



Power of Place
Shetland's Year of Architecture and Place 2010

Housing in Shetland

– the present and the future

Mike Finnie considers the problems and benefits of house-building in Shetland, and asks how house designs might change over the coming years.



(Clockwise from top): Balaskerry, by Redman and Sutherland; croft house at Bridge of Walls; Houlland, Veil; house at Lower Voe, by Peter Johnson Architect; Westshore, Walls, by Richard Gibson Architects; Grunnabreck, Nesting, by Redman and Sutherland.

We are very fortunate in Shetland to have opportunities for self-build houses. We have plenty of relatively cheap land, lots of space around us, fabulous views, and we have had a planning system that has been fairly easy to negotiate. This has resulted in many houses being built over the Shetland countryside.

Many of these developments are undistinguished, but there are an increasing number of houses which stand out as good examples of design, and some that might perhaps point the way to the future.

What will that future be?

Certainly we know that energy will become more expensive and carbon-based fuel increasingly scarce. That poses challenges as to how we heat our homes – very important in our often cold, and very windy, climate.

Our population is also changing. We have a decreasing population but an increasing demand for a different range of housing to suit single and older people. But do most houses we build reflect this change?

The normal house now has three or four bedrooms and perhaps a couple of bathrooms, but how many of us really need that throughout our life? Younger people when they leave home need small houses, and that's also what we need once our children have moved on. So it is only for 25 years or so that we need the bigger house.

So, do we move homes a lot during our lifetime? This is unlikely in Shetland, where most folk have strong roots to their area, possibly a croft or even a great view. Perhaps what we need is more adaptability – houses which are flexible enough to let us stay in them for as long as we can but avoid us either being overcrowded or rattling about in a big place that we can't afford to heat.

How about smaller, flexible units? You have a bigger family house but you can then split it into two smaller units, one for you and one for the grown up son you can't get rid of. Or use it for holiday rental to give you a bit of income to offset your own bills.

And how do we cope with the



Sandness (left); Houss, Burra, by Mike Finnie (right).

energy issue that won't go away? Wind and wave power might avoid the problems when oil becomes unaffordably expensive or harder to get. But even the wind and the sea are not going to make our electricity any cheaper.

So do we build the same houses, but increase the insulation, as standards decree, with the result that most of us will end up in houses which are a generation or two older than the current standards of the day and a bit cold and draughty? Or do we try to predict the future? We also have to comply with airtightness regulations, but these bring with them additional problems of potential condensation and controlled mechanical ventilation. Extra jumpers help, and the odd draught can be quite healthy.

Perhaps we need to think differently about how we used to live – winter in a cosy sitting room, then retreating to your somewhat chillier bedroom with a hot water bottle? Was it so bad? How about saving your clothes washing for a fine drying day like our mothers did? You'll save on the cost of running a tumble dryer and reduce the risk of condensation in your house.

Underground or semi-underground houses will help, with plenty of insulation and well tucked out of the wind, but this is not a solution for most folk and it's hard to get a suitable site with decent ground conditions and facing south to maximise the heat gain. It's not cheap.

What should our houses look like?

Our architectural history has always been determined by external influences, and adapted to local conditions. Our typical older rural housing stock is a development from croft houses and Scottish traditions. Twentieth century housing is much the same as you can find throughout Scotland, with an increased use of timber external cladding. This helps speed up construction in our climate

and can also reflect a Scandinavian tradition when it's done well.

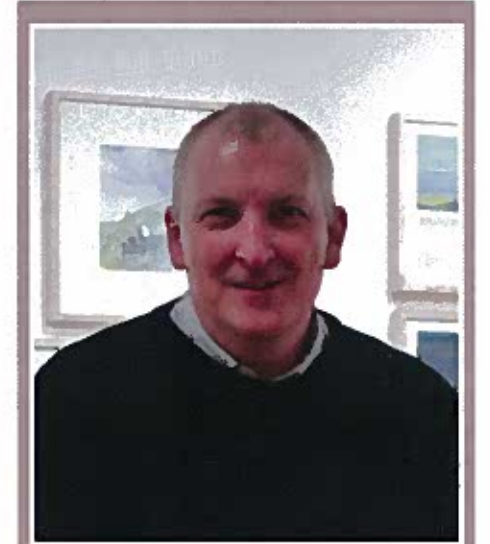
So what now? What form should new housing take and what will it look like? We enjoy Shetland's scattered development pattern but this is increasingly placing a burden on the provision of public services. Is this sustainable in the longer term or should Shetland be moving towards clustering development in communities where the supporting services are concentrated? Should we be looking at our own lifestyles and tailoring our housing to suit?

The croft house is not really a viable option for most folk now – the rooms are too narrow and it's difficult to keep this form when you need a bigger house. The west coast of Scotland has seen a flurry of recent housing taking its lead from croft houses and from the larger two storey white house with dormers. Throughout Shetland we have new houses based on traditional forms, various degrees of Scandinavian influence in timber houses, a couple of earth-sheltered houses and even a variation on an English arts and crafts house c.1905. Does it matter what our housing looks like as long as it meets our needs, and is well designed, well built and well insulated?

Shetland is distinctive for its spectacular landscapes and seascapes and is increasingly attractive to tourists. Traditional croft houses, sheds and outbuildings form an important part of our landscape and heritage. These houses are well rooted, physically and visually, into the landscape. I make good use of these in my own paintings. While none of us would want to live a nineteenth century lifestyle, most of us probably want to maintain this relationship between our houses and where we live. With plenty of experience, lots of local knowledge of what materials and detailing work in Shetland, and more importantly what's been tried and what's failed in the past, local architects are well placed to help you get the house that you need. But

first – think about how you will be living now and in 20 or 40 years time.

How do you think your lifestyle will change in the future when energy becomes increasingly expensive? Will you be able to stay in the house you are in now? And what do you think Shetland houses should be like in the future? ■



Mike Finnie is an architect for Shetland Islands Council. He is also an artist, and member of Veer North. Some of his work can be viewed at www.houss.co.uk.

The February Power of Place question:

What should Shetland houses be like in the future?

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