

A place of remembrance



When serial rescuer of listed buildings Suki Urquhart died before completing her project to resurrect a Tabernacle church, her daughter Niki Kinloch Bakshy stepped in, finds **Nichola Hunter**

PHOTOGRAPHY: MICHAEL DICKIE

Heavens above:
Ecclesiastical proportions make for an interesting open plan living space.



As a serial rescuer and renovator of listed buildings, journalist Suki Urquhart was horrified that the Tabernacle in Aberfeldy was quite literally going to landfill, so she decided to save it.

'Over the years, my mum had renovated several listed buildings and had engaged in many battles with councils and planning departments over their restoration,' Suki's daughter Niki Kinloch Bakshy explains. 'She loved tabernacle buildings and couldn't understand that bodies who were normally so strict on the rules attaining to listed buildings were essentially going to let this one disappear.'

For those not in the know, the definition of a tabernacle is a moving sacred space which is to all intents and purposes a flat packed building. In this instance, this tabernacle started its life in a London workshop. It was gifted to the local Catholic community by the Marquis of Bute in the 1840s and was chosen from a Bond Street catalogue of prefabricated, flat-packed buildings in London. During this period, many buildings were required quickly and efficiently, and it was possible to order a church, a school, or even a community hall to be shipped almost anywhere in the British Empire.

In 2004, the tabernacle was residing in Aberfeldy as the Mary of Mercy Church. It was B-listed but had been declassified and was scheduled for demolition when Suki came across it.

Clockwise from above: Pews have been repurposed to build the kitchen; candles add to the church-like ambience; view to the original altar window; the old vestry is now a cosy bunk room; the essential wood burner; the original doorway through to the old vestry is now reimagined as a bedroom; Niki and Nir with Stella the Airstream; main bedroom; claw foot bath and vintage sink; the exterior has been restored to its original glory.



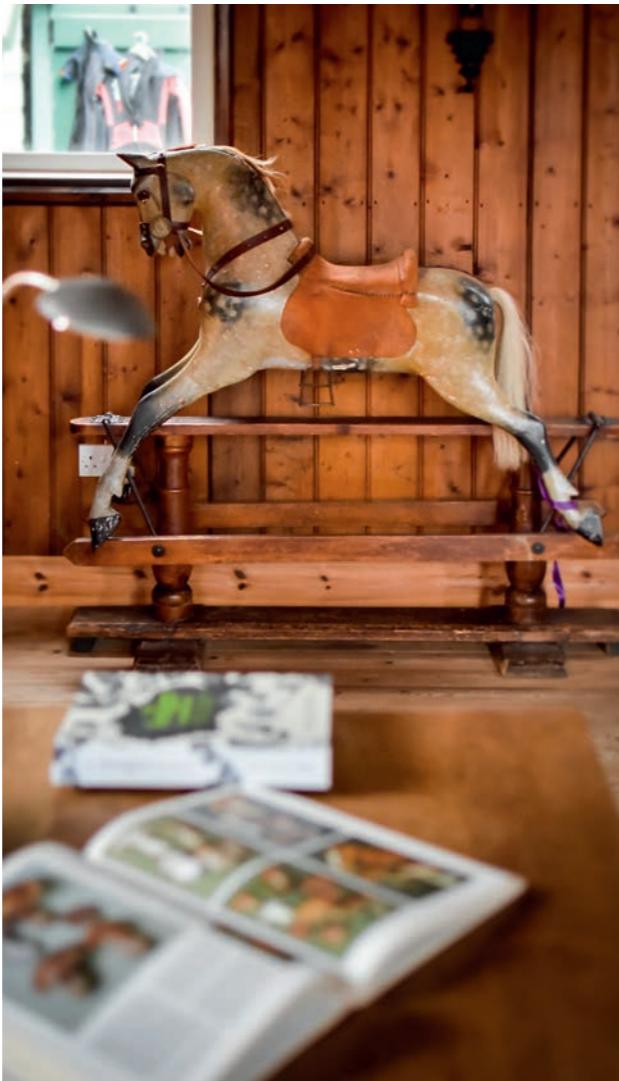
'My mother eventually persuaded the minister to give her the building,' says Niki, 'and then she set about the laborious task of dismantling it with a view to re-erecting it when she could find a suitable site.'

For four years, the tabernacle was stored in Suki's other church, the kirk in Dull, which she also owned. 'She wanted to erect the tabernacle on her land behind her house, the former schoolhouse in Dull which she'd renovated,' said Niki.

Suki's hope was that the council would support her plan to turn the property into a dwelling, but it was not the case. 'My husband, Nir, helped her design an off-grid heating system so that she could install a huge wood burner that would heat the house, the radiators and the water,' said Niki. 'But for years, the tabernacle was empty apart from the heating system and it was classified as a heated storeroom.'

After much lobbying in 2014, a change of use was finally granted but sadly the decision came too late for Suki, who was for many years a columnist for Scottish Field, to realise

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her dream. She had been diagnosed with cancer three months before the ruling and died three weeks after it was finalised.

‘Nir and I tried really hard to get the tabernacle into a situation where my mum could be in the house before she died,’ says Niki. ‘We got the kitchen built, which was made from the original pews, and we put in a basic bathroom. Mum ordered new double-glazed windows, but we ran out of time and she passed before it was complete. Nir and I decided we had to take it on and finish it.’

There was, however, still a lot of work to be done. ‘It feels like quite a traditional Scottish building, but it is essentially a flat pack. All the blonde wood is new wood which are timbers that needed to be replaced. At the altar end where the sitting room is, Mum had put in new windows as previously there would only have been windows higher up because it was a church. Now, you can be inside and watch the whole drama of Scotland unfolding through the altar windows.

‘We were also keen to do everything from an eco-friendly viewpoint where we could. The outside was looking tatty, so we hired dry ice blasters and we blasted the exterior to remove all the old paint. We took all the wood and detailing right back to the raw wood and galvanised steel and restored the windows. I then repainted the entire building. We did a lot of groundwork around the building and we found a spring on the land which we had tested and we’re now able to pump spring water to the building.’

The couple also decided to bring the interiors up a notch having initially done a basic fit-out. ‘We re-did the bathroom, putting in the claw foot bathtub and the vintage sink,’ she says. ‘They seemed to be in keeping with the building. My mum had fantastic taste, so I used what we already had. Using the reclaimed wood from the pews in the kitchen, it felt appropriate to finish it off in that slightly French style with curtains instead of cupboard doors.’

TOP TIPS

Making unique interior dreams a reality

1. The unfamiliar is hard for others to digest: stay confident and true to your vision.
2. Simplicity is key when it comes to the interiors. One beautiful piece of furniture in each room will lift the whole space.
3. Let the building speak for itself, don’t try to make it a normal house. Celebrate its uniqueness.
4. Don’t compromise on the lush factor of bedrooms and bathrooms. You will never regret being comfortable.
5. Listen to the land and the building, they are not separate. Find the symbiosis between your garden design and the building, the materials you use and how they interface with the natural landscape.
6. Don’t be afraid to take on work you have never done before. Except dry ice blasting. Let someone else do that!



Opposite, clockwise: Many of the accessories are pieces that Suki had already collected; Niki’s grandfather’s rocking horse takes pride of place; made with love. **From top:** Suki fitted lower level windows at the altar end of the tabernacle to take advantage of the beautiful views; interior of Tin Tabernacle before demolition; the roof is removed.

The most recent additions have been the creation of the box bedroom with its traditional box bed and, rather surprisingly, a hot tub outside. It may not be quite what one expects alongside a church-style exterior, but Niki is unrepentant.

‘We’ve given it the glam factor with the hot tub, but it was important that if we were going to add one, we did it well,’ she says. ‘I didn’t want a ghastly big tub sitting there ruining the view. It had to be integrated into the landscape and by sinking it into the decking, which is made from rough scaffolding boards, it’s in keeping with the ruggedness of the valley around it.’

The land around the Tabernacle has indeed become just as important as the building itself. ‘The garden is about an acre, which we landscaped and planted as wildflower meadows,’ explains Niki. ‘We then bought Shakti, our campervan, and latterly Stella, a 1973 American Airstream which required extensive renovation and now resides alongside the Tabernacle.’

‘As a family we like to be nomadic, and we wanted a home we could live in and one which we could use as a base when we choose to live in other countries. We’ve put our experience in these renovations to good use and now we reimagine other people’s spaces as part of our company Highland Spaces.’

It sounds like Suki’s legacy of restoration joyfully lives on.



FIELD FACTS

The Tabernacle,
Dull, Aberfeldy
PH15 2JQ

Find out more
by visiting their
website at
www.highlandspace.com