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A time for troublemakers



'A creative voice in a national discussion'

It is not often that a generation of people are offered the opportunity to decide the future course of a nation. In a little over a year around four million people living across Scotland will be afforded the monumental chance to decide whether the place they call home should be an independent country. As both 'Yes' and 'No' campaigns debate with claim and counter-claim over a wide range of emotive issues neither side can definitively answer, the grassroots campaigns of the pro-independence side are offering imaginative visions of a different Scotland building upon the cultural gains of devolution.

Writing in *The Scotsman* newspaper on 22 May 2013, referendum expert Dr Matt Qvortrup, of Cranfield University, argued that a 'Yes' case will only prevail if a distinct sense of cultural identity is created in the nation as economic arguments cannot be proven. It is this belief in the combined ability of artistic and cultural ambition to reach out alongside the power of a modern grassroots campaign based around national identity that could win the referendum. The arts campaign for Scottish Independence, National Collective, was the first 'Yes' movement to form after the landslide election victory of the pro-independence Scottish National Party (SNP) in 2011 paved the way for a referendum on 18 September 2014. A predominantly young group of artists, architects, writers and filmmakers (among others), National Collective constitutes a growing voice in the national discussion. A year after its launch – as a website and social media outlet – it now has a membership verging on a thousand citizens with local branches appearing in towns and cities across the country contributing an array of new and expressive content. It is the aim of National Collective to provide the people of Scotland with the space to engage positively with how they see themselves, offering a broad-based platform to imagine the country they want to be part of.

From this platform for creatives I have shared articles, outpourings of political discontent and organised campaign material in the cooperative spirit of National Collective. The ambition of the group and its embrace of social media channels give it a direct link to people across the country looking for non-partisan reflections and imaginings. The membership is primarily drawn from a generation who have no fear over wresting powers from a Westminster political machine embroiled in scandal after scandal, and for good reason. National Collective makes the case that if powers over health, education and justice are safe (and valued) in the hands of Edinburgh ministers, why not taxation, welfare and defence? Holyrood is a parliament we young Scots have always known and we trust it.

Throughout much of my school and university career I have lived in a Scotland with its own devolved Parliament, reconvened in 1999 after an almost 300-year wait. Its abilities, though limited, have seen a centre-left progressive consensus form at the heart of each of its four governments. Setting aside the achievements of specific political policies, although many are a strong reason to support the completion of the Parliament's

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A Catalan's design for Scotland's Parliament, Edinburgh. Enric Miralles / EMBT with RMJM, 2004

'architecture building on vernacular forms and looking out for ideological companions'



An architecture of social consciousness. Forth Valley College, Stirling, Reiach and Hall Architects, 2012. Photo: David Morris

powers, it is the growth of cultural confidence in the nation that has seen a fresh impetus given to architectural productivity. An emergent Modernism embraced the opportunities afforded by a confident populous and a (now discredited) booming economic model to build works that were at their core built on 'Scottish' values. A new wave of architecture discovered itself by building on vernacular forms and looking out – mostly towards Scandinavia – for ideological companions. It is this relationship between a quantifiable cultural blossoming in Scotland in parallel to divergences in political ideologies which is most valuable in today's debate.

At its most fundamental level the question on offer to Scotland next year is whether it wishes to project itself as an independent nation or a region within a dysfunctionally devolved United Kingdom. The basic aspects of nationhood lie in its citizens' willingness to coalesce around a shared identity, as outlined by Ernest Renan in his seminal work, 'What is a Nation?' (1882). His description of a 'spiritual principle' as a first test of a nation can be applied to and answered successfully by the contemporary United Kingdom, with a common will shown by our ancestors to act decisively together based on shared ideology. This is of course not always positive and is embroiled with issues of colonialism and empire, but was undertaken with Scots equally culpable in the carrying out of shared policies. However, it is upon Renan's second test, the will to continue to share ideals, that the future continuity of the United Kingdom fails to provide comfort for many in Scotland. Today Scottish society shows unity on its will to protect its health service and universalism while the Westminster ideological path of all political colours drifts towards continued austerity and insular Euroscepticism.

Architecturally the shifts in the UK's social values have been noted by Miles Glendinning in his review of Reiach and Hall's Council Headquarters in Dundee for the *Architects' Journal* (July 2011), positing the idea that, 'It is not too far-fetched to see this new, confident sense of social integrity within contemporary Scottish Modernism as the architectural expression of a growing gulf between Scotland and England in social policy, as the SNP government stands aside from Westminster's reckless assault on the welfare state south of the border.'

The work of Reiach and Hall, under the guidance of Neil Gillespie, can be viewed as a clear characterisation of an architecture comfortable in responding to a socially-conscious populous. Expressing itself using high-quality materials, the output of the office nods nostalgically to the optimism of Scandinavian Modernism, and its entailing social democratic values, while utilising contemporary building techniques to form places of civic importance. Aalto-esque curves are witnessed in their light-filled Aberdeen Sports Village while the Scandinavian influence becomes more overt as Danish brick, by Petersen, finds its way to the strip-windowed Forth Valley College and Dundee Council Headquarters. These social buildings play a significant role in their communities and are positively expressive of a modern Scotland whose values are found in the high-quality design of its public faces. They follow a principle laid down by the office which aims to make ordinary spaces better, be they hospital waiting rooms or simple classrooms. Careful craft makes the buildings human and touchable, while both the boldness of their commission and the consideration in their design provides an insight into a national identity guided by values consistent with the 'common weal'.

It is here that it is perhaps important to recognise the value of the principles of the Modernist masters whose primary narrative was one of social harmony and improvement. It is these traditions that remain at the core of the work of practitioners such as Gillespie. Against this notion of social democratic principles, the idea a purely 'Scottish Modernism' exists sits uncomfortably with these architects, who are not focused on the nationality of an idea but its ability to make a better society. In architecture as in wider society we witness the strength of Scotland's 'national movement', one which is not built purely upon identity but of discovering an inclusive and outward-looking way in which ultimately to develop better places for society to engage with one another.

It is not purely in the oeuvre of Reiach and Hall that we witness a 'common weal' approach

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Blair Jenkins, the 'Yes Scotland' Chief Executive is watched over by *A Thoroughly Modern Girl* by Jim Arcola of National Collective. Photo: Alex Aitchison

'cultural identity can talk to the hearts of people in a way politicians only dream of'



2014 Social Club. A gathering of creatives to celebrate Scots film, art, poetry and music. Photo: Peter McNally

which positions the architect as a significant contributor to the social constructs once more, through manipulating familiar architectural forms to create places of familiarity and joy. Fellow Edinburgh practice Malcolm Fraser Architects can also be viewed as a key proponent of the value imbued in the high-quality design of public buildings and they are by no means alone, with colleagues such as NORD and Gareth Hoskins investing much time in connecting architecture to both man and his environs. In this post-devolution world we have witnessed the nation's architectural practices carefully and thoughtfully address issues both urban and rural, while being bold and adventurous in exploring contemporary form and building technologies. Identity, within local place as well as broader national and international discussion, is just one parameter with which to define these new architectures but can be seen in the traces of vernacular and historical precedent that are embedded in their creation. Whether it be Reiach and Hall's addressing of Scandinavian ideals – via MacMillan and Metzstein, Morris and Steedman and Alan Reiach – or an office such as Rural Design re-imagining the crofter settlements of the Western Isles, we can see through an architectural lens that today's Scotland addresses Ernest Renan's two tests of a nation. A clear correspondence has been made between the constructs of the ancestor and the present provides a view of how this informs a move forward. The architectural discourse of Scotland continues to engage this conversation as new works offer a clear lineage of references and ambitions.

It must, however, be noted that beneath an apparently united ideological stance of consensual social democracy, in Scottish culture as well as its Parliament, a body of public opinion remains at its core constrained by a post reformation conservatism. We see this in public life and its expression remains clear in the built environment, with too many developments still falling into the trap of unimaginative Modernism or parochial historicism. The successful architecture of the post-devolution period must be viewed as small steps on a bigger journey and despite showing a strong commitment to the social contract between citizen and the state, a small 'c' conservatism continues to pervade. It is here that grassroots organisations such as National Collective must speak to the people of Scotland directly. By injecting humour, vision and a sharp critique of the status quo into the debate, National Collective are able to mischievously provoke conversations throughout the country which ask for new ways of looking at Scottish identity. It must be stated most of all that the strengths of cultural identity and the power of inhabiting those buildings imprinted with 'common weal' ideals can talk to the hearts of people in a way politicians could only dream of.

The coming year will see much thought given to Scotland's referendum, from politicians, expert witnesses and interested observers. What has gone before will inform, but Scots will place their trust in those opinions which resonate most closely with their daily experience and their sense of identity. Ultimately an imaginative outlook, sparked by challenging but familiar art and architecture, will shape the consciousness and it is against that backdrop the people will decide whether they identify with the culture of Westminster or a distinct Scotland. Whatever happens, the artisans at National Collective are wise to follow the words attributed to the famous Scots Nationalist Ian Hamilton QC: 'There are times for troublemakers. This is one.'

Ross Aitchison is a MArch graduate of Edinburgh University. Investigating Reykjavik, his thesis work has been nominated for the 3D Reid Student Prize. He has collaborated on a variety of architecture and art projects since 2011 (www.rossaitchison.com) and is a National Organiser at National Collective (www.nationalcollective com). Author photo: Peter McNally

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