



# SCOTTISH INDEPENDENCE

FROM A BRICK-BUILT OLYMPIC SUBSTATION AND EXPO SHOW HOUSE IN STONE, TO A HOUSE ON THE BEACH AT DUNGENESS AND A HIGHLANDS FARM CARPENTRY WORKSHOP ALL IN WOOD, SCOTTISH PRACTICE **NORD** IS CREATING ITS OWN STRIKING STATEMENTS WITH THESE TRADITIONAL MATERIALS, REPORTS *OLIVER LOWENSTEIN*

**Eerie, desolate, dreamlike, surreal:** the words effortlessly trip off the tongue as one turns through 360 degrees to take in the singular landscape of Dungeness. Sitting out on a far edge of the Sussex coastline, it is a geological spit of lost land, hewn by waves into one of the planet's largest shingle beaches, while inland stretch the flat expanses of Romney marshes.

And then there are the man-made incursions. Dominating the horizon, at least westwards, is the nuclear power station; huge, inaccessible, a hint of an aura of menace mixed with the technological sublime. Two lighthouses, one disused, stand guard, while at ground level a miniature railway loops around the shingle. The approach is lined with rickety old huts, some once-upon-a-time railway carriages, originally dragged on to the beach by the local fishing community. In recent decades these have partially been taken over by incomers and weekenders drawn to the strangeness of the setting.

Derek Jarman's celebrated garden, all gorse and sea cabbage, introduced the modern art, landscape and, to an extent, architectural audiences, to Dungeness's surreal atmospherics back in the Eighties. Jarman's house and garden anticipated the invasion of the contemporary in the form of two small residential homes as refined modernist dwellings by Simon Condor Architects, which neither add to nor detract from the beach's random concoction of filmic oddity.

Last year, a new building was added to this desolate dreamscape. Scottish practice NORD (the Northern Office of Research & Design) completed Shingle House, the first in Living Architecture's initial round of buildings. The modestly scaled holiday home continues an unfolding story, which has been a part of NORD since the practice was founded by Alan Pert and Robin Lee in 2002. It is a story of enduring immersion in the physicality, tactility and atmospheres of buildings and of place, and overlapping absorption in the vernacular and everyday, as well as the history of what's gone before.

Such an approach, along with an emphasis on materiality, isn't particular to the practice, and its path shadows that of a new generation of architects who have been making an impact over the past decade, though it is also a departure from the established practitioners of the British chapter of the central European architecture of the everyday: Tony Fretton, Caruso St John and Sergison Bates.

Of the new generation, Mole Architecture, Mitchell Taylor Workshop, for instance, and ex-Caruso St John man Adam Khan, have all turned the everyday a greener shade. NORD, with its roots in industrial Glasgow, has taken its language of place in another direction. The practice's buildings speak not so much of a post-industrial – even if forcefully expressed in the all-brick Olympics Substation 'heavy object' – but of a working-man's vernacular; it is equally responsive to rural working as to urban contexts. This common theme has found expression in a group of recent projects including, most visibly, Shingle House.

'Dungeness is such a loaded landscape, which makes it much easier to talk about the vernacular,' says Alan Pert, NORD's remaining director, before explaining how the building's footprint determined and traced the original vernacular, which again involved NORD's trademark penchant for architectural archaeology: 'stripping back, digging down, uncovering what's hidden, which can teach us something'.

The single-level cottage is actually four separate units linked by porch-corridors, all tar-black except for a boiler outhouse. The client's guiding spirit, Alain de Botton, notes in a brief email that the approach suited the site: 'Living Architecture had early in its life identified Dungeness as a dream location for the house... We expected an abstracted vernacular and we got one.'

