



## Island of Opportunity...

Adrian Wishart is the Director of Shetland-based architectural practice, née gibson architects. Founded in 1972 by Richard Gibson, and renamed in 2022, the practice works predominantly on all types of housing, but has considerable experience in working in most other sectors both solely and collaboratively.

Given our experience as a local practice producing social housing in Shetland, née gibson architects were invited to contribute to RIAS *Quarterly*'s housing feature. To set the context, I'll give a brief run through our past and present work.

Around 15 of Shetland's 100 or so islands are inhabited, and they've sat at a geographical crossroads for centuries. Vikings, Hanseatic traders and latterly, oil and renewable energy giants have all visited our shores. As with any part of Scotland, people come and go, but those who decide to stay for a while need a place to reside, a house, a home.

Social housing has formed a large part of our practice portfolio, reaching back to the mid-1980s. Two providers of public or social housing have been the Zetland County Council, which became Shetland Islands Council in 1973, and Hjalteand Housing Association, which was formed in 1980. In

this time, our practice has been involved in the construction of over 400 dwellings, plus a few projects outwith Shetland.

The national trends towards houses for rental, the Right to Buy for existing tenants, and a move to shared ownership were echoed in Shetland. In the face of increasing challenges, more innovative procurement methods were developed here in order to facilitate home building – such as developer partnering and hybrid design & build models, which successfully delivered very high quality housing.

Shetland's waiting list for rented housing has hovered around 600 for the past 20 years, and now approaches 700, despite over 300 dwellings having been built during that time. This is not to belittle the efforts of those building homes, as they've had to contend with the nationwide housing pressures.

Opposite page  
Gröndans  
© Phatsheep

This page  
Brae Housing  
© née gibson architects







Particular reasons for the difficulty experienced in reducing Shetland's waiting list are varied, but seem to include a couple of major factors. For example, private self-build used to be an attainable means of home ownership in rural Scotland, thanks to croft ownership combined with dual occupations or capabilities. More recently, many of these people turned to rented accommodation due to high build costs, a shortage of builders, long lead-in times, and prohibitive mortgages; thus adding a new demographic to the queue of people awaiting homes.

Another factor was that the private rental sector has gradually become saturated by the transient work force associated with major projects in Shetland. There were other causes of course, but these major projects appear to have significantly reduced the availability of accommodation to anyone seeking long term homes, or even short-term residence.

In terms of our past work, under our previous moniker as Richard Gibson Architects, the practice completed various successful housing developments in the 1990s, such as John Jamieson Closs in the old town centre and the cloistered schemes at Gremista and Holmsgarth in Lerwick. In the 2010s, we completed Gròdians and Da Vadill, both in Lerwick, with Gròdians held as Hjaltrand Housing Association's flagship development. We are fortunate to have won local and national architectural awards for all of these developments.

Shetland is an extremely vibrant place to be at the moment, with so many large projects happening on our doorstep. Since 2015, the steady stream of over-lapping developments has included the Viking Wind farm with its 103 turbines, an associated power station, and the Unst Space Port which are also currently underway. There's a very active building industry forging on with smaller commercial and mostly private work on new and extended houses, conversions and suchlike.

Clockwise from top  
left

Da Vadill

© Pratsheep

Aith Housing

© née gibson architects

Stanleyhill Housing

(detail)

© née gibson architects

Stanleyhill Housing

© née gibson architects



Above

Gremista Housing

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Amidst this frenzy of activity, Hjaltrand Housing Association has begun enabling works to build 300 new homes in the main town of Lerwick. As the largest housing project in the isles, the housing association has had to grapple with labour shortages and inflated tenders due to a very over-heated local market. Interesting times lie ahead.

Our practice has recently completed two rural developments for Hjaltrand Housing Association, in the villages of Aith and Brae, and at Wista in Lerwick. We've also completed external refurbishments on several schemes for the local authority, as part of their Net Zero and energy efficiency programmes.

Peering into the future, we can see headwinds strengthening, with exponential increases to Building Standards and Planning NPF4 legislation. Combined with local demands, this inevitably increases design fees and build costs. Sadly, many have already found these factors prohibitive to progressing any form of improvement to

their home or aspirations for a new house, emphasising the urgent need for new solutions.

Our future work is likely to be much more involved with improvements to existing social housing stock, to help meet the ambitious energy and carbon targets. This is an exciting sector, and we gain immense satisfaction from helping to improve our local assets and balance the trend for new housing on virgin land. We are also very encouraged by recent initiatives led by the local council and housing association to meet regularly with the local building industry, with the aim of developing methods of collaborative house building and working to develop local skills.

Essentially, providing more homes should ensure Shetland remains a viable place to live. née gibson architects look forward to playing our part. ■

Adrian Wishart

Director, née gibson architects