

SUMMER 2007

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# BRIDGE FOR DESIGN

A photograph of a tropical resort at dusk. In the foreground, a swimming pool reflects the sky and the building. Two lounge chairs with small tables are on the pool deck. In the background, a modern building with a large, glowing stone wall and a covered walkway is visible. Palm trees are scattered throughout the scene.

THE INTERNATIONAL RESOURCE FOR INTERIOR DESIGNERS





Orangery, France





## Inspired by Blott Kerr-Wilson

photography by Benjamin Krebs

**E**NTERING A COMPETITION IN A MAGAZINE WAS the definitive moment that set an artist on a path that has taken her all over the world to design shell houses for clients.

In 1993 a competition to design your own room was featured in a glossy interiors magazine. Blott Kerr-Wilson entered with a picture of a shell bathroom she had created in her council flat in Peckham, London, where she was living as an art student, studying fine art at Goldsmiths. Her contemporaries have become giants on the contemporary Brit art scene – Damien Hirst, Gavin Turk. “The tutors hated what I did – they called it ‘craft’. That was a very disparaging term in the art world. So I led a double life; I did passable fine art at college, and carried on working with shells at home. The summer I left Goldsmiths I won the competition and from that day on commissions kept coming in.”

Winning that competition certainly opened doors for Blott, as a newly graduating artist, but her cheerful willingness to follow up unusual opportunities has been the key to her worldwide success as a shell artist, decorator and renovator of shell houses and grottoes.

Soon after graduating she was asked to house-sit a friend-of-a-friend's chateau in France. A new life suddenly opened up to her. ‘I gave up everything I had. I left my council flat in Peckham,’ she says without irony, ‘and my Robin Reliant, which I exchanged for a van,’ she adds with perhaps a touch more irony. ‘Except,’ she adds, ‘it turned out there was no chateau, just a tumbledown wreck. But I’d promised to house-sit, so I stayed there anyway.’





Cilwendeg shell house ceiling, Wales



While she was living in France she met her husband, a French photographer of objets d'art. They live with their two children in an old mill in south-west France. "It's decrepit," she says, squashing any delusions of grandeur. "We're doing it up, bit by bit." Her home is her portfolio. Seashells have crept into every room, as 'sketches' for commissions in chateaux and private houses. The tearoom with a latticework of shells on the walls is a marquet – or sketch – the real one is in a chateau in France.

"Magazines would ring me up and want to feature a project that hadn't already been in a magazine, so I'd panic and think I'd better do something else, and quickly work on a new project to have something to photograph. I tried a few things on my house. Soon there wasn't any room left untouched by shells – it became a house dedicated to the sea!"

Her bathroom in France bears a traditional shell design inspired by a 19th century woven pattern. "It's hard living with your own work, I get terribly critical of it," she says. "When I do work for myself, I'm never satisfied. When I do work for clients, I give it over to them. I did a detailed baroque bathroom for an American client and then she put in a gold scallop shell basin. People do ask me to come back and see it, but I'd feel a bit awkward."

"What I do is a luxury. People don't *need* a shell room. Traditionally this is a rich person's folly. The head of the house would commission the captain of the ship to come back with shells for the lady of the house, and then a shell folly would be built." You can see examples of this at Goodwood house, Marwood shellhouse, and Goldney grotto in Clifton, Bristol. "I've always been fascinated in shell houses since I was dragged around stately homes as a child," Blott enthuses.

Her clients have *grounds* rather than a garden, and include wealthy patrons of the arts and landed gentry. She created a shell house for the Duke and Duchess of Westminster in a fernery on their country estate in the north of England. "My clients are very rich and usually very private people – they are in the supersonic rich strata. They live in another world," says Blott. "I work a lot with interior designers and garden designers and I deal with the gardener."

