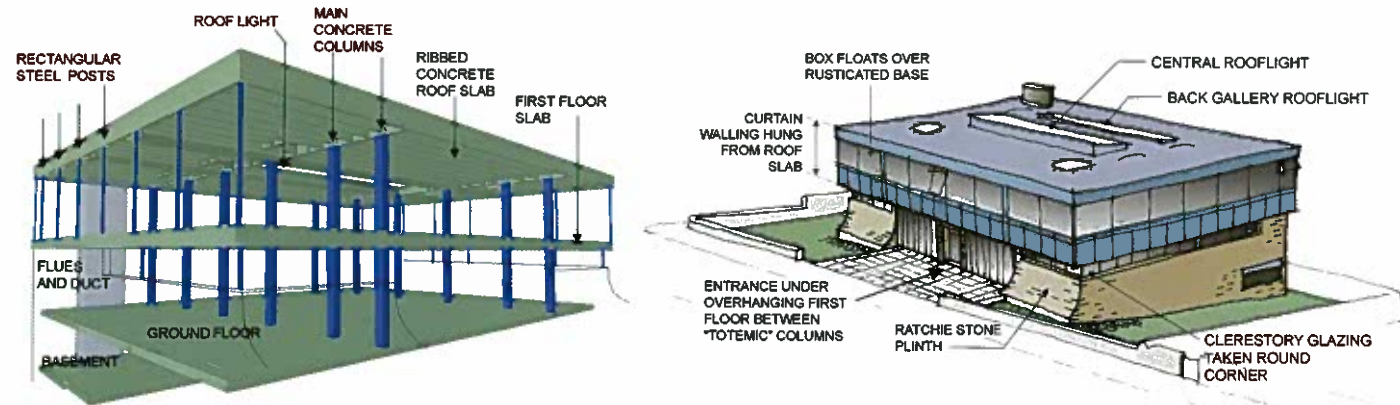




Power of Place
Shetland's Year of Architecture and Place 2010

The modern movement in Shetland

Jim Sutherland praises the old Hillhead library and museum building.



The reinforced concrete "skeleton". 3D model by the author.

Aerial view by the author.

The former library and museum were completed in 1966, the same year I moved in from "the country" to digs in Lerwick to attend the Anderson Educational Institute. I revelled in the comparative variety offered in "da toon" and was from the start particularly impressed by the brand new building on the Lower Hillhead. Whether sent by my landlady to load up with detective novels or just to get in out of the rain I browsed the library and studied prehistoric artefacts and marvelled at the intricate ship models and boaty bits in the museum.

Fifteen years later I returned to work at Design and Technical Services and had need to consult the drawings done by previous staff in the 50s and 60s. I found the drawings assured, confident and comprehensive, and they illuminated my appreciation of buildings I had grown up with, especially the museum and library.

In post-war Britain, there was really only one style: Modern Movement. Borne out of the Bauhaus and influenced by Le Corbusier, Mies Van Der Rohe and Alvar Aalto, this style was employed in new schools, housing and hospitals for the welfare state brought in by the post-war Labour government. New materials and mass production techniques replaced craft skills which had relied on low wages.

Exciting possibilities were opened up with the use of steel, concrete and glass. This period gets a bad name due to some shoddy building. There was however a huge body of work that has stood the test of time and the unassuming but competent examples left in Shetland by this busy local authority office are mostly still in use and doing service more than 40 years on.

The museum and library was designed at the end of the 1950s for the Zetland County Council and Lerwick Town Council. At that time the library was housed in a WW2 hut

and there was no museum in Shetland.

Pushed right to the back of a corner plot opposite the energetic Gothic St Ringan's Church on the Lower Hillhead, the museum and library's upper floor projects out beyond the rusticated Ratchie stone plinth with curved batter facing the Hillhead. This device, which replaced the simpler base shown on earlier designs, defines and frames the entrance forecourt reached by a range of long steps. The entrance is under the overhang of the upper floor, flanked by timber glazed screens and

The library and museum building was designed by George Barr who was county architect from the late 1950s until 1964, when he left Shetland. He was ordained as a minister in 1967 and worked in Uddingston before retiring to Comray, Perthshire.

Ray Bradbury, who had just graduated, took the building on site and completed it. Ray and Elspeth emigrated and

he practised in New Brunswick building schools and senior housing before retiring to West Vancouver where he enjoys painting.

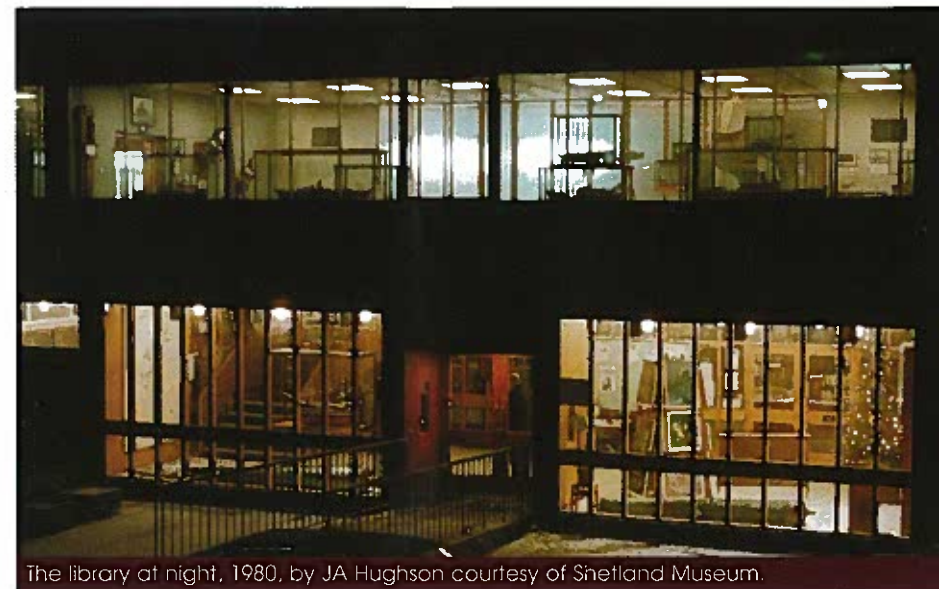
Jim Watson (who had worked with George Barr in Kirkcaldy) also worked on the design. Jim Watson moved to Northern Ireland.

