

Kathryn Findlay: Back with a redefined approach

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Kathryn Findlay is back after a five-year hiatus, redefining her practice with a collaborative approach, says Rory Olcayto.

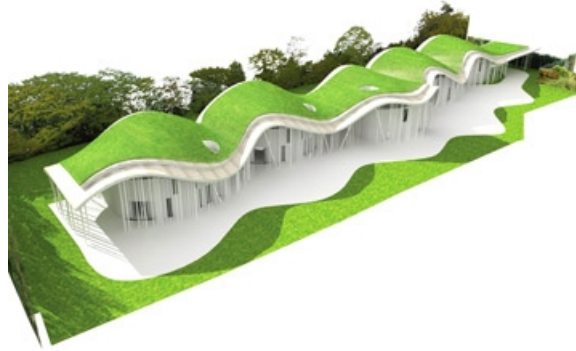
Try this. Fire up Google Earth, type in 'Doha' and watch as the planet spins round to the capital of Qatar. Pan up until you meet the coastline, then trace a line upwards along Qatar's sandy beaches. You'll know when to stop. There - do you see it? Four radiating 'wings' that spiral outwards from a central hub. It looks like a UFO or a high-tech weapons base. In truth, it's a royal villa built for the wife of the Qatari Emir. Stranger still, it was originally planned for the green fields of Grafton Hall in Cheshire. This is Ushida Findlay Architects' Grafton New Hall, a 2002 RIBA competition-winning scheme for a 21st-century country house - with a twist. 'It's the sand-dune version of Grafton,' says Kathryn Findlay, who is now relaunching her Edinburgh-based practice after five years of quiet toil.

If Ushida Findlay hadn't gone bust in 2004, resorting to the internet to catch sight of the practice's work wouldn't be necessary. Alongside Grafton New Hall, which failed to entice an off-plan buyer, the practice had several UK projects lined up at the time, including two large-scale public buildings in Bury St Edmunds, a visitors' centre in Hastings and a Maggie's Centre in Wishaw, near Glasgow. Another stunning house in Doha, designed for the Qatari minister of culture and shown at the 2004 Venice Biennale, was also planned. But Ushida Findlay folded, citing cash-flow problems, and only a tiny poolhouse in south-east England, 'Grafton-on-Gulf' and a Glasgow housing project that prompted the practice's 1999 relocation from Japan were built.

Findlay went on to lead a research team at Dundee University, Fieldwork, as professor of design, but has since committed entirely to practice, with Fieldwork refashioned as a commercial research arm. One project, commissioned in 2000 and completed last year, bridges Findlay's hiatus: Poolhouse 2, a thatched extension

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that links a converted barn and farmhouse in the Chilterns (see pages 30-37). Along with Park House, a grand-scale eco-home in Preston, Poolhouse 2 signals Ushida Findlay's new business approach - not in form or aesthetic, as both projects build on the practice's unique organic modernism, but in the way they are conceived and delivered. 'Through collaboration,' explains Findlay, who names **RHWL Architects'** principal director Geoff Mann and Scottish firm Holmes Partnership as her new conspirators.



Findlay's reputation is huge - and global. On graduating from London's Architectural Association (AA) in 1979, she travelled to Japan on a scholarship and worked with Arata Isozaki, eventually setting up her own practice in 1987. A crop of Tokyo townhouses startled the profession when they were published in the early 1990s. The Truss Wall House (1993) in particular, designed by Findlay with her former husband and partner Eisaku Ushida, stood out. Imagine a building-sized 'fobject', or rapid prototype, that blends Victor Horta with MC Escher and the spline modelling curves created by 3D software. A stark white, sinewy concrete bubble, Truss Wall House seems to fold inwards and outwards simultaneously. The tactile, sculpted interior feels hollowed out rather than planned, as if carved by the motion of people passing through. It is spectacularly beautiful. The Qatari minister's house in Doha was a logical progression of these ideas. Had it been built, Findlay would today be a superstar.

Lazy observers might group Findlay's work with that of Future Systems or Zaha Hadid, but they'd be wrong. The expressive materiality of her buildings and her interest in ecology place her nearer to Bruce Goff or Antoni Gaudí. Holmes chairman Harry Phillips has long admired her work. 'Some architects are shape-shifters, sculptors, but Kathryn should not be confused with them. There is a hard-worked rationale underlying her designs - one that works closely with environment and materiality,' he says. 'The result is a complete architecture, where everything seems absolutely right.'

Clearly RHWL and Holmes have much to gain from collaboration with Findlay. Phillips, who guided Park House through planning, approached her in 2007. 'We wanted to help Kathryn reactivate as a practitioner by providing her with the resources to see projects through and access to sectors such as health centres, prisons and schools. But we were also keen to work on the exotic projects that Kathryn commands.' Findlay, in turn, will benefit from the firms' hardened operational and construction nous. 'I realised I couldn't do it myself this time,' she says.

Mann met Findlay at Arup's Christmas lunch just over a year ago. 'There is a huge amount of goodwill towards Kathryn in the industry. Developers are excited about seeing Kathryn build again,' he says. 'She's a very free thinker. We thought we could complement those skills and collaborate on research. We're looking at how office design can be more responsive to its users. We think we can do something better than the "catch-all" typologies which dominate the industry.' Already Findlay and Mann have designed a cultural institute in Kyoto, Japan, and another poolhouse, with a boathouse and hotel on the way.



The prospect of a Findlay-designed school, prison or office - in Mann's words, 'the sharp end of procurement' - is intriguing given her methodology. 'I don't see architecture as defined by walls. It's more about movement and defining routes through a landscape,' she says, using a four-stage sketch of the Truss House plan to explain. It resembles an apple being eaten from within by a maggot. 'It's easy to start with a box and fill it in. But if you start with a route through a solid form, then excavate out of it, conceptually it provides a different starting point.' Creating space by walking and wayfinding is a legacy of Findlay's AA education and the musings of her teachers Peter Cook and Leon van Schaik, but also recalls the rural backdrop to her childhood - a landscape 'excavated' by ice-age glaciers in Forfar, Scotland.

How this might influence, say, prison design, is open to debate, but Findlay, appalled by government plans for Titan mega-prisons, is taking collaboration even further than she initially planned - by writing to a career prisoner. 'It's enlightening. I'm learning a lot,' is all she'll say of this unexpected development.

Meanwhile, at Grafton Hall, a country house designed by neo-classical architect Robert Adam was recently approved and has a buyer. Adam has described the success of his design where Findlay's failed as the death-knell for 'experimental architecture' - at least among Britain's super-rich. That must have hurt Findlay, surely. 'No, not at all. Robert is a lovely man,' she says. 'He was my planning supervisor on the Chilterns Poolhouse. I'd love to do a project with him.'

Portrait by Maja Flink

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