2-storey town house style dwellings. It was recognised such redevelopment would cause major alterations to the site with the consequent loss of any sub-surface structural remains and their historical significance. An archaeological assessment was commissioned in 1997 with initial fieldwork conducted in January 1998.

Assessment and excavation of the bath-house was severely constrained by an occupied house (containing 4 nuclear families) and a large external concrete slab extending some 15m beyond the rear of the flats. An excavation at the original site of the bath-houses was, clearly, a major undertaking and considered unlikely to reveal much significant data. An exploratory study noted several large pieces of concrete adjacent to the gully running across the lot (Fig. 2). One large concrete block, measuring 190 × 250cm, lay partially exposed near the bath-house site.

#### MATERIALS AND METHODS

The archaeological work was undertaken in 2 stages to accommodate the demolition and construction programme identified by the property developer. The first stage involved pre-demolition appraisal and retrieval of identifiable elements. A Case 590 backhoe, fitted with a 45cm-wide tined bucket, was used to remove soil around the exposed concrete block. Trowelling was limited as this material was clearly backfill. The initial 5cm spits were increased, after the first 25cm, to approximately 10cm as the investigation continued through fill material. The block was then inverted and subsequently removed during the first stage investigation.

The second stage took place in late March 1998 and involved monitoring the house demolition including the removal of its concrete slab. These were devoid of 'rat walls' and exposed shallow sand fill overlying sterile soil. Monitoring of the excavation by the builder for the new foundations revealed no artefacts or evidence of prior disturbance in this area.



FIG. 2. Concrete block prior to archaeological work. View from near north western corner of house.

#### RESULTS

The first (pre-demolition) investigation revealed pieces of marine turtle shell (carapace) and dugong bone fragments. These bones probably relate to Islander *kupmauris* held from time to time by post-1960s occupants of the site. Excavation also revealed several sections of broken blue on white transfer underglaze tile recovered at a depth of 50cm on the southern side of the slab. In addition, a lever action grease gun, a dessert 'fiddle' spoon and a neck of an early crown seal glass bottle were collected. The hall-marks on the spoon, manufactured 1890-1920, were DON (with an overstrike D cutting it at the lower left corner), separately boxed 'L' and 'S', and 'BP' in an oval impression at right angles. Identification of the maker has not yet been possible. The crown seal and part of the neck section were of pale green glass. Its form is indicative of an early alcoholic beverage bottle, circa 1920s.

The profile exposed by excavation indicated fill extending adjacent to the concrete block. It was possibly associated with demolition of the bath-house (circa 1940s) or with site preparation for the construction of the adjacent Okinawan divers' boarding house (circa 1960). The concrete block extended to about 70cm below present ground level. Using the backhoe bucket it was inverted, primarily with the intention of removing it from the site. This action revealed a tile-lined bath.

Several other sections of broken concrete displaying similar structural characteristics were

subsequently observed in adjacent locations. Their position indicated they had been used to backfill the site. Some sections were cement rendered. Two small sections showed signs of once holding similar distinctive tiles. No other large pieces of tiled wall were recovered. One section of concrete, about 100 × 30 × 20cm, was painted with a violet/blue matte paint (approximately equivalent to PMS 2716C colour).

The house concrete slab had been laid in several stages. Under the main house section the unreinforced slab was 8-11cm thick. It had been prepared using a coarse aggregate. On the south side much denser concrete was encountered. It was up to 17cm thick and comprised a finer mix. Some reinforcing was noted. To the rear of the house there was an extensive cap of concrete, laid about 1996 to form a rear patio. At the centre rear was an ablution block, also of recent construction. This slab was not only reinforced but overlaid a black plastic damp-course. The ground beneath these slabs was sterile. The natural sandy soil showed no signs of prior disturbance. Only one fragment of a Japanese bath tile was recovered. This was from immediately beneath the circa 1996 patio.

The building contractor undertook preparation of foundation trenches, to about 50cm, in May 1998. Opportunistic monitoring was conducted as the contractor was required to advise if any archaeological material was encountered. No archaeological remains were observed.

