



Clubbs, Walls by Richard Gibson



Continuing our series of articles on architecture in Shetland, **Neil Clubb** explores the significance of

# Site and light

**Site and light:** how important these factors are when it comes to our homes. Daylight and sun always makes you feel good when it's shining on you.

When planning a home, whether you manage to buy land to design and build or buy a house to renovate to make your own, you have probably, subconsciously, started to plan how you would like to live in your new home. We have all visited friends homes, spotted a house on the banks when out walking, flicked through a magazine and thought to ourselves, "I really like that". It might be the whole building or certain aspects that stand out to you. However, whatever road you go down when planning your home it is important to spend time getting to know the natural aspects of the site and house.

We spend so much of our time in and around our homes, relaxing, working in the garden, cooking,

eating, spending time with our family, day to day jobs, sleeping . . . the list goes on. If you were to write a design brief for your own home it would cover a huge, ever-changing range of aspects.

When deciding on a site or house, visit it as much as you can at different times of the day and even different times of the seasons to appreciate the impact that daylight, shadowing and weather plays on it. Due to Shetland sitting at 60 degrees north we are lucky to enjoy long, light summer days but we also experience the opposite range of shorter, dark days in the winter months, and both have an intriguing attraction and contrasting impact on the landscape.

How we plan our home around the natural path of sunlight/daylight isn't always that easy. A site might have great aspects and views over the coast and sea but the orientation may not be ideal. The landscape and

natural contours of a site might dictate the orientation. You might buy a house that hasn't been designed or orientated well to maximise the daylight. Other close by buildings might also affect you. There could be any amount of issues to consider and try to resolve, so plan around what works for you and how you can best go about achieving the solution.

In new-build houses, even if the predominant view from the site is not a preferred south/ south-west aspect, you have to consider the design of your home. For example, window positions should be site specific to work around all the plus points that exist on the site.

In this case, you could look at designing a long, narrower house. Designing rooms and spaces that use the full width of the house allows you the advantage of windows or doors on two elevations of most central rooms and spaces, providing possible dual

views. Gable rooms have the options of three elevations to consider openings in. For example, a house that faces east can still make the most of the south and west light through well positioned openings. This type of layout can also greatly reduce the area of corridor or circulation space required within the house, allowing more effective use of the floor area. Internal corridors can sometimes be dark with limited natural daylight.

Also, consider where the light sits on your site or house during the day. Would you like to be bathed with early morning light flooding into your kitchen/dining area, afternoon sun to all your living areas and then maybe catch the evening sun and sunset in your living room?

Large glazing should be considered for any south elevations, not only to allow the afternoon sun to stream into your home but to also act as a major source of solar energy gain. Resultant thermal mass built into the fabric of the building will act as a natural storage heater, reducing your home's reliance of other energy sources.

If you buy a house to refurbish and stamp your own mark on then you might already have some inherent design features that you will have to work around. Getting a feel for the house before you launch into any alterations is a good idea. See how the existing layout and connection of spaces work for you and follow how the light fills and moves within the rooms, planning possible alterations to enjoy it more fully.

For example, increasing window and door openings and careful removal of partitions will open up spaces, increasing the flow of light into the footprint of the house. Traditional croft houses have limited window openings in size and number so adding a glazed extension will create a mixture of both light and snug areas to the house. Sometimes the simplest of internal alterations can benefit improved connection of spaces, allowing light to penetrate into the core of the house. It doesn't always have to become a major project to increase the quality of your home.

Most clever ideas and solutions in design are usually the most simple and straightforward. These usually come around as a result of doing your homework, knowing the site or building well and having experience of what has worked in the past as well as integrating new ideas. Lastly talking them over with others is helpful (not



Houss, Burra by Mike Finnie



Internal alterations

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really a very new principle I know, but one that usually works).

Having grown up in a light and airy house in the country and then moving to my first house in the lanes, I have experience of two contrasting homes in terms of light. While the light, airy house is always a winner in the summer months, I do love to retreat to a wee, snug, cosy room in the dark winter months so my ideal home would have to be a mixture of both. As I mentioned earlier, light and how it changes with the seasons are important factors to consider when planning how you want to live in your home. Good design can strive to achieve this.

However you want to live life in

and around your house it is important to know your site and house and to make full advantage of it. Spending time doing this at the early stage and all the way through the building/renovation period will never be time wasted. You can never regret knowing too much about the light and your site.

When learning the saying **Never Eat Shredded Wheat** back in primary school, I didn't think it would play such an important guide to me.

We all hope to have a happy and comfortable home, and although a house can often be the biggest investment we will ever make, some aspects that help us achieve this are free. ■