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Faculty of Design.

Department of Industrial Design.

**The Real Houses of Ireland:
An Analysis of the Irish Domestic Interior.**

By

Ruth McKenna.

**Submitted to the Faculty of History of Art and Design and
Complementary Studies in Candidacy for the Degree of
Bachelor of Design.
1999.**

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Acknowledgements:

I would like to thank Dr Paul Caffrey, my thesis supervisor for his guidance and advice. I would also like to thank Tom and Joan Llewellyn, Ithel and Michael McKenna, Tom and Vivienne Llewellyn, Frank and Rita Larkin, Gearoid and Muireann O'Conchubhair and Mary Gray and Matt O'Connell for their kindness in allowing me to photograph their homes and delve into their lives. For photographs in chapter 5, I thank Lucy Johnston. Lastly, I would like to thank David Byrne, who provided many services, not least proof reader and sounding bat.

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Introduction:

The aim of this thesis is to analyse the interior design of the Irish post-famine family house, and to determine whether or not there is a definitive Irish approach. This will be achieved through the examination of a number of case studies ranging from a mid nineteenth century farmhouse in Co. Waterford to a late twentieth century house in Doolin Co. Clare.

In the following chapters, a number of themes will be discussed. The use of natural and native materials in the Irish house will be looked at. This includes the use of native timbers, native stone and also imported materials, including an approach which would have been similar to that of Scandinavian design. In the past there may have been a reluctance to work with or implement any Irish materials in Irish houses. This was for a number of reasons, most importantly the belief that anything indigenous was inferior, incapable of competing with imported style from Britain and America. In recent years there has been a reappraisal of Irish design, leading to the belief that anything Irish is beautiful, simple and therefore precious. Is it possible that this is also happening with Irish materials and building techniques? Diseased elm only found in Ireland, Irish granite, traditional wall rendering and natural timber floors from Irish wood. The iconography of the Irish interior, which includes both secular and religious imagery and ornament will also be discussed. This is looked at in one of the chapters, a suburban house in Dublin. This chapter gives a background to the Irish interior, social, political and religious and brings together a traditional approach with the material culture that has developed in

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Ireland. The use of space and arrangement of furniture and rooms within the house is the final theme, which is looked at in each of the five chapters. This includes the different uses of the rooms and spaces, which varies with each house examined. In comparison with many other countries, Ireland has a very low population density, with 632 people per square mile (website: <http://www.africa2000.com/>). Unlike other races who will do their utmost to preserve their own sense of privacy, Irish people tend to fill their lives with people and their space with things. So Irish houses are filled with clutter, just to fill the space that they feel they have so much of. In recent years, due more to external influences than a natural change within society, as minimalism has become more popular, there has been a move away from the usual hoarding tendencies of Irish people. There is less clutter, less stuff, but it is still somehow an Irish minimalism. It is somewhat warmer, more welcoming, more acceptable than it's European counterpart.

The key issue of this thesis is to ascertain whether or not there is some facet of Irish interiors that could be said to be exclusive to Ireland and to the Irish people. There has been an amalgamation of styles and approaches in interior design, particularly between neighbouring countries and it may be virtually impossible to differentiate between two houses from a different country, for example. By looking at the following case studies the thesis will determine whether or not there is something identifiably Irish in Irish houses.

These case studies have been chosen to represent a cross section of Irish houses. Some have been inherited and therefore may not represent exactly the people living there. Others have been built by the people living in them, specifically to suit their own needs. All of the houses represent some Irish

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tendencies with respect to Interior design. The first two houses discussed are owned and lived in by my family. The first, a farmhouse was built by my great-great-grand uncle Tom Landers and is now owned by my uncle. The second, built in 1929 by my great-grand aunt, Ellen Mullins, belongs to my family.

The case studies that will be discussed in this thesis are as follows. The first is a rural single storey farmhouse built in 1868, in Co. Waterford. This post-famine farmhouse is representative of the vernacular tradition in Ireland and is discussed with respect to natural materials, use of space and traditional lifestyle, as well as a more modern approach taken by current owners. The second is a rural bungalow built in 1929. This example is an interesting blend of classical interior detail, Edwardian architectural additions such as the bay windows and a modern approach to living. The third chapter deals with a suburban semi-detached house built in 1971. This interior represents a modern urban approach to living, but still retains some of the traditional Irish influences and deals particularly with iconography used in the Irish interior. The fourth interior discussed is a suburban 2-storey detached house built in 1988. The interior was designed by an Irish designer, and represents a more universal, cosmopolitan approach, but retains some Irish features. The final chapter deals with a rural 2-storey detached house built in 1993. The owners, Irish artists, also built this house themselves. These final chapters represent a more aesthetic approach and deal almost entirely with a more modern concept of living.

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Literature Survey:

Of the several books and articles that have been read and referred to in this thesis the following are those that have been of particular interest in it's writing. Many of them have been written by Irish authors about Irish houses, regarding style, period and social history. They deal almost entirely with the large and aristocratic and focus on 18th century houses. They give an impression of Ireland that is not altogether accurate. They fail to recognise the majority of houses in Ireland, owned by ordinary people. Few books available on this subject succeed or even attempt to portray everyday life or anything other than houses of the aristocracy in Ireland. This thesis acknowledges the existence of such everyday, commonplace houses and gives them their due as the houses of Ireland.

Architectural Background:

Maurice Craig's book Classic Irish Houses of the Middle Size (1977) focuses entirely on the architectural aspect of Irish houses. He attempts to present what constitutes central tradition in Irish house building. Craig justifies his choice of case studies by saying that he has looked at less well-known examples for their architectural qualities rather than their reputation, and has avoided to an extent the 'great houses'. This is not an examination of the décor of Irish houses but rather of their architecture, and in this it is a fair rendition. He tries to trace the evolutionary path from the humble cottage to the middle class house of the 19th century. This however is not entirely the case. Craig seems to get caught up in the 'greater' houses, dwelling only briefly on the vernacular and traditional

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Kevin Danaher's homage to Ireland's more traditional building methods is felt strongly in his book, Ireland's Traditional Houses (1993). This book is written in praise of vernacular architecture and is an excellent basis for information on the subject. Danaher is perturbed at the move in recent years towards the use of materials such as the concrete block and cavity wall that completely disregard more traditional methods and materials. The well established crafts of stone masonry, thatching and dry-stone walling for example are as far as Danaher is concerned, endangered species. He bemoans this loss and blames modern building techniques for it. Danaher's love of the vernacular is faultless and well founded. The proliferation of 'bungalow bliss' type houses in the past and even now is responsible for the ruination of many of Ireland's highways and byways. The importance of traditional architecture cannot be overstressed and Danaher's respect for such is quite appropriate in a time when more and more people are returning to more traditional approaches.

Interior Design: Background:

Sybil Connolly's, In an Irish House (1988) is in essence, an account of the lives of the owners of a number of Irish houses and of the houses they lived in. Each chapter deals with a different house, the story being told by the owner. This book attempts to tell the story of life in these houses, described as the 'humble' cottages, townhouses and farmhouses of Ireland, in an intimate and humorous manner. The houses chosen are far from ordinary, some well known for their

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Brian de Breffny's The Houses of Ireland (1975) deals with the Irish aristocracy and nobles of Ireland from 1100 to the early 20th century. Intended to take a look at domestic architecture from the "medieval castle to the Edwardian Villa" (Title) including it must be assumed the more ordinary abode, the book is more a social history of the great house in Ireland. In this it is not entirely misleading. It does touch on the not so magnificent gate lodges and labourers cottages that are a strong presence in Ireland even today, but does not give them the interest that would be expected. The general feeling from the book is one of confusion. As in many of the books read, what would seem to be the initial intention is lost against the draw of the illustrious and the renowned.

Herbert Ypma's Irish Georgian (1998) is a glossy rendering of Georgian houses in Ireland and of the Irish people. A quote from Mariga Guinness in the first pages sums up the whole approach of the book, "Ireland is heaven, everyone is so dotty and delicious, and none dreams of taking anything seriously, except, perhaps, the Horse Show" (Ypma, p4, 1998). This is typical of books written for the foreign market, for those who believe the Irish are drunken layabouts and have fairies at the bottom of their garden. The details of Irish Georgian houses are incorrect and the whole tone of the book is one of unsubstantiated, generalisation with respect to the Irish people as a whole. The

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book deals with Georgian houses but only on a very superficial level, representing a side of life that few Irish people actually get to experience, yet is implied as typical of the people here. This is a book aimed not at the Irish intellectual but the tourist to Irish architecture and interiors.

On the Irish interior specifically, Paul Caffrey's article, Ireland, (from Joanna Banham's Encyclopaedia of Interior Design) (1997, pp 612-620), attempts to sum up interior design in Ireland. Caffrey concentrates mainly on houses of the 18th century, using these to define the Irish interior, and refers to the country house as representative of an 'Irish style', if such a thing exists. Reference is made briefly to vernacular architecture, but only as 'rudimentary cabins and cottages' and there is little detail on these. These houses are not regarded as important though, despite the considerable impact they have had on contemporary architecture. The article focuses on the décor of various houses, focusing on the plasterwork in most of these, most notably Castletown House, Co. Kildare, Lismore Castle, Co. Waterford & Carton Co. Kildare. Detail is also given on the history of interior design in Ireland, using various case studies. While this article is interesting background reading, it does not follow the same brief as this thesis, in that it is unconcerned with the majority of houses in Ireland, which surely have some part to play in the interior design of Ireland. This is but a chapter in a book on interior design and is more a summation of Ireland's contribution to interior design generally, than a strict analysis of Ireland's architecture and design.

Much of the reading done for this thesis has been interesting as background information, but has not been directly relevant or influential in it's writing, as so few of them are written on this subject. A small number of books

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and articles, have been significant in writing this thesis, some for their approach rather than subject and others for their immediate application.

An article in House & Home magazine, "Hidden Treasures, A deceptive Gem in Doolin", written by the editor Karen Hesse, was the basis for choosing to write about the final case study in this thesis. Written about a house in Doolin, the article brought to light a house that, tucked away in the west of Ireland, was definitely worthy of writing about as a significant case study. The article is a piece of journalism, and does not claim to be entirely objective. It does give vital information on the lives of the people who live there and the history of the house; why it was built, why it was designed the way it was and how it suits the lives of the family and the climate of the west coast of Clare. This article dealt with a house worthy of note, having won an R.I.A.I. award a few years before. Yet the house is not one out of reach, or built in a style foreign to most Irish people. It could be said to be the product of life on this island, taking influence from vernacular architecture, modern materials and a blend of contemporary style and traditional layout, and is therefore directly relevant to this thesis.

A book, which although not identical in subject, but influential in its approach and style, is 20th Century Architecture, written by a number of different authors and edited by Annette Becker, John Olley and Wilfried Wang. The book is a survey of Ireland's 20th century architecture, including an examination of architecture in existence in Ireland, but not necessarily of this century. Various aspects of Irish life and history are examined, from Irish literature to ecclesiastical architecture, and how they have affected architecture of this period. Possibly one of the most interesting, relevant chapters is one written by Orla Murphy, "Building in the Irish Landscape," (pp.37-41). The chapter goes

and articles, have been significant in writing this thesis, some for their approach rather than subject and others for their immediate application.

An article in *House & Home* magazine, "Hidden Treasures: A deceptive Gem in Doolin", written by the editor Karen Hesse, was the basis for choosing to write about the final case study in this thesis. Written about a house in Doolin, the article brought to light a house that tucked away in the west of Ireland, was definitely worthy of writing about as a significant case study. The article is a piece of journalism, and does not claim to be entirely objective. It does give vital information on the lives of the people who live there and the history of the house, why it was built, why it was designed the way it was and how it suits the lives of the family and the climate of the west coast of Clare. This article dealt with a house worthy of note, having won an R.I.A.A. award a few years before. Yet the house is not one out of reach, or built in a style foreign to most Irish people. It could be said to be the product of life on this island, taking influence from vernacular architecture, modern materials and a blend of contemporary style and traditional layout, and is therefore directly relevant to this thesis.

