

## **A new generation of critical thinkers is revitalising the architecture profession in Scotland**

Within its risk-averse architectural culture, opportunities to move beyond the delivery of polite contemporary modernism in Scotland are rare. A second Stirling Prize nomination for Reiach and Hall and a Festival of Architecture organised by the Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland (RIAS) might suggest an architecture that is in rude health. Quality output, however, remains the exception rather than the rule, with the best architecture falling into two categories: contemporary interpretations of traditional Scottish typologies or well-executed applications of the pervading style of the day.

Over the last few years it has been disheartening to witness the collapse of RMJM, the split of NORD co-founders and the decision by Malcolm Fraser to dissolve his practice. The output of these practices as driven by the likes of Paul Stallan at RMJM, the young team at NORD led by Alan Pert and Robin Lee, and Fraser himself has often been an inspiration to emerging practitioners. If these practices were unable to thrive, what hope is there for the rest of us? In a recent article for the Architects' Journal, Ellis Woodman bemoaned the lack of Scottish-based architects selected for inclusion in the Architecture Foundation's recently published *New Architects 3*. My practice, Baxendale, was fortunate enough to be included as one of four Scottish-based practices in the publication alongside A449, Orkidstudio and Graeme Massie Architects. Although a new generation of architects has emerged in Scotland that is ambitious in terms of social engagement, material culture, digital technologies, enterprise and spatial complexity, it has increasingly found that buildings of significant scale and purpose are not a means through which a critical dialogue on these themes is possible.

I arrived in Glasgow in 1999 when the city had been designated UK City of Architecture and Design. Looking back, it is difficult to see how the optimism and agenda for the role of architecture in wider Scottish society as communicated through that year had any real impact. Despite significant legacy projects such as the Lighthouse (a centre for architecture and design), the Homes for the Future development at Glasgow Green and the Millennium Spaces initiative, these projects do not appear to have maintained any influence regarding the manner in which architecture is conceived, delivered and communicated. We have now arrived at a situation in which, within the context of Scotland, our academic institutions rarely innovate, our professional bodies do not provide real mechanisms of support, the construction industry doesn't actually want us and the general public are unsure of what we do and for whom we do it.

Despite initiatives such as its Policy On Architecture and Place and the Festival of Architecture, I fail to recognise anything resembling a progressive, contemporary culture of architecture that moves beyond the derivative or deferential. But several practices – Lateral North, GRAS, Tog Studio, Dress for the Weather, Akiko Kobayashi, the City of Play and McGinlay Bell Architects, as well as the recent Architecture Fringe – have managed to create a space for innovation and development, often through self-initiated projects and communicated through a diverse range of media and activity. Consistent through this is an interest in the potential for architecture to be socially, culturally, economically and environmentally transformative – as well a thirst for knowledge through action and the desire to share this process with the wider public. This goes far beyond the patronising and tokenistic carnival of community consultation packaged into engagement 'toolkits' and

delivered by well-meaning young practices looking to 'make a difference'. The toolkits these practices use tend to have actual tools in them, and the processes create experiences of genuine, mutually beneficial exchange between practitioner and participant.

Both GRAS Studio and Lateral North used their final-year thesis projects as a catalyst for establishing their own practices. The Lateral North 'atlas of productivity' presented an argument to realign Scotland's economy towards new forms of sustainable productivity connected to the Arctic regions and Scandinavia. This ambitious and aspirational proposition combined comprehensive research and mapping with tantalising visions of a future Scotland reframed as a central and critical part of an industrially connected Arctic region, rather than a small nation on the periphery of Europe. Community organisations in marginalised regions of Scotland have since commissioned Lateral North to develop grassroots strategies for regeneration and local empowerment, using crowdfunding to support the purchase and adaptation of a van to visit remote communities in Scotland and provide different forms of consultancy, knowledge and support.

GRAS Studio established a working relationship between co-directors Stuart Falconer and Gunnar Groves-Raines while also in the final year at Strathclyde University. Representing Scotland at the 2012 Venice Biennale along with three other emerging practices developed a fruitful relationship with the British Council, which encouraged GRAS to engage with the growing Maker Library movement, now an international network of spaces that provide access to literature, tools, expertise and people for communities to develop their own creative agency. The adaptation of a caravan to form its own mobile Maker Library

developed its skills to the point that the studio will be upscaling the concept with the creation of a permanent maker space.

