



## REGIONALISM ■ Building on the blackhouse: a community hall in the Inner Hebrides

*The first public building by Dualchas Building Design proposes a modern Scottish vernacular that is both simple and situated, finds Neil Gillespie. Photographs: Andrew Lee.*

In their 1944 manifesto, *Building Scotland*, Alan Reiach and Robert Hurd appealed for an approach to building in Scotland that looked both to the best of European modernism and the simplicity and common sense of a local vernacular, a kind of Presbyterian modernism. ‘The houses of our ancestors were well-designed, simple and unassuming’, they argued. ‘Can we honestly say the same of the houses of recent years?’ They then went on to illustrate ways forward through contemporary work in Sweden and Switzerland.

The work of Dualchas, an Isle of Skye-based practice formed in 1996, echoes this long-forgotten counsel. The driving ambition of the founding partners, twin brothers Neil and Alasdair Stephen, was to stem the tide of kit houses of excruciating quality that inundate rural Scotland through a rigorous

reappraisal of a simple longhouse type, the Highland blackhouse. Mary Arnold-Forster joined them three years later, bringing with her a precision, intelligence and acuity developed in London practices, notably Stanton Williams. Dualchas has gone on to produce a formidable portfolio of considered residential projects across the north of Scotland.

The image of a house in the Highlands may be romantic, but it raises a few ghosts. Daniel Maudlin traces the history of these imported pattern designs in his very readable book *The Highland House Transformed: Architecture and Identity on the Edge of Britain, 1700-1850*. ‘The white, two-storey symmetrical farmhouse standing alone against a mountainous landscape is an iconic image of the Scottish Highlands,’ he writes. ‘These were the homes of the new Highland

**Above, left** After winning a limited competition, Dualchas Building Design was appointed as architect for the new village hall on Raasay in 2003. Construction began in 2007. The design is based on simple agricultural sheds, but with a high thermal mass, a heavily insulated retaining wall, and a simple steel portal frame infilled with timber, glass and insulation. Full but protected glazing overlooks the Sound of Raasay and the Red Cuillins of Skye.



middle class of tenant farmers... the new farmhouses were highly visible symbols of agricultural improvement’.

The agricultural ‘improvements’ referred to the mass clearances of countless traditional clachans or communities from the land to create large tenant farms. Organic clusters of indigenous blackhouses once formed these crofting settlements. Dualchas looks to these structures, rather than the solitary spectral house clothed in its modest classical garb, for its inspiration. Its designs draw heavily on a half-remembered form – the simple pitched-roofed longhouse – that is redolent of the naïve, and is consequently shunned by those who would be artists rather than architects. Although the work does not refer to the

**Above** *The Shed, Tokavaig, Skye (2006).* Corrugated metal and larch-clad house with exhaust air heat pump to power the under-floor heating and hot water system. External shutters bring a sense of protection during winter storms (ph: Mary Arnold-Forster).

**Right** Recently completed Singleton House on Skye, with larch-clad walls and flat roof (ph: MAF).

**Below** *The Black House, Clashnessie, north-west Scotland (2009).* Corrugated fibre cement-clad house with large kitchen/dining/living room, bedroom and bathroom on the ground floor, with a gallery and sleeping loft above. Sliding doors open onto a deck overlooking the beach, with a large framed view west out to sea. The building complements existing ones in the village, which include stone and corrugated metal sheds. (ph: MAF).



houses that Maudlin reveals, the practice does take inspiration from the outhouses and steadings of the tenant farms. These buildings are simpler because of their lower status, their detail more stripped, their fenestration more abstract and less classical, dictated by function rather than composition.

Mary Arnold-Forster has logged virtually every modest building of note in the Western Highlands. She has a profound knowledge and sense of the landscape and how buildings sit into the land. She states that the first mistake the kit builder makes is to sit the building too high above the ground; this territory and climate demands a more intimate connection.