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into some of the history of building in Ireland with respect to the connection between man and the landscape, and of the preservation of culture in Ireland. This relationship between man and landscape is described as it evolved through the years, due to various changes in political climate. The English Plantations and the battle for independence had a marked effect on this relationship, changing it from respectful owner to one of peasant tenure, living a life outside the walls of the great estates. This followed through to the peasant owner, as an embodiment of the country and of the resistance to the Big House and the oppressive English presence. The existence of the thatched cottage was regarded as representative of the antithesis to the houses of the landowners and the enemy, and unknowns to them, the rural dwellers were elevated to the level of national symbols. This background of political turmoil is the basis for Murphy's analysis of contemporary architecture in Ireland, which she finds to be remarkable in its connection with the landscape, considering Ireland's history. Murphy comments most importantly on houses like that in Doolin, which are not ashamed of their existence, that do not attempt to hide in the landscape, but rather let the site in to the building.

Tony Farmar's book Ordinary Lives (1991) is a book written on the lives of the professional classes of three generations in Ireland. Taking a number of case studies and using photographs, documents and other publications from the time, Farmar builds up a picture of the lives of the people of the time. The subject of the book is not relevant to this thesis, but more the method which Farmar uses in his writing. The case studies, quotes from publications of the time and realistic exploration of the people in question gives the reader a vivid

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and incredibly tangible impression of the kind of lives these people led. It is this approach that has been of use in the writing of the following thesis.

The main focus of this thesis has been to examine the Irish family domestic interior, and to analyse it's various aspects. What has been found to be lacking in various books and articles is that the ordinary individual has not been dealt with. To the visitor, reading these books it might seem that all Irish people are entirely dotty, completely devoted to ornament and decoration and of course live in gigantic houses in the middle of nowhere. This is not the case, as any Irish person will know. The majority of people in Ireland do not have extraordinary lives or incredible, ancient houses. They live lives similar to many European people. Therefore, the interest in this thesis is in how ordinary Irish people live; in how their way of life, beliefs and interests are manifested in their domestic environment. This thesis looks at a number of houses, intended to represent the abode of many Irish people, thereby including a vast majority that have until now, been virtually ignored.

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Chapter 1: The Post-Famine Farmhouse (1868).

This first case study is of a traditional Irish farmhouse built by Tom Landers (a beef farmer) in 1868. It would have been regarded as quite a sizeable property at the time, as most farmers in the area would have had much smaller houses to accommodate large families and sometimes even animals. While the family would not have been big landowners, they were substantial farmers and were regarded with respect by neighbouring farmers due to the fact that they were educated.

The land on which the house was built was given to Tom Landers as a wedding present and would have been part of the original farm where his family lived. A condition of the 'gift' was that Mrs Landers (his mother) would have a room in the house at all times and that there would be provision made to graze five sheep on the surrounding land. This was typical of the time, and was intended to protect the family's claim over the land, at the same time ensuring a certain dignity for Mrs Landers as she grew older. The structure of the house is that of a traditional farmhouse (see fig 1). The walls are 18" to 2' thick composed of clay and small stones. The interior and exterior of these walls would have been finished with a lime and clay mix plaster, which would have prevented damp as it was a breathable material. Sometimes in this mix, horsehair would have been added for reinforcement to outside edges and corners. The roof was tiled with tun slate, which is composed of thousands of tiny little slates of different sizes, probably the first slate used in the area, but originally it would have most likely been thatch and was later replaced with asbestos. The floors in the bedrooms were covered in wooden boards

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Fig.1: The front of the house, built in 1868.

and in the living area, beaten concrete, originally most likely to have been just mud.

Original House Plan:

The layout of the rooms in the house is symmetrical, typical of farmhouses built at the time and representative of the lives the people would have led (see fig.2).

The central room, which would have been kitchen/dining/living area, is accessible from both sides, with a door back and front, allowing access from the farm at the back of the house and to visitors coming from the front. To the right of this room is what would have been the parlour, kept for entertaining company such as parish priests and doctors, for parties, wakes and mass.



Fig 1: The front of the house, built in 1858

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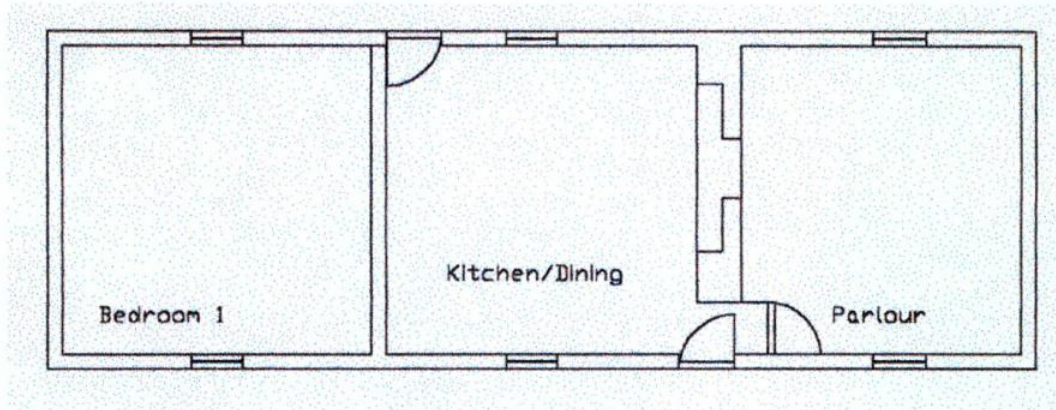


Fig.2: The original plan of the house. The front and back door open from the kitchen and the parlour and bedroom open off either side.

The word parlour comes from the French 'parler', to speak and is an Elizabethan word, used only in Ireland to describe the 'good' room. The idea of having a room used only for entertaining the most important guests is something seen in few countries. Irish people tended not to have a separate dining room, using the kitchen as the dining space. Even though space would have been tight in the house they would still have an entire room set-aside for special visitors. This would have been used very rarely, yet would have to be kept in perfect condition just in case. To the left is a bedroom, originally divided in two by a partition wall. Upstairs in the loft is a small bedroom.

The wall dividing the main living area from the parlour contains a huge fireplace, stretching the full width of the room (see fig 3). It tapers quickly from 8' at the base up to a 2' square and continues straight up to the roof from there. On the right hand side, there was a Dutch oven built in to the wall, which would have been used for cooking food. The bellows in the centre of the fireplace was used to keep the fire going.

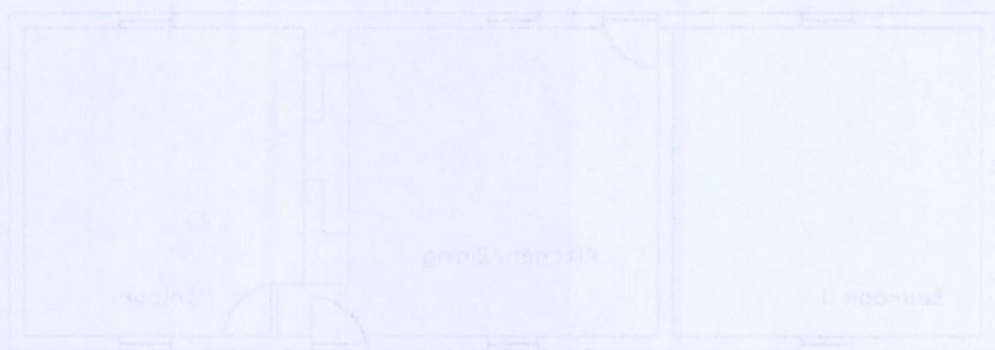


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Fig.3: The fireplace as it is now, showing original stonework, originally plastered.

On the left hand side sat the crane used to hang pots and pans. At the back is a 10" square recess, which would have been used to keep the tea warm. The fireplace would have been finished in the same clay and lime plaster as the walls, which was recently removed. The walls were lined with painted pitch pine wainscoting and the windows with similar panelling, which would have been a traditional method of insulation and damp proofing at the time. This detail remains in the house today (see fig.4)



Fig. 3. The fireplace as it is now, showing original stonework (originally plastered)

On the left hand side sat the crane used to hang pots and pans. At the back is a 10" square recess, which would have been used to keep the tea warm. The fireplace would have been finished in the same clay and lime plaster as the walls, which was recently removed. The walls were lined with painted pitch pine wainscoting and the windows with similar panelling, which would have been a traditional method of insulation and damp proofing at the time. This detail remains in the house today (see fig 4).



Fig.4 : View of the main living room, showing the traditional wainscoting around the walls and panelling around the window recess.

This fireplace was truly the centre of the house. Its huge size meant that any number of different tasks could be going on at once from cooking to drying clothes, and also that this room was the warmest in the house, attracting all the members of the family. This central living area would have been where people gathered at the end of the day, where all the cooking and eating was done, where decisions were made and quarrels resolved. There would more than likely have been a settle to one side of the hearth, which would have slept a labourer or dairy girl. Structurally this is also the centre of the house, with doors at back and front, and also doors into both rooms at either side. So people naturally congregated around the fire for warmth and comfort, as it was the first and last room they encountered. It is also the largest room in the house, 14' long x 14' wide, apart from the space taken up by the fireplace. The windows were quite small, only 2'6" square, due to the fact that windows were seen as unsafe and unnecessary, allowing heat out and in earlier times, enemies in. So light



Fig. 4. View of the main living room, showing the traditional window treatment, the wall and paneling around the window recess.

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was sacrificed for warmth and perceived safety, creating an atmosphere of cosiness.

The parlour would also have been a comfortable room, although rarely used. A hole through the wall common to that and the living room meant that both rooms shared the fire, a very interesting feature of the house. The fireplace was smaller in this room, but as it's only function was to keep the occupants, on rare occasions, warm this was not an issue. The furniture in this room would have been dark and heavy, most likely made from mahogany polished to a high shine and upholstered with a heavy, durable fabric. There would also have been a table and sideboard, for drinks and glassware. As this was the good room, it would have to be kept presentable, and so every few years before the stations began the walls would be whitewashed. 'Stations' is a word used to describe the practice - which began in the time of Penal Laws in Ireland - of having mass said in the houses of the lay people of the parish. This room was completely different to every other room in the house. It retained a sense of restrained good taste and luxury, which the owners of the house wanted to present to the rest of the world, even though the rest of the house was in no way similar.

The main bedroom was divided in two. A big iron bed on one side, with a flock - geese down - mattress slept any number of people. The other side was reserved for parents, and the loft was used for children or visitors. To allow for this loft bedroom, the ceiling in the lower bedroom is quite low, with beams crossing it's length at various intervals. The bedrooms were quite sparsely furnished, with a bed and a chair for clothes. Luxury and even comfort were not prerequisites to sleeping as the bedrooms weren't that warm and the beds

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usually crowded. Privacy was not an issue either, there was not enough space for corridors to divide the various living areas and therefore the family of four children, two adults and on occasion a grandmother, had to put up with each other's foibles and bad habits as a matter of course. In order to go to any room one had to go through the living room, and as the bedrooms led off one another, one of them ultimately became a corridor.

The lifestyle of this family would have been quite basic and simple – led by their responsibilities to the farm. They were beef farmers, but would have had a dairy cow for their own milk, cream and butter. They worked all day in the fields; the children went to school and also helped on the farm. This simple lifestyle was reflected in their house. The big central, multi-functional room with a smaller room off either side was all their needs required. There wasn't even a bathroom, the toilet was outside and any bathing took place in the living room in front of the fire.

This type of arrangement of rooms is representative of an Irish lifestyle that is long since gone, yet still respected for its traditional nature. The lack of private space, yet the allowance of an entire room for entertaining is typical of the Irish people. The welcoming of visitors in to their home was of the utmost importance and still is. Visitors had to feel at ease, and this was achieved by putting aside space for them in the lives of the people who lived there. The notion of privacy is a modern urban concept. There was no such thing in traditional rural and indeed Catholic life and so the use of a parlour, which reduced the amount of space for day to day living was not unusual.

In the 1940s some changes were made to the house, including the addition of a flush toilet, a separate kitchen/dining area and another bedroom.

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This was in the form of an extension to the back of the house, running it's entire length (see fig. 5 plan).

