

## Field Report

# On the Other Side of Sorrow: Reimagining the Highland Longhouse

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In the context of contemporary debates about Scottish devolution and identity this report investigates the re-emergence of the highland longhouse typology on the Isle of Skye after nearly two hundred years of decline. Following an introduction to post-devolution discourse on Scottish identity and to the postmodern notion of “reimagining,” the report looks specifically at one architectural practice, Dualchas Architects, which has been active on the Isle of Skye for the past seventeen years and is attempting to reimagine the highland longhouse for the highland community today. The report concludes by suggesting that through the act of reimagining, a process of taking from the past that which serves the practical, political and cultural needs of the present, Dualchas Architects have triggered a renewed interest in the highland longhouse as a progressive and specifically “highland” architecture.

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*Beyond the lochs of the blood of the children of men,  
beyond the frailty of the plain and the labour of the mountain,  
beyond poverty, consumption, fever, agony,  
beyond hardship, wrong, tyranny, distress,  
beyond misery, despair, hatred, treachery,  
beyond guilt and defilement: watchful, heroic,  
the Cullin is seen rising on the other side of sorrow.*

— Sorley MacLean, *The Cullin*, 1939<sup>1</sup>

Many visitors are drawn to the Scottish highlands because their seemingly “wild,” “ancient,” and “untamed” landscapes offer relief from, and a foil to, the intensity, complexities and frustrations of urban life.<sup>2</sup> Yet it is important to remember that people’s responses to landscapes are to a large extent subjective. Thus, Robert Macfarlane, in his engaging survey of cultural perceptions of mountains through history, *Mountains of the Mind*, wrote, “. . . our responses (to landscapes) are for the most part culturally devised. . . . [W]e interpret their forms in the light of our own experience and memory, and that of our own shared cultural memory.”<sup>3</sup>

This kind of reflexivity leads to a realization that visitors’ perceptions of the highlands will inevitably be multifarious and almost certainly different from that of the highlanders themselves. If one engages with highland history through its music, poetry, literature, and the memories of the highland people, it becomes clear that many highlanders see their landscape as bearing the scars of three centuries of exploitation by “outsiders.” These scars include the ruins left by the nineteenth-century clearances, the soil erosion resulting from the introduction of large-scale sheep farming, and the planting of nonindigenous conifer forests in the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> One also begins to understand why a people whose history of oppression is inscribed so starkly in the landscape are currently being so vociferous about asserting their right to choose independence from England (devolution) and the need to articulate a new identity based on a “reimagining” of their Gaelic past.

The term “reimagining,” introduced by the social anthropologist Adam Lerner in his seminal work *Reimagining the Nation*, is used here to denote an understanding of the way social groups use the past to inform shared notions of national identity.<sup>5</sup> Underpinning Lerner’s term is the postmodern notion that individuals and cultural groups subjectively “imagine” their identities based on individual and shared memories, myths, beliefs, experiences and values, and that these identities are constantly re-created, or “reimagined,” through a process of creative and dynamic negotiation between the old and the new. This postmodern notion is useful because it deflects the discourse on individual and collective identity away from modernist concerns of the authentic versus the inauthentic and the modern versus the traditional, which have tended to preoccupy architectural debates on place, identity and architecture. Instead, it moves the discussion toward questioning why one identity is imagined rather than another, and, of particular relevance here, why one history is remembered rather than another.<sup>6</sup>

Scotland in the period since the 1976 referendum on devolution provides a particularly rich example of the cultural reimagining of identity. Through this period both Scottish institutions and the Scottish people have produced a heterogeneous set of reimaginings of Scottish identity that share three tendencies. First, they use highland identity as a metonym for Scottish identity, when in reality the highlands

are only one part of a larger Scotland. Second, they cast off both the romantic image of the highlands constructed by the British in the eighteenth century and the pre-devolution self-identification by the highland people as victims of centuries of British colonial oppression.<sup>7</sup> And finally, the reimaginings seek to (re)connect with the cultural values of pre-Union (i.e., pre-1707) Gaelic/highland culture (particularly the notions of communitarianism and environmentalism). In recent years these reimaginings have begun to be reified in the policies of the Scottish government and the Highlands and Islands Council, including the Right to Roam policy, support for the purchase by local communities of estates from “outsiders,” the introduction of Gaelic language studies into schools and universities, and free higher education and care for the elderly. The success of these policies became apparent when the 2012 National Well-Being Survey reported that people living in Orkney, Shetland, and the Western Isles were among the happiest in Britain.<sup>8</sup>

For the purposes of this report, however, what is of particular interest is the role of cultural producers — artists, poets, musicians, architects, etc. — in the process of reimagining identity. If one accepts Pierre Bourdieu’s notion that cultural producers are not destined to reflect or reproduce culture, but have agency, albeit limited by their context, then it follows that their work can actively contribute to creating culture anew.<sup>9</sup> In this respect, there has been a veritable renaissance in Scottish high and popular culture over the last twenty years or so, particularly in the areas of art, music, food, textiles, poetry and literature, much of which has drawn on personal and collective notions of pre-Union Gaelic culture.<sup>10</sup> For instance, contemporary highland poetry from writers such as Kathleen Jamie, Sorley Maclean, and Ian Hamilton Finlay is characterized by a form of reverential realist naturalism that is entirely different from the English romantic tradition.<sup>11</sup>