The familiarity of the external expression of a Dualchas longhouse conceals contemporary interiors of impeccable modernity, making use of double-height space, exposed concrete, natural timber, white walls and panoramic windows. Externally, instead of the classic symmetry of door and windows



**Above** *The larch-clad south-facing elevation of the community hall incorporates sliding shutters and glazing to the ground floor and fixed lights and sliding shutters above, protected by fixed solar shading.*

**Landscape plan** *The sloping site is close to a daycare centre and church and some housing association homes in the heart of the island, close to the largest village, Inverarish. The 1981 census found a permanent population of just 194 on the island. Though this is up on the 152 resident in 1981, the population has declined significantly since 1803 when more than 900 islanders were recorded.*

**Below** *Stone from the site was reused in gabions in the landscape.*

that imbued a sense of propriety and status in the pattern houses of the eighteenth century, Dualchas’ longhouses reveal their modernist ambitions by opening up to the sun and views.

Dulachas occupies an ambiguous and interesting place, and its work raises very complex issues to do with the vernacular. Strictly speaking the vernacular is a native language, and some might argue that the very kit houses Dualchas is affronted by constitute a contemporary vernacular. It is certainly the normal way of building, the approach adopted when working without architects. Polite architecture on the other hand is an approach that features stylistic elements that are intentionally incorporated for aesthetic purposes that go beyond the purely functional requirements of the building.

Recently the practice has begun to explore this polite territory more explicitly, notably in

the Singleton House on Skye that sees the abandonment of the pitched roof, and in the recently completed community hall on the island of Raasay. The new hall takes the architects’ well-rehearsed domestic approach into the field of public building.

Raasay lies to the east of Skye, that almost mythical Inner Hebridean island normally shrouded in low cloud and mist. On an extraordinarily clear day, the Cuillin hills are visible across the Sound of Raasay, ancient and pitiless. The great Caithness writer Neil Gunn speaks eloquently of a mountain scene on Skye: ‘Its tone was somewhere between



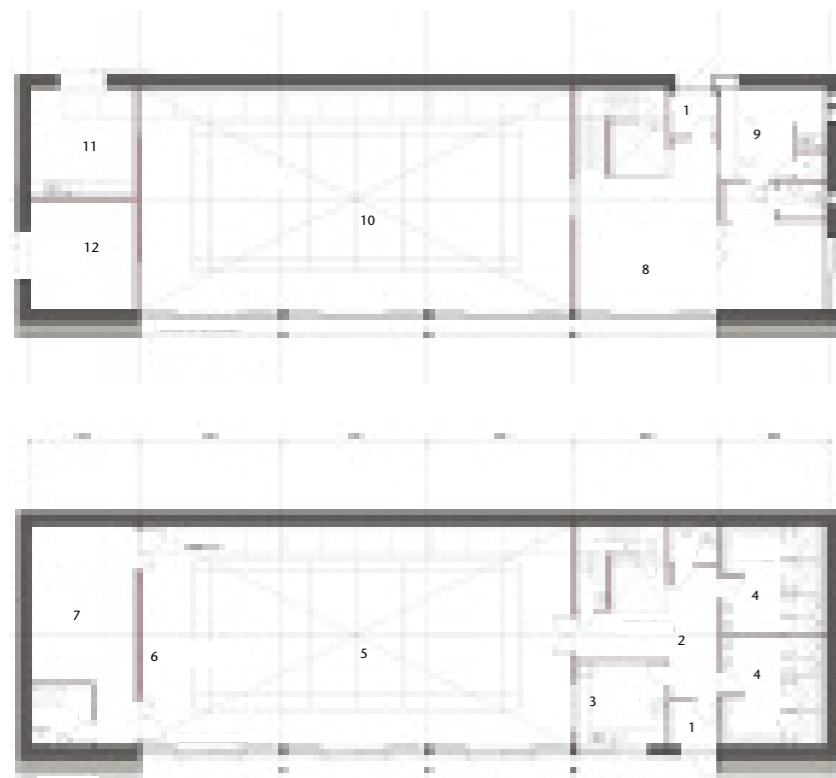


amontillado and a medium or richer sherry, but it looked like an immense living golden hide... the glow of life was there, as if the earth were a beast'.