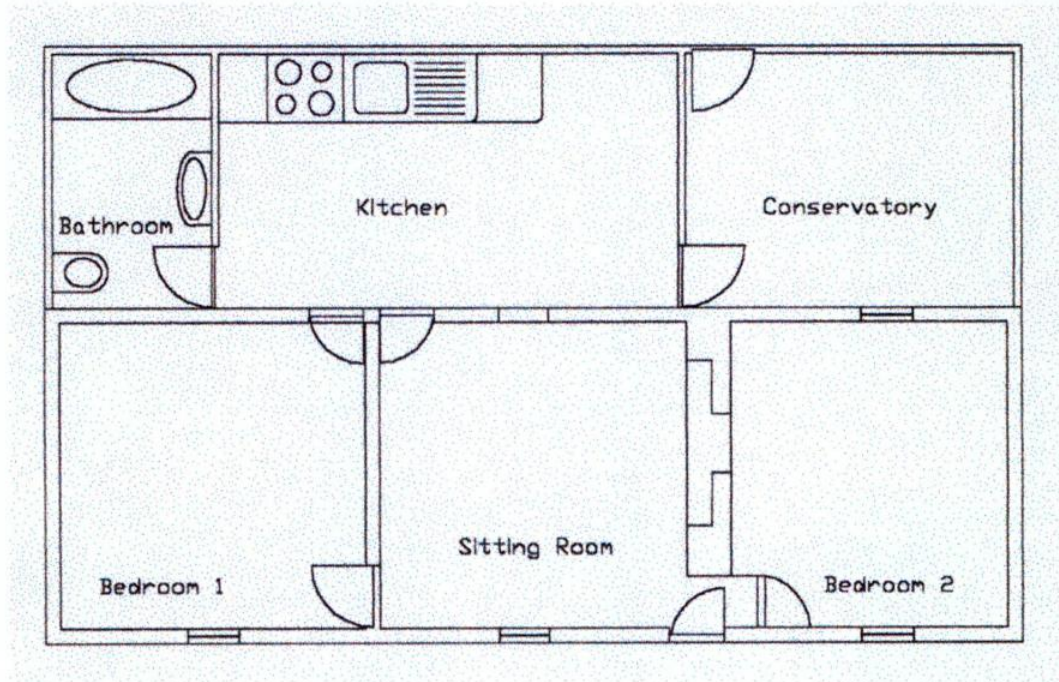


Fig. 5: The plan of the house as it is today, showing the new kitchen, bathroom and conservatory.

The bathroom contained a bath, sink and toilet, and the kitchen had a cooker, fridge, sink and dining table. The big room now became the living room and the kitchen received more of the interest. Big comfortable chairs and couches were introduced to the living room; the fire became partly redundant in that it was more a showpiece than a necessary feature, although it still warmed the toes of the family. A porch was built inside the front door, so it was more insulated than before, and the parlour became another bedroom. The large bedroom was restored to one room, allowing some semblance of privacy. The living room now opened into the kitchen at the back, which was at a slightly lower level than the rest of the house. A second door was added to the large bedroom, which also

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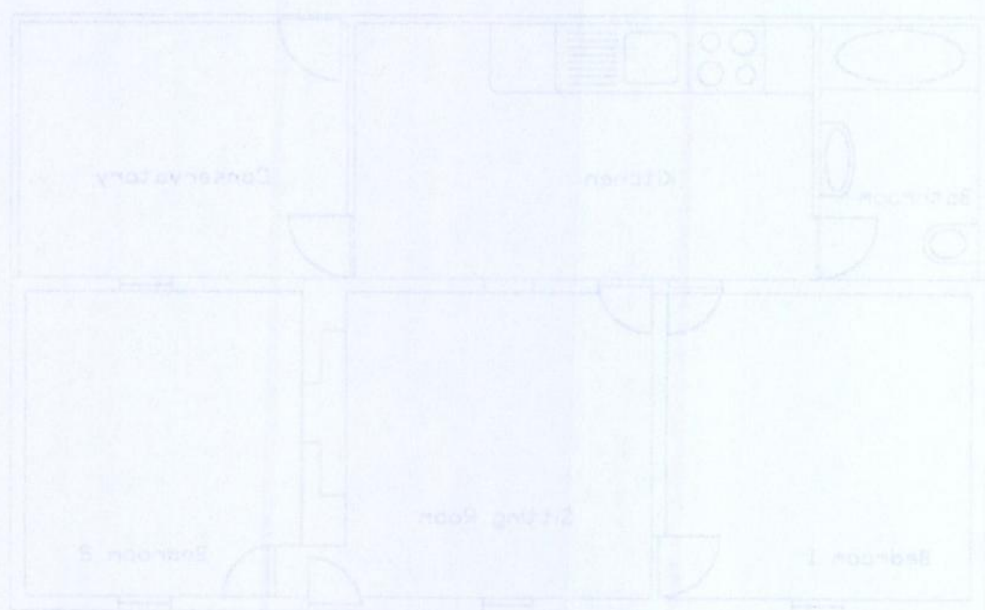


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led into the kitchen, meaning that this room was almost entirely separate from the other rooms. One could now enter the house from the back and go from the kitchen into either the living room or the large bedroom. These changes meant that there was a greater sense of privacy for all in the house. The parlour had become a bedroom, with two beds, and the loft was another. The large bedroom was still a corridor of sorts as it was the only access point for the room in the loft.

The house is now owned and lived in by Tom Llewellyn and his family, who bought it from his mother Joan Llewellyn, about 20 years ago. He has made several changes to the house, most notably the addition of underfloor heating. The layout of the house remains the same, apart from the extension. The bedrooms that were there have been demolished and there is now a conservatory in its place, where the back door is now situated (see fig.6).



Fig.6: The conservatory at the back of the house.

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Fig 6: The conservatory at the back of the house

The kitchen has had a minor face-lift, and now has a traditional flagstone floor, in place of the linoleum one, also to be seen in the living room. At one end of the kitchen there is a wooden dining table, behind which is a dresser (see fig.7).



Fig. 7: View of the redecorated kitchen, with flagstone floor and traditional dresser at one end.

This may be a return to an appreciation of traditional style in the house, where in the recent past there may not have been much money or inclination to

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Fig. 7. View of the restaurant kitchen with flagstone floor and traditional dresser at one end.

This may be a return to an appreciation of traditional style in the house where in the recent past there may not have been much money or inclination to

bother with the aesthetics of such a utilitarian space. The whole room has become more of a blend of colour and texture, more appropriate to its history and style. The original back window of the house, now looking into the kitchen, remains in place. Rough, hessian curtains are hung to frame this opening, with red and white check tiebacks, which adds to the country feel of the kitchen (see fig. 8).



Fig. 8: Detail of the original window recess, with 'country feel' window dressing. The stone wall has been stripped of original plaster and remains bare.

The outhouses have recently been knocked down, so the kitchen windows, without blinds or curtains, now look out on the fields beyond, instead of the piles of manure from years before.

The living room has had a new floor laid in black/grey flagstones as the addition of underfloor heating meant that the old floor had to be removed. The room itself is much cosier than it was in the past, as the old fireplace has been

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Fig. 9: Detail of present fireplace. The arch shown is original, while the base has been built up to hold the new fireplace – the tar barrel.

One side of the huge chimney has been blocked off, to prevent draughts coming into the room from above and the second flue from the parlour fire is now used instead.

An interesting blend of furniture has been accumulating over the years, all of which is from second hand markets in nearby towns. The sideboard running along the wall common to the bedroom on the left as well as the dresser near the door are both second hand, and have been restored by Tom and his

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wife Vivienne. All of the furniture in this room is second hand, and most is Dutch, yet blends into the house well, as there is a sense of disorganised comfort and relaxation about the space inside.

The hearth is still the focus of the room, even though it is not used to its full capacity. Only part of it is now used, but it is the subject of many animated conversations regarding its use in the past, and the reason for some strange features. These included such details as the hollow in the back wall which turned out to be for the bellows wheel and the archway which could only be for a fireplace in the same wall, but which was covered with plaster for years and seemed not to have been used at all!

Apart from the rearrangement of some furniture very little has been changed about the other rooms. Both are bedrooms, one for children and one for adults, with the loft room now used as a playroom in the winter and a bedroom in the summer when it is warmer and there are more people to be accommodated (see fig. 10). All of the walls and ceilings in the house are painted white, which would be in keeping with the older method of whitewashing the walls every few years. The ceiling in the living room is the original one, which is pitch pine boards, and follows to some extent the profile of the roof.

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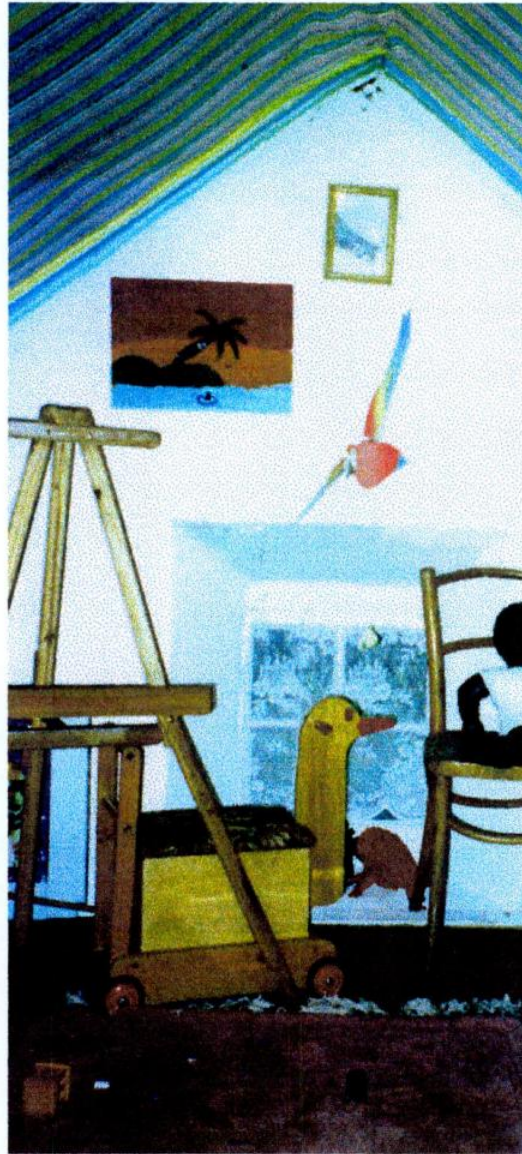


Fig.10: The attic room, now used as a playroom by the two young children and sometimes as a bedroom.

This house could only be Irish, with features like the small windows, the thick walls with no insulation and the enormous hearth as tell tale signs. The way it has been treated by the current owners is also distinctly Irish in its lack of a particular style or arrangement. The eclectic mix of furniture from all sources tells of a certain disregard for fashion and supposed 'taste' that would be regarded as so out of place by others. What makes this house Irish is that there



Fig. 10. The attic room, now used as a playroom by the two young children and sometimes as a bedroom.

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is nothing formulaic or defined about the style of the house, from furnishings to the finish of the rooms. There is no preordained methodology that must be followed and there is no sense of manufactured style that can be seen in some houses.

An effort has been made to preserve the character of the house. While the removal of plaster from exterior walls and the fireplace could be regarded as interfering with this character, it has been done for more practical reasons and with as much care and consideration for the building as possible. The respect for tradition and for a vernacular style of decoration and architecture that is seen here is typical of a growing interest and appreciation in all things native to Ireland. People are continually realising that everything old is not obsolete or unworthy of preservation, resulting in a growing number of restored houses, 'architectural palimpsest – that is, the adaptation over hundreds of years of forms and buildings to new uses,' (Murphy, p.40, 1997). Buildings are being reclaimed and reinvented and rather than dying and crumbling to ruins, buildings of all descriptions are

reclaimed by the land out of which they came, transmuted into adapted forms to serve new functions, added to, built on and built around, all the time reinforcing their relationship with the earth. (Murphy, p.40, 1997)

This reappraisal and rethinking of Irish buildings is characteristic of Irish people's unwillingness to allow a building to decay and disappear – possibly due to the strong protective, territorial feelings they have over the land and its architecture. The appreciation of traditional architecture clearly follows through to interiors, particularly in this example, and is definitely experiencing a renaissance of sorts.