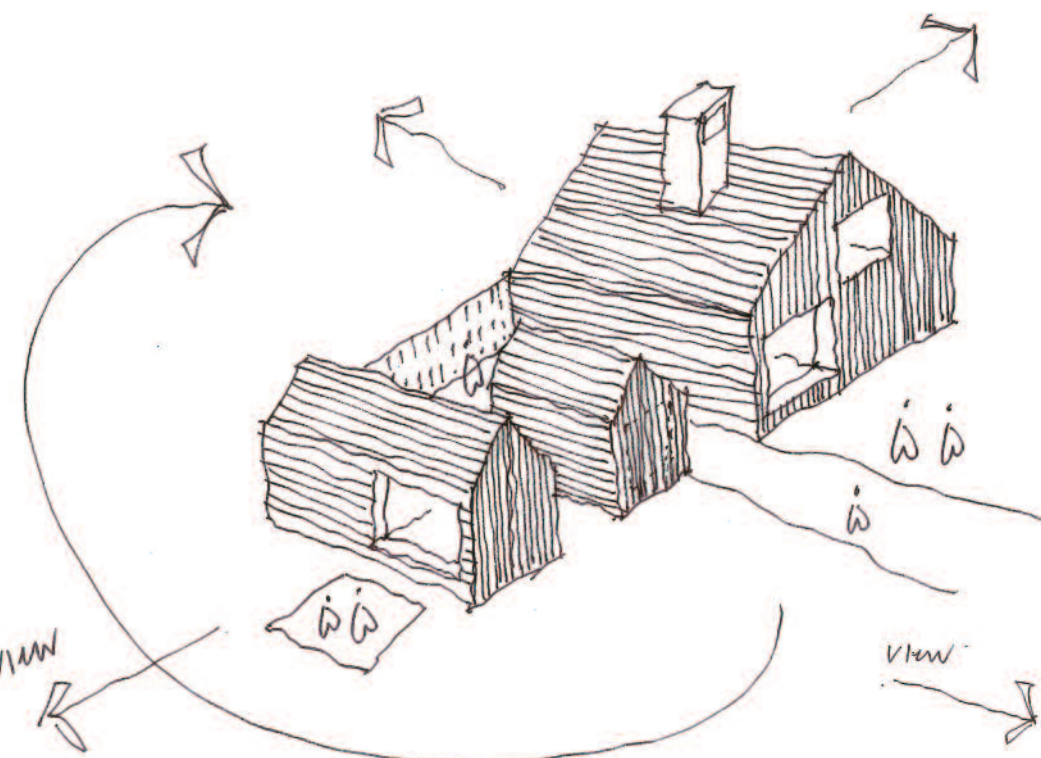
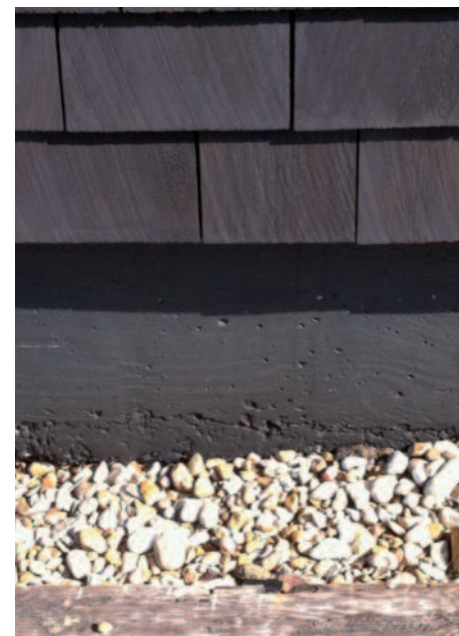
Initially, Pert wasn't sure whether it would be new or rebuilt, and whether it should be black. Jarman and Condor had already done that. The working method, that Pert calls the archaeology of ideas,

uncovered 80 structures, which were all painted black. 'The more we visited Dungeness, we realised how many black and charred things were already there. The tar coating which fishermen applied to their buildings and huts was an economic way of protecting them.' The research continued, 'metaphorically dismantling' the structure so as to rebuild it again, and the practice eventually decided to replace the old building while keeping to the footprint.

There was the need to build off the shingle on a special concrete plinth, a meeting space between technology and shingle. Talking with the retired fisherman who was selling the plot, Pert asked about the absence of porches. Exposed to the weather and close to the sea, porches are a basic protection against the elements, and the seller became apologetic. From this NORD composed brief connecting corridors – inverted porches – between the building's different compartments, as the structure's sheltered spaces. »

*Right, below left, bottom and previous pages: Scottish architect NORD designed a new residential building, Shingle House, for the Dungeness beachscape*

*Below: Stone House was built with Caithness stonework for the first Scottish Housing Expo, held in 2010*



