



## Power of Place

Shetland's Year of Architecture and Place 2010

# New life for old buildings

Suzanne Malcolmson looks at the benefits of restoring old buildings rather than building new ones.

As an architect in private practice you often find yourself faced with the dilemma of advising clients whether an existing building is worth repairing and restoring or if it should be demolished in favour of a new development that meets all the aspirations and expectations of modern life. This is never straightforward, particularly when the historic value of a building can be rather subjective.

The protection of our historic environment first became a priority at the end of the 19th century as a backlash against the over-zealous and rather dubious quality of the restoration work carried out during the Victorian era. Following on from there, the slum clearances in the 1930s, bombing raids during the blitz in the Second World War and the transport and inner city improvements of the 1960s and '70s each brought about the loss of huge sections of our towns and cities. There was a realisation after each event that some form of legislation was necessary to protect the historic environment and so the Listed Building Schedules came into being.

The restoration and upkeep of historic buildings is a costly endeavour, so why do we bother and is it worth it?

For me, perhaps the most important aspect is cultural identity. The remains of our built heritage provides a focus for our human past and how we have inhabited our landscape. In Shetland, the rural and urban landscape has a historical dimension that defines its character and enhances its uniqueness and sense of place. Historic buildings provide a tangible and physical link with our past, bringing the social and cultural aspects of previous generations to life

in a way that no museum artefact or photograph can. You only have to happen across some of Shetland's built heritage to get a sense of "how we used to live". The overbearing, austere Haa Houses stand in stark contrast to the humble croft houses that huddle into the landscape, reflecting the social divide between laird and tenant. The trading bōds at the head of our voes recall the years of prosperity brought by the German traders, a chapter in history that was cut short literally overnight by the Act of Union in 1707. The fishing bōds on the windswept beaches of Stenness and Fethaland bring home the hardships that would have been faced by the haaf fishermen. The abandoned townships that are scattered across Shetland's coastline are reminders of the thriving communities that once crofted and fished around the shores.

Colvadale, on the east coast of Unst, has been a settlement for thousands of years, with neolithic, Norse and 20th century remains. I recently walked from Sandwick to Colvadale and counted the ruins of at least 30 dwellings. If you stand in the doorway of one of the derelict cottages and overlook the landscape as previous generations would have done, it takes little imagination to hear the echoes of the past. You can still make out the noosts for the boats above the tide line, and field system of each croft with the lang riggs in front of the houses, the dykes, planticrubs and kaleyards. How long will it be before this part of our cultural heritage is consigned more to the history books and ordnance maps than the built environment?

It is not just about a sense of belonging or well-being; the preservation of our heritage can be educational, practical and make good economic sense. Historic buildings attract visitors to Shetland every year, benefiting the tourist industry, while historic properties or those within conservation areas have an air of quality, permanence and status that will generally afford them an enhanced market value.

Furthermore the restoration of derelict historic buildings into economic use is often the key element that helps to regenerate towns and rural areas. Scalloway was once a busy village and Anderson's Buildings on the main street was once at the heart of that thriving community. As shops closed up and moved away this group of buildings fell into disuse and dereliction until Hjaltland Housing Association recently refurbished the block. The existing buildings were stabilised, the street frontage restored and a new extension built to the rear to bring new housing and commercial premises back into the heart of the village. If the original buildings had not been protected it would undoubtedly have been easier and less expensive to demolish and rebuild anew. However, the character of the existing buildings with their patina of age creates an air of

Above: Anderson Buildings, Scalloway, 2006  
Below: Anderson Buildings, Scalloway, 2010



Shetland's old buildings are part of our local heritage.

confidence, improves the image, and contributes to the overall appeal of the village street and its sense of place.

There is of course a counter argument to this, when the presence of an older building stands in the way of progress, and regeneration would be better served by its removal. Good quality, well designed buildings whether new or old are always an asset. New buildings that

sit cheek by jowl with the old can make a positive contribution to the overall character of a place. This is well illustrated by the new TSB Bank on Lerwick's waterfront.

The sustainability of our environment is of global importance and one argument that is often cited in favour of new build over restoration is the ultimate improvement in energy efficiency. Old buildings can undoubtedly be damp, dark, draughty and difficult to heat if they have not been improved, upgraded or maintained over the years. However, seeking to enhance the energy performance of existing buildings rather than condemning them is one of the most sustainable solutions in the construction industry. A building represents a valuable resource in terms of embodied energy and natural materials. It would be difficult for the energy saving benefits of a new building to compare favourably over the lifespan of the building with the cost to the environment of the demolition, landfill, supply of raw materials and transportation.

Traditional materials, construction techniques and building types were developed and designed for a society where energy was expensive and our buildings were a valuable resource. They are still a valuable resource but one we are often too eager send to landfill.

So what is the future for our old buildings? All the arguments need to be considered when weighing up the pros and cons of restoration versus demolition and an understanding of the importance and significance of any historic building must be grasped before the right solution will be found.