Charlie Messer and Jim Moar were quantity surveyors.

The builder was Pearson and Tawse. Ray remembers Magnie Pearson as a tough, small, older man who chain smoked his way through site meetings.

Clerks of work were Jim Bruce, Tommy Williamson and Jock Henderson.

There were of course many others involved in bringing about and constructing this building



The library at night, 1980, by JA Hughson courtesy of Shetland Museum.

the totemic "columns" carved by Johnie Walterson, portraying men and women's work and reading.

The building is approximately 57 feet x 78 feet on the museum floor. Spine walls break the ground floor into 3 bays of 18, 40 and 18 feet. This grid defines the building and everything is worked around this.

Columns hidden in the spine walls are spanned front to back by beams within the depth of the slab. The roof and first floor are formed by remarkably daring 18 inch deep reinforced concrete slabs cantilevering (projecting) 18 feet practically unsupported either side of the building. This over-sailing structure, which is technically a propped cantilever – because of slim square steel posts hidden behind the glazing – is at the heart of the design of the building. All the other components are hung off it and it is this skeleton that enables the first floor to appear so light and the glazing to the library to turn the corner below with no visible support. The ribs in the slabs allow the structure to retain its strength but keep down the dead load at the same time.

You entered the original building through a common foyer from which the stair rose to the first floor galleries with the library straight ahead. The stair takes advantage of steel's high weight to strength ratio. A free-standing folded steel plate assembly spanned from floor to floor with a circular support under the quarter landing.

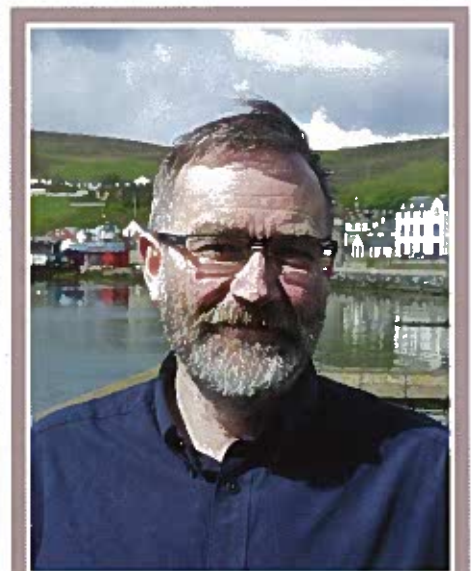
The library's main space had rooms off housing the junior, reference and Shetland libraries. The museum's loop circulation pattern revolved around the workroom core. Galleries were ranged around the outside, taking advantage of the ample light

from the large plate glass windows and roof lights punched in the roof. The effect of daylight on artefacts does not appear to have been considered in the brief and it would be fair to say the building functioned much better overall as a library than as a museum. Because of the deep plan, a 40 x 8 foot central roof light was let into the roof and intermediate floor to bring daylight down into the library and side light the workroom on the way. Unfortunately it was later floored in to give much needed work space.

The curtain walling is standard Crittall windows and panels of the period. Their galvanised steel sections allowed very slim mullions, transoms and opening sashes and architects used them extensively at this time. The masterfully detailed Miesian corners and spandrel panels form a well crafted skin to the first floor box. The curtain walling has survived 40 years with little attention and only now shows signs of distress.

The material palette was restricted by the austerity of the times and the result is all the better for it. Hardwood screens and wood strip linings were made up in a local workshop. Combined with the terrazzo-like thermoplastic tiles they gave a solid quality feel to the building.

Heating from oil boilers in the basement was delivered by convector cabinets on the first floor and a heated ceiling in the library. Opening windows provided ventilation and light fittings integrated into the ceiling panels complemented the natural daylight when needed. All the fixtures and fittings were designed and built in. These included display cases, cabinets, and the book issue desk. The furniture chosen was stylish, comfortable and complemented the interior.



Jim Sutherland is a partner in Redman + Sutherland Architects and is passionate about Shetland's built environment.

The July Power of Place question:

What would be a good long term use for the former museum and library?

Text / phone 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.**

This building was vacated when the new museum was built at Hay's Dock and the library moved across the road. The building has been colonised in a rather piecemeal fashion as these things can happen and the simplicity and elegance of the downstairs library broken up by lowered ceilings and a Birolandschaft of workstations with little daylight, unless you are one of the lucky ones near the window. The upstairs has incredible potential. The views from the upper floor are stunning as are the snatches of the Town Hall seen through the clerestory windows in the former Junior Library. The main fabric is robust and this part of our heritage has a lot more years in it yet. It deserves a future that makes the most of its assured design. ■