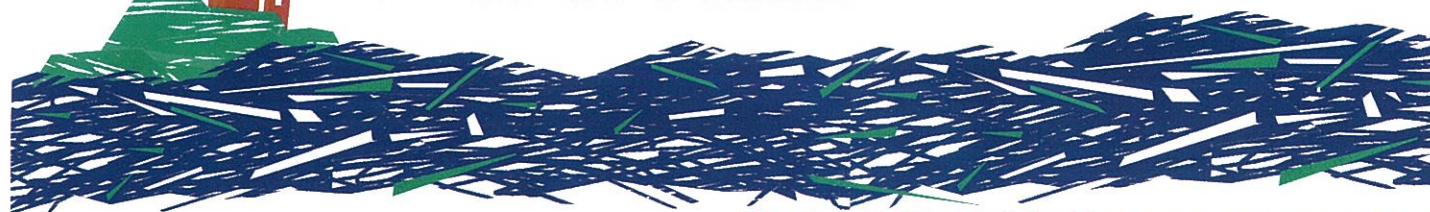


Power of Place



Shetland's Year of Architecture and Place 2010



(From top) Bank of Scotland; D&G Leslie; Da Street.

In the first of our new monthly series of articles, celebrating 2010's Power of Place event, **Iain Malcolmson** suggests it is time for all of us to

Look up

It is a few years ago now since I was a skinny architecture student at Edinburgh University, but there are fundamental things you pick up at that age that stay with you forever. Things like: simplicity is the key to beauty; a mouse is really the same as an elephant (give or take a trunk and a tusk or two); and when you are walking around this big old world look up occasionally. I can almost hear you grumbling "what a waste of tax payers money his education was" as you read this, but I would ask you to bear with me for a minute while I try to justify my meagre student grant.

The first of these points is something we all know but most of us have forgotten; the second "elephant point" is a little more complicated, but if you want to stop me on da Street I can go over it (limited for space in this article – honest!) and the latter is probably the most important thing you will learn in life.

It is amazing once it is pointed

out to you just how much of your life you spend looking at your old size nines rather than taking in what is going on around you. Go on, try it! Next time you are walking down a street lift your head for a second and open your eyes. And if you don't walk into a lamp post I bet you will see something you have never seen or at least never been aware of before.

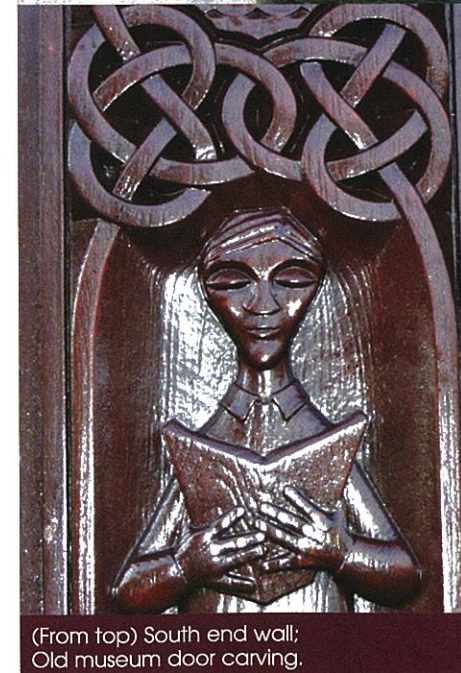
When you do this you begin to realise just how much effort has gone into creating the built environment that we all think we know and which we all take for granted. You find that you suddenly begin to see little details and maybe you begin to question why, when or how did they do that? Perhaps you like it, possibly you loath it, or you may be indifferent to it, but you certainly begin to have an opinion about it. Then you may realise that every single thing you look at someone has agonised over, puzzled over, argued about, cut, lifted, placed, nailed, painted and paid for. You begin to understand that buildings are not just stone and mortar but pieces of people's lives – people who have created them out of nothing but their imaginations, and built them with their own blood, sweat and tears. There are stories here that need telling, and who is going to know that they are there if you don't look up?

But I said the "most important thing in life", didn't I? Surely that is an exaggeration? Well, maybe, but "looking up" can apply to everything in life. To stop and "look up" at anything in one's life is to give it a healthy reality check, to ask that awkward but necessary question, to have that "wait a minute" moment of realisation that we really all could do with at some time in our lives. Becoming an architect has taught me not to take the easy way out but to question my own preconceived ideas every now and again: to give them a

good shake. More often than not what you are left with is a solution to your problem that is usually beautifully simple.

After living for 20 years on the mainland, where my wife Suzanne and I learned our trade in both the cut throat commercial world and in well-renowned design practices, we had our own "look up" moment. We left the cosy world we had built south and moved back to Shetland in 2006 where we had the double opportunity of building our own house in Nesting and joining forces with Bernard and Jim at Redman + Sutherland Architects.

The change has been a breath of fresh air for us all, but also an eye opener. We are now in the



(From top) South end wall; Old museum door carving.

smug position of knowing exactly how good it is to live in Shetland – something I admit I lost in those years away and maybe I would still have lost if I had stayed here. The power of this place cannot be put down to one single factor. Even though the islands have unrivalled beauty, the weather is spectacular, it has fantastic education and leisure facilities, music, art, an approachable political system (go with me on this one), a spirit of cooperation and unbelievably good craftsmen and builders, the whole is still greater than the sum of its parts. Maybe we should all look up and see where we are.

There are however drawbacks to



(From top) Anderson's Building; Town Hall detail.

looking up if you are an architect. The world famous architect and genius Antonio Gaudi, famed for his fantastic buildings in Barcelona, was working on the construction of his masterpiece, the cathedral of Sagrada Familia. To get a better view of his extraordinary creation he looked up and stepped back to study his work, and was promptly run over by a tram.

So there we are: it is better to look up and step forward than to look up and step back. Unless, of course, you are moving back to Shetland! ■



Iain Malcolmson is a partner in Redman and Sutherland Architects in Scalloway, and chair of The Shetland Architectural Society. He lives in Nesting with his wife Suzanne and their two children Jacob and Luke.

The January Power of Place question:

"What building in Shetland has surprised you when you have taken a closer look?"

Text / photos to the Power of Place phone **07503596635**. Or you can also email your thoughts, opinions and photographs to powerofplace@yahoo.co.uk or by post to **Power of Place, Toll Clock Shopping Centre, Lerwick.**