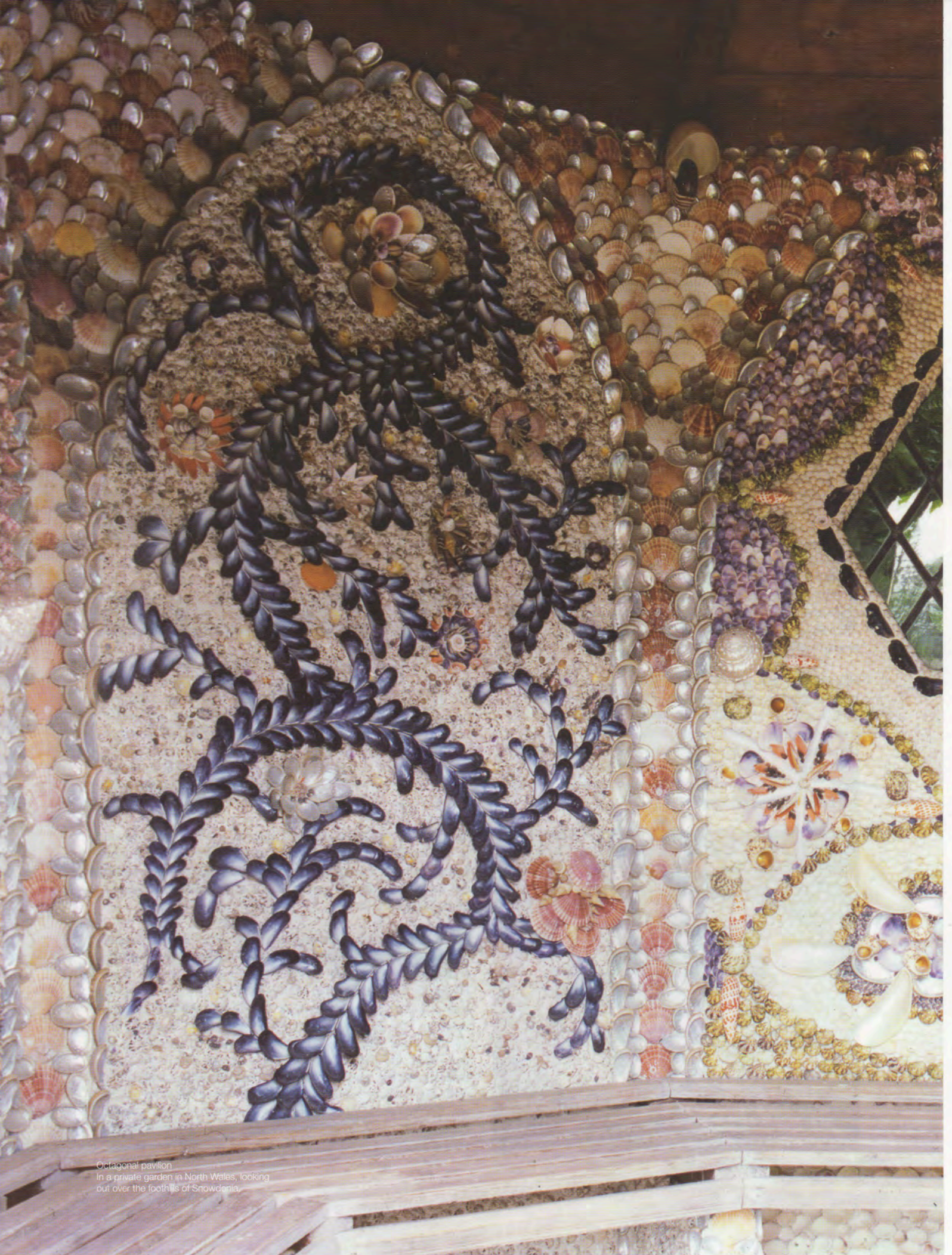


Creating each shell house or room is work intensive and takes months to complete. Her reputation for decorating with shells has taken her around the world. One project on Mustique meant an extended family stay in the Caribbean. Blott comes to the site en famille and sets up home in a cottage on the estate for several months while working on a project. "I need to make a home. I like to cook and have my own space to read books. My attitude is it must be fun and not too much pressure. At the end of the day the job has to be to the highest standard."

