

Take me to church



When serial renovator Suki Urquhart found Aberfeldy's Tabernacle in trouble, she had to help

Words: **Nichola Hunter**
Photographs: **Michael Dickie**

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, and 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 Tabernacle is a moving sacred space and to all intents and purposes it's 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. "My mother eventually persuaded the minister to give her the building and 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. "She wanted to erect the Tabernacle on her land behind her house, the former schoolhouse in Dull which she'd renovated. 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 design an off-grid heating system so she could install a huge wood burner that would heat the house, the radiators and the water, 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 to realise 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. 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. The outside was looking tatty, so 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.”

The couple also decided to bring the interiors up a notch having done a basic fit-out initially. “We re-did the bathroom, putting in the claw foot bathtub and the vintage sink. They just seemed to be in keeping with the building. My mum had such 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.”

The most recent additions have been the creation of the box bedroom with its traditional box bed and rather surprisingly a hot tub outside. “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.

“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.

[Find out how you can stay at the Tabernacle, Stella or Shakti at www.highlandspaces.com](http://www.highlandspaces.com)



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