Noticeably absent from this cultural renaissance is much physical evidence of a reimagining of highland architecture, and even less evidence of a reimagining of the highland dwelling.<sup>12</sup> That said, in post-devolution Scotland the Scottish government has launched a number of initiatives intended to stimulate debate. These have included the launch of the Scottish Executive’s first Policy on Architecture in Scotland in 2001; the opening of The Lighthouse, Scotland’s Centre for Design and Architecture, in Glasgow in 1999; and sponsorship of the first Scottish Housing Expo in 2010.<sup>13</sup> In addition, it is well known that Scottish schools of architecture, and particularly the Mackintosh School of Architecture in Glasgow, have long explored the issue of identity and architecture. Despite the high levels of debate and optimism associated with devolution, however, Scottish architects have had little impact on the landscape of the highlands. A number of factors have contributed to this lacunae, including the relative poverty of the highland people, the ready availability of poorly designed but cheap kit houses, a lack of ambition among highland councils, an enduring cultural association between the in-

digenous highland longhouse (known as the blackhouse) and poverty, and the continued exodus of architectural graduates from Scotland in search of work.

That said, there have been a number of attempts to reimagine the highland dwelling over the last century. These were well documented by Dan Maudlin in his 2009 *TDSR* essay “The Legend of Brigadoon: Architecture, Identity and Choice in the Scottish highlands.”<sup>14</sup> However, of these projects, only the designs published in 1944 by the German ethnologist Werner Kissling explicitly attempted to reimagine the longhouse typology. Kissling’s aim was to “update” it in an attempt to “overcome [its] disadvantages . . . without losing the desirable elements of its character.”<sup>15</sup> His designs outwardly resembled the pre-improvement blackhouses, but internally they subdivided their traditional large high living space to provide bedrooms on the upper floor. They also “modernized” its construction to include concrete foundations, concrete ground-floor slabs, and imported windows and doors.

Kissling’s substantive understanding and admiration for the blackhouse — even though by 1944 there were only a few examples of it remaining in the highlands — led him to suggest that the typology could be successfully adapted to contemporary needs. However, as Maudlin pointed out, Kissling failed to understand that highlanders at that time associated blackhouses with backwardness and poverty rather than with a progressive highland way of life.<sup>16</sup> This bias remains today, although over the last few years a growing number of “updated” blackhouses have been built for the holiday cottage market (FIG. 1).

The highland environment today is characterized by dramatic mountainous landscapes scattered with a mixture of ruined stone, pre-improvement blackhouses, such as those to be found in the ruins of the village of Suisnish (which was cleared by the Lord McDonald in 1853 to make way for



FIGURE 2. Ruins of a pre-improvement highland settlement, Suisnish, Isle of Skye. Photo © the author.



FIGURE 3. Highland improvement “whitehouse,” Torrin, Isle of Skye. Photo © the author.



FIGURE 1. Example of a blackhouse reconstructed for the holiday market, Breakish, Isle of Skye. Photo © the author.

large-scale sheep farming) (FIG. 2);<sup>17</sup> small one-and-a-half-story, white-painted stone houses with slate roofs dating from the improvement era (eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) (FIG. 3); and white-rendered one-and-a-half-story timber kit houses built in the period since World War II (FIG. 4). However, over the last seventeen years Dualchas Architects, an architectural practice located on the Isle of Skye, have been building dwellings that attempt to reimagine the pre-improvement highland longhouse (blackhouse) (FIG. 5). The case study that follows looks at the ethos of the practice, how this has informed their reimagining of the highland longhouse typology, and how their projects have begun to reorient the domestic market on Skye away from the kit whitehouse.





**FIGURE 4.** Example of the now ubiquitous highland kit house, Kilbride, Isle of Skye. Photo © the author.



**FIGURE 5.** The Skye Museum of Island Life at Kilmuir, Isle of Skye, was opened in 1965. The museum preserves a small township of nineteenth-century thatched blackhouses. Photo © the author.

## REIMAGINING THE HIGHLAND LONGHOUSE

Dualchas Architects, just as Kissling did before them, have declared their aim to serve local community needs through reimagining the highland longhouse typology. On their Web site they explain this commitment: “We . . . wanted a house which was unmistakably highland, yet modern; a house that could be seen as part of the cultural regeneration of the highlands. To do this we sought inspiration from the true vernacular of the highlands — the blackhouse.”<sup>18</sup>

The formal similarities between the pre-improvement blackhouse and Dualchas’s longhouse designs are self-evident to any visitor (FIG. 6). Both nestle into the landscape, have long narrow plans, and use local materials in their raw form. Further, any architect’s gaze will place the quiet mini-

malism of the new longhouses within a modernist lineage that includes such design greats as Alvar Aalto, Mario Botta, Sverre Fehn, Glen Murcott, and Peter Zumthor. Yet, as the architectural historian Keith Eggner has warned, it is all too easy to fall into the trap of assuming that meanings seen through eyes of outsiders, especially architects, are identical to meanings constructed by an area’s inhabitants:

