



Concluding our series of articles on architecture, **Nick Brett** explores

The neo-Viking, the rural house, landscape and preoccupation

Cultural Significance: "Return of the Vikings"

For most architects some cultural and structural and contextual prompts are usually needed as a starting point for the design of a rural house.

Scotland had tended towards a rather "thistlesque" interpretation of the rural house

through into the 1990s. Developers continued to produce Pete Seager "little boxes", with token stone panel trappings. These became big boxes as aspiration for more floor space increased.

Interestingly there has been a shift of ideas in Scotland: the idea of change, new

technical innovation and most of all a change in expectation on the part of public. As a way of illustration I will look at the beginnings of what I think is a positive shift that has influenced the design of the Scottish rural house. This has a regional influence and owes more to the vernacular of agricultural byres and outhouses than the traditional rural house. Agricultural buildings tended

to have less preoccupation with status decoration style or self-couscous proportion. Frugality limited the pallet of materials and imposed a discipline that ensured that they remained truer to the vernacular than with the rural house. Tradition had a continuity with the Plain Jane shed long after the house was slapping on the lippy.

This refreshing rural house design shift was initiated by a small architectural practice in the west of Scotland called Dualchas. It embodies ideas and aspirations that have coincided with technical performance improvements in glazing. Screens of glass are set in rudimentary forms, having narrow cross sections that lend themselves to simple double height spaces. This can produce a light airy feel within a modest space. These houses are not vast. They have a tempered modernity that exploits open view and penetration of sunlight. The buildings are set low to the ground, allowing a connection with the open landscape.

The influence of these buildings has spread, to some extent been copied, and can now be seen on developers' websites. These unfussy,

steep roofed, single or storey-and-a-half narrow section houses tick the right boxes with the planners. "A Shetland house, long and narrow like a Viking longhouse", I hear them say.

Woo there! Loosen that helmet! I scratch my head and wonder at what point the safety and appropriateness of regionalism risks drift in the direction of the parochial?

Copying: "Imitation is the best form of flattery"

There is nothing fundamentally wrong with copying or being influenced by other people's work. Study of other people's work is a big element in design education. The designer accumulates a library of other people's work and influence. There is a skill in the ability to select appropriate elements to copy and adapt. However, it needs to be appreciated that in meeting the client's particular needs and being sensitive in responsive to the qualities and restrictions of a site will

limit scope for straightforward imitation.

Then there is the urge to fine tune and refine. Copying just isn't that easy. If the architect could just "copy" she would be a sadder person that smiles more often.

Drawing: "What do architects do? They draw little houses don't they?"

What of designing a building? What will it be like to be in, how is it built, how will it look and what impact will it have on its surroundings? Strangely the archaic

act of drawing remains central to the design process. It remains the primary way an architect shares ideas, explores and refines.

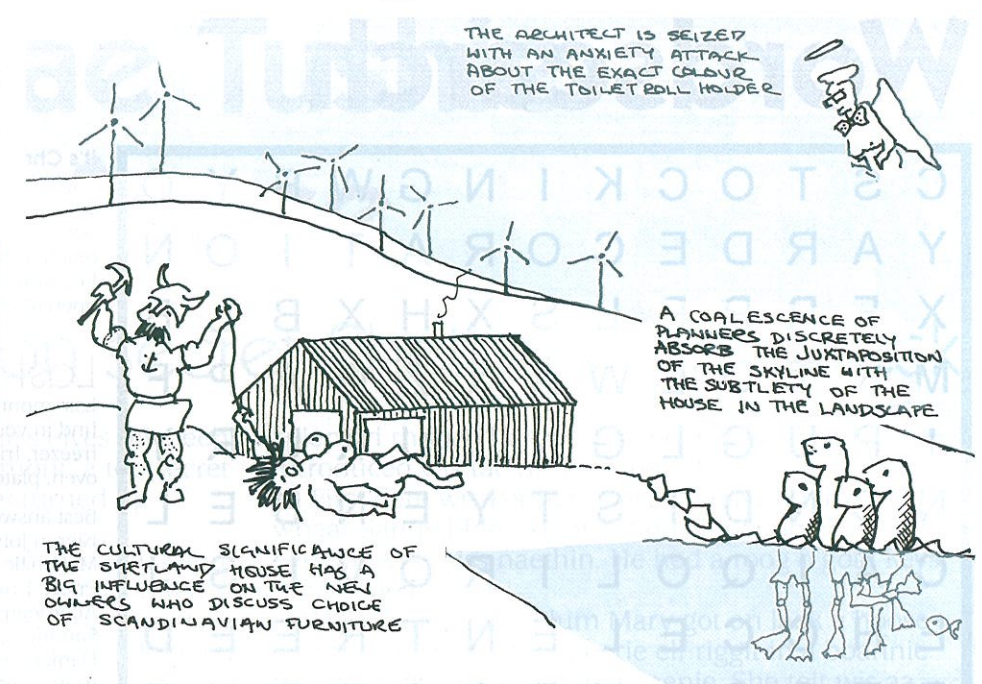
This process is now revolutionised by computer-aided design, latterly offering 3D

visualisation and modelling. So in a technical sense computer-aided design drawing has made a staggering leap that can help create complex built forms. Yet while it has revolutionised production information, most architects have not fully exploited the design possibilities that have revolutionised, say, the automotive industry. While the computer has had a massive impact on the building information production process it has tended to have a less significant impact on the design approach.

In many ways the simple hand-drawn sketch can open doors to ambiguity and accidental discovery that are closed to the CAD drawing, where there is temptation to zoom into the minutia and rapidly deliver polished drawing that has the ready capacity to make the third rate look very convincing.

Ideas: "The flouncing prima donna"

The image of the architect writing or talking about abstract ideas tends to be borrowed from other disciplines, such as literature or art. This is in part because she is more inclined to draw



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than write and what she does is neither science nor art. She straddles roles between professional, technician, designer and production worker.

The process of designing can drive the architect into a corner where she has to prove herself. Designing becomes a focus where intuition is allowed to creep in, get rationalised, and then frequently sneak back wearing a slightly different guise.

This is the area that she will worry about, puzzle about – problems of image-making, abstraction, materials and texture and place making. This demands a dialogue: "do I like it, is it credible, on what level does it work?" This is the area where the bin fills with "good ideas" and "perfect solutions" dreamed up overnight and rejected the following day. Where on reflection it is realised that that brilliant idea is not appropriate to the context of the project.

Once things start to grip, the design takes on a unity, identity and life of its own. Forming ideas of some sort of structure and going from cross-section to plan becomes a working preoccupation. While it may seem presumptuous to claim that a design for a building can take on life of its own, this presents the architect with the framework of knowing when and where to stop tuning and adjusting.

So to some extent the architect needs to be her own spectator. To some extent she has to please herself

in the tussling with ideas. To some extent there is the need to be put in a straightjacket and then wriggle out. This isn't necessarily arrogance or showing disregard for the client's intent, more a necessity of a process that pushes the architect into a corner not just to resolve the problem, but to develop ideas which inevitably involve complexity and conflict.

The Unravelling: "People come to an architect wanting a house when what they really need is a divorce" (Cedric Price)

That statement might seem a bit flippant, but it illustrates the point that a built solution is not always the answer to what is presented as a design problem. There is a need to unravel a client's aspiration in order to help them to get a better understanding of what is wanted, what is achievable and what they can afford. This can be stimulating for all taking part but will produce some unexpected changes of direction. Be prepared! ■