This is difficult territory; all building feels provisional when seen against this elemental landscape. Dualchas has responded with a singular rudimentary form that boldly confronts the Cuillins across the Sound. The hall's presence in the landscape is at once abstract – a long horizontal the colour of the

**Above** The hall can be blacked out to allow film screenings. It is also used for sports, music and meetings. Since 1969 the community has wanted to establish 'a meeting place and facilities for physical and mental training and recreation, and social and intellectual development'.

**Plans** Lower and upper ground floors: 1 entrance lobby, 2 entrance hall, 3 kitchen, 4 changing rooms, 5 main hall, 6 screen, 7 store, 8 meeting room/viewing point, 9 office, 10 void above hall with rooflights over, 11 craft loft, 12 external store.



earth – and at the same time familiar shape, its pitched roof recalling the longhouse.

The hall is rendered civic through this heightened awareness of scale and through minimal detailing. Externally all detail is removed – no rainwater goods. A single material, a larch rainscreen, is courageously used to envelope both wall and roof. The building exudes a soft austerity.

The kind of resolution and technical refinement required to pull off this rainscreen is easily achievable in the climatically benign, economically advantaged south. Here on the edge of Europe it is remarkable. Its very simplicity illustrates a resolve and determination to raise the architectural ambitions of the ordinary.

The siting and stepped section allows the building to operate two ground levels, pragmatically avoiding the need for a lift, a complex piece of kit to install on a remote island. The plan is straightforward; a double-height hall is served from both ends. On the lower ground floor are kitchen, servery, toilets and changing along with storage and plant at the opposite end. On the upper level there is an open flexible space that overlooks the hall along with a meeting room and office, with external stores for play equipment and landscape equipment on the opposite side of the hall. The interiors are glacially simple with no architectural pretension.

The structure of the hall is uncomplicated, a standard steel frame, clad in a proprietary insulated panel system then skinned both internally and externally by a seamless timber



surface, a surface that denies the tectonic. Internally the hall is lined in birch plywood and beech flooring. The building uses a ground-source heat pump with underfloor heating and a heat recovery ventilation system, along with high levels of insulation and thermal control.

Within a Highland context the opportunities for civic or non-residential work will always be thin on ground. Dualchas has grasped this opportunity firmly and to my mind very successfully. There is a quiet voice, spoken with precision and modesty yet with an underlying ambition and courage. And yet in discussions about a regional vernacular

it risks being lost in the din created by Donald Trump's £1 billion baronial golf resort in Aberdeenshire, or Andres Duany's designs for a new town at Tornagrain, Inverness, where simpering watercolours once more tout the Scotland of Brigadoon and promote imported classical pretensions. Culturally insecure clients do not have sufficiently acute hearing or vision to sense that an authentic approach to contemporary building might lie within their own community. Peter Zumthor once said 'the very core of my work is staying at home'. The work of Dualchas finds its inspiration and its relevance through doing just that.

Neil Gillespie is design director at Reiach & Hall Architects and teaches at the Scott Sutherland School of Architecture, Aberdeen. His current projects include a Maggie's Centre in Lanarkshire, opening in 2012.

**Project team**  
Architect: Dualchas Building Design; design team: Mary Arnold-Forster, Lara Hinde, Alex Dickson, Alasdair Stephen; m&e engineer: ACC Consultancy; qs: Armour & Partners; structural engineer: Waterman Group, Campbell of Doune; client: Raasay Community Association.

**Selected suppliers and subcontractors**  
Cubicles: Armitage Venesta; blinds: Moray Firth Blinds; steelwork: AJ Engineering; timber cladding: Russwood; underfloor heating: Begetube; doors, windows: Nordan; insulation: Kingspan, Rockwool; ground-source heat pump: NIBE with heat recovery by Ecoiling; semi-sprung floor: Boen; breather membrane: Tyvek; plywood finish: Dricon, Restol.