**NORD'S PATH SHADOWS THAT OF A NEW GENERATION OF ARCHITECTS WHO HAVE BEEN MAKING AN IMPACT OVER THE PAST DECADE, THOUGH IT IS ALSO A DEPARTURE FROM THE ESTABLISHED PRACTITIONERS OF THE BRITISH CHAPTER OF THE CENTRAL EUROPEAN ARCHITECTURE OF THE EVERYDAY**



Top: One of three residential projects *NORD* has been working on during the past two years is *Glen Dye*, involving the refurbishment of six farm buildings

Above: The larger plan for *Glen Dye* involves a new set of timber buildings, including a new carpentry workshop, shown here

Pert would be the first to acknowledge that *NORD* has been lucky. The run of luck began in 2004, just two years after Pert and Lee founded the practice, when it was picked to represent Scotland at the Venice Biennale (the first time the country had been invited to participate). Two years later, *NORD* was chosen as Young Architect of the Year by Building Design. This was followed by a steady growth in projects and profile before an official split between the founding partners in 2011, with Lee leaving to set up in Ireland, and Pert continuing under the *NORD* name in Glasgow.

During the latter period in the relationship, *NORD* completed the Olympics substation, a commission awarded, Pert thinks, on the back of the early awards. Both of those also likely contributed to Living Architecture deciding to give one of its first projects, the Shingle House, to the Glasgow practice: 'That was a massive help,' opines Pert.

The Glasgow background is, inevitably, significant. Once called the workshop of the British Empire and most visibly symbolised by the Clyde-side docks and shipbuilding, the city has been scrambling to uncover a new identity for the post-industrial future. Pert recalls growing up 'in a place where

things were made, working products', in his case looking out on the Singer sewing machine factory.

Along with archaeology, *NORD*'s working process invariably includes a vein of social history. The patient sifting and uncovering of the everyday past is tied to both memory and loss of these social histories, rather than the denial and erasure implicit in much of celebrity architecture when put to use, attempting to combat industrial decline. 'It's about creating identity after one identity has gone,' remarks Pert. 'It's driven by the city fathers thinking the way to economic salvation will be through attracting tourism, through the cultural branding route, which is understandable up to a point.'

The reinvention is most prolific along the Clyde, in the aftermath of ship-building going East, most recently with Zaha Hadid's snaking, zinc-covered, big shed that references warehouses on the opposite waterfront. 'Another charm to add to Glasgow's charm bracelet,' says Pert of the building. 'It's purely image-based, with T-shirts and other memorabilia using the primary image of the zinc-dressed front gable as a core marketing device.'

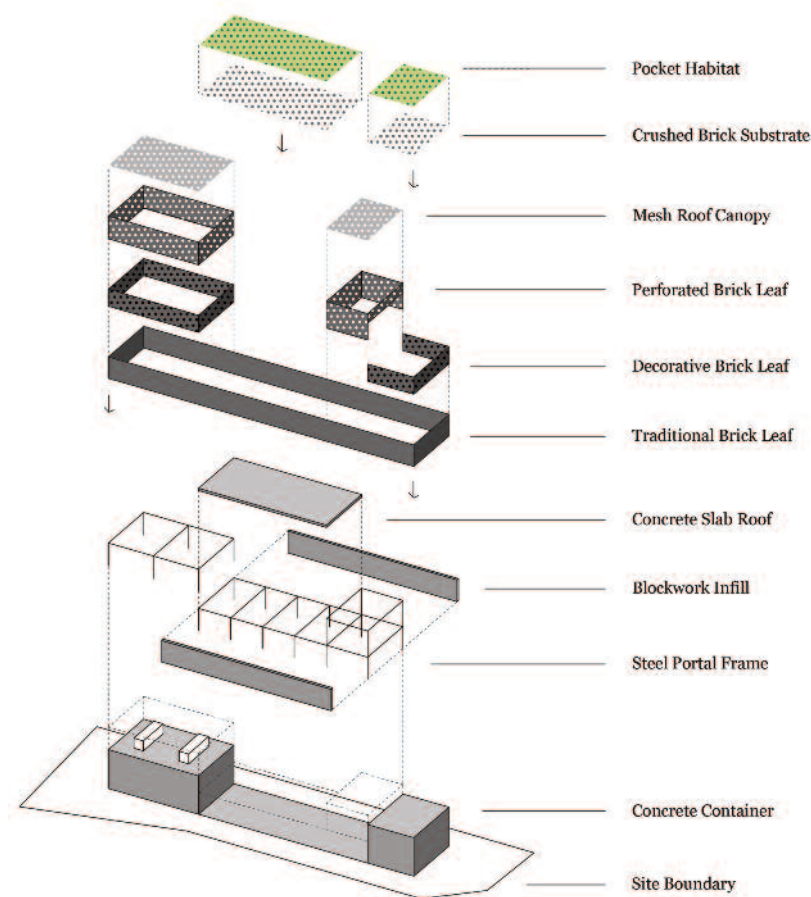
Shingle House may have been grabbing headlines and winning awards, but it's actually one of a trio of dwelling buildings