**THE BATH.** A coarse, angular aggregate was used to construct the bath. Judging by the fragmented concrete sections, subsequently used as landfill on the site, the building's interior made extensive use of unreinforced concrete for the baths and surrounds (Fig. 3). No reinforcing was used and strength relied purely on the aggregate and sheer bulk of the concrete when poured. The walls of the recovered bath section are variable but generally 40-49cm thick while other sections of concrete are of variable thickness averaging 10cm thick. The bath measures 190 × 250 × c.70cm (external dimensions) and 108 × 167 × 54cm (internal dimensions). These measurements translate to 2.356m<sup>3</sup> of concrete weighing 4.7-5 tonnes. The capacity of the bath is 0.969m<sup>3</sup> or 969 litres.

Form work pattern on the exterior of the concrete indicates the recovered bath, and probably the other bath, would have been constructed on site. Much of the concrete was first rendered with 1-3cm thick cement plaster on

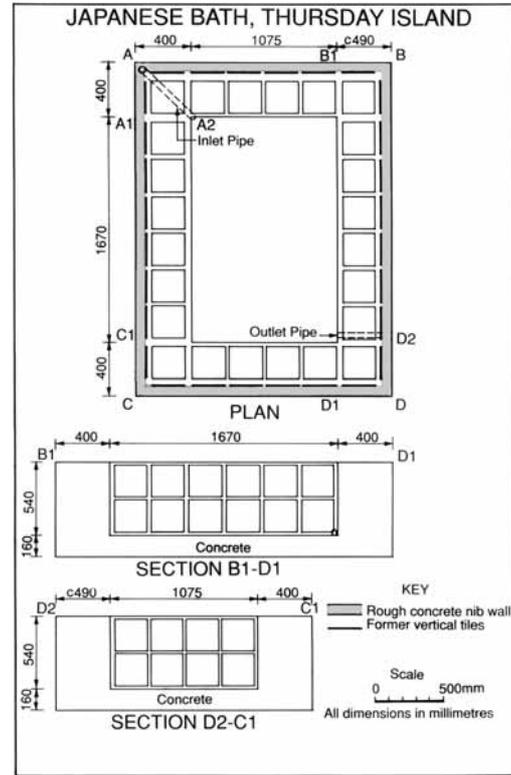


FIG. 3. Architectural drawing of key features of bath.

exposed surfaces; such as the external wall. A finer plaster of concrete was then applied as a bedding for the tiles. This ranged from 3-5mm thick. The tiles were crudely embedded flush in concrete render (Fig. 4). The distance between tiles ranged from 16mm on one side wall (A-C) to 67mm on the top surface. Little effort was made to square the tiles with each other. The gap between 2 of the horizontal surface tiles was 62-67mm and 31-35mm between 2 other tiles. The most accurately placed tiles were parallel with a 32mm gap. On one end wall (C-D) the space between top and bottom rows diverged by 5mm, from 15-20mm. On wall A-C the spacing between the rows diverged from 12-20mm. Sixty-eight tiles are incorporated in the recovered section of the bath.

The practice of embedding the tiles in the wall render differs markedly from modern practices in Australia and Japan where the surface is first plastered and each tile is butt joined and filled in between with 'grout'. It is possible that makers of the bath-house quickly recognised that

insufficient tiles were available to undertake a standard butt joining with the adjacent tiles. Spreading the tiles, to provide some overall balance to the bath, was a logical solution. In this case, the 'grout' was part of the rendering. From close visual examination it appears that a thin render was applied initially for tile support. The in-fill cement render was added later.

Tiles were fixed to the ledge (or top) and walls of the bath but not the bath base. There was evidence along 2 sides of the top that walls of vertical tiles extended around the recovered section of the bath base. They appear to have been fitted to a probable concrete nib wall about 80-90mm wide. From the evidence available it is assumed they were a single tile high (about 300mm with surround), providing a decorative back section to the bath itself. Evidence of the nib wall is present on all sides of the recovered bath section. The possibility that the wall was much higher than 300mm was discounted due to the need to provide reasonably easy access to the bath and the fact that the base of that wall was 8-9cm thick. It is unlikely the wall extended any higher as like the rest of the structure the concrete was not reinforced.