One project was in an octagonal garden pavilion, looking out to the foothills of Snowdonia. The owners redeployed their tennis court as a croquet lawn when they retired, then added the shell house in the garden pavilion. The delighted clients invite Blott back for tea.

When Darina Allen, the owner of Ballymaloe Cookery School in County Cork, wanted a shell house she found some gothic arch windows and built the little shells house around them, laying the foundations and building it from the ground up. It was a collaboration between the owner, the builders and the designer. "In Ireland everyone's equal," says Blott. It has window seats where the late owner Mr Tim Allen used to sit and relax, and Blott created a water feature with a pool and fountain, so the water flows over a bed of shells, using shells from the cookery school itself and from local restaurants. "It was finished on the opening night of the cookery school – on the clients' 25th wedding anniversary," says Blott. "The pool was lit with candles."





Octagonal pavilion  
In a private garden in North Wales, looking  
out over the foothills of Snowdonia









Cilwendeg shell house, Wales





Cilwendeg shell house, Wales



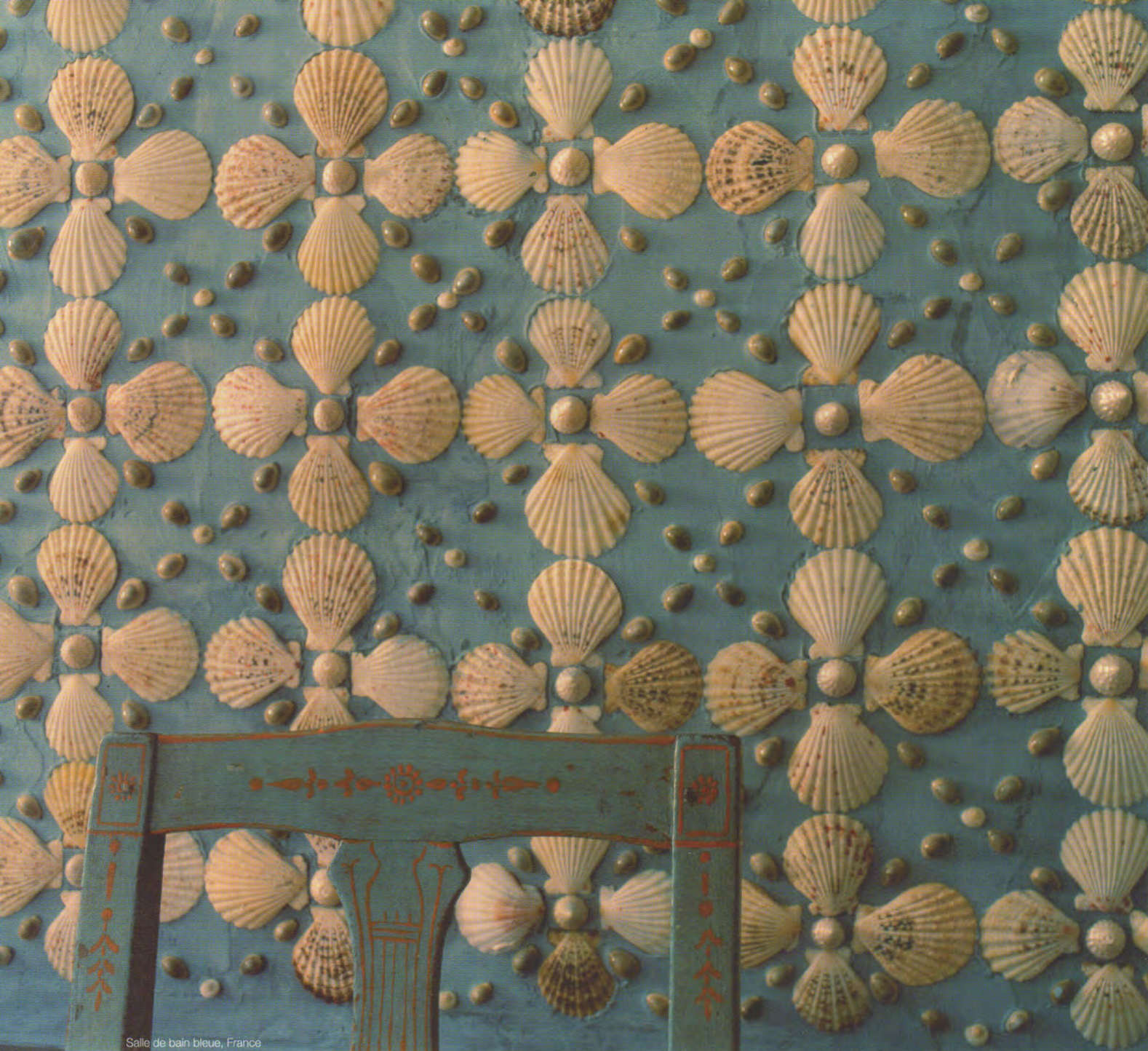
Ceiling detail

Another project is a shell labyrinth design for Belcombe Court near Bradford on Avon in Wiltshire. The owner of Belcombe Court had the idea to decorate an outside pantry in the grounds as a shell house. They stipulated white shells and asked for their children's initials to be incorporated into the design. The idea for the shell labyrinth design on the wall of this pantry came from a photograph of a fountain in India, which had a pattern of water channels in the floor tiles. "It's so simple yet really beautiful, your eye walks it," Blott explains. The pattern of slanting shells in the labyrinth she created has a sense of movement like flowing water – which Blott considers to be her Modernist slant on the traditional technique.

"I work a lot with pattern, not always symmetrical as the pattern develops. The latticework patterns are traditional, but creating movement with shells is a more modern approach. At the beginning it is very slow, the search for ideas, then drawing, doodles on paper, just scribbles really. Once I know what I'm doing, I'm away! The shells know what to do next. Working with the shells is so different from the drawing – the shells' texture and the way the light hits them.

