

**Book review**

**Shoulder to shoulder, Broadening the Men's Shed movement**

Editor Barry Golding  
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Reviewed by Ursula Harrison

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This comprehensively researched revision of Golding's earlier book, *The Men's Shed Movement – the Company of Men* (2015), that documented the beginning of the Men's Shed movement originating in Australia in 1993, was assisted by international researchers and activists in the movement.

Reflecting back during the COVID enforced slowdown, Golding realised that much had changed in the decades since the grassroots movement began, notably their establishment in additional countries and the development of women's sheds. Sheds were often hard hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, forced to close for significant periods of time, this had some impact on the mental health of Shedders and family members. It seemed probable that post-COVID may bring different cohorts to the Sheds.

A reprint of the earlier book would not necessarily lend itself to the comprehensive reflection and evidence needed to illustrate the

growth and adaptability of the movement over nearly three decades. Thus, *Shoulder to Shoulder: Broadening the Men's Shed Movement* documents the story of the broadening of the movement into many more countries, and of its growing relevance to diverse cohorts, for example, younger folk, non-Anglo speaking community members, and women.

The book provides case studies and detailed descriptions of the origin and function of Sheds in a growing number of countries showing that Sheddors' lives have been changed for the better, particularly those who were disconnected, isolated or were adjusting to life as retirees, widowers or with chronic health issues.

Chapter Eleven offers further research evidence and references about the social, psychological, and community benefits of Sheds. Benefits can be attributed to their safe, friendly and low cost nature, allowing men to come together to share their skills, knowledge, stories and concerns. Typically, sheds provide a mix of social activities and workshop production, according to local needs and interests. Sharing and preparing food occurs in many sheds, and health is often a focus.

Gender became an issue in community spaces with the establishment of the Neighbourhood House movement some two decades before the Men's Shed Movement in Australia. Neighbourhood Houses were predominantly focused on women's learning and social needs. With increasing attention being focused on men's health and wellbeing, and growing realisation of the impacts of social isolation, particularly in retirement and ageing, Men's Sheds, similarly, were grass roots localised responses to these concerns.

Within a decade of the Australian Shed movement getting off the ground the innovative model and concept had spread to early adopters in New Zealand, Ireland, and the United Kingdom. The book plots the growing international Shed movement and its indebtedness to the Australian model and other early adopters. While the model has become increasingly widely adopted it is also made clear that local contextualisation is necessary for success. The book highlights variation in the governance and auspicing arrangements, financial resources provided to Sheds (some operate on no or very limited funding) and main activities on offer. However, it is apparent that despite this variation, the grassroots nature and agency of the Sheddors remain core features.

While total accuracy of numbers is not guaranteed estimates suggest there are more than 3700 Sheds worldwide with approximately 1300 in Australia. Complete accuracy regarding numbers of Sheds in Australia is not currently possible due to the splintering of relationships, described as ‘Shed wars’ between the Australian Men’s Shed Association (AMSA), and some state-based peak bodies, that in some ways echoes a common federal/state impasse in Australia. Chapter Two comprehensively describes the tensions; it’s complicated, but worth inclusion if you want to understand the complexities of conflict in community settings.

The twelve chapters in the book provide numerous detailed case studies of Sheds in Australia and the four early adopters along with the next tranche of adopters, the United States, Canada, and Denmark. Then follows a chapter outlining fledgling movements in for example Iceland, Sweden, Belgium, Kenya, and South Africa. The case studies are presented as enthusiastic first-person accounts of the origin, aims and functions of the Sheds by local instigators and champions.

Chapter One of this book provides a detailed overview of its contents and what can be found in the earlier book for those new to Golding’s work and wishing to deepen their historical knowledge of this important social movement. It comes with a rider that you don’t need to go back to the earlier book to get a comprehensive picture of the movement.

Chapter Two focuses on Australian Men’s Sheds and provides important information in the context of the development of the model. It outlines the history in various States and includes 36 updated case studies from the first decade or so that featured in the original book. Highlighting the ways they had adapted and changed to 2021 illustrates the responsiveness of the Sheds to the times and their communities.

Chapters focused on country situations follow roughly similar formats – summarising developments, the history and distribution of Sheds, revisiting some earlier case studies and including new case studies. Chapters identify local heroes, history and challenges, COVID responses, and references. Both the updated case studies and the 56 new case studies are evidence of the broadening of the movement. There is less historical and contextual detail provided in this book about the early adopters, but 67 case studies from the earlier book are revisited and updated.

As there is a large amount of detail in the chapters, for those wishing to gain a quick overview, start with the first two chapters, then read the following country accounts (Chapters Three to Nine) according to your interest. Don't miss the final four chapters covering: newly established sheds and start up projects in Kenya, Iceland, and other continental European countries; the Women's Shed movement; research evidence since publication of the previous book; and finally, opportunities for broadening the movement.

Unsurprisingly, interest has grown in the idea of Women's Sheds, and appropriately a chapter is devoted to this. As for men, Women's Sheds are community spaces for women of all ages and life stages to engage in different activities and connect with other women in a predominantly or exclusively female environment. By 2021, at least 124 Women's Shed programs were identified with the greatest numbers in Australia – 61. Golding proposes a shed typology to clarify the diversity in the Shed movement and how gender relations are managed differently in diverse contexts, men-only Sheds, to mixed Sheds – where women and men meet on separate days or participate together – to women only Sheds. Most common is the mixed model, with men and women using the same shed on different days.

Chapter Eleven reviews research undertaken on Sheds, thematically and in different national contexts, and helpfully includes many citations and references. Chapter Twelve brings it all to a comprehensive conclusion outlining the ways in which the movement has broadened and continues to broaden. Along with much of the research mentioned in Chapter Eleven into the impact of Men's Sheds on the lives of men, their families and communities, Golding's two books cement beyond doubt the importance of Sheds in local communities. This book more than adequately fulfils Golding's desire to present a comprehensive, informative, definitive but readable book, complementing the earlier book.