

# Ancient and modern... architecture couple building a better future by design

By Katie Macleod

It is at the Gerrannan Blackhouse Village on the west side of Lewis where the past and present of Porteous Architecture collide. Fiona and Duncan Porteous, the husband and wife team behind the approachable Achmore-based architecture firm, are responsible for the recent renovations at the Gerrannan hostel, transforming it from a basic bunkhouse to a high-end hostel fit for the discerning traveller.

"Tourists these days are much more refined in their tastes, so we tried to realise the potential of it," says Fiona of the interior redesign project. "We wanted to focus on the possibility of what we could do through design, raise the quality and the interest, and make it evocative of the place."

"We really modernized everything, made it more bright and cheery and colourful," adds Duncan, describing how the interior has been redone to a high standard, adding in a family room, new showers and a more modern, fun feel.

Working in this way at the community trust level is especially attractive to Fiona and Duncan as it offers a direct benefit to the community. This recent Gerrannan redesign was also a natural development for the two of them, as Duncan was involved in the initial restoration of the blackhouse village back in 1998, when he was working at a local architect's office and Fiona was finishing up her studies.

The projects act almost at bookends for their architectural adventures abroad, during which Fiona and Duncan gained extensive experience. "We went from here to the Bahamas – it wasn't entirely to do with the weather!" laughs Duncan, describing the colourful character of the buildings and the extent of his input in designing every detail of a house, from furniture to door handles.

After working on tourist developments and holiday homes in the Bahamas, Duncan and Fiona ended up in the popular American ski resort of Aspen, at a creative firm with a boss who was a great inspiration in his imaginative approach to architecture. Always contemplating new ways to do old things, the firm had the feel of a small studio willing to think outside the box.

Since then, the couple have come full circle, returning to Lewis the long way round in 2011 to start their own firm. "We were exposed to a lot, so we have a wealth of experience between us," says Fiona. "We wanted to pursue our own ideas, and we love the islands, we consider this home. We can use all of our experience and bring that to bear here."

Porteous Architecture's approach to the hostel, making it "evocative of the place," is part of an attitude essential to the firm's architectural ethos.

Their take on Hebridean contemporary architecture is, as Fiona describes, "influenced by a strong sense of place, using the dramatic landscape and culture as a vehicle for a more contemporary take on architecture and design." They believe in an open philosophy, where design, people and a sense of place are paramount.

"We try to be accessible as architects, try to bust a few myths," she explains. "We work collaboratively with people, using our experiences for mutual development to reach their vision."

As Duncan points out, it's a process that people are becoming more interested in and attuned to. "People watch things like Grand Designs now. They want something interesting where they can incorporate their own ideas, use new technology – architects can do that for people."

It's a holistic style of working that has resulted recently in a number of interesting projects for the pair, like the permanent home currently being built for a client in Uig. While they have expertise in every size of house, this is their smallest design to date.

The Uig design demonstrates a new take on the Hebridean cultural values and environment. Built into the landscape, it boasts a turf roof and a palette of materials evocative of and influenced by local buildings. A flash of red on the rooftop was inspired by the sails of herring boats that cruised past the bay in days gone by. "It's an echo of the memory of that," says Fiona. "It's not literal; it's taking something and moving the design along."

Sustainability is another central tenet of their architectural approach. Ethical and sustainable parameters feed into the design process from the start, rather than being 'added on' at the end of a project.

Every aspect of the Uig home is sustainable – even the construction process was built on the idea of sustainability, based on the notion that the structure should enhance the landscape. In this particularly rocky and dramatic location, instead of flattening the area, the home was built into the rocks in an "immediate response to the site and the place."

In a similar vein to the Uig eco home, Duncan

has been renovating an old Mission House on an Achmore croft, using inspiration from the local landscape, and especially the old airighs out on the moors. "We take our ideas from things about us," says Duncan. "There's not often colour in island buildings, but the airighs were colourful, capturing the spirit of people going out and staying in them in the summer." He has tried to incorporate the fabric of them too, using the corrugated iron and recycled materials that constituted these summer sheilings.

The Mission House is a personal side project for Duncan, whom Fiona describes as something of "a master builder", the precursors to architects who took on design, construction, and everything

in between. While in architecture there can be a slight disconnect between the design on the computer and the space to build on, with Porteous Architecture there is that extra link between the drawing board and the building. "It's a special skill to have in our firm," she says. "You have to know how it's going to be made. It refines and brings something extra to the design process."

It all harks back to the holistic nature of their business, one that takes in the place and the people they work with. "We're very open about things. Good design should be for everyone – it's not just for the elite."



Gerrannan Youth Hostel Interior



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