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## Scotland: An old farm with a few new tricks

**A Morayshire couple opted for a cutting-edge design in revamping a derelict steading, writes Caroline Ednie**

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I thought, why Scotland — why not Spain?” says Paul Hearson, recalling the time his wife, Claire, suggested building a home in rural Morayshire. Yet the Cairngorms rather than the Costas eventually won out, and Paul now admits that Midport Steading, the result of the couple’s first self-build foray, was “absolutely the right thing to do”.

It is not difficult to see why. The ambitious project to convert and extend a series of drab and derelict farm buildings into an imaginative mix of traditional single-storey and contemporary two-storey homes has provided an ideal retreat from the couple’s “pretty hectic life”.

“The house was Claire’s project. To begin with I was dead against it,” says Paul, whose “hectic life” involves being chairman of a specialist engineering firm. Since selling his own computer firm six years ago, he also finds time to breed racehorses with his brother in Wiltshire. “Initially I took no interest in the house at all and thought that the whole thing might just fizzle out and not happen.”

But it didn’t fizzle out. Instead, Claire enlisted the help of an Edinburgh-based home-search company and within months the Hearsons had an acre of land featuring a run-down cottage and farm steading building “with any kind of rot — it had the lot. The only thing that stayed up was the stone walls,” says Paul. “Luckily, Claire has always had great imagination and worked with the Inverness-based HRI Architects. They put together a wonderful combination of old and new elements.”

Originally, the Hearsons had earmarked the cottage for development, but following discussions with the architect firm, it was decided the dilapidated steading building would offer the greater potential — due in most part to its elevated position that enjoys spectacular views of the sprawling Morayshire landscape.

The couple — who have two daughters, Camilla, 22, and Cara, 17 — also decided to opt for the most ambitious proposal presented by the architects. “It suddenly seemed stupid not to be ambitious with what we had,” says Paul.

The final plan, which had a relatively effortless journey through the planning process, involved converting the existing single-storey L-shaped steading building and extending it with a two-storey structure to the southeast of the site. There was a clear view that the converted steading should reflect the traditional style of the old building, whereas the new extension should be treated as a piece of contemporary architecture. There was no question of the new addition unimaginatively deferring to its predecessor.

“We didn’t believe there was any point in trying to make something new look like something old,” admits Paul. Luckily, although the steading building had clearly seen better days, the stone walls were basically sound. In fact, only one small section of the building had to be rebuilt, due to cracking. Other than that, the fabric of the old part of the building is original.

Furthermore, all the original openings have been retained and only one additional window has been inserted. Asbestos in the old roof meant it had to be removed. The new roof structure visually reflects the old traditional roof, but it now meets modern building standards. The criss-cross pattern of the old roof structure has also been re-created to dramatic effect inside.

The new two-storey extension was logistically a much taller order — both literally and metaphorically — in terms of construction. Essentially the structure consists of a bespoke timber frame with 4in of blockwork, finished with white rendering and horizontal larch cladding. The pitched roof features new slate from Wales.

One of Paul and Claire’s main concerns was to bring as much light into the building as possible, and this has been articulately achieved by means of NorDan windows in the old part of the building and

aluminium-framed windows and doors in the extensively glazed new south-facing extension. In addition to the highly effective solar gain, underfloor oil-fired heating from Invisible Heating Systems and a wood-burning stove on the first level living area provide heat in the chilly Highland winters.

The stove is recessed into a blockwork wall in the only part of the new build that isn't timber kit — a device designed purely to take the weight of the chimney.

The raison d'être of the design was to twist the building towards the views of the Cairngorms. As part of that plan, the house has an upper-level steel balcony off the living area that sits directly above the lower-level larch decking.

Four en-suite bedrooms are on the ground floor of the new extension, and the upper level is given over entirely to a large airy open-plan living area.

The Hearsons' reluctance to scrimp on any aspects of the project means the interior finishes and details are sumptuous. These include French oak and Caithness slate flooring, Brazilian slate bathrooms, and even kitchen worktops of lava stone from Mount Etna. Thanks to its high density, the stone remains stain-free.

From the first floor, access to the ground floor bedrooms is achieved via an impressive central staircase of oak, glass and stainless steel, manufactured by WA McGarrie & Son of Perth.

Accompanying each bedroom is a luxurious Brazilian slate en-suite bathroom, designed by the architects down to every last detail, including heated panels set into the recessed walls, which function as heated towel rails, and the bespoke slate shower trays, with a design that cleverly reflects the criss-cross pattern on the ceiling roof of the old building.

Upping the ante in the en-suite stakes is the master bathroom, which features a bespoke one-and-a-half-tonne concrete bath, designed and manufactured by London-based Concreations to fit the unusual tapering space. It was brought into the house by fork-lift truck, then taken through the french doors from one of the bedrooms before the partitions were built. A hydraulic trolley ran the bath over the concrete floor before it was plumbed in and dropped into place, then grouted up and polished. It's a stunning sculptural solution to an awkward area.

The steading's traditional-meets-modern dilemma has been imaginatively resolved with a glazed insertion that functions as the entrance lobby. This cleverly dovetails the new extension into the revitalised farm building and offers a seamless transition into the steading lounge, which in turn leads to the impressive open-plan dining and kitchen area, finally culminating in the garage with utility and storage areas tucked in between.

The interiors here reflect strongly Claire's idea of "a Scottish hunting lodge with interiors influenced by our travels around the world". The lounge betrays an eastern influence, characterised as it is by the rich, spicy reds of the mulberry leather sofas, the russet rug from Marrakesh and the autumnal landscape paintings by the Scottish artist David Martin. In contrast, the kitchen has a more contemporary monochromatic feel, with an immaculate white, glass and stainless-steel range from Alaris in Inverness.

Other luxurious finishes include the lava stone worktops, which were recommended and provided by Inverness-based Marble Granite and Fire as a complement to the kitchen units. The slate floor in the kitchen gives way to bespoke oak floors leading to the impressive dining area.

The 10-month construction of the 2,200-sq-ft house, at a cost of £550,000, began in the summer of 2004, and, Paul says, it had "refreshingly few problems for such an unusual building".

"It's a big house, and considering how remote we are, it's worked rather well," he says.

"The living experience is great and it's a wonderful location." He has finally banished all thoughts of a Spanish villa. "In fact Claire and I actually met up here on holiday in 1978. And since then we've spent most of our summers in the area with our friends and family. So now I can see that building this house was absolutely the right thing to do."

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