**TILES.** Each tile measures 242 × 242 × 16mm (Fig. 5). Creamy white stoneware forms the body of the tile. Glazing is confined to the front face and sections of the sidewalls. The pattern is an underglaze cobalt blue (closest colour match PMS 287C). It incorporates both floral designs and ribbon patterns. In the centre is a peony flower viewed vertically. It is edged in blue with the lower sections of the petals infilled in blue. From this central feature 4 leaves emanate to form quadrants in 2 of which are peony flowers with white tipped petals viewed obliquely. The leaves are heavily outlined in blue with the stylised venation left white. In the remaining quadrants are other peonies partially obscured by 3 stylised leaves of infilled blue. An octagonal band of daisy-like floral design surrounds this centre piece. This pattern is frequently found in Japanese frieze designs and is widely used as trimming for kimonos (Otsubo, pers. comm. 1998).

At diagonally opposed corners of the tile are representations of stylised flowers. The flowers



FIG. 4. Section of bath showing extent of concrete and tile placement.

are drawn with thin blue outlines to the petals and petal bases infilled in blue. On the other corners the same flower species is shown but with 2 buds and small leaflets attached to the stem. They too are outlined in blue with a blue infill calyx. A quarter section of a fully open flower appears in the extreme corners. The flowers probably represent chrysanthemums, which are native to China (Chevalier, 1997: 77). The central third of each side depicts a joined double loop pattern that may be half a 4 petalled flower or part of a long-life mushroom or fungus. The floral band borders this element.

## DISCUSSION

**TILE DESIGN SYMBOLISM.** It is possible that the bath tiles were of Chinese origin and imported to Japan before being trans-shipped to Australia as much of the provisioning of sojourners from east Asia was direct from their homelands (Otsubo, Strong, pers. comm. 1998). The emblems incorporated in the tile design are strongly Chinese in form and style while the peony has significant symbolism in Chinese culture. It represents 'love and affection ... [and] feminine beauty' (Williams, 1976: 321). Peonies also symbolise spring and good fortune (Stalberg & Nesi, 1981: 50). Chrysanthemums are representative of autumn, longevity (Eberhard, 1993: 63), quiet retirement (Stalberg & Nesi, 1981: 50) and joviality, as well as being regarded as the national flower of China (Williams, 1976: 70). The mushroom or fungus is generally associated with longevity and with *Shou Lai*, the God of Long-life in Chinese mythology. While

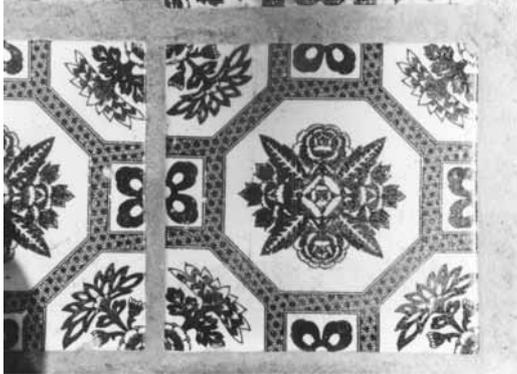


FIG. 5. Portion of corner section of horizontally laid tiles embedded in mortar. Each tile is  $242 \times 242$ mm.

the floral symbolism appear Chinese, it is noted that the 'chrysanthemum with sixteen petals is the emblem of the Mikado of Japan' (MacKenzie, nd: 141).

**WATER RETICULATION.** The water reticulation system was by way of a 40mm pipe entering at the top of one corner (A) and crossing diagonally through the wall 30mm below the surface. The pipe entered the bath at the adjacent internal corner (A2) (Fig. 3). At the entry point, it was connected to a female elbow (right angle bend). It was set in the wall with only part of the pipe exposed. The pipe terminated about 40mm above the bath floor to allow for a direct and uncontrolled flow into the bath. If there was a tap, or control valve, it would have been outside the bath itself. The outflow was via a 40mm ferrous metal pipe running directly through the wall at the corner diagonally opposite (corner D2) (Fig. 3). The pipe ran through the wall at right angles to the surface. It was set slightly below the floor surface that would have ensured optimal drainage.

**FABRIC CONDITION.** The concrete structure is generally sound except for a hairline crack running through wall B-D. It commences at a point about 78cm from corner B and 25cm from the inside corner, and extends to the bath floor 14cm from that corner. The 2 tiles affected are both cracked. The top of wall B-D has a section missing which measures 50cm long by up to 10cm thick. This loss has also taken the top sections of the 2 uppermost tiles in columns 4 and 5.

Most tiles are chipped or cracked to varying degrees with damage the result of direct scrapping to the glaze, possibly during demolition. Fractured tiles are less apparent. Colour appears

to be generally well-preserved. Two tiles have been partially painted over with roughly applied patches of white paint that is powdery and easily removed. As is common with many older ceramics the glaze shows some signs of fine crazing.

The water pipes are spalling as a result of continuous moist conditions. This does not appear to be threatening the integrity of the structure. The pressure from spalling is apparently being taken by the void in the hollow pipe itself.

#### CONCLUSION

The Japanese bath is considered significant because of its rarity and its association with Japanese pearling operations in Torres Strait during the late 19th and early 20th Centuries. The bath is an example of an ethnically specific site type which is unique in terms of far north Queensland cultural heritage. Additional significance is derived from the fact that the bath was an integral part of the bath-house complex and was found where it was originally constructed and installed.

The tiling is of a form and style rarely discussed within Western museological and archaeological literature. They are notable for their large size and, particularly, their thickness. Further research opportunities exist in relation to adaptations made to 19th and 20th Century Japanese bath-house utilisation overseas and trade goods imported for the Japanese-Australian pearling industry.

The Queensland Museum and the Torres Shire Council recognise the significance of the bath and tiles (Fig. 6). Although the original site has now been destroyed by development, the bath and loose tiles have been salvaged. Temporary storage for these remains has been arranged on Thursday Island pending suitable display.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Cooperation and financial support provided by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Housing Programme (ATSIHP), Queensland Department of Public Works through Alex Ackfun (Director), Melda Morris (Senior Project Officer) and staff of the Thursday Island office, Caroline Cloudy and Vernice Skeen, was invaluable. The following people kindly provided historical information essential for the project: Phylis Ah Loy (long term resident and business-woman on Thursday Island); Shikiko Otsubo (Japanese born Cairns resident and potter whose family has



FIG. 6. Resident Michael Bond (left), with Mayor of Torres Shire, Pedro Stephen (centre) and Bill Shibasaki (right) examining the bath soon after its discovery.

a long association with the pearling industry. One time resident pearl farmer on nearby Turtle Island); Bill Shibasaki (Deputy Mayor of Torres Shire, Thursday Island born, of Japanese descent, and President of the Torres Strait Japanese Association); and Michael Strong (Director, Abbey Museum, Caboolture, Qld and Director, Ann Wallin & Associates, Brisbane).

Kate Hunter undertook background historical research. Eric Ireland prepared architectural drawings of the bath. Many people, including Lesley Peddell, Gwen Maloney (since deceased) and Phylis Ah Loy, all long term residents of Thursday Island, assisted my research. Shikiko Otsubo was able to provide useful background information on Japanese culture. Michael Strong commented on design elements of the tiles. Michael Bond, tenant of the Milman Street flats, helped with the site work while all tenants were

forced to put up with several hours of dust and noise. They did so graciously and with considerable interest. Q-Build undertook removal of the bath to temporary storage. Peter Frazer, builder, assisted during the second stage of the study. Richard Robins and Peter Gesner, Queensland Museum; Pedro Stephen, Mayor of Torres Shire, and Bill Shibasaki were quick to recognise the cultural value of the material and to offer assistance.

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