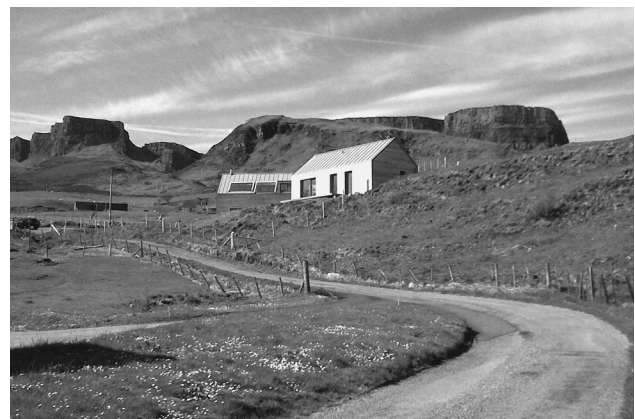
*What is defined as authentic local culture . . . is often imposed from the outside. The outsider sees what they want to see, with little consideration given to local circumstances, operations or perceptions.<sup>19</sup>*

Thus, it is not easy for the visitor to understand whether the similarities between the pre-improvement blackhouses and Dualchas’s contemporary longhouses are poetic, semi-otic references to a bygone typology that appeal primarily to a market of middle-class, culturally educated incomers, or whether they are homologues that resonate with the local community as a meaningful reimagining of contemporary highland identity. However, a first step toward answering this question might be to look at the way Dualchas, as embedded architects, understand their community’s history and identity, and how this understanding has informed their work.

## ARCHITECTURE, IDENTITY AND POLITICS

In the introduction to this report I described the burgeoning of a national discourse on Scottish identity in the years that followed the referendum on devolution in 1976 and the contribution that artists have made to this discourse. These debates, which have occurred at both national and local levels, have provided the context for the practice of Dualchas Architects.

In this regard, specific insight into the firm’s cultural positioning can be found in the transcript of a reflective lecture given by Alisdair Stephen, one of its two founding broth-



**FIGURE 6.** An example of a reimagined highland longhouse, Flodigarry, Isle of Skye, designed by Dualchas Architects. Photo © the author.

ers, to architecture students at the University of Aberdeen in 2007. During the lecture, Stephen described first visiting his grandparents on Skye when he was a boy, and then again when he was an architecture student in the early 1990s at the University Strathclyde. He recalled his distress on encountering the desecrated landscape and the abject poverty of the community, which he saw as the product of several centuries of systematic symbolic and spatial violence inflicted on the Gaelic language, culture, and way of life by British colonizers and their clan-chief henchmen. As Stephen suggested, “the distance from our language, and often a sense of alienation from our home, has been the inevitable effect of the treatment of past generations. You could call it identity theft, and for its victims the effects are everywhere.”<sup>20</sup>

Stephen went on to explain that he had been so incensed by what he saw that he decided at the end of the fourth year of his architectural studies to move to the Isle of Skye to learn Gaelic, and to carry out research for a local architect, rather than leave for Hong Kong in search of work. Stephen subsequently set up the architectural practice Dualchas Architects with his twin brother Neil in 1996. Neil had previously written his undergraduate dissertation on the blackhouses of Boreraig.<sup>21</sup> The explicit aim of the brothers was to create an architectural equivalent to the renaissance in Gaelic language, music and dance that they saw around them. Even the word “Dualchas” (the Gaelic for “culture” or “heritage”) in the name of their new practice reified the brothers’ ethos.

It is clear from this lecture that Stephen understood the reimagining of the highland longhouse as a political act, one that rejected the conceptual and material signs of the colonized past and sought to reconnect with the long-suppressed Gaelic culture. For him, the reimagined highland longhouse was to be the product of an evolution of traditional forms with “the best elements of the past being altered by advances in building techniques allied to changes in social and cultural patterns.”<sup>22</sup> The challenge for the practice was to produce buildings that lived up to these explicitly political aspirations.

The early work of the practice consisted of small domestic conversions that provided little scope for reimagining the longhouse typology. However, in 1998 the Dualchas practice won a commission to design a new house on the Isle of Lewis for a Scottish nationalist party activist. This house, the Barden House, closely resembled a blackhouse from the exterior with its drystone walls, curved corners, hipped roofs, and clipped eaves. However, with its concrete-block inner construction and subdivided interior, it was really more of a whitehouse in blackhouse clothing. Nonetheless, in subsequent commissions for other private dwellings, Dualchas increasingly freed themselves from the obligation to make direct material and semiotic references to blackhouses. Instead, they began exploring ways in which certain “useful” Gaelic values, which had informed the architecture of pre-Union blackhouses, might be synthesized with the exigencies of contemporary highland life to produce a reimagined highland longhouse. Two Gaelic values in particular — reverence

for the natural environment and strong belief in community — were already prominent in the national and grassroots discourse on Scottish/highland identity, and not surprisingly, these values appear to have informed the architecture of the reimagined highland longhouses.

