



# The four-dimensional house

Richard Gibson examines the importance of time to home building in Shetland.



Lerwick's outskirts.

How often have we architects heard the phrase "we know what we want, here is a sketch of our floor plan"? It's useful, but doesn't take into account the full potential of thinking in three dimensions, which can reduce circulation space, light dark corners and make full, creative use of every inch of space. But what about the fourth dimension, time? Under the Power of Place banner I want to explore how time moulds both our surroundings and our homes.

Shetland's landscape and settlements were formed by travel time. For centuries the relationships between home, work and community were based on walking distances. Homes were built as part of agricultural holdings or close to the sea, boats being the only way to transport goods in bulk and provide an alternative livelihood to agriculture. Community buildings were built for people on foot, schools for daily use by children, and churches, shops and public halls for less frequent visits by whole families. Teachers, ministers, doctors and shopkeepers lived in the community close to their places of work. Larger settlements had sufficient population to include government and administrative buildings, but also remained compact to keep distances short and sheltered for people on foot. Unlike mainland Britain, where suburban living spread with the railways a century earlier, Shetland continued at walking pace until motorised transport became commonplace and buses and cars extended daily distances ten fold, increasing choice for residents and competition for local services that previously had captive audiences. This process continues today with

improving roads and transport, including bridges and the possibility of tunnels, further weakening the outlying communities they are built to serve.

Landscape and settlements also changed as travel times were reduced. Previous generations were tied to family and land by walking distances, and either extended or altered their homes to meet changing circumstances, or built a new house within the same settlement, often recycling the materials from previous buildings. In town, homes were also subdivided or extended, or new accommodation found close to family and friends for mutual support. Today we have the opportunity to choose where we build because home, work and play are seldom more than 45 minutes apart by car. Town workers live in the country and farmers shop in town. While we profess our love for the close-knit shelter and freedom of old towns and the un-cluttered open countryside of the past – even making laws to preserve them – our love affair with motor cars has led to our surroundings being dominated by regulations controlling parking, building lines, turning-circles and road-signs. Tax laws make new houses cheaper than altering or extending old ones and our consumer society encourages everything new. In consequence there is a reduction in contrast between town and country because regulation favours detached houses on small plots in both, without reference to existing buildings, street frontages, agricultural patterns or landforms. The countryside becomes cluttered with houses jostling for the best un-spoilt view while the towns spread, losing the shelter and



Low Lane, Lerwick.

convenience associated with popping to the corner shop on foot, walking to school or chatting with old friends on Da Street. Non-drivers become disadvantaged and isolated. Caring for the young, old and vulnerable becomes a logistical nightmare, leading to multi-vehicle households and careful time management to accommodate everybody's needs to ensure all visits to the health centre, club or supermarket are honored.

Consider how time, the fourth dimension, fits into the design process of the house itself by improving both its usefulness and the quality of life. Breakfast in dawn sunlight; watching the sun sink into the sea; being able to hear young children sleeping but not being disturbed by loud music as they grow up; accommodating an older child or parent while retaining your sanity and their dignity and independence; planning for the possibility of wheelchair access. These are simple examples of how forethought during initial planning increases usefulness and pleasure in daily use. Considering time is also about how a house ages and matures; whether it is adaptable and grows old gracefully; which materials improve with age and which look shabby and

require maintaining; whether it is larger than you will need in terms of cleaning, heating and maintaining later in your life.

Although the design life of a house is usually sixty years, a well-maintained house can last considerably longer, allowing countless generations to pass through its door. It is already being suggested that we should build "long life loose fit" houses that maintain the energy and carbon investment of the original, with alteration, adaptation and refurbishment becoming the norm instead of demolition and reconstruction.

Just as cheap energy is changing the appearance of Shetland, it is also changing our homes. Building used to be a craft based industry, most processes taking place on site from locally sourced materials, giving buildings a distinct regional appearance. This has changed to a mechanised process of site assembling of mass-produced components that are just as likely to have come from China as Scotland. Shopping has become a recreation, and we are bombarded with the need to replace our belongings at ever decreasing intervals. This commercial pressure has now focused on our homes, and stripping out and replacing kitchens and bathrooms is promoted as an essential lifetime ritual. What everyone needs this year is minimalist décor, with everything millimetre perfect, while last year's oak panelled look is consigned to the skip; the irony being that both were made in the same factory from wood pulp.

A clue to a possible alternative to such commercial pressure is our fascination with old houses, cottages or even the great estates, where the history of the buildings are intertwined with their inhabitants. A fascination that starts from comparing their lives with ours, and the part our homes play in our stories – the idea

that our homes, particularly the interiors, are unique to each of us and reflect not only our thoughts and aspirations but our relationships with the wider world. When a friend's father died she found a letter addressed to her amongst his papers. It was a conducted tour of his home, describing the things that meant most to him, where they came from or who gave them to him, and by connotation, who meant the most to him. Because her parents separated when she was a child this gave her a particularly vivid, personal insight into his life that she would not have otherwise had. Some of the things have now joined her collection and others have moved directly to the next generation, thus continuing the story. By using this as a model, it is possible to create a home, not as a museum, but as a living personal story combining photographs, pictures, furniture, decorations and objects that mean something to members of your family, past and present. I would go further and, instead of buying fixtures and fittings, would make, or have made, such things as kitchen fittings from solid wood (rather than wood pulp), or a table from leftover flooring, or even a copy of a chair my grandfather brought back from his Norwegian honeymoon. They would probably not be perfect, but they would be unique, have a story and be made here rather than in China. With regard to our surroundings, I would try and find a building site that relates to existing features in the landscape, close to a ruined or abandoned croft house or byres, with dykes and previously cultivated land, or even a boat noost or pier – something that already indicates settlement and can be kept and used to help locate the new house in the landscape.

Shetland Islands Council is inviting comment and ideas for the forthcoming review of the Shetland Structure and Local Plans to, in their words "ensure sustainable, vibrant

communities throughout Shetland in the future". Involve yourself in this debate because the future of Shetland is uncertain in a world that is unlikely to allow us to continue basing our lives on cheap energy. In respect of some of the issues discussed in this article, consider whether we should base our planning policies on universal car mobility, and the effect this will have on both outlying communities and those people who cannot, or do not wish to drive. Consider whether you favour the present permissive policy on individual housing development in rural areas and the low-density town development through restrictive car and traffic regulation that disadvantages people who cannot drive, and lastly consider whether it is possible or desirable to decentralise council services to reinforce local communities.

If you want to know more about this consultation visit <http://www.shetland.gov.uk/planning/LocalDevelopmentPlan.asp>. ■

Richard Gibson came to Shetland in 1968. Five years later he started Richard Gibson Architects, where he still works.

## The May Power of Place question:

Should we be planning for a less car-reliant society?

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A home should be a "living personal story".