This desire to create physical and mental spaces to develop creative practice is exemplified by the work of Tog Studio. Pioneered by Tiree-based practice Roots Architecture and inspired by the work of Rural Studio and Ghost Lab, along with a frustration with an often hands-off approach to architectural education, in 2012 Tog established an annual live/build summer school. The award-winning projects delivered increase in scale and complexity year on year and, as well as giving students of architecture and other disciplines an opportunity to 'learn through doing', this process contributes to the creative and professional development of Roots Architecture and their partners in the Tog project.

Dress for the Weather has similarly developed ways of exploring its own interests while creating opportunities for others to share in the knowledge gained through its investigations. So far Dress for the Weather has analysed the tenement, the history of the Glasgow pub and Glasgow's subway system. These investigations often involve the public, with walks, exhibitions and discussions held around each typological theme also explored in a newspaper. This self-initiated project has assisted the practice in gaining commissions for imaginative place-based research, public art and local art strategies in Glasgow and beyond.

In spite of these success stories, we may lose the talented practitioners that have set up shop in the past decade if there isn't serious consideration given to how public procurement in Scotland could be reconfigured and tangible support provided.

Practices speak well of the support they received from tutors and established practices such as Dualchas, Collective, NORD and others (I would have been unable to establish my practice without the support of my former employer Jon-Marc Creaney). But the absence of any meaningful structural support by RIAS or Architecture and Design Scotland explains why many of the examples given above are self-initiated.

Providing opportunities is not the only purpose of institutions – they are also responsible for helping us to establish a collective voice to communicate our concerns and address them creatively and productively. Yet it is other groups that give shape to this emerging voice. While these grassroots initiatives have never received much attention in the mainstream architectural press, the way Peter Wilson, Andy Summers and Bruce Newlands have persevered to deliver initiatives such as the Scottish Scenic Routes project, the Architecture Fringe Festival and the MAKLab deserves respect.

These projects have succeeded where institutions have failed, generating new opportunities for emerging Scottish architects to develop across a range of media. The Scottish Scenic Routes initiative, for example, takes inspiration from a similar project in Norway and is currently the only mechanism aimed solely at recent graduates and new practitioners, providing a unique opportunity to design, develop and realise a small public building or space in inspiring contexts with meaningful support at every stage, from conception through to fabrication and marketing.

In response to the RIAS Festival of Architecture, which many feel lurches between speaking over people or speaking beneath people, Andy Summers, with the support of Akiko

Kobayashi, Ross Aitchison and Stacey Hunter, developed the Architecture Fringe Festival. The aim was to create a more open, accessible and critically engaged platform to develop and communicate new ideas, rather than celebrate established practitioners. The Architecture Fringe was open to anyone with an idea, with quality maintained in monthly meetings in which presented proposals were critiqued among peers.

Through the Architecture Fringe, creative agency Taktal – with support from myself and designer Neil McGuire – established a multidisciplinary summer school to demonstrate the benefits of live-prototyping new forms of public space. The fringe also created space for diverse exhibitions, talks and activity that genuinely reached out beyond the profession, not just to seek appreciation but to invite the public and our communities to be a part of the conversation. Tinker Town, delivered by the City of Play at Pollokshields Playhouse, took this ethos of genuine participation and over three weeks provided children and their parents with the tools, support and expertise to create their own conceptual village out of reclaimed material.

A dedication to new technologies and the development of material culture in architecture is a theme in the work of Bruce Newlands. He had become increasingly frustrated with the gap between design, prototyping and making, which often seemed to be crushed by misinformed 'value engineering'. He ended up launching a small charity to promote his ideas, which eventually became MAKLab, Scotland's first and largest maker space network giving the public access to both digital technologies and traditional tools. MAKLab encourages and supports enquiry, learning and skills uptake, be that architectural

components or electronic devices. Already successful, with greater support from the Scottish government, there is the seed of something transformational there.

Newlands has since moved on from MAKLab to work for the Construction Scotland Innovation Centre and is on the cusp of realising a long-term ambition to deliver an open access 3,530m<sup>2</sup> prototyping space giving people access to advanced construction technologies including robotics and multi-material 3D printing to make large-scale architectural components.

The selfless achievements of these studios presents a positive future for Scottish architecture – but also serves as a warning. The ambition and talent is here, with curious and critical thinkers. Unless structural change creates a progressive mechanism to support emerging talent, opening access to public procurement and creating a meritocracy based on design talent, there is a real risk of a lost generation from which Scottish society will never benefit.