## ARCHITECTURE AND PLACE

Natural environments have always been fundamental to the construction of human identities and practices. Concepts of the environment are not just products of the imagination; they are also shaped by physical engagement with it. The wind, the rain, the fields, the mountains — these provide the conditions of possibility for human development in any given place. This is never truer than in wild places. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that the highland environment, with its remote, mountainous topology and harsh climate, heavily influenced both the construction and subsequent development of highland culture. This eventually included distinct farming practices (animal husbandry, fishing and subsistence arable farming), settlement patterns (small communities in fertile glens and along coastlines), artistic traditions (particularly poetry and music), and architecture (predominantly dwellings). However, what is surprising, particularly to outsiders, is that the Gaelic concept of the environment was — and arguably is “becoming again” — radically different from the English concept, as underpinned by the Enlightenment premise of man’s superiority over nature and capitalist notions of ownership.

James Hunter, best known for his revisionist account of the highland clearances, has argued that the Gaelic reverence for the natural environment can be traced through the unbroken lineage of Gaelic poetry to the sixth century.<sup>23</sup> This attitude to the natural environment also influenced the form of Gaelic settlements and dwellings. However, unlike the oral Gaelic traditions, the development of the blackhouse typology was halted in the early eighteenth century when the English “modernized” the highlands by imposing a new mode of agriculture (large-scale sheep farming), settlement patterns (crofts and towns), and architectural forms (whitehouses).<sup>24</sup> By contrast, there is now a large body of evidence, including archaeological and historical accounts, folk collections, and oral histories, that combine to produce a rich picture of the way that Gaelic *clachan* (village) and blackhouse (*taighean dubha*, or “thatch houses”) gave material form to the Gaelic notion that man depended on, and therefore had to respect, the natural world.<sup>25</sup>

Dualchas Architects have repeatedly expressed their appreciation of the blackhouse as a form of architecture well suited to the highland environment. For instance, their Web site points out how its low, contour-hugging form, rounded roof, thick walls, and small, east-facing openings helped mitigate the worst effects of the powerful southwesterly winds. It also points out that highland communities, out of necessity,



**FIGURE 7.** *Larch Cottage, Drumfearn, Isle of Skye, designed by Mary Arnold Foster of Dualchas Architects, adopts a long, low form that echoes the proportions of the blackhouse, and that is sited carefully in a natural hollow that protects it from the prevailing winds. Photo © the author.*

used local and often recycled materials for the construction of their blackhouses.<sup>26</sup> However, the Dualchas practice also accepts that the blackhouse remains a symbol of backwardness for many contemporary Gaels, and consequently assert the necessity for “tradition to be an evolving thing” — a reimagining for the contemporary world.<sup>27</sup> But what architectural form could this reimagining take?

By 2001 Dualchas had already produced twenty designs for contemporary longhouses.<sup>28</sup> These were designed to work “with” the topography and the microclimate, in contrast to the older whitehouses or postwar kit houses that were imposed “onto” it in an attempt to symbolize their dominance. For instance, the modest Larch Cottage, designed by Mary Arnold Foster, who joined Dualchas in 1999, adopted a long, low form that echoed the proportions of the blackhouse, and was sited carefully in a natural hollow for protection from the prevailing winds (FIG. 7). The landscaping around the building was also designed to work with the landscape by de-emphasizing the site boundaries and allowing the surrounding ground-cover of heather to come right up to the building. Gone were the picket fences and manicured lawns of the kit houses.

Many of the early longhouses were small and low-cost, designed to attract a Rural Home Ownership Grant.<sup>29</sup> However, as the practice became better known through design awards, publications, and word of mouth, it attracted more prosperous clients, many of whom were successful Gaelic *émigrés* returning to Skye in hope of reconnecting with their heritage.<sup>30</sup> As a consequence, the architects began to secure commissions with increased budgets, which allowed them to work with sites in more ambitious ways. For instance, the longhouse at Boreraig, completed in 2011 for a Buddhist client who inherited a croft from his mother, kept the building form low by breaking it into three separate elements: the living accom-



**FIGURE 8.** *The longhouse at Boreraig, designed by Dualchas Architects, keeps the building form low by breaking it up into three separate elements: the living accommodation, the bedrooms wing, and a studio space. Photo © the author.*

modation, the bedrooms wing, and a studio space (FIG. 8). It also used a natural bowl in the landscape to form a *lochan* (small pool or pond) by damming the out-flowing burns, that became a focal point for near views from the house (FIG. 9). Similarly, the recently completed house at Flodigarry split the accommodation into three parts — a house, an outbuilding, and a self-contained flat — and located the accommodation in three different-sized longhouse forms. These were sited on a hillside in positions that both minimized the necessity for earth-moving and optimized the aspect from the habitable buildings (FIG. 10, REFER TO FIG. 4).

Both the above designs evidence a *modus operandi* that might be termed “constructing the site.” This results in informal collections of buildings that sit gently within the natural contours of the land, but that also manage to create a sense of place in the space loosely bounded by the buildings.



**FIGURE 9.** *Dualchas Architects used a natural bowl in the landscape to form a lochan (small pool or pond) that became the focal point for near views from the longhouse at Boreraig. Photo © the author.*





**FIGURE 10.** The house at Flodigarry split the accommodation into three parts — a dwelling, an outbuilding, and a self-contained flat — and located the accommodation in three different-sized longhouse forms. These were sited on a hillside in positions that both minimized the necessity for earth-moving and optimized the aspect from the main buildings. Photo © the author.