I believe it is important that we preserve the evidence of the past but in doing so I also firmly believe that we need to recognise that, unlike Mousa, Fethaland or Scalloway Castle, most buildings are

### The October Power of Place question:

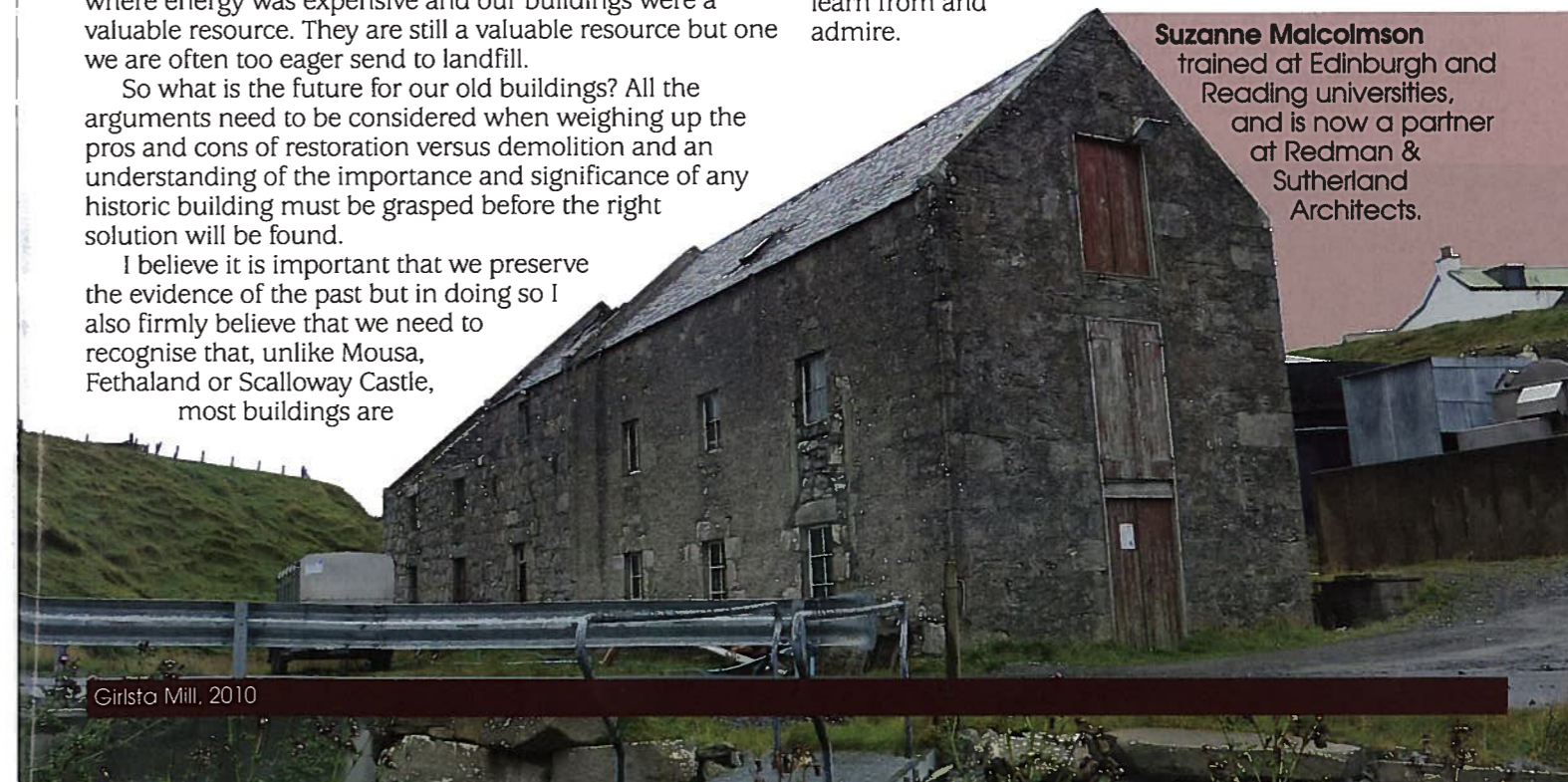
Which building in Shetland do you think should be restored to safeguard it for future generations?

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not fossils or museum artefacts and the best way to preserve our built heritage is to keep it in economic use. It is not always possible for a building to maintain its original function, as with the mill buildings, redundant churches and old school houses that lie empty and derelict across Shetland. New uses therefore need to be found for these buildings to secure their future. However a change of use will inevitably involve adaptations to the original built form and fabric of the building, which may require listed building consent and conservation area consent as well as compliance with current building standards. If the proposed alterations are refused consent and too many obstacles put in the way then the building will continue to deteriorate and the very legislation that is put in place to protect the built environment acts to stifle and hinder its survival.

However, if these changes can be managed sensitively with an understanding of the significant and important elements of the original building, compromises can be successful. After all, change and the reasons for change is at the core of the very cultural identity that brings the human dimension and social history of our built environment to life. You only have to investigate our built heritage to map the changes and adaptations that have been made over the years to keep our buildings fit for purpose. Perhaps in the 21st century we should not always try to mothball history but keep it moving forward by adding our own layer for future generations to appreciate, learn from and admire.

**Suzanne Malcolmson** trained at Edinburgh and Reading universities, and is now a partner at Redman & Sutherland Architects.



Girlsta Mill, 2010