that *NORD* has been working on over the past two years. Close to the Cairngorms in the Highlands, an inside-out refurbishment of six farm buildings is just about to be completed at *Glen Dye*, on the Gladstone estate between Montrose and Aberdeen. And, in 2010, the first Scottish Housing Expo showcased Stone House, complete with striking Caithness stonework, a vivid contrast to the dominant timber material mood of the Highlands vernacular.

While hardly a signature work, the long period the *Glen Dye* farm steadings have been on *NORD*'s books has fed into and informed the practice's rural vernacular dwellings. Pert and project architect Alistair Forbes listened at early meetings to a local stonemason and carpenters, relishing hearing about and sensing the materials' subtleties through the craftsmen. 'We all sat round the table, and they clearly talked with respect and love about the materials,' says Pert. A wealth of regional detailing information about stonemasonry and wood was one result. During the rebuild, each and every stone has gone back exactly to where it was in each individual building, maintaining the particular textures in the same parts of the buildings.

The work on *Glen Dye* is ongoing, and with the estate diversifying its 9,000 acres >>

Left: The Olympic substation, with detail shown right. An all-brick structure, its commission followed quickly on from NORD winning two awards



of forested land, the larger plan also calls for a set of new timber buildings, including a sawmill and timber workshops. For this, NORD has developed what looks to be an exciting timber-build design, which will come on line very soon, if not in the immediate future.

The research on stone and granite dovetailed into the Highland Housing Expo's Stone House. NORD noted the popularity of timber in other designs and, in a counter-move not dissimilar to the choice of brick for the Olympics substation (which in its brief had stipulated a mesh facade), began looking into stone.

A striking design emerged along with the help of a stone supplier. Initially the cost was prohibitive and Pert was told to use render. 'It became a battle,' says Pert, with NORD scouring the quarries and finding one in Caithness that could bring the stone to site at price which, amazingly, came in at cost-equivalent to render. It was a hit at the expo says Pert, and at least two other architects are now building with stone, and NORD is considering it for its latest competition win – a hospice to be built in a Glasgow park.

Such promotion of a new building in Scottish stone distinguishes NORD from various groupings in the close-knit Scottish architectural community. Along with the reach of NORD's projects, and the catholic spread of materials, its approach is also at odds with the distinctive timber-led Highland and Island regionalism which

has emerged over the past decade, led by the likes of Dualchas, Neil Sutherland, Bernard Planterose and Gokay Deveci.

While agreeing that there are sound reasons for reintroducing timber, a material which grows in abundance in Scotland, and attempting to make the forested landscape usable, Pert is not without reservations. 'There are contradictions in timber as a Scottish vernacular,' he suggests, claiming that timber use in the new Highland regionalism is actually a reaction, expressing something new and modern. NORD's work straddles both these and the English tactile, materiality-led practitioners. Pert calls the overlap 'a similarity of attitude'.

For me, NORD's approach works best when substance isn't distracted by style, when there's no grating with vernacular's anonymity, simplicity and modesty. Walking round Shingle House, it felt at times, for all the archeological investigation, like a box of party-time surfaces all wrapped up in vernacular dressing. Pert must be fully aware of these paradoxes, and of the architectural cottage industry producing small-scale, everyday, iconic even, wonderments.

But how will this uncover the new identities required to replace earlier, lost ones? It's a dilemma for all those staking out the landscape of an early 21st-century, regionalist-inflected and vernacular-hewn architecture. NORD is better placed to do this than many. ■