In addition to working with the site to minimize the visual impact of its designs, Dualchas have used the materiality of their buildings to reinforce a sense of “belonging,” both in the literal and metaphorical sense of the word. Although some of their early longhouses were finished in white render, evoking the ubiquitous improvement whitehouse, Dualchas have increasingly used as-found, or “brut,” materials, such as local stone for external walls and internal floors, galvanized steel for gutters and ironwork, and larch planks to form rain screens (FIG. 11).<sup>31</sup> The colors and textures of these materials, particularly when weathered, help the longhouses tonally meld with the highland landscape — in a sense reproducing the camouflage effect created by the markings on the highland stag, wildcat or hare.

Lastly, Dualchas have reimagined the way the longhouse visually connects man with nature. The primary function of the blackhouse was to provide shelter from the elements for families and their livestock. Its perimeter double-skin dry-stone walls and thatch roofs were very thick, and the openings in them small, resulting in a visual disconnect between inside and outside. Yet the Gaels expressed their reverence for their environment — including the animals, the mountains, the weather, and seasons — in their oral traditions, their poetry, folklore and music.

Two hundred years later Dualchas have harnessed the potential of airtight timber construction and high-performance windows to create longhouses that visually connect the inside and outside without compromising thermal efficiency. These connections come in two distinctive forms. First, there are the small windows that frame particular views — a tree, a mountain, a stream — creating living pictures that have a



**FIGURE 11.** Dualchas Architects have increasingly used as-found, or “brut,” materials in their work, as demonstrated by the larch-plank rainscreen on the house at Borerraig. Photo © the author.

captivating temporal dimension (FIG. 12). Such windows work in a similar manner to Ivon Hitchens’s millpond paintings (Hitchens painted the same scene over and over with a view to gaining a deeper understanding of his immediate environment). Second, there are the large, full-height windows and sliding doors in the main living spaces, which allow a blurring of the horizontal boundary between outside and inside and offer massive, awe-inspiring, and ever-changing panoramas of the highland landscape (FIG. 13). These panoramas are indescribably captivating. I recall seeing a rain squall approaching from afar and a rainbow set against snow-



**FIGURE 12.** Small windows, such as this one in the bedroom at Larch Cottage, are used to frame particular views and create living pictures that have a captivating temporal dimension. Photo © the author.



**FIGURE 13.** Dualchas Architects employ large full-height windows and sliding doors in main living spaces, such as this one at Larch Cottage, to blur the horizontal boundary between outside and inside and offer massive, awe-inspiring, ever changing panoramas of the highland.

covered mountains and dark skies. Such experiences act as a constant visual draw and a humbling reminder of the power and presence of the weather, the mountains, and the sea.

#### ARCHITECTURE AND COMMUNITY

Social relations have a material component. People are situated with respect to others, in part through the physical environment they inhabit, whether in the form of field boundaries, walls that enclose spaces, or chairs around a table. The maintenance, or transformation, of the patterns of life within a community relates in no small part to the way the physical environment facilitates or denies certain patterns of movement or action, lines of sight, proximity, interaction, and much else. Research on relatively stable and tight-knit premodern communities, most notably the famous study of the Berber house by Pierre Bourdieu, has demonstrated how dwellings may reify the practical and symbolic lives of their inhabitants.<sup>32</sup>

The pre-Union blackhouse provides a paradigmatic example of this phenomenon. In the twelfth century the kings of Scotland replaced tribalism with a feudal system based on kinship and paternalism, in which clan chiefs, loyal to the king, governed defined territories. This social structure remained relatively stable until the 1707 Union with England. Thus, for more than five hundred years the (mainly Gaelic) clans consisted of a disparate collection of small farming communities located on fertile lands. These communities (*clachan*) housed a small number of families living in organic groupings of blackhouses and associated outbuildings, surrounded by communal land, “infields” adjacent to the settlements for cultivation, and “outfields” beyond for cattle grazing. On the one hand, the form and spatial arrangement

of the blackhouses reflected the practical requirements for living, such as providing respite from the weather and a place to cook food. But on the other, they also reflected Gaelic cultural belief in kinship, the symbiotic relationship between the individual, the family, and the community.

The most substantive example of the architecture of kinship was the way the large living spaces in the blackhouses provided a location for social gatherings (*céilidh*). These were typically held around a central peat fire (*teine*) and involved communal storytelling, singing, and music (FIG. 14). Other examples of Gaelic civility, however, included keeping front doors unlocked and providing a stone or block of wood, called a “wanderer’s stone,” just inside the front door as a symbolic, and practical, welcome to strangers.<sup>33</sup> Inside the blackhouse, family relations occupied one half of its space, while the livestock were located in the other. A multiplicity of activities occurred in the living space, including cooking, weaving, sleeping, talking and entertaining. While members of a family would coexist in the same space, their individual roles and status were signified through material objects. For instance, men would sit on “sitting benches” placed against the wall near the fire, while women would sit on low stools around the fire, and dogs and children would sit on the floor.