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Chapter 2: The Rural Bungalow (1929)

This second case study is of a house owned originally by Ellen Mullins a spinster, who took care of her sister's children, after she died in childbirth. As she had no children of her own she left it to her grand niece Ithel and her husband Michael McKenna. This was in 1973 as a belated wedding present, on the condition that she would always have a room there. It was built by a local builder.

This house, while not regarded by contemporary standards as anything unusual, would have been special at the time, more for what it contained than for the style in which it was constructed. It was built in the style of a Georgian lodge house, with a blend of classical detail and Edwardian bay windows, which in the early 20s would have been the height of fashion (see fig 1).



Fig 1 : The exterior of the house shows the original style in which it was built.

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Fig 1: The exterior of the house shows the original style in which it was built.

Ellen Mullins was not a farmer, nor did she have much land or money. What she did have was an education, and this prompted her to demand the things, which would have then been seen as unusual. Most notable of these was a flush toilet and indoor plumbing, and a well to supply them.

The method of building used at the time was the surest way of ensuring the house would withstand the test of time. The 2' thick walls and heavily over timbered roof were standard practice at the time, and while regarded as overcompensating in current climates, in the 1920s there was little knowledge of building and insulation technology. This meant that although there was little known of engineering principles, the thick walls did help to keep the heat in and sound out.

The layout of the house is simple and symmetrical, two large rooms at the front, one either side of the entrance off the main hall, both with fireplaces and bay windows. Behind these are two bedrooms, a bathroom and a kitchen (see fig 2. Plan). When the house was built, the bathroom was merely a corridor and the kitchen was only half it's present size. An extension built in the 1960s added the new bathroom and extra kitchen space, as well as a rather primitive sun porch at the front of the house.

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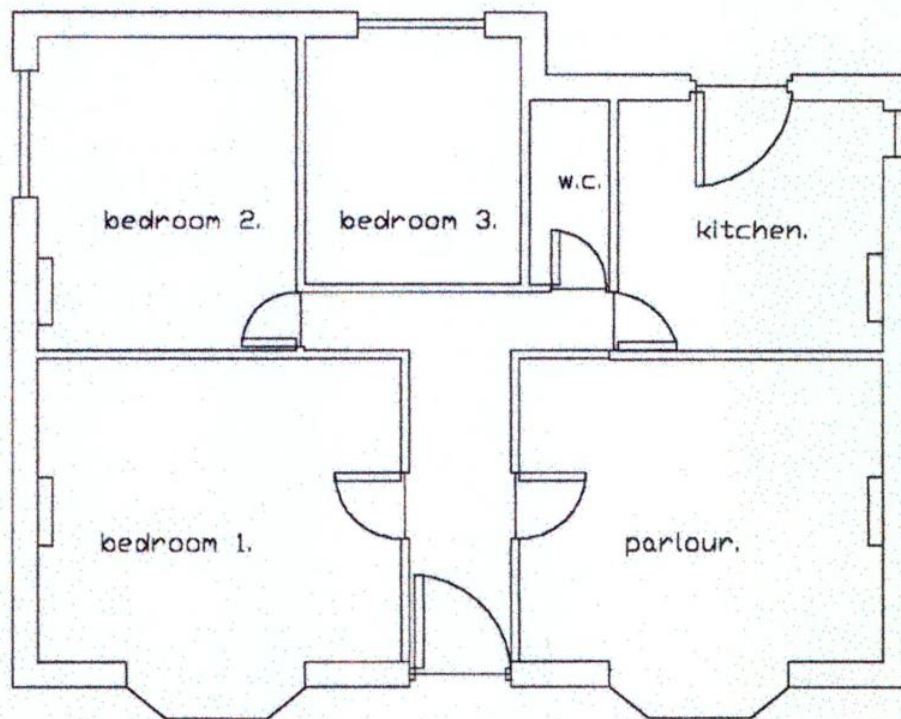


Fig.2: The original plan of the house.

When Ellen Mullins lived in the house, she lived a life that may now be regarded as rather unusual, even a little mysterious. While unmarried, she had the responsibility of caring for the three children of her sister. Also in the house were her brother Martin, who had been injured in W.W.1. and hence could not work but who would have had a pension, and her Aunt Kate. She had no regular source of income, apart from a few cows and hens she kept which helped a little. Her brother in-law may also have sent some money from time to time, to help with the children. What made the situation interesting was that she seemed to have stocks and shares of some kind, which nobody seemed to know anything about, and this is what must have kept the family afloat.

While the house was clearly built as a middle class house, it was not used as such. The reception rooms at the front were reduced to one, the one on

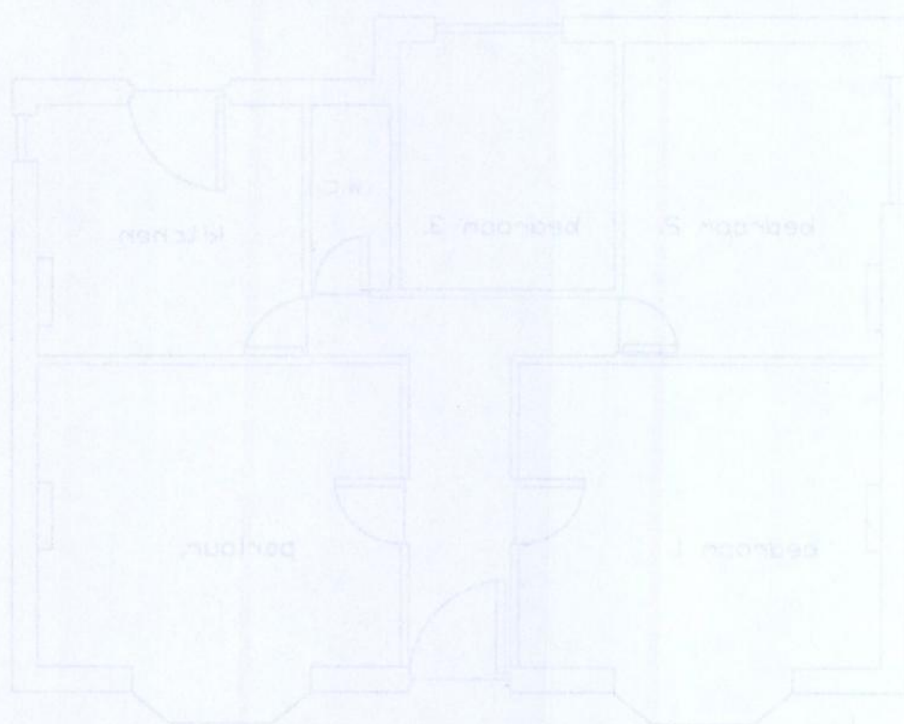


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the left being used as a makeshift bedroom and sometimes as a less than grand second sitting room, never really becoming either. It would have had two or three beds in it for the three children, two girls and a boy, but no wardrobe, dressing table or washstand, which would have clearly identified it as a bedroom. The fireplace would have been the only real attraction of the room, but as one of the exterior walls is west facing and sheltered by nearby trees, it was always colder and less welcoming than the identical reception room on the other side of the house.

The important guests would have been entertained in the living room and they would have had suitable furniture for this function. A heavy mahogany sideboard stood opposite the bay window, which would have held the drinks and good glasses. Also in the middle of the room was a mahogany dining table, and in the recess of the window, stood a piano. The choice of furniture for this room represented for them a sense of grandeur that would be presented to those who visited, and would not necessarily be reiterated in the rest of the house.

The entrance hall was also quite special. As it was the first thing that anyone would see, it had to be more than what the family needed for their own requirements. So it was tiled with a decorative arrangement of tiles, giving the hall a suitable atmosphere and first impression (see fig. 3).

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Fig. 3: The detail of the original tiles in the entrance hall.

The pattern and tiles used here is similar to that used in the local Catholic Church in nearby Clashmore.

Another feature of the hall is the wainscoting, made from pitch pine, which has been painted, (see fig. 4). This presentation of luxury in only one part of the house, to be seen in many Irish houses is possibly representative of a certain sense of Irish inferiority. The rest of the house, which would have been suitable for neighbours and family, could not be seen by important guests, as it simply was not good enough. Even in modern times this is often the case. Those who do not know the family will knock on the front door, as they are unsure of their status. On the other hand, it would be considered an insult for a friend of the family to come to the front door, as it would imply that they were somehow of higher standing.

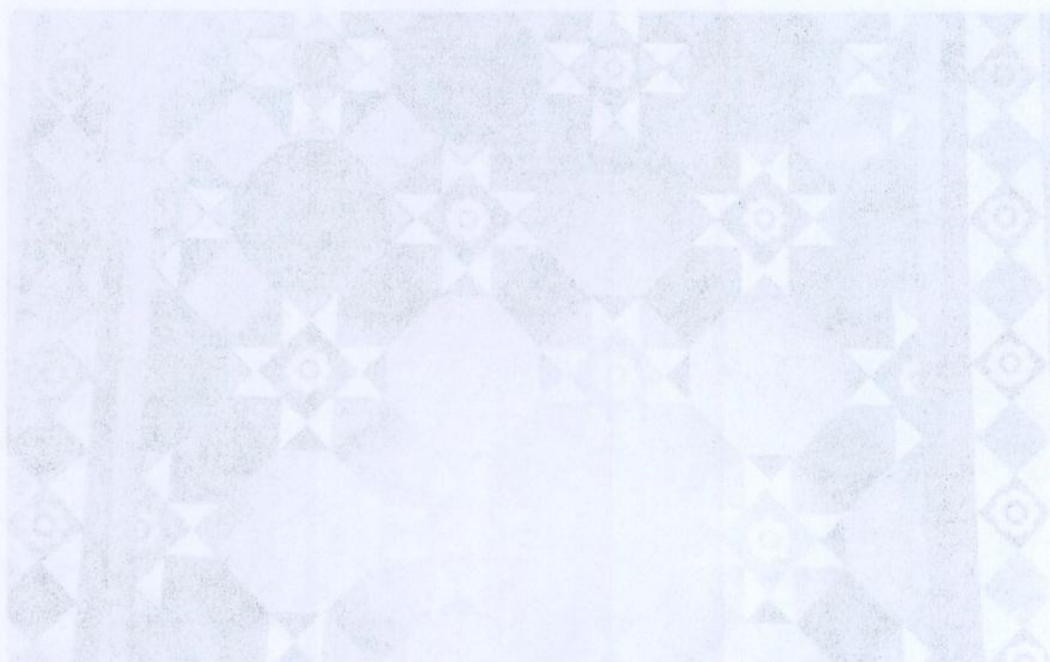


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Fig. 4: The main entrance hall: the wainscoting can be seen lining the walls, with the tiles stretching the length of the floor.

The kitchen would have had a big fireplace initially; similar to that in the farmhouse in chapter 1, but not quite as large, used for cooking and bathing. A solid fuel stove and gas fire later replaced this, around the same time as the extension was added. There would also have been a kitchen table for preparation of food and eating, and most likely a kitchen dresser. This was not uncommon and would have been seen in most houses of the time. After the

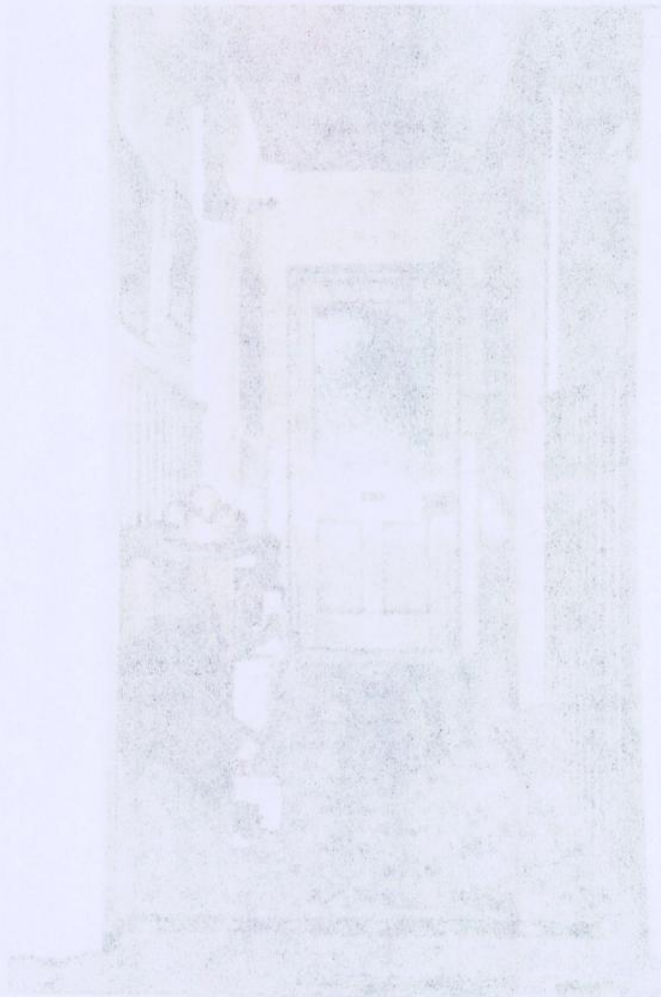


Fig. 4. The main entrance hall, the vestibule and the kitchen and bath.

