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Bagshaw's grand designs for island life

Black Sheep House and Blue Reef Cottages have won the public vote thanks to an English architect's love for the Hebrides



Jenny McBain

Announcing Black Sheep House on the Isle of Harris as the winner of Grand Designs Live's viewers vote for the best home of the year, Kevin McCloud made an important omission. He failed to mention the man whose vision the house was — its architect, Stuart Bagshaw.

Bagshaw, who is based in Stornoway on Lewis, was drawn to the Hebrides by a desire to become a crofter. Indeed, his intention was to give up architecture when he arrived on the island — but a love of good design and a passion for traditional Scottish buildings has kept this Yorkshireman firmly wedded to the drawing board. He says: "My neighbours were always asking for assistance with design and planning issues so I just kept going with it. I've a strong belief that community architecture should be available to all, not just the rich."

Before working for Christine and Pete Hope, who built Black Sheep House (featured in Home Scotland on April 6), Bagshaw helped another couple with the building of two highly original, yet traditional-looking houses known as Blue Reef Cottages, run as holiday lets.

Like Black Sheep House, these circular buildings are built from local stone. Both have turf roofs which allow them to sit snugly into the hillside and each roof is fashioned to look from the air like a frog. The inspiration for their design came from Neolithic buildings, which were deep-set into the ground.

Each of the cottages, owned by Neil and Rhoda Cameron, is equipped luxuriously. Alongside the master bedroom there is an office which doubles as a gym. Both properties, which each sleep two, have a sauna and hot tub in the bathroom. They were completed in May 2003 and by year two were booked solidly summer and winter.

Although underfloor heating keeps the place warm, a stove for burning wood and peat adds to the ambience. Then there's the view. Bagshaw says: "A view is like a picture and a window acts as a frame which improves the picture." The bay windows create a circular frame on to an endless white sand beach.

Blue Reef Cottages are entirely different to the type of building the Camerons first envisaged. Neil, who is trained as an accountant, says: "We were thinking more of a whitewashed cottage, but when we looked at Stuart's drawings we liked what we saw. We had to spend a lot more money than planned but we make more income than we originally forecast. The excellent design is a key part of our business success."

This realisation as to the value of an aesthetic approach to building design is music to any architect's ears. To Bagshaw it is a validation of his devotion to Hebridean heritage. He says: "I'm keen on vernacular design, but the black houses, which were a fantastic example of 'good architecture without architects', fell out of favour. When I first came to the Hebrides people believed they could catch TB from the walls of a black house."

Black Sheep House is now worth around £400,000, and each Blue Reef cottage would cost a similar amount to build at today's prices. However, Bagshaw maintains that expense can be minimised by using local skilled labour instead of employing main contractors. He is involved in initiatives to train young people in traditional building skills and is concerned about the energy costs of using concrete. He says: "To make concrete you take a rock and squash it to change it into a shape which people can build with when there are already stones in their natural form in the environment."

Bagshaw also has aesthetic concerns about the new-builds that litter rural Scotland. He says: "A building should age and look better with the action of time. A kit house will never do that."

Black houses varied from island to island and even from village to village. They were all made of stone and built to shelter livestock together with people. Surely this primitive arrangement would have contributed to the spread of disease? Not so, says Bagshaw. "People sat below the smoke line and it was only when ventilation was introduced that cold and the spread of disease became a problem. You no longer had heating from the convection currents or the circulation of ammonia from animal urine. Ammonia provides natural protection against TB."

Bagshaw and his wife live in a traditional 1890 croft house which has a roof of Ballachulish slate. He bought it 25 years ago and considers it a good example of a sympathetic restoration. The windows are all sash and case, and some have been enlarged to let in extra light. The upstairs ceilings have been thrown up to the apex whilst the barn has been transformed into a double-height master bedroom. Bagshaw says: "I told my family, you can have any colour you want as long as it's white, any material as long as it's natural and any paintings as long as I painted them."

Bagshaw has a number of innovative house-building projects in the pipeline, including one in Cornwall. Closer to home he is involved in the construction of two underground dwellings near Achiltibuie in the north-west Highlands. And a proposed building in Durness, Sutherland, will incorporate roof drainage down sloping walls into pools, to create a wetland habitat for wildlife.

Whilst the architect hopes the publicity from Grand Designs will help to secure the future of the remaining black houses, he has some reservations. "One of the problems is that everybody sees Black Sheep House and wants that no matter what the geographic location is, and we must be careful that we match the local surroundings and the vernacular of that area to keep the identity."

Stuart Bagshaw, 01851 770 4889

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