

Scottish identity

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There are two extreme perspectives that can be taken of Scottish identity as seen through its architectural and planning legacy. One which simply identifies with the monumental and symbolic set-pieces, the churches, town halls and memorials, the other with the commonplace, the houses, factories and shops. Ultimately, both have shaped the environment in turn conditioning and informing our lives. Understandably there has been in the last few years a preoccupation with the search for representative symbolic forms to reflect Scotland's new-found political status. However, that distraction has perhaps deflected general attention away from the incipient erosion of the quality of the everyday places and buildings we inhabit.

Nowhere is that more apparent than on the edges of our cities, towns and villages, where a seemingly insatiable desire for new housing is being met by a repetitive formula of standardised detached single-family domestic units, mirroring more closely the production line ethos of the mass car market than the intimate hand-made romantic ideal images of the isolated countryside cottage. The most obvious characteristic of this housing production type is that it is not specific to any place and that it shares many of the production values of the automobile, ironically the very means by which the suburban house is maintained. They are:

a dependence on strictly regulated performance standards, accepted industry wide, regulating the street network and the ubiquitous cul de sac format,

an acceptance that the individual unit type is capable of being located anywhere (if necessary with local accessories)

a massive marketing campaign to convince the general public of its ideal qualities.

What is surprising is the scale of the uptake of this housing pattern as witnessed on the borders of the built-up areas and even the creep into the denser centres. To the detached observer, it might appear to be part of a grand national planning strategy to edge our settlements and part infill the rotten cores. Remarkably, however, there is no such universally accepted strategy, but rather a planning vacuum occupied by a lowest common denominator house-delivery mechanism, facilitated by a host of civic regulations to make sure that the refuse bins can be emptied, and that the police are satisfied with the security arrangements.

The closer we look at the scale of this 'naturally' proliferating urban 'virus', the more helpless we become and unable to offer a viable alternative. Mass house replication, supported by technical regulation and huge marketing budgets, cloned across our landscapes is a formidable movement. What makes it all the more threatening is that it claims a status of moral rightness because of its public sanction and acceptance; they, the public, of course, buying into it in ever increasing numbers.

One could hardly argue warmly in favour of this quickly emerging new Scottish 'identity', any more than welcoming the proliferation of universal fast food outlets or the seeming standardisation of retail choice. Yet for the most part this *is* the real identity of the new Scotland. The old Scottish identity of dense town and village centres, grouped around the local shops and post office, is becoming an ever distant memory, and even with the most rigorous legislative historic building protection systems, old buildings in old streets with intimate uses become vulnerable.

So how do we reconcile the reality of this rampant new identity with the yearning for a representation of traditional identities? Perhaps, firstly, by recognising that the old identities, as represented by our idea of intimate cities, towns and villages, have at all times in our history been threatened with change, and above all by the enduring desire of urban folk to escape into the country, into nature. This desire, over the past two and a half centuries, has been shaped by mercantile forces of renewal every bit as powerful as the suburbanising pressures of today.

We only have to look back to the mid 18th century, where it is possible to imagine the Old Town of Edinburgh bursting at the seams, a cacophony of civic life in lime-washed, half-timbered dwellings densely and unhealthily packed together, extending from the Castle down to the palace. It is not surprising that its counterpoint found form in the construction in the adjacent countryside of the Edinburgh New Town, with

its broad streets conducting fresh air between elegant grey stone facades. We owe this civic expansion, which doubled the scale of the old town, not to some accident but to the conscious exploitation of the green fields that surrounded the town, and to its promotion as an escapist ideal, not least in health terms.

This luxury, of permanent proximity to the countryside, had been, until then, the privilege of the truly rich or ennobled. But now this access became a possibility to a new group of people, and achieved not by direct land purchase and building but through the work of an intermediary class, who developed the infrastructure for subsequent purchase. The suburbs began here, and like them Edinburgh's expansion was copied across the country with a proliferation of Union Streets and George Streets set into grid layouts, and supported by a grander industrial infrastructure of canals such as the Union Canal and eventually railways.

By the early 19th century, nibbling into the green surrounding Scottish towns, the suburban extensions now took the form of rhythmically shapely settlements of sweeping crescents and gardens, in an exponentially growing exodus of the privileged, ever deeper into that countryside. Curiously, however, each subsequent extension into that countryside left an embedded fragment of a previous generation's incursion into the countryside, and gradually, as the cities and towns developed, took the form of a layering of forlorn escapist departures. In our own century, that drive was ratcheted up, as seemingly the whole nation sought to escape into the hinterland, both in peripheral estates and, subsequently in the leap-frogging post-war New Town movement.

This annular growth model of the expansion of urban centres into the seemingly infinite natural desired space beyond has other qualities which are worth noting. Perhaps some enlightened citizen recognised the inevitability that each new vision would in subsequent generations be swallowed up by the next ring. In defence, some ground might become allocated to long-term amenity, so that now, in the annular pattern, we can spot the aberrations of parks and green space sandwiched in the development layers. Of course, deep within the city rings, many older areas went rotten, to be replaced within our century by buildings set in space, a forlorn space which seemed to yearn for the now far-distant natural landscape. When the inner urban core itself went rotten, an urban landscape of paved streets and planted courts seemed to allude to a distant association with a dim green embraced past.

What emerges within this short analysis is the dependence of urban

folk, through modern time, on a relationship to the landscape from within which the urban form has grown. We have 'captured' countless fragments of landscapes and yet we still remain unsatisfied. Perhaps now, finally, our exploitation of the green periphery has run out of control, with developer house-boxes massing in all directions around our settlements. Somehow the contest is no longer fair. We seem to be destroying, not simply enjoying, that no longer infinite green space. We now face a starker choice, a realisation that the space between individual settlements, (or in our annular analogy, between the trees) is precious, that it needs to be re-conceptualised as a centre, a green centre, an activity centre, a living green space that in turn can, in a series of reverse rings, ripple back in towards the urban centres.

Modern people have repeatedly demonstrated through modern time, that they hold the countryside in precious esteem, but owing to our dependence on agriculture the outer edge of the cities has seldom been seen as an amenity but rather a soft development resource. We face the opportunity now to rethink that city border protection mentality, to create a texture of living park landscapes, laced between our settlements, in a pattern every bit as varied as the imagination can conceive. Development is not ruled out, but the land simply demands more of it than simple mass building. The stakes have become higher, but it is no answer to simply bottle up demand and once more allow only elite building in that green space. We need to rethink our development world far more comprehensively, and three general ideas may serve as starting points.

One such world was recently conceptualised within the Year of Architecture project in Glasgow, where a multilayered, varied ensemble of flats and houses was assembled in a tight inner city site. The ensemble owed little either to the dominant inner city flatted form, or to the suburban two-storey house model, but more to a loose imaginative juxtapositional character, that revelled in a harmonious dialogue between various contributors. That dialogue welcomed differences and sought new forms of social and formal relationships, within a series of landscaped volumes and settings. In microcosm, its garden framework proactively challenged the inevitability of continued city edge incursions into nature, and put forward the possibility, in the imagination of a model far richer than a simple continuation of the exploitative edge.

A second option is to channel that peripheral development energy and pent up demand into nationally agreed large development sites, where there is more opportunity to consolidate infrastructural invest-

ment in transport, education and leisure. This would inevitably affect the ability of individual settlements to grow other than in a limited manner, but if these large focal point projects were distributed evenly around the countryside it could be argued, from a regional perspective, that each settlement would benefit in wider terms. For example the re-development of Ravenscraig in Lanarkshire could be seen to serve the periphery conurbation that stretches around from East Kilbride and Hamilton north to Airdrie and Cumbernauld, with its population of over half a million people.

The third and most extreme of the three options – that of completely new and distinct settlements within the ‘living park landscapes’ – might offer, in unique circumstances, the opportunity to absorb significant development pressure, but only at the point at which these landscapes have been reconceived as open, accessible and usable spaces serving the new and old conurbations.

In conclusion, there is no getting away from the fact that if we wish to face and address the realities of this new Scottish identity, hard choices will require to be made about whether we need to curb the freedom of the exploitative mechanisms of development and the superficial attractiveness of the product that results. If we dare to address the wider disbenefits of the endless consumption and eating up of green spaces, we will have to challenge and begin reversing the whole development process of the modern age in Scotland. A new value system and control mechanisms will have to be evolved. This system would place limits on today’s market-driven ‘freedoms’, but in compensation would allow an extended democratic access to a new, fused vision of nature and urban settlement – a new urban – rural living landscape.

This essay is based on and extends the argument developed with Miles Glendinning in the Polygon publication – *Clone City*.