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uncommon and would have been seen in most houses of the time. After the

addition of the extension, the kitchen would have had a sink, due to the new electric pump outside, where before the water would have been collected from the roof and pumped by hand into a tank in the attic.

Most of this house was a standard design for the time in which it was built. The arrangement of rooms, with the most important to the front for visitors and the bedrooms to the back in the dark would have been the case in most houses of the period, and still follows through to houses being built today. There was the progression to more division of space, separate bedrooms, corridors and a bathroom, which led to more privacy for the occupants. This may have been a little before it's time, due to the fact that Ellen had been educated in England, but it was soon to come to most Irish houses. It may also have been an attempt to mimic the houses of the gentry to a certain extent, a bid to emulate their way of life. In the 1960s an extension was added to the house, this was a flat roof addition, which extended both the bathroom and the kitchen. The original bathroom, became a corridor and the kitchen size almost doubled (see fig.5).

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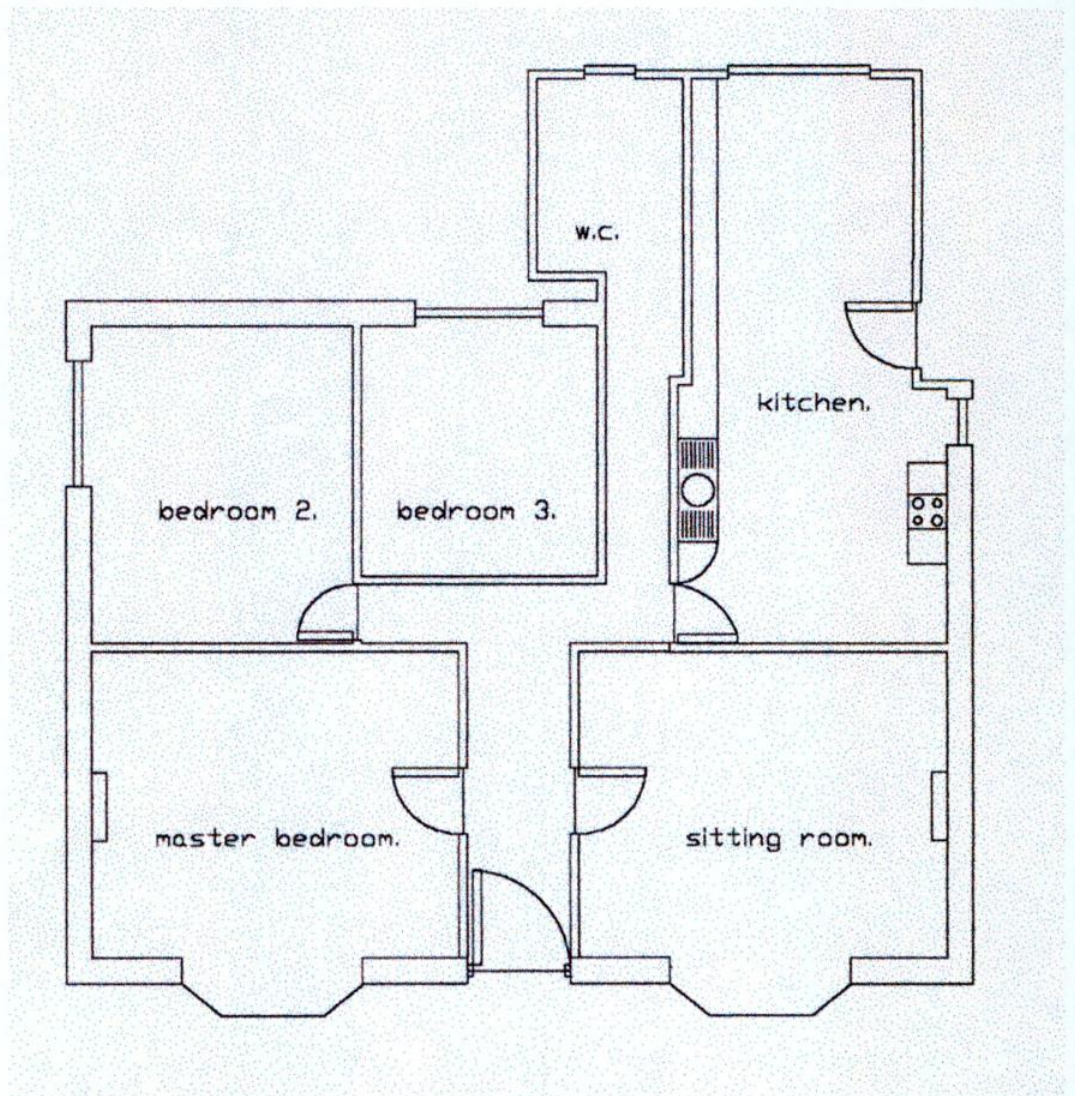


Fig.5: The plan of the house as it is today, with extended bathroom and kitchen.

When Michael and Ithel McKenna came to live in the house, they began to slowly make several changes, mainly in the form of extra storage.

- In the front room, that which had been the parlour, a wall of shelves was added to house the hundreds of books they gathered over the years (see fig. 6).

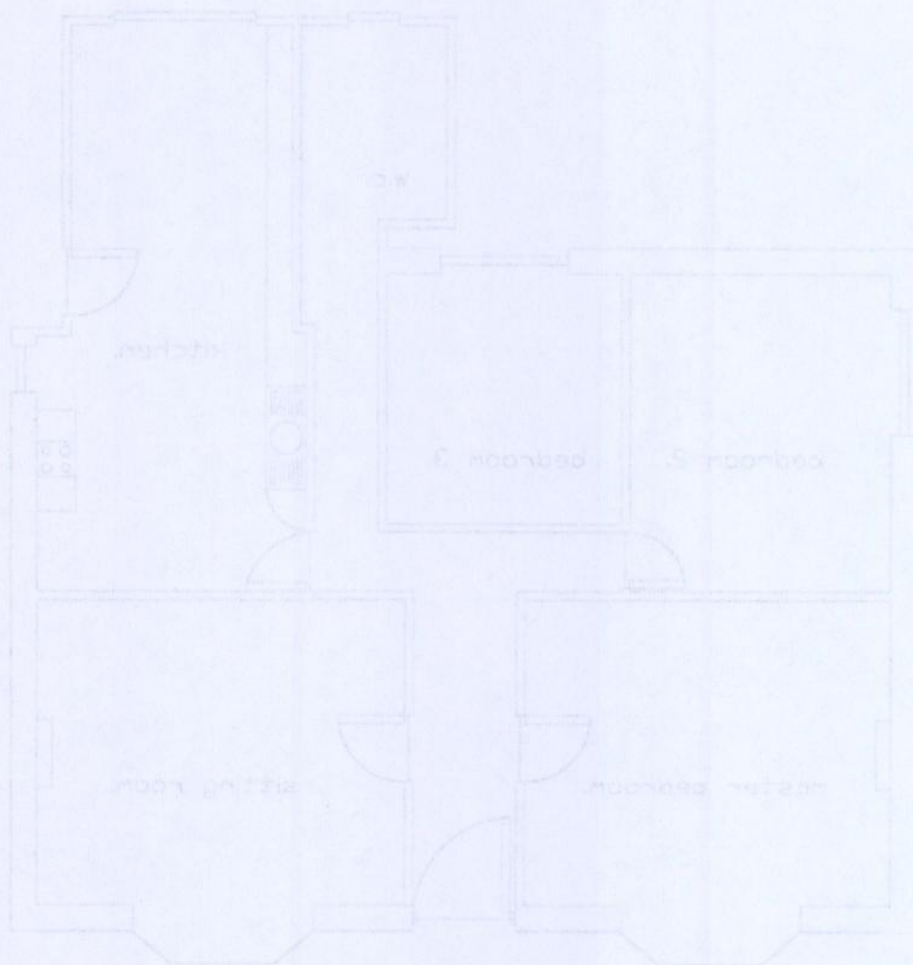


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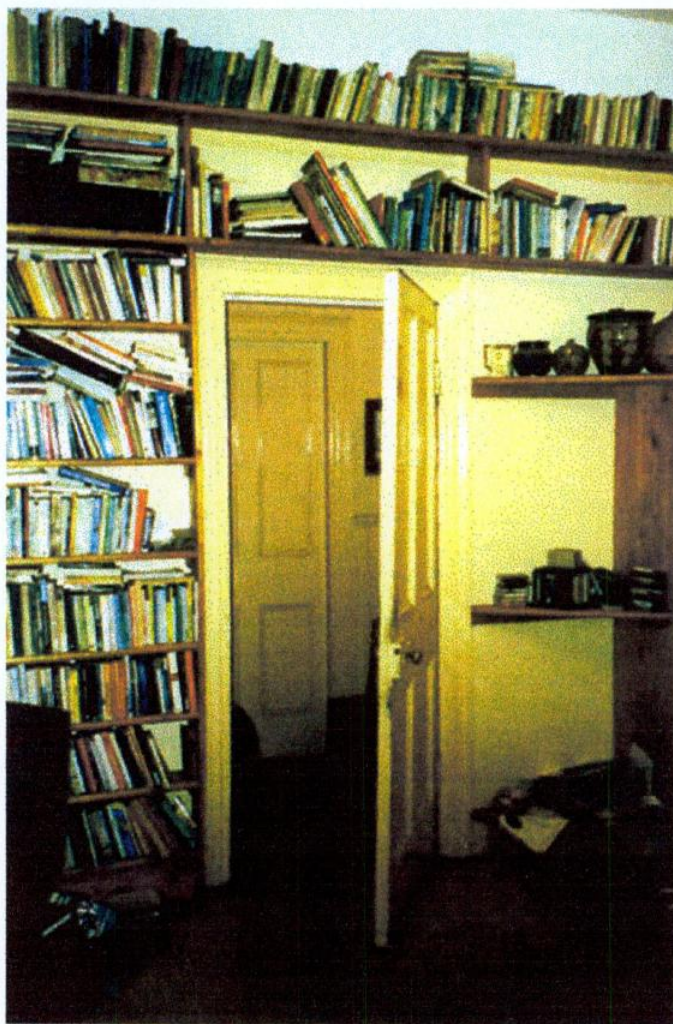


Fig. 6: The shelves added about 10 years ago to house the large collection of books.

This room became more of a relaxing, living room, where the family would gather at the end of the day, to sit by the fire and play games on the floor.

- The porch at the front of the house became a playroom, loved by the children, as it allowed all sorts of fantastical games, hated by adults as it had a tendency to leak in the winter and was begging to be demolished, and was soon after.
- The room on the other side of the hall became the master bedroom, with the other two bedrooms for children. Wardrobes were added to two of the rooms, the third being too small for such an addition.

