

# Stable mates

IT BEGAN AS A SHORT-TERM PROJECT, A BREAK FROM CITY LIFE. BUT BEFORE THEY KNEW IT, LOUISE AND MARTIN MCBRIDE WERE LIVING AND WORKING IN THEIR CONVERTED STABLES

Words by **Mark Williamson** Photographs by **Keith Hunter**



**T**he desire to put their own stamp on 17th-century stables in the village of Blair Atholl in the Perthshire hills so seduced architect Louise and Martin McBride that they bid for it after watching only a glimpse by torchlight. The deadline for sealed offers was upon them, and they were so convinced that they could create a distinctive hideaway from the crumbling stone and slate rain looms at the Grain Store, that they prof much more cash on the table than their surrogates thought it could ever be worth.

The idea of taking such an unconventional route still makes Louise grimace. And the reality of combining busy work and social lives in Glasgow's West End with weekends working in the sticks soon made the decision of the purchase even more questionable.

"We had the building for a year and realized we hadn't done anything to it," says Louise. "That's when we thought, 'This just isn't going to work.' We were too busy doing other people's planning applications to come up and down at weekends."

The temptation to exploit the boom in Perthshire property prices (caused by an exodus of professionals from cities) and how not must have been hard to resist, but they did, opting instead for a more radical solution. Over a couple of glasses of red wine, they decided to put Blair Atholl and city-centre life in an A-listed mansion block on hold and relocate to the country, despite knowing precious little about rural life.

Back then – the summer of 2007 – the idea was to take a year's sabbatical working ▶



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out the Grain Store before slotting back into metropolitan life. As both had run plenty of building projects before, and Martin had formerly been a joiner, they were confident of getting the job done quickly once they knuckled down, and of saving money by dispensing with contractors on many jobs.

But then the need to generate cash for living expenses persuaded them to launch their own practice from the Grain Store, as well as temporarily setting up home in a neglected lock up adjoining the stables. Their business, Urban Creators, immediately won work in an area where there was plenty of demand for their services and few competitors. The downside was that, faced once more with the demands of clients, Louise and Martin found the schedule for converting two small rooms and a layoff into a two-bedroom hideaway stretching into infinity. With a central dividing wall and cubbed floor to remove and a slate roof to replace, months of slog had to be completed before they could create new living spaces in the resulting shell.

Sitting in the compact but elegant lounge, smash with light from new full-length windows that open on to the garden, Louise shudders at the memory of the exhausting struggle to juggle professional and personal demands. "Had we realized we would have been living and working in that small space for so long we would have reassessed things," Martin hit rock bottom as he sat feeding one midnight setting insulation material in readiness for underfloor heating contractors the next day. There were compensations, however: friends helped fit the double doors windows in the master bedroom, in return for lots of cold beer.

Local planners avoided through designs for an extension in the space between the old outer wall of the stable and the lock up. Now covered in white render with a window grill framed in cedar and slate, the area includes an entrance hall and a bathroom. The latter features a bath with a sarcoid big enough to accommodate wine glasses, a marble basin and high red fittings, all funded from savings created by their laboring. Officials only dropped an apparently theological objection to ▶

## LOUISE SHUDDERS AT THE MEMORY OF THE STRUGGLE TO JUGGLE PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL DEMANDS



- 1 Entrance hall
- 2 Bathroom
- 3 Living room
- 4 Kitchen
- 5 Kitchen/Dining area
- 6 Patio
- 7 Timber decking



This page, clockwise from top left, the open-plan kitchen/living area; light filters into the kitchen through skylights; contemporary fittings in the kitchen; the couple's book collection reflects their passions. Opposite page, clockwise from far left, view of the garden from the kitchen; the living room; the entrance window, framed in cedar and oak



## WHO ARE THEY?

Before heading to their island in Asia and establishing their own architecture practice, Urban Coasters, husband and wife Iain Leslie and Martin McBride both worked for large architecture practices in Glasgow. This experience, combined with Martin's previous occupation as a joiner made the conversion of the flat more manageable than it could have been, and they allow those their build experience with clients looking to self-build themselves. The practice has grown from strength to strength with projects including a number of houses, conversions, extensions, and a children's nursery.

KISHO KUROKAWA  
 POH-OH  
 SHIMIZU KAWANO & SHIYOKU  
 ...

## STABLE CONVERSION

lower windows (which now open on to a cedar-lined balcony with grandstand views of the Forthcreek) were persuaded that without them, the Creatives could not create enough space in the attic for the two bedrooms and an suite needed to give the building future letting potential.