The relative stability of the highland clan structure and associated way of life was disrupted in the early eighteenth century when Scotland signed the Union with England (1707) and to all intents and purposes became a colonized land. Scotland’s annexation to England was accompanied by a program of “improvements,” a potent mix of Enlightenment thought from England and Scottish Protestantism. These ultimately led to the systematic destruction of highland life, commonly known as the clearances, and the imposition of new forms of agriculture (large sheep farms), settlement



**FIGURE 14.** Reconstruction of a blackhouse interior at No. 42 Arnol, Lewis (c.1885) (owned by Historic Scotland), showing the single living space with its central peat fire. Photo © Crown Copyright, reproduced courtesy of Historic Scotland, [www.historicscotlandimages.gov.uk](http://www.historicscotlandimages.gov.uk).



(crofts, planned towns), and dwellings (“whitehouses”).<sup>34</sup> As a result, the blackhouse typology went into decline and gradually became associated with backwardness and poverty. From the nineteenth-century whitehouses through to the twentieth-century timber kit houses, therefore, it can be argued (as Maudlin did in “The Legend of Brigadoon”) that the domestic architecture of the highlands symbolized an “imposition” of English values, fuelled by Enlightenment notions of progress, ownership and privacy at odds with the inalienable Gaelic values of kinship and community.<sup>35</sup>

It might seem somewhat ironic that the timber kit version of the whitehouse has been the architecture of choice for the resident Gaelic community since World War II. However, as Alisdair Stephen suggested in his lecture to architectural students, this odd choice was a result of a confluence of factors, including the systematic undermining of Gaelic culture over a period of two hundred years, the lack of resources locally to commission architect-designed homes, and a lack of choice (there are a large number of firms that produce kit homes, and their catalogues present a seemingly great number of models to choose from — e.g., “The Strae,” “Harris,” “Aonach Moor” — even if the models are merely variants of the same typology).<sup>36</sup> However, in setting up a practice on Skye in 1996, the Stephen brothers put their faith in the potential of architecture as an agent of change — that is, that an architecture need not merely reflect culture, but that it could be an instrument to reimagine culture. For them, an architectural practice had the power to reimagine the way people lived in their homes.

One aspect of their vision of the reimagined highland home has been remarkably consistent. From their very earliest low-cost projects, built with housing grants, Dualchas has included large communal living rooms with wood-burning stoves in their designs. These open-plan spaces, such as the one in the Larch Cottage, do much more than reproduce the spatial typology of a blackhouse (FIG. 15). In practical terms, they provide space for a number of functions that would otherwise be carried out in separate, “named” rooms (dining rooms, kitchens, sitting rooms, studies, etc.). They also reduce the number of rooms, the amount of circulation space, and the cost of construction (essential for the relatively poor residents of the region) in relation to whitehouses and the antecedent highland kit houses.

Inside this space, the wood-burning stove provides both a symbolic focus and a heat source for the whole house. The impressive air-tightness of the timber-framed houses means that, with the aid of a simple mechanical ventilation system, heating bills can be very low.<sup>37</sup> But, more importantly, the large, airy living spaces alter the way inhabitants dwell in their homes. Dualchas have reimagined the Gaelic notions of kinship into socially progressive ideas about family life. In this regard, the large living spaces allow family members to engage either in the same or in a range of activities simultaneously such as cooking, eating, watching television, and reading. The goal is to break down definitions of gender and age and the hierarchies that go with them and that are sup-

**FIGURE 15.** *Open-plan living spaces, such as the one in the house at Larch Cottage, house a number of functions that would normally be carried out in separate “named” rooms (dining room, kitchen, sitting room, study, etc.). This strategy results in a reduction of the number of rooms and the amount of circulation space needed to support them — therefore also reducing the construction cost. Photo © the author.*



ported by multiroomed houses. In addition, these generous living spaces, which characteristically rise to the apex of the roof, also reinstate the possibility for holding community gatherings (*céilidh*) — which, as Sarah Macdonald found in her recent study of an isolated community on the Isle of Skye, are still of necessity held in people’s homes.<sup>38</sup>

Although the large living space is a characteristic of all Dualchas’s longhouses, it is arguably the living space in the house at Boreraig that demonstrates their most poetic work to date (FIG. 16). Here, the very long, thin living room is divided into functional areas — a study, a kitchen, a dining area, a sitting area — by a series of freestanding elements — a wall, a kitchen unit, a dining table — without destroying the sense of the platonic whole. This sense of a single volume is reinforced by the oak-faced plywood lining the walls and roof, and by the Caithness stone floor, which is laid on a 600-mm. grid. This is architecture whose richly materialist minimalism alludes to Gaelic archetypes.

#### A RENAISSANCE FOR THE HIGHLAND LONGHOUSE

As Dualchas Architects have become better known, their client base has slowly grown.<sup>39</sup> They started by serving local inhabitants who had a pragmatic need for low-cost homes, but they have subsequently attracted *émigrés* returning to Skye, drawn by a notion of returning to their physical and cultural roots. More recently, the practice has also attracted prosperous “outsiders,” drawn to the wild beauty of the island’s landscape. With this shift has come a concomitant increase in budgets for the practice’s designs, and as a result a growing collection of carefully crafted and highly poetic houses. However, in parallel to the practice’s increasing reputation as “architects’ architects,” Dualchas has maintained a strong



**FIGURE 16.** The living space in the house at Borerraig is arguably Dualchas's most poetic work. This is architecture whose richly materialist minimalism alludes to Gaelic archetypes. Photo © Andrew Lee.