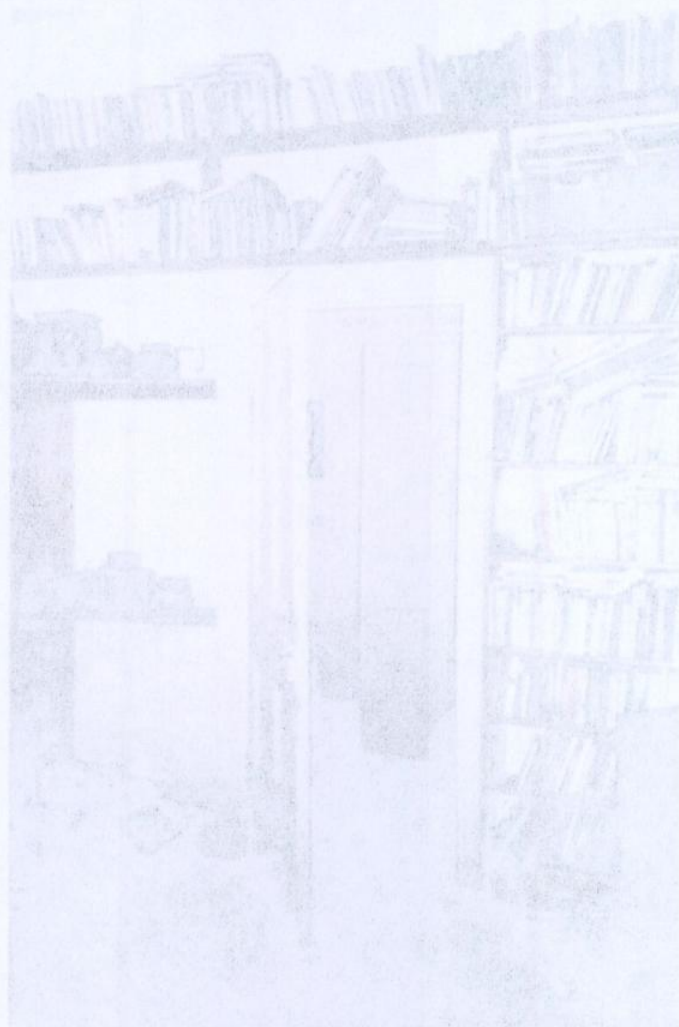


Fig. 6. The school building about 10 years ago to house the large collection of books.

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rooms, the third being too small for such an addition.

- The kitchen eventually lost the solid fuel stove, which was replaced by an electric cooker and oil heating. Children had gone beyond using the heat of the stove to warm them after a bath, and it had lost its sense of charm along with its inability to work properly. The opposite wall was lined with pine cupboards to house kitchen accoutrements. These were made by Michael, with the help of a local boat builder, Bruce Bell, and add a feeling of warmth to the room which, as it is north facing is long, narrow and rather dark (see fig. 7).

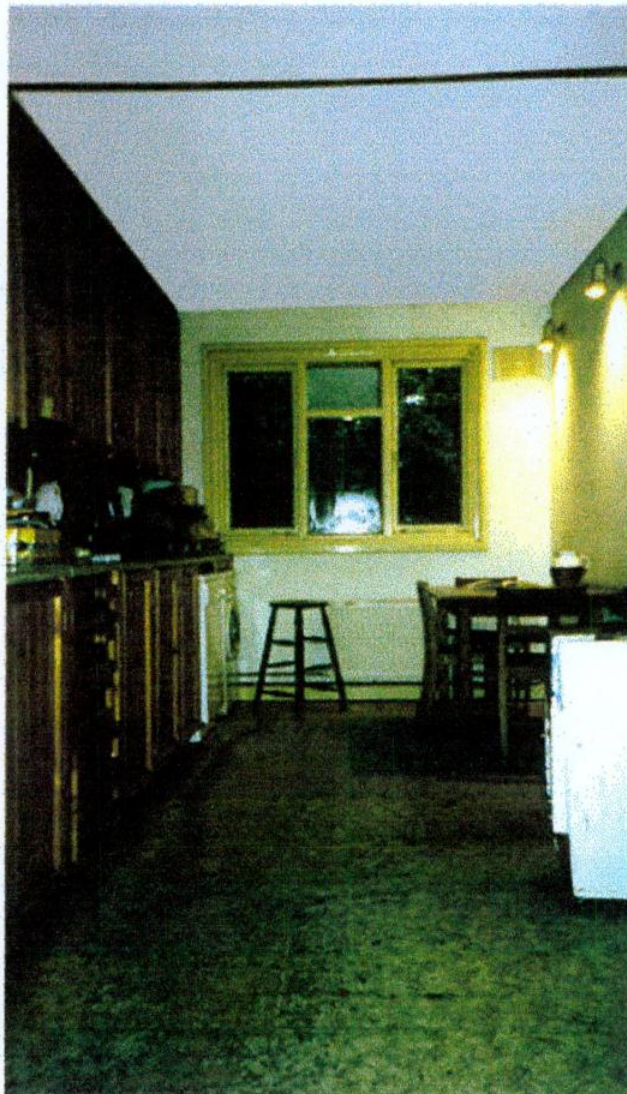


Fig. 7: The kitchen as it is now, one wall lined with cupboards.

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Fig. 7. The kitchen as it is now, one wall lined with cupboards

Much of the changes that were made to the house were done with the intention of keeping the essential mood the same, no major structural changes have been made, and few of the original fittings have been touched. At times it was thought that a carpeted hall would add a sense of luxury to the old house, as it can get rather draughty at times but covering the tiles was out of the question, so the only room to get a carpet was the sitting room. Also, the sash windows, which are beginning to rot slowly, have remained untouched, apart from being painted, as the modern alternative of replacement aluminium windows would have destroyed the character of the house.

The warmth and informality of this house is represented in a number of ways, firstly in the use of natural materials in furniture and ornament. There is a small, subtle collection of wooden crafts, which for this family represents a love of all things natural. In the entrance hall there is a collection of wooden fruit, made by local woodturner, Tim Froud, labelled with the appropriate varieties, Apple, Cherry and Oak (see fig. 8). This is a link with the outdoors and nature, which is very important for the family that live here. In the entrance hall, there is also a number of paintings by Joan Llewellyn, Ellen's niece and Ithel's mother, not a family blessing or holy water font, but traditional and comforting all the same. Also dotted around the house are a number of candles, another link with the spiritual and natural, and an attempt to hide the flaws that are bound to appear in such an old house in bright light!

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Fig.8: The wooden bowl of fruit in the entrance hall, with a collection of bowls by local wood-turner, Tim Froud.

- There is a distinct lack of overpowering ornament in the house. Everything from fireplaces to doorways has been reduced to its minimum, without interfering with the original design. There are no floral carpets or patterned wallpaper. The furniture is simple and functional and appropriate to the simple, unassuming style of the house.
- In the kitchen, the layout is quite basic. The length of one side is taken up with a worktop counter. This houses sink, washing machine, dishwasher and laundry cupboard. Food and dishes are stored above and below this work surface. The other side of the room is taken up at one end with a dining table and at the other with a cooker, boiler, fridge and freezer. This is one of the cosiest rooms in the house, and after the sitting room is the most popular for chatting and working. Because of its size, it is possible to have a number



Fig. 3. The wooden bowl of the entrance hall with a collection of bowls by local wood turner.

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of activities going on at once which would reiterate the traditional way of living in vernacular kitchens.

- The sitting room activities revolve around both the television and the fire. They are equally enjoyable and the furniture is arranged to take advantage of both (see fig. 9).

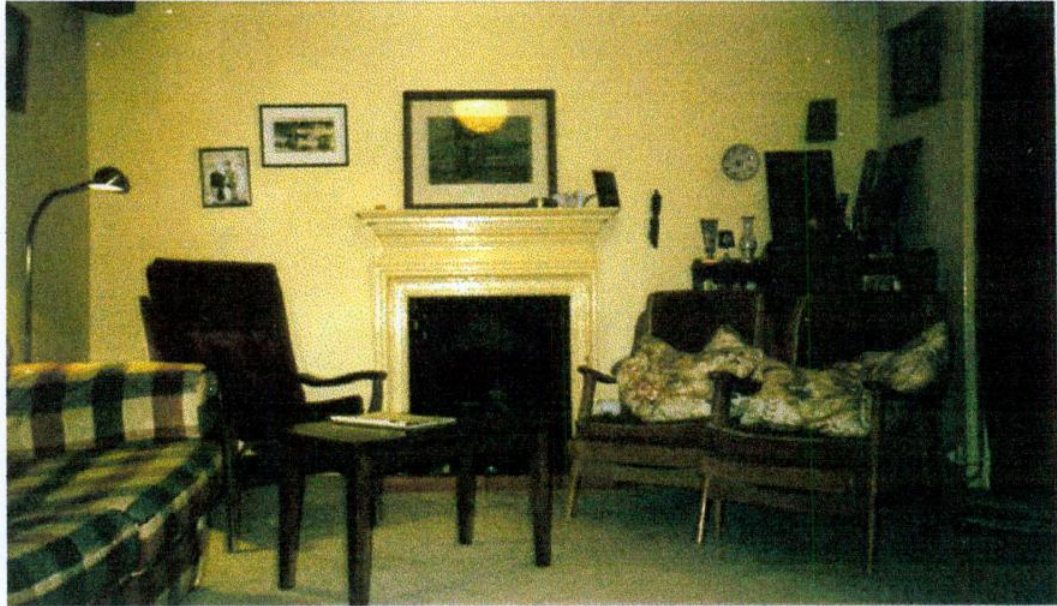


Fig. 9: The fireplace in the sitting room, surrounded by armchairs and couch.

Armchairs remaining from Ellen's time there are still used, despite their shabbiness. The piano is long gone, entertainment now provided by the television. This room is also used for study, and in the bay window is a table used for this purpose (see fig.10).

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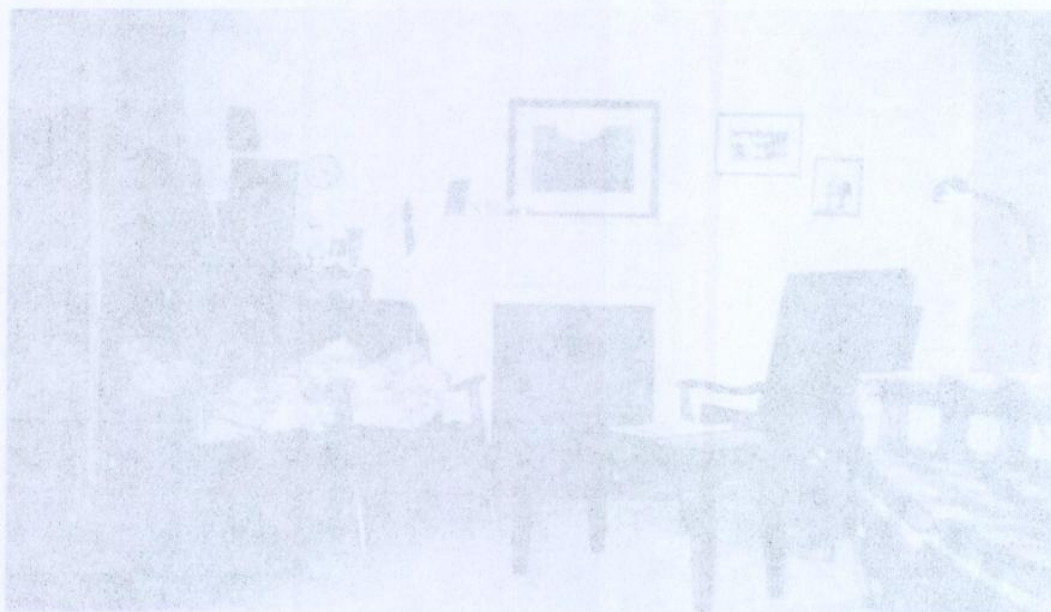


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used for this purpose (see fig. 10).



Fig. 10: The bay window in the sitting room, which lets in lots of light and is used for studying.

The sash windows are the original ones.

The questions of what this represents of Irish interior design or what the role of interior design is in Ireland must be asked. Possibly the strongest feature of the house is that it has not been planned. The design of the layout of rooms was the choice of some anonymous builder. The original owner, Ellen Mullins insisted the addition of plumbing on, and everything that can be seen today has evolved slowly since then. There is no predetermined design 'theory' or plan. The owners of the house may not even consider the work they have done to be 'designed'. It is more a slow process of improvement and addition of comfort, which is in keeping with the original style of the house. The way in which the house has been furnished and decorated is reflective of the kind of people that live here and of a way of life that is typical of some but not all Irish people. What can be said for sure is that there is no definite, easily identifiable Irish style or arrangement represented in this house.