"Each shell is chosen and stuck on by hand. Shells for me are a tool. I have shells from all over the world. When I go to the beach I always pick them up. I go to certain beaches to look for specific types of shells. When I'm doing a design I think by colour not by species. My children and their friends like to collect shells for me, but I never use shells that the children have collected in a private work, that's not fair – it has to be open to the public as they like to see their shells in place.





Salle de bain bleue, France

Blott's latest work is a tribute to the mussels themselves, a public artwork in Tain, Scotland. During the Highland Clearances, in the 1700s, the crofters were thrown off the land by factors and clergymen acting for landowners, who figured they could make more profit from sheep, and later turned the estates into deer parks for hunting and shooting. As their homes were set on fire, many starved or died of exposure during this shameful episode of social/ethnic cleansing. Men folk were sold into slavery and herded onto ships bound for the Caribbean. Others fled to the coast where they had nothing, and survived by eating from the hedgerows. Bonnie Prince Charlie bequeathed the mussel beds to a common fund for the people, so they had cockles and mussels to eat. "So in a way mussels protected the people, they helped save them from starving," says Blott, imbuing the humble shellfish with a heroic status.

*Blott Kerr-Wilson*

[www.blottshellhouses.com](http://www.blottshellhouses.com)

*Some images of Blott Kerr-Wilson's shellhouse designs are published in *The Shell – a World of Decoration and Ornament* by Ingrid Thomas (published by Thames and Hudson)*

*Highland Clearances references:*

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[www.alastairmcintosh.com](http://www.alastairmcintosh.com)

*Alastair McIntosh directs the MSc postgraduate human ecology degree at the Centre for Human Ecology, University of Edinburgh. He is also a trustee of the Isle of Eigg land restitution Trust.*