

Words by Ellinor Thunberg

From Iceland to Norway, building in remote rural spots requires an entirely different way of thinking – and a host of unusual challenges

WORKING

REMOTELY

THIS PAGE Hlöðuberg
Artist's Studio (2021) in
Iceland, by Studio Bua

IN THE REMOTE fishing and farming area of Skarðsströnd in western Iceland – itself one of the least densely populated countries in the world – you can see abandoned concrete farmhouses located a few kilometres apart like a string of pearls along the coast. Icelandic architect Sigrún Sumarliðadóttir, of Studio Bua, explains how houses traditionally have been left behind here – from the first turf houses to concrete farms that were abandoned in the 1970s, when many locals instead opted for shed-like catalogue homes. Some of the old farms are now being revived, though, and Studio Bua – founded by Sumarliðadóttir with Mark Smyth in 2017 – has completed two projects in the area: Nýp Guesthouse (2019) and Hlöðuberg Artist’s Studio (2021).

Both renovations interpret the local architecture, but in a modern and simple way. ‘It is almost like we are stripping it down and continuing with the language of the cultural heritage,’ Sumarliðadóttir says. She has family in the region and has been visiting for many years – which is how the first project brief came about to renovate the Nýp Guesthouse, which also functions as a cultural hub hosting exhibitions, lectures and workshops. The

THIS SPREAD With Hlöðuberg Artist’s Studio, Studio Bua transformed a derelict farm in a remote and rural area



IMAGES: MARINO THORLACIUS



THIS SPREAD Studio Bua's Nýp Guesthouse (2019), in the same remote Icelandic region

'The winds are strong, and often we couldn't reach the area.'

Sigrún Sumarliðadóttir

owners of the now-completed Hlöðuberg Artist's Studio then visited the transformed guesthouse – and Studio Bua's second project, to transform a derelict farm into a home and studio, was born.

Doing two projects in the same remote area means a lot of shared knowledge has been applied – the same team of builders was used and many of the details were refined the second time around. During winter, the area is characterised by a harsh and unpredictable climate, which dictated the work on site, the materials used as well as the accessibility. 'The winds are strong, and often we couldn't reach the area,' says Sumarliðadóttir. 'We had to wait a few days and try again.' She laughs and says that time is an 'elastic' concept there.

Smyth, who is Irish, didn't know Skarðsströnd before and with these two projects sees a huge but beautiful contrast to those he does in central London. 'We really had to be much more flexible in Iceland and go with the flow in terms of what the builders were capable of doing and what we could get there in terms of materials.' A lot of video chats took place to assist the builders; when the architects could finally visit, they were able to collaborate on small details. ▶



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