Fig. 10. The bay window in the sitting room, which lets in lots of light and is used for studying. The east windows are the original ones.

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Whether or not the design of our houses plays a part in the way we perceive ourselves is also an interesting question. There is always a certain degree of vanity and surety that the houses we live in represent our inner self, and perhaps the tendencies of a nation! There are aspects of this house that represent a side of Irish interior design. The approach adopted here, which attempts to blend traditional features with contemporary living in a sensitive way is perhaps representative of a growing realisation in Ireland that the vernacular and the traditional need to be preserved, if only to remind ourselves of our own history.

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Chapter 3: The Suburban Semi-Detached House (1971)

This case study is of a suburban semi-detached house in Coolock, Dublin. It is owned by Mr and Mrs. Larkin and their two children. The Larkins bought the house in 1980, as they felt they needed more space and the house they were living in did not have an extension and this one did, in the form of a garage. Another reason for the move was that their old house was in a terrace with no access to the house other than from the front, while this house was semi-detached, with access from the laneway behind the house. This was regarded as important to the family for a few reasons, first of all Mrs. Larkin is from Enniskillen, where she would have been accustomed to more space and felt hemmed in living in a terraced house. Also the existence of the garage meant that there was the option of converting the space if it was needed in the future. The fact that this house had a large back garden also meant that another garage/workshop could be built at a later date, and accessed from both the lane at the back of the property, from the garden (see fig.1).

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Fig.1: The front of the semi-detached house.

The layout of the house and arrangement of rooms is not dissimilar to many suburban houses. On the ground floor there is a living room at the front of the house, which is rarely used. Towards the back there is a dining room cum television room, which would have originally been the kitchen and dining room. Beyond this, through what would also have been the back door of the house is the kitchen, beyond which is a small w.c. The garage, now converted to a spare room, but used as a study is accessed through a door off the short hallway at the back of the house. Upstairs there are three bedrooms and the main bathroom (see fig.2 plan).



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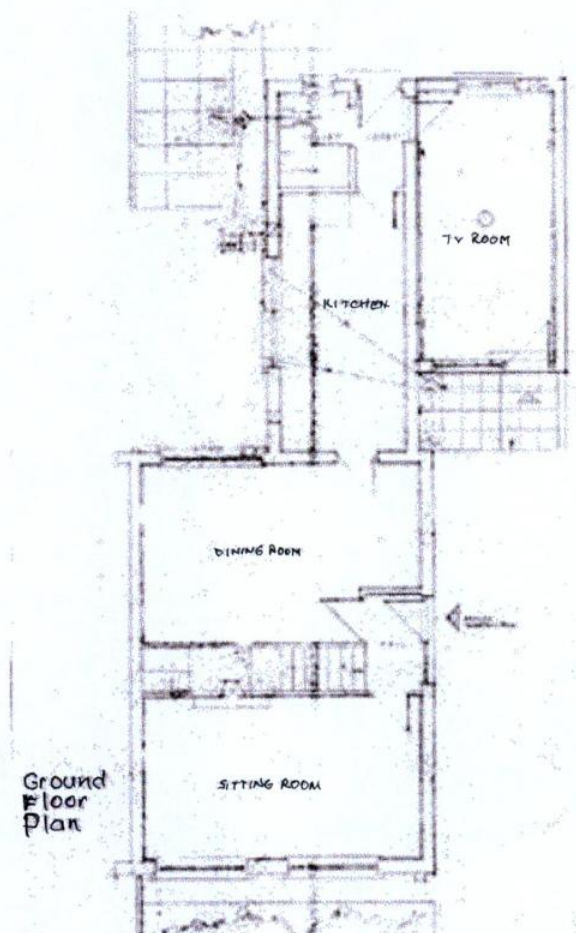


Fig.2: The ground floor plan of the house.

The most dominant feature of this house is the strong presence of political and religious memorabilia. These include a picture of the Sacred Heart and some, which are less ordinary, like the Salvador Dali representation of Christ on the Cross. Friends who have returned from holidays in other countries have given many of these to the family, and some have been handed down from older generations. Mrs. Larkin is also a fan of the Kennedy family, as they are Irish and there are also a number of Kennedy mementoes around the house.



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The collecting of religious iconography has a long and fascinating history in Ireland. Certain items are strongly linked to the granting of indulgences. Possession of certain objects, such as pictures of the Sacred Heart, holy crosses, medals and so on enabled the recipient to gain various indulgences on the performance of certain prescribed good works or acts of piety. In receiving these indulgences, the person in question was excused from punishment in a later life for a sin committed, once that sin had been forgiven. So by having a number of these objects in the home, blessed and regarded with respect, the family or individual was excused payment 'of the debt of temporal punishment after the guilt of sin has been forgiven,' (New Catholic Encyclopaedia, p482, 1967).

These images are dotted all over the house, beginning in the front hall. There is a holy water font just inside the front door in the form of Our Lady, which the children were encouraged to use when they were younger. There is also a Padre Pio crest here, seen to bless the family as they enter and leave the house (see fig.3).

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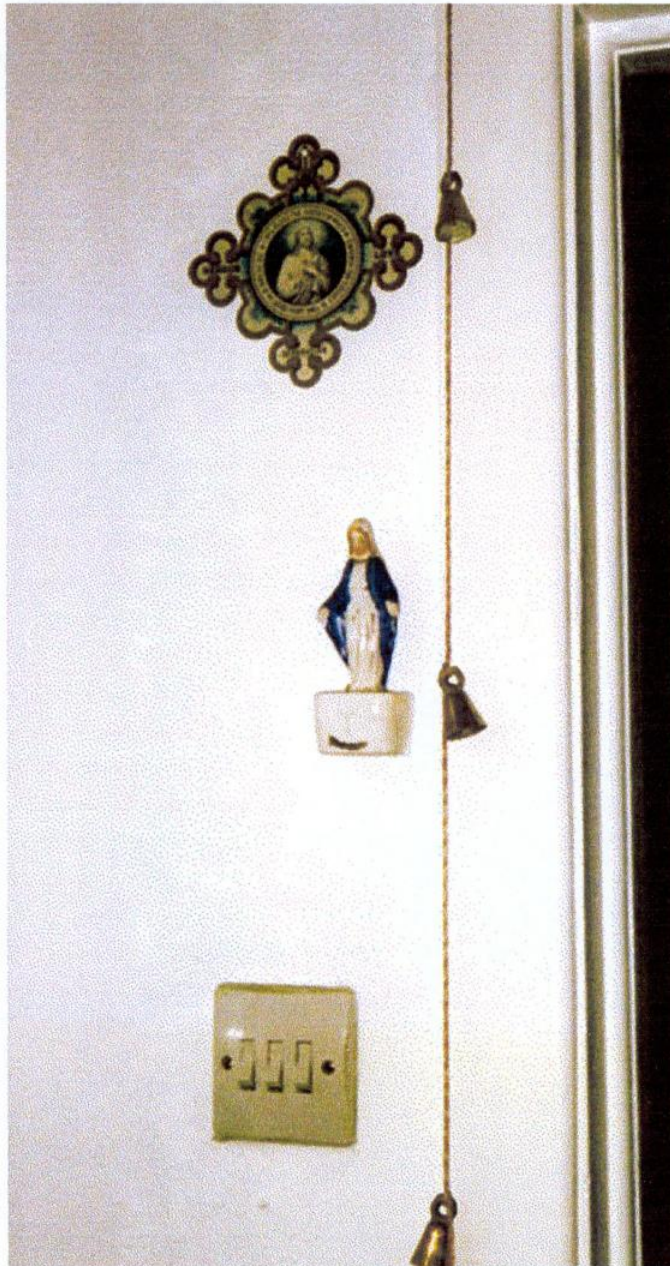


Fig.3: The holy water font and crest inside the front door.

In the living room at the front of the house, just inside the door there is a collection of plates, one of which is a representation of Ruth at the Well, from the Bible and a framed family blessing. Over the light switch there is a paper cross, sent to the family from friends in Durbin, Australia. The dresser at the far end of the room holds two Kennedy busts, one of Robert Kennedy and the other of

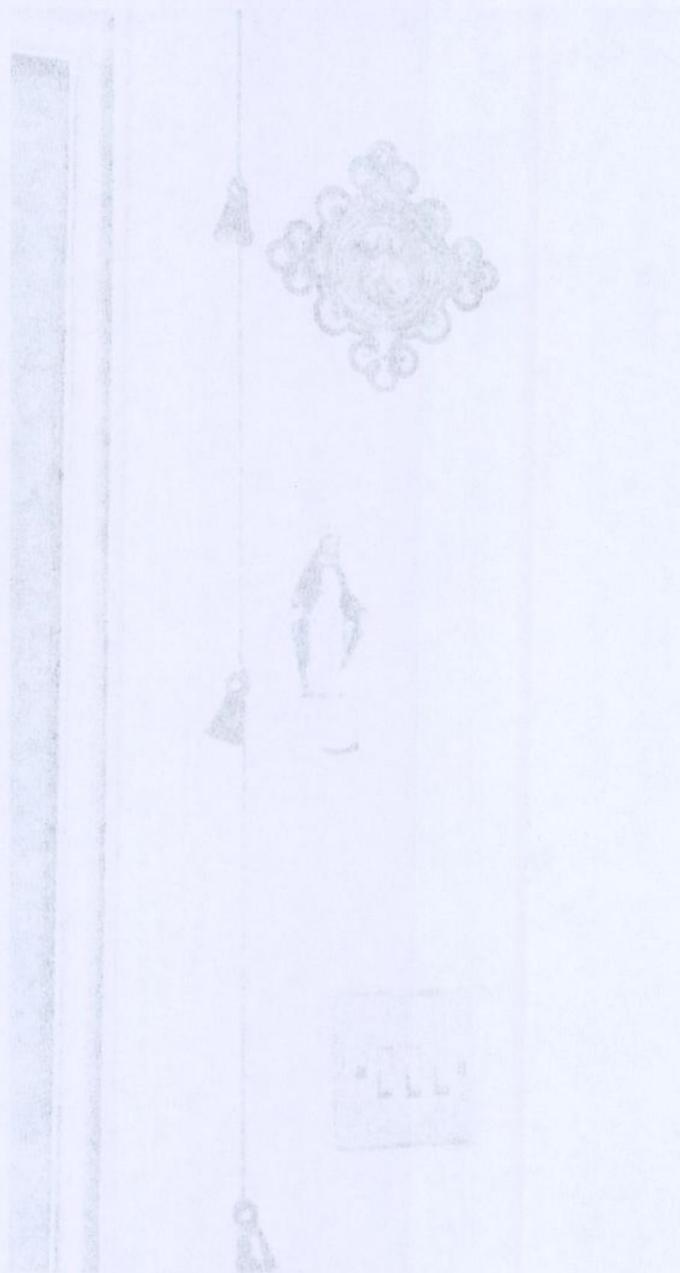


Fig. 2. The boy's room and chest inside the front door.

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John F. Kennedy. These were bought by the children in America, one in Cape Cod, where the Kennedy family have a holiday home and the other in The President's Shop in Washington D.C.(see fig.4)

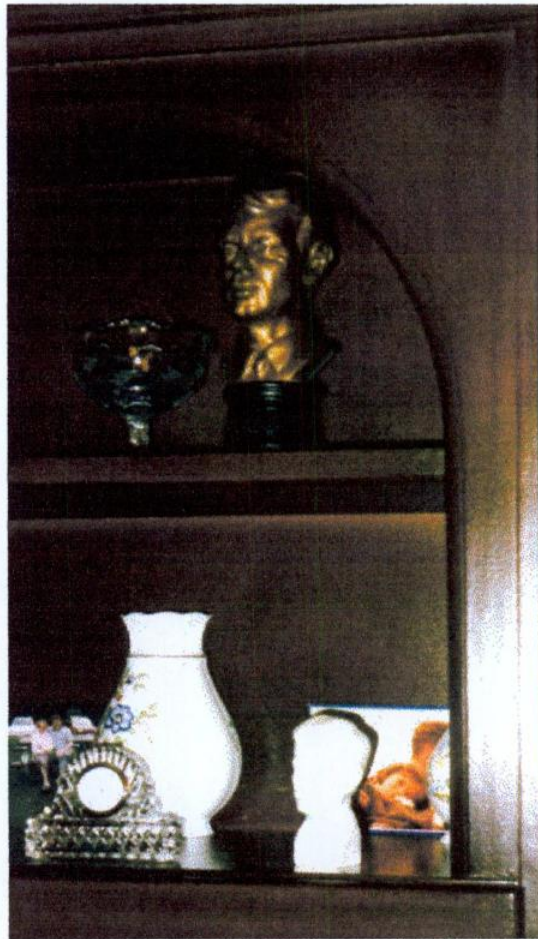


Fig.4: The Kennedy busts, in the dresser in the front room.

In the dining room there is a collection of family photographs in one corner; the children when they were young, first holy communion celebrations and a portrait of the childrens' grandfather in uniform (see fig.5). This is in a sense a shrine to the family history, something that Irish people partake in, in many houses, but may not regard it as an altar.

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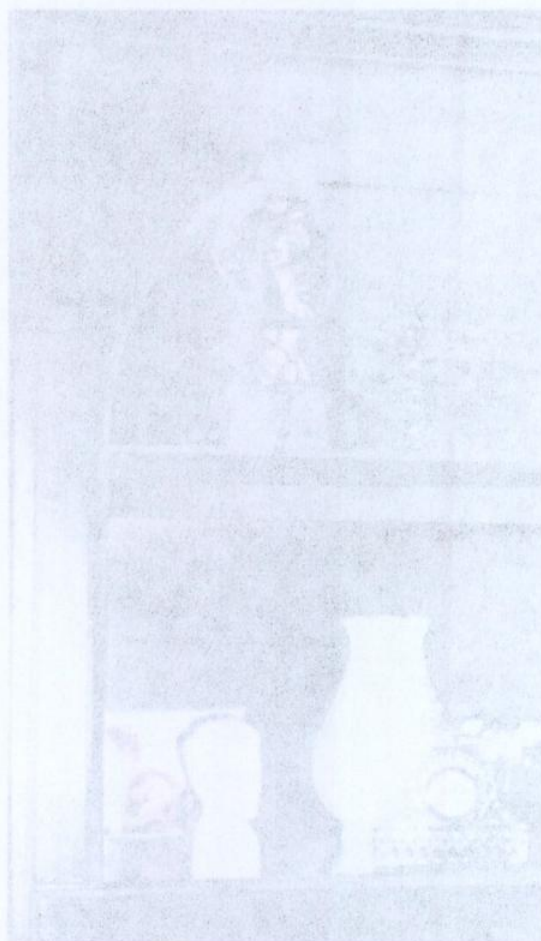


Fig 4. The Kennedy bust in the display in the front room.

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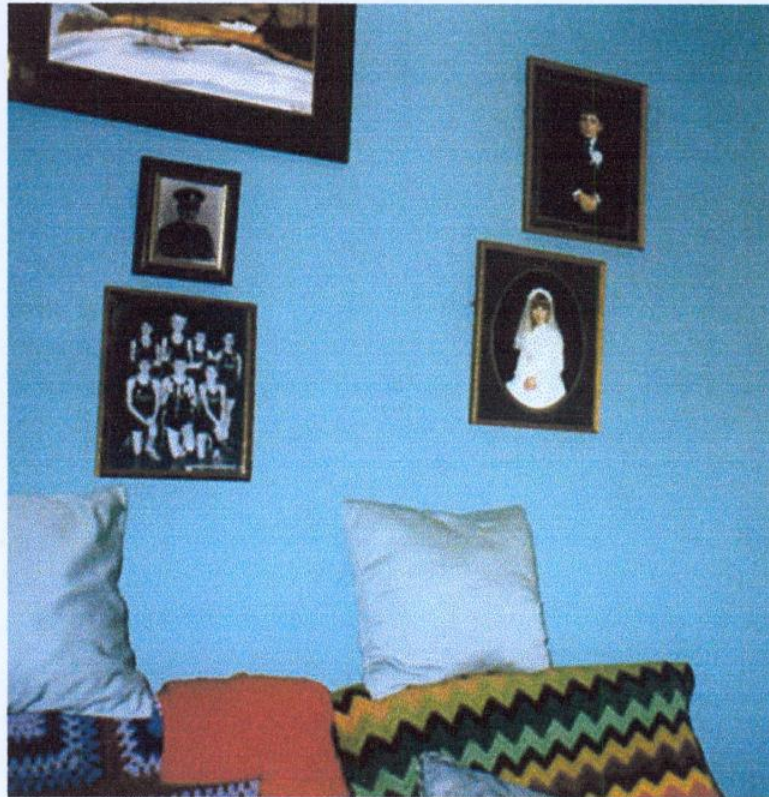


Fig.5: The family photos in the sitting room, together with paintings.

This phenomenon has been discussed in depth with respect to Mexican culture, which is not entirely different to our own. This gathering of familial imagery is seen in Mexican houses, and is used as a method of denoting importance and honour to members of the family who are dead and those who are regarded with love and respect. In Mexico, "religion punctuates the days of the week, the seasons of the year, the periods of celebration and of fast" (Gutierrez, 1997, p.38.) in the same way that it does in all Catholic countries, who would regard their faith as the most important aspect of their lives. In Mexico, 'home altars' use "photographs, trinkets and mementoes to construct family histories that visually record one's relations to a lineage and clan." (Gutierrez, 1997, p.39)

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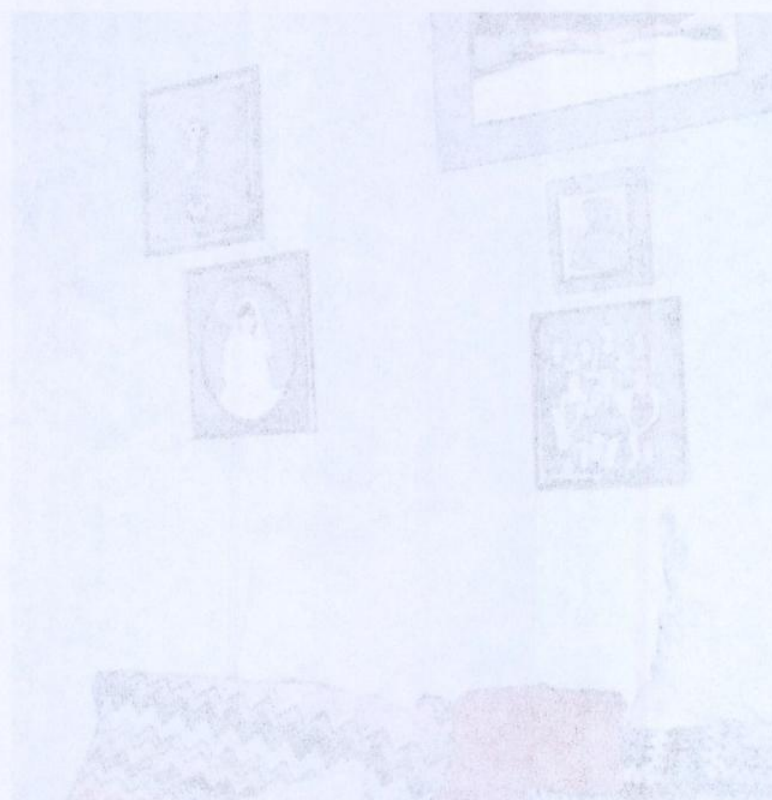


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the family, which hold a special meaning for that family and are given a place of respect in the house. It is a way of holding on to the past and their ancestors and reinforces their sense of belonging to a clan, of having a family history.

Other religious iconography include a print of Leonardo da Vinci's, 'The Last Supper' brought as a present from Italy which is situated on the wall in the dining room. There is also a Salvador Dali print of Christ on the Cross, which came from their grandmother's home. Beside this, an interesting contrast, is an Elvis clock, another love of Mrs. Larkin, with a number of similar paraphernalia spread around the house (see fig.6).



Fig.6: The Dali print and Elvis clock, side by side on the wall in the living room.

In the kitchen the religious memorabilia continues. There is a collection of holy water bottles lined up on the counter by the window, and also on the table. There is a small plaque, blessing the maker of the tea in the house, a distinctly Irish note, yet in line with the importance of religion in the house. Above this is a wooden rack holding a collection of Irish pottery, with mortuary cards of a number of relatives stuck in behind. This is typical of Catholic people,

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who believe the dead watch over them and give them a certain respect for this (see fig.7).

Fig.7: Mortuary cards and more family photos in the kitchen.

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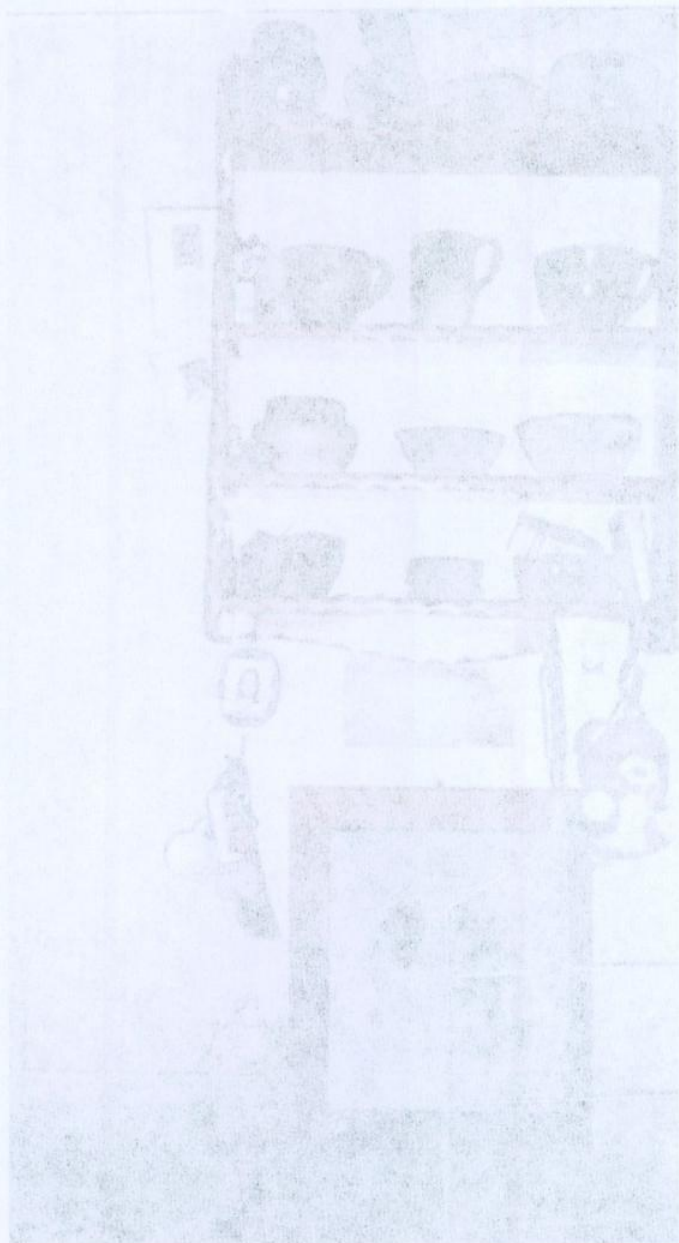


Fig. 7. Mortuary cards and more family photos in the kitchen

The use of mortuary cards is not restricted to the home. They are seen in cars and in places of work also. The reason for this, being to remember the person and ask to be watched over by them. The bottles of holy water are from Knock.

a place of pilgrimage in the West of the country, some having been blessed by the local parish priest (see fig.8).



Fig.8: The collection of holy water bottles lined up against the window in the kitchen.

The fridge is covered in an amusing mix of magnets, some sent by friends on holiday; some collected by the family. Among these are magