





# CORROUR

## INVERNESS-SHIRE

MARY MIERS visits the wilds of Lochaber to discover the boldest shooting lodge to have been built in recent years, designed by the Jewish-Canadian architect Moshe Safdie, and published here for the first time

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ever there was an opportunity for a domestic building to convey the mood and drama of a wild landscape, it must be that provided by the Highland shooting lodge. In recent years, a number of good, interesting examples have been built, but few make the sort of powerful architectural statement that defines so many of those designed during the heyday of the Highland sporting estate in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

But at Corroun, on the edge of Rannoch Moor, the wheel has turned full circle. Here, at the head of Loch Ossian, 12 miles from the nearest public road, a new shooting lodge has been built that fulfils all the functions of its predecessors in an emphatically contemporary idiom (Fig 1). Completed in 2003 on the site of an earlier lodge, its design, by the Boston-based architect Moshe Safdie, is one of the boldest of any private house to have been built in Scotland in recent decades.

The choice of this Israeli-Canadian architect (who is a friend of Corroun's owner) is a surprising one for a Scottish estate. Mr Safdie, who spent a formative year with Louis Kahn, designed his famous Habitat building for Expo '67 in Montreal when he was just 24, and has since forged an international reputation on a string of public commissions, notably in Canada, Israel and America. The new lodge at Corroun is his only work in Britain.

It is a hard-edged, geometric composition on an awesome scale, expressive of its glass, steel and granite construction. The building would have excited strong opinion in any setting; in the unbounded wilds of Lochaber, it is extraordinary. Some relish this daring intervention into the Highland landscape, others brand it an eyesore. Certainly it is stark, uncompromising, even shocking. But the architect's undoubted achievement is to have created an imposing house for large-scale entertaining, with dramatic interiors that seem to draw inside the beauty of the landscape.

Corroun is owned by a Swedish academic with a strong interest in the arts who, after purchasing it in 1995, has initiated a remarkable renaissance on the 52,000-acre sporting estate. Plantations of national significance are being restored and properly managed, four deer-stalking beats have been re-established, and the number of permanent staff has increased to 13. Estate dwellings and other buildings have been improved and rebuilt, and public access is encouraged, with cottages available to let.

This idealistic and improving approach is very much in the spirit of Sir John Stirling Maxwell, the crusading gardener, forester, conservationist and

*(Previous pages) 1—The principal elevation of the new lodge, comprising two tower-like structures pierced by shafts of glass, linked by a glazed stair*

politician who, in 1891, aged just 24, bought Corroun and Fersit for £63,750 (he later enlarged the estate with the purchase of Beinn a' Bhric). It is an area that has never been more than sparsely populated, although the main cattle-droving route from the Isles passed this way. Much of the land south of the Spean was traditionally used for summer grazing by the MacDonells of Keppoch, and later turned into sheep walks. Stirling Maxwell's predecessor at Corroun was Col Sir George Walker, whose father, John Walker of Crawfordton, bought it as part of a larger property in 1834 and started to develop the famous deer forest.

The original lodge stood in bleak isolation at 1,723ft, on the shoulder of Carn Dearg. In 1897, Stirling Maxwell replaced it on a lower site with a much larger, crowstep-gabled house by Frank College of the Glasgow architects Wharr and College (remodelled, in 1904, by L. and J. Falconer), which, in 1942, was destroyed by fire. He dreamt of rebuilding the fire-gutted lodge as 'the sort of thing that William Adam might have built', but in the 1950s, all but the wings were demolished.

The site of the lodge lies at the heart of the estate, where the broad strath of the River Ossian meets the loch of the same name. At 1,269ft, this is a place too high to ripen corn, but it possesses a remarkable microclimate, and it was here that the idealistic, improving laird realised his vision for a 20th-century Scottish landscape. Below the lodge, he created an alpine garden

on the margin of the loch, with a pond, curving steps and a rockery of latticed beds. He grew Britain's highest rhododendron garden and planted 71 species of conifer—pioneering plantations that established the tenacity of Sitka spruce and led to the formation of the Forestry Commission.

The opening of the West Highland line to Fort William, in 1894, was the key to Corroun's accessibility (the vehicular route into the estate was completed only in 1972). The romance of boarding a sleeper train in London to alight the next morning on the solitary platform of Britain's highest station, surrounded by a desolate moor, and then journeying down Loch Ossian to the comforts of the lodge, is an experience that is still a high point for visitors to Corroun today. In Stirling Maxwell's day, guests alighting at the Corroun halt were met by a horse-drawn carriage and taken to a waiting room (now a youth hostel) on the lochside. From here, they embarked on a steam yacht for the 4½-mile journey up the loch (a track along the shore was made in 1910). There can be no better first encounter with Corroun Lodge than to see it from Loch Ossian, standing out in the distance among trees against the bare shoulders of Beinn Eibhinn and Cnoc Dearg.

The new lodge incorporates into its design—and owes its strong granite presence to—the surviving >

*'The new lodge at Corroun is a hard-edged, geometric composition on an awesome scale, expressive of its glass, steel and granite construction'*



2—The glazed corner in the sitting room, with Finn Juhl's Chieftain Sofa of 1949 facing out onto Loch Ossian



3—The entrance hall, created out of two bays of the great hall



4—The great hall, with the sitting room on the left



5—The dining room, with Arne Jacobsen's Oxford chairs



6—One of Arne Jacobsen's Egg chairs in the great hall

wings of its predecessor. On the left, the former school-room, game larder and gun room have been converted into two cottages and an estate office, and on the right, the chapel has been imaginatively transformed into a 1950s-style mountain cabin, now available to let. Between these arms, the new house rears its distinctive towers—one rectilinear, one cylindrical—connected by a glazed stair. Their walls, of rock-faced granite with metal windows, are rent by semi-conical or pyramidal glass shafts, which thrust up through the masonry like shards of ice. To the rear, a vast glass-and-steel barrel roof rolls down from a crenellated parapet, and a pair of flat-roofed, single-storey library/studies extend into the wooded garden.

The design was intended to take into account the strong geometry and other qualities of Scottish castles, and to convey a sense of belonging to the landscape. Certainly, it expresses something of the stark grandeur of the setting, and there is a suggestion, too, of the fort-like form of brochs in the cylindrical tower. But the difficulty of obtaining local granite that could be cut to the right specifications resulted in the importation of stone from Portugal, the unweathered, silvery glare of which creates an unsettling contrast with the soft-green-and-fox-coloured landscape, whose name in Gaelic—*Coire Odhar*—means 'dun corrie'.

The lodge is entered on the north-west side through an austere granite cloister. Taking its form from the scale of this Edwardian service court, the great hall forms a transverse atrium through the centre of the house, from which the principal rooms open through

a granite colonnade (Fig 4). There is something of the public concourse about this great echoing hall, the overwhelming scale and austerity of which makes it difficult to use in a domestic context. Originally open to the glass barrel vault, it has since been modified with the suspension of a glass-margined ceiling, which has made a conservatory-style sitting room in the space above (Fig 8). It has also been shorted by two bays to create a separate entrance hall—a beautifully serene space, sparsely furnished with a handsome marbled console table presided over by a pair of prehistoric elk's antlers found in an Irish bog (Fig 3).

On entering the house, one is struck immediately by the use of this stern architectural setting as a showcase for contemporary and antique furnishings. A pair of sofas by the Swedish designer Josef Frank, upholstered in his riotous technicolour and chocolate 'Hawaii' fabric, is juxtaposed with an 18th-century French tapestry. Offset against a huge Mongolian sheepskin rug, Frank's sofas combine with Arne Jacobsen's signature 1950s Egg chairs (Fig 6), and a table by Erik Johansson, to establish the strong Scandinavian theme that runs through the house.

The interior decoration was largely the responsibility of design journalist turned interior decorator Suzy Hoodless. Her former collaboration with Swedish architects Thomas Sandell and Thomas Eriksson on projects for *Wallpaper\** magazine has given her a keen

eye for the Scandinavian aesthetic. She has mixed furniture by designers such as Arne Jacobsen, Paul Kjaerholm, Fritz Henningsen and Kaare Klint with serious antiques, vintage and novel pieces acquired at markets and auctions, contemporary lighting, and fabrics by, among others, Pierre Frey and Kenzo. The owner's collection of Swedish artworks at Corroul includes some fine Friberg ceramics, and tapestries and rugs made in the early 20th century by leading textile designers such as Märta Måås-Fjetterström.

A notable feature of the house is the way in which the severe beauty of the landscape is drawn into the interior through its tall windows and soaring shafts of glass. Beneath the stone stair, which rises in shallow curves against the glass wall of the stair tower, a whale's jawbone lies on granite paving against the backdrop of the loch. The sitting room, situated in the drum tower on the south-east corner, is a circular space cut into by the sharp-angled base of the glass pyramid. This creates a transparent sitting area (Fig 2) filled with the ravishing colours of the woods and hills. It is furnished with chairs by several celebrated Danish designers, notable among which is

Finn Juhl's Chieftain sofa of 1949. The curving lines of the sitting room walls are echoed by the granite chimneypiece, over which hangs a convex mirror by Anish Kapoor, and by the pair of sofas designed by Suzy Hoodless.

The library/studies are semi-circular, with oak bookcases built into their curving walls. These continue the flow of serpentine lines that runs through the house and mirror the form of a wonder-

fully equipped cedar-lined mud room, which would be the envy of any shooting lodge. On the opposite side of the great hall is the dining room (Fig 5), with a convex chimneypiece on its east wall and views down the loch through the bow of the conical glass shaft. The focus of this room is a dramatic battle scene featuring elephants and rearing horses, which fills the whole west wall. This 16th-century Brussels tapestry, a Gustavian cabinet by Stenstrom and the Irish Georgian mahogany dining table combine with Arne Jacobsen's high-back Oxford chairs to exemplify the brave decorative approach that Mr Safdie's uncompromising architecture demands.

Corroul Lodge is also a children's paradise, with a vast, circular games room in the basement of the drum tower (the master bedroom occupies its first floor) and a brilliantly imaginative dormitory by the film production designer John Bunker. This was conceived as an assault course, with 15 bunks on different levels. In an echo of Stirling Maxwell's boathouse and servants' lodge, which were imported from Trondheim in 1906, Corroul has a grass-roofed timber sauna from Norway, with a pontoon running out into the loch (Fig 7).

Sir Herbert Maxwell gave a detailed description of his son-in-law's garden at Corroul in his book, *Scottish Gardens* (1908). It was an 'experiment of no small uncertainty', which proved that it was possible—by removing the mantle of peat and draining the




7—The grass-roofed sauna on Loch Ossian is a timber kit imported from Norway



8—The first-floor sitting area, with mountain sculpture by Anish Kapoor; sofas and table by Barber Osgerby

ground—to grow an array of alpine plants, and to promulgate mountain pines and other species on the exposed ridges. The landscape gardener Jinny Blom has restored the architecture of this garden and re-established it with naturalistic planting as a setting for the new lodge. She has mixed giant Himalayan cowslips and other exotic species with native plants to suggest the collecting spirit in which the garden was created.

The climate at this altitude is harsh and unforgiving, and so the garden has been designed to fend for itself, rather than to rely on gardeners in the

usual manner. Contemporary sculpture has been introduced—Antony Gormley's figure *Hear and Hear* in a pine grove by the old steamer pier being a particularly moving example. This extends to the landscape what is the most exciting feature of Corroul today—the introduction of contemporary art and architecture into one of Scotland's most isolated natural wildernesses. 

*Photographs: Simon Jauncey.*

*For information on lets at Corroul Lodge, telephone 01573 22979.*