commitment to serving the island's socially and economically deprived community.<sup>40</sup>

Their sister company, HEBHOMES, promotes and sells a collection of standard longhouse-inspired designs that may be purchased as self-build kit houses or as complete design-build packages.<sup>41</sup> The designs employ Dualchas's own Structurally Insulated Panel System (SIP), that is constructed off site and can be erected very quickly (within a week) (FIG. 17). Dualchas claims that the SIP system uses up to 50 percent



**FIGURE 17.** An LH102P design taking shape at Kilnaish near Tarbert in Argyll. This is one of the standard house types that forms part of Dualchas Architects' HEBHOMES project. The project aims to provide low-cost housing that continues the longhouse typology. Photo © Dualchas Architects.

less raw timber than a conventional timber-framed house, and that it is highly energy efficient and thus produces a building shell that is cheap to heat. Prices for a HEBHOME package range from £51,000 to £150,000 (US\$78,000 to \$230,000), plus an extra £10,000 to £20,000 (US\$15,000 to \$30,000 for installation. This process compares favorably with the average house price on the island in August 2013 of £183,000.<sup>42</sup> In addition to responding to the practical needs of the economically impoverished community, the range of HEBHOME designs remains faithful to the central tenets of Dualchas's reimagined longhouse typology: the large, high living spaces, the importance of siting, the use of brut materials, and the visual connection to landscape.

Dualchas Architects have been arguing for a "reimagining" of the highland longhouse for more than seventeen years. Through their words and designs they have demonstrated that "reimagining" — a process of drawing from the past that which is useful for the present — can result in practical and culturally meaningful buildings. There is now plenty of evidence that their arguments are winning converts. Another architecture practice, Rural Design, located in the north of Skye, have also adopted the longhouse typology as their trope (FIG. 18).<sup>43</sup> In addition, the local planning authority, in conjunction with Dualchas Architects, Proctor Matthews Architects, and the kit-house builder Scotframe, produced a design guide for the highlands and islands in 2011 that explicitly promoted the longhouse as the preferred housing typology.<sup>44</sup>

Collectively, these initiatives appear to represent a paradigm shift in the local conception of domestic architecture, a shift that rejects the "imposed" typology of the whitehouse in favor of a "reimagined" longhouse, and one that results in buildings that sit more gently in the highland landscape and that provide their inhabitants with more economically, socially and culturally relevant dwellings.



