Day 5 and 6 – The clean-up begins in Brisbane

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On Friday, 14th January 2011, many Brisbane residents returned to their flood damaged homes to inspect the damage and begin the clean-up. Two living opposite Perrin Park, Toowong (Figure 1) invited us into their homes as they were re-entering for the first time since the flood peaked at 4am on Thursday, 13th January. The first home (House A) is a two storey, brand new, architecturally designed home that was only finished 2½ months ago. There are 3 bedrooms, 3 bathrooms, 1 study and an open plan kitchen, dining room and living area upstairs and a rumpus room, bathroom and laundry downstairs. Downstairs is a double garage and large storage area. The construction of this house consisted of a slab on ground with reinforced concrete block walls. The second floor was of lightweight construction including a timber frame and fibro clad, with timber batten detail and a Colorbond roof.

The owner of House A informed us that his architect researched the 1974 floods and designed the new house 80cm above the 1974 flood level. The architect had built the house with a number of features to make it more resilient to floods including painted, reinforced concrete block walls, aluminium door frames, hardwood timber doors, frames and flooring (Figure 2), and large sump drains for rapid surface water drainage. The property was surrounded by a concrete wall to physically block the water out but unfortunately, sandbagging around the front gate was not high enough, nor was the concrete wall.

On Wednesday 12th January, the owner realised that this flood would penetrate the top floor of his home. He and a friend got a tinny (aluminium tin boat) and rowed through the floodwater in his neighbour’s yard, over his back concrete wall (Figure 3) and up to the verandah so he could enter his home and lift the furniture higher off the ground. Although House A is made of resilient materials, it still sustained damage. In the downstairs rooms, plasterboard from the collapsed ceiling was ‘lining’ the floor and the insulation and light fittings were hanging from the roof (Figure 4).

The second home (House B) is an old, two storey Queenslander. There are 2 bedrooms, 1 bathroom, 1 kitchen and a lounge room upstairs and 3 bedrooms, 1 bathroom, laundry and kitchenette with living area downstairs. The exterior walls consist of weatherboard cladding on timber frame with a concrete tiled roof and the internal walls were all plasterboard. The owner of House B informed us that the family had lived in the house about 13 years ago but it is now a rental property. When purchased, the house was on stilts and consisted of only one floor. The current owners further elevated the house to be above what they thought was the 1974 flood level and closed the downstairs area to create additional bedrooms and a kitchenette.
Prior to the 2011 floods, House B was rented as a share house to 5 people in their early 20’s. These occupants had moved the majority of their belongings to the top floor of the house anticipating that there they would not be vulnerable to flooding. Several of the housemates returned early on the 14\textsuperscript{th} January to find that the floodwater had reached 3.3m from ground level (Figure 5) or approximately 40cm over the top floor, and nearly all of their possessions were flood damaged. House B had also sustained damage to the upstairs and downstairs interior: wall lining, kitchenette, staircase, insulation and floor coverings (Figure 6).

The occupants had contacted the rental agency in order to find out if they could remove saturated carpets and furniture belonging to the owner. The agency told them that they were too busy to assist and they were not given the owner’s details to contact them themselves. The rental occupants then concentrated on removing all their own flood soaked possessions from the upstairs and a swag of volunteers turned up to help. Due to extensive damage, the occupants and volunteers were not able to start the clean-up downstairs until the owners had been contacted.

When the owner’s arrived on Saturday, the house was once again filled with volunteers cleaning up, most of whom were unknown to their family. All the plasterboard, insulation and carpets were removed and most of the mud hosed out.

All people impacted by the flood seemed overwhelmed with the support they had received. People were wandering the streets, handing out food and drinks (Figure 7) and offering to lend a hand. It was remarkable how quickly neighbourhoods were being stripped and cleaned (Figure 8).

While surveying people’s homes however, we cannot help but wonder about the number of personal injuries sustained during the clean-up phase. In Emerald, a shop owner slipped and split his head open after entering his shop when the floodwater had resided. The shop owner was taken to hospital where he received five stitches. Today in Brisbane we witnessed volunteers, who were wearing thongs or no shoes at all, help carry damaged furniture down muddy, slippery stairs. Personal injury will not be limited to slip and fall accidents. Many volunteers were carrying heavy, water laden furniture, sand bags and appliances such as refrigerators and televisions. We estimate that there will be many aching bodies in the coming days.
Figure 1. Perrin Park, location of House A and B, southwest of Brisbane CBD.

Figure 2. A. Internal hard wood timber staircase covered in mud in House A – image taken at 12:48 on Friday 14th January, 2011. Dirty walls mark the maximum flood level inside. B. Internal staircase after cleaning – image taken at 16:29 on Friday 14th January, 2011. The stained plasterboard walls have been removed.
Figure 3. View from the back verandah of the House A. The owner’s came to inspect their home during the flood by rowing their tinny over the concrete wall running behind the swimming pool. The maximum flood height is marked by the light, brown line on the next door neighbour’s red shed roof.

Figure 4. A. Ground floor rumpus room of House A, opposite Perrin Park. Image taken at 12:38 on Friday 14th January, 2011. In this image you can see the plasterboard, from the ceiling, lining the floor and laying across the top of the timber cupboard. The insulation and light fittings are hanging from the roof but the ceiling fan remains in place. B. Image taken at 17:15 on Saturday 15th January, 2011.
Figure 5. House B opposite Perrin Park, Toowong. This image shows the 3.3m flood mark on the timber baluster. The change table hanging from the rafters floated from the next door neighbour’s laundry with the sneakers still in place.

Figure 6. Damaged walls were stripped from House B on Saturday 15th January, 2011.
Figure 7. Two girls and a ute offering free drinks to flood victims and volunteers working to clean the aftermath of the 2011 Brisbane floods. We were informed that the driver of this vehicle had lost the contents of her home in Gympie due to flooding but wanted to help other people who were suffering.

Figure 8. Plasterboard and insulation removed from inside the ground level of House A. Image taken at 16:23 on Friday 14th January, 2011. Note the clean road – several people with gurneys turned up, unannounced and unknown, to help in the clean-up.