Other locals seemed pleased to see what was happening next to the village inn. Most had only ever known the block as a tip that was smartened up briefly by television crews when it was used as a location for a long forgotten drama years ago. The misleading words 'Grain Store' had been painted on the main outer wall.

Martin is delighted that one neighbour blamed the rejuvenated building for the traffic, so surprised was she to find that the couple had created a home with plenty of room not only for the workers but for their giant dog, Nelson.

Design tricks like wall hanging units, dispensing with internal doors, and ensuring plenty of daylight pours into the living room, have paid dividends. By cutting away a section of the ground floor ceiling, the kitchen was opened up to light from windows built into the roof.

Notwithstanding Louise's avowed hatred of the standard rooflight window they had to install in the second bedroom (from which the view is dominated by the signal pole used to direct trains towards Inverness part the back of the house), both are delighted with the fruits of their endeavours.

Numerous potential clients have come away from meetings in the Grain Store impressed enough to employ Urban Creatives locally on jobs like farmstead conversions, meaning there is no need to cast their net further north. As Main Atholl sits one mile from the geographic centre of Scotland they have been easily able to manage bigger jobs, including a nursing home, in cities like Edinburgh and Dundee.

"Pleased to feel business 'tickling along nicely'", Martin is hatching plans to develop other properties. Both he and Louise are revelling in country living and its pleasures, such as driving to meetings through miles of glorious hills instead of talkbacks. With their old stomping grounds less than two hours away by car, what is definitely not on the agenda is a return to living in Glasgow. ■



## TELL US ABOUT IT

### Where is your favourite place to sit?

The upstairs balcony is summer with a glass of chilled wine looking up Towlax Hill.

### How biggest 'surprise'?

Initially we wanted limestone flooring throughout the ground floor, but we were worried about the level of maintenance required, so found a limestone look-a-like ceramic floor tile (Horvona floor tiles at Wickes) for a per cent of the cost of the limestone.

### Worst moment during the build?

Two months were equally horrendous: digging drainage trenches by hand in January in sleet, and installing the roof insulation.

### And the best?

When the large sliding door was installed after much delay, and we sat upstairs on deck chairs balanced on the exposed floor joists admiring the view.

### Any future plans for the house?

We are expecting a baby in June so the house will become a family home.





This page, Louisa on the cedar-lined balcony, above, which opens on to the master bedroom, below left. Below right, the second bedroom has a view of the signal post. Opposite page, the bath has Vola fittings, the marble basin



## DIRECTORY

Cost of estate £20,000  
 Cost of renovation £80,000  
 Total cost of project £100,000

### Architect

**Urban Creators**  
 (01794 481 435;  
[urbancreators.co.uk](http://urbancreators.co.uk))

**Electrical contractor**  
**K W Bell (Electrical)**

**Pittchocky Ltd**  
 (01794 473 263)

**Windows and doors**  
**James Norman & Son**  
 (01738 624 640)

**Stonemason**  
**Stoneworks**  
 (01794 474 495;  
[stonework@pittchocky.com](mailto:stonework@pittchocky.com))

**Glass specialist**  
**Greg Robb Claring**

(01738 441 212)  
**Cladding and decking**  
**Buzwood Ltd**

(01540 673 648;  
[buzwood.co.uk](http://buzwood.co.uk))

**Metalwork**  
**Steven & Bell**

(01738 787 334)  
**Bathroom fittings and tiles**  
**Scope Bathroom Interiors**

(01418 828 282;  
[scope-bathrooms.co.uk](http://scope-bathrooms.co.uk))

**Fired Earth**  
 (01295 814 215;  
[firedearth.com](http://firedearth.com))

**Tags**  
**Vola**  
 (01525 841 135; [vola.co.uk](http://vola.co.uk))

**Immunology**  
**D-Line at Allgood**

(0870 609 0009;  
[dline.co.uk/d-line.com](http://dline.co.uk/d-line.com))

**Wall coverings**  
**Design Works**

(01413 399 520)  
**Electrical fittings**  
**Edge by MK Electrical Ltd**

(01268 563 000;  
[mk-electric.co.uk](http://mk-electric.co.uk))

**Ligne Roset**  
 (020 7325 1248;  
[ligne-rosset.com](http://ligne-rosset.com))

**Appliances**  
 (0444444444;  
[ukappliances.co.uk](http://ukappliances.co.uk))