**FIGURE 18.** House at Milovaig, Isle of Skye, designed by Rural Design Architects. Photo © Andrew Lee.

## REFERENCE NOTES

1. This is a translation of the last verse of "The Cullin," a poem written in 1939 by the twentieth-century Gaelic poet Sorley MacLean, in which he sets man's tragic history against the permanent symbolic hope represented by the mountain ranges of Skye.
2. The highlands are used in this paper as a proxy for the northwest Scotland and the Western Isles (i.e., the land of the Gaels).
3. R. Macfarlane, *Mountains of the Mind: A History of a Fascination* (London: Granta, 2004), p.18.
4. J. Hunter, *On the Other Side of Sorrow* (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 1995). For a general introduction to the highland clearances, see E. Richard, *The Highland Clearances* (Edinburgh: Birlinn Ltd, 2000).
5. A.J. Lerner and M. Ringrose, eds., *Reimagining the Nation* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1993).
6. For criticism of the way modernist theory has limited the discourse on place, identity and architecture, see N. AlSayyad, *The End of Tradition?* (London: Routledge, 2004); V. Canizaro, ed., *Architectural Regionalism: Collected Writings on Place, Identity, Modernity, and Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); and D. Upton, "Tradition of Change," *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review*, Vol.5 No.1 (1993), pp.9–15.
7. For more on the romantic construction of the highlands by the British in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); and H. Trevor-Roper, *The Invention of Scotland: Myth and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
8. Office of National Statistics, "Measuring National Well-Being: Survey Result for 2012." Available at [www.ons.gov.uk/ons/release-calendar/index.html](http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/release-calendar/index.html) (accessed July 24, 2012).
9. For a straightforward summary of Pierre Bourdieu's ideas on agency and cultural production, see H. Webster, *Pierre Bourdieu for Architects* (London: Routledge, 2011), pp.57–79.
10. For examples of contemporary Scottish artists and their work, see [www.scotland.org/creative-scotland](http://www.scotland.org/creative-scotland) (accessed January 30, 2013).
11. For examples, see K. McNeil, *These Islands, We Sing: An Anthology of Scottish Islands Poetry* (Edinburgh: Polygon An Imprint of Birlinn Limited, 2011).
12. There are a few architects producing work that explores issues of place, identity and architecture, including Malcolm Fraser, Anderson Bell and Christie, and Rural Design, but their oeuvres are not extensive and their work is little known outside Scotland.
13. In 2010 Scotland's Housing Expo (<http://scotlandshousingexpo.com/plot17.php>) provided a showcase for contemporary reimaginings of Scottish housing and was intended to raise the quality of Scottish housing design and give a national focus to the housing debate. However, the Expo received mixed reviews and failed to have the impact hoped for by the Scottish government. Curiously, Dualchas was not represented in the Expo, although Rural Design Architects, the other notable Skye-based practice, was represented.
14. D. Maudlin, "The Legend of Brigadoon: Architecture, Identity and Choice in the Scottish Highlands," *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review*, Vol.20 No.2 (2009), pp.7–9.
15. W. Kissling, "House Traditions in the Outer Hebrides: The Black House and the Beehive Hut," *Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, No.44 (Nov.–Dec., 1944), p.139.
16. Maudlin, "The Legend of Brigadoon," p.10.
17. It is difficult to pin down the beginning of the improvement era in Scotland. If one equates the period with the control and modernization of the Scottish highlands by the English, then this began with the Union in 1707 and gained momentum after the quelling of the Jacobite Rebellion in 1745, when the English army imposed stringent controls on the highland people and their way of life.
18. Dualchas Architects (2012) [www.dualchas.com/Heritage.html](http://www.dualchas.com/Heritage.html) (accessed Oct. 21, 2013).
19. K.L. Eggner, "Placing Resistance: Critique of Critical Regionalism," *Journal of Architectural Education*, Vol.55 No.4 (2002), p.202.
20. A. Stephen, "National Politics, History and the Reinvention of a Scottish Architecture" (2007). Available at [www.dualchas.com/Lecture.html](http://www.dualchas.com/Lecture.html) (accessed February 2, 2013).
21. N. Stephen, "The Blackhouse of Boreraig," unpublished undergraduate dissertation, Glasgow School of Art, 1993. This dissertation included an archeological exploration of the ruined village of Boreraig and an impassioned plea for the reintroduction of the blackhouse. The dissertation included drawings by Stephen of a reimagined blackhouse.
22. Ibid.
23. J. Hunter, *The Making of the Crofting Community* (Edinburgh: Birlinn Ltd, 2010). On the clearances specifically, see Hunter, *On the Other Side of Sorrow*.
24. For the best account of the modernization of the highlands and how this changed the settlement patterns and architecture, see D. Maudlin, *The Highland House Transformed* (Dundee: University of Dundee Press, 2009).
25. The best of these accounts include I.F. Grant, *Highland Folkways* (Edinburgh, Birlinn Ltd, 1995); B. Walker and C. McGregor, *The Hebridean Blackhouse: A Guide to Materials, Construction and Maintenance* (Edinburgh: Historic Scotland, 1966); and Kissling, "House Traditions in the Outer Hebrides," pp.134–40.
26. Dualchas Architects, "The Blackhouse of the Highlands: Response to the Environment." Available at <http://www.dualchas.com/heritage.html> (accessed February 2, 2013).
27. A. Stephen, "National Politics, History and the Reinvention of a Scottish Architecture."
28. For examples of Dualchas-designed longhouses, see [www.dualchas.com/private-residential.html](http://www.dualchas.com/private-residential.html) (accessed February 4, 2013).
29. A. Stephen, "Housing and Gaelic Culture," *PropertyPeople Magazine*, Issue 296 (May 31, 2001), p.8.
30. Ibid.
31. Although spruce planted by the Forestry Commission in the twentieth century is now the dominant timber in the highlands, there are now numerous projects to replant indigenous trees, including larch, oak, and Scots pine, in the highlands in a manner that will be economically sustainable.
32. P. Bourdieu, "The Berber House or the World Reversed," *Social Science Information*, Vol.9 No.2, pp.151–70.
33. C. Sinclair, *The Thatched Houses of the Old Highlands* (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1953), p.28.
34. Hunter, *The Making of the Crofting Community*. See also Maudlin, *The Highland House Transformed*; and C. Dalgligh, *Rural Society in the Age of Reason: An Archeology of the Emergence of Modern Life in the Southern Scottish Highlands* (New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 2003).
35. Maudlin, *The Highland House Transformed*, pp.1–13.
36. Stephen, "National Politics, History and the Reinvention of a Scottish Architecture."
37. Fuel poverty is an enormous problem on Skye. Many postwar houses are dependent on oil-powered central heating.
38. S. Macdonald, *Reimagining Culture: Histories, Identities, and the Gaelic Renaissance* (Oxford: Berg, 1997), p.17.
39. Dualchas Architects have won many architectural awards. These include the Saltire Medal 2012 for the house at Boreraig, Isle of Skye, and Kirk House, Garve, Ross-shire; the RIAS Award 2012 for the house at Boreraig; and the RIBA Scottish Award 2011 for the Community Hall, Isle of Raasay.



40. According to the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation, the Isle of Skye is one of least socially and economically deprived areas in the highlands, yet the island community continues to struggle with high unemployment, low incomes, fuel poverty, and high rates of alcoholism and suicide. See <http://simd.scotland.gov.uk/publication-2012/> (accessed Oct. 23, 2013).

41. For more information about the HEBHOMES concept, see <http://www.hebrideanhomes.com> (accessed July 30, 2013).

42. See <http://www.zoopla.co.uk/house-prices/isle-of-skye/> (accessed July 30, 2013) for an average house price index.

43. For examples of the work of Rural Design Architects, see [www.ruraldesign.co.uk](http://www.ruraldesign.co.uk) (accessed July 30, 2013).

44. The Scottish Government, *Rural Design Future Landscapes: Guides and Projects* (Edinburgh: The Scottish Government, 2011). Available at <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2011/11/09091627/0> (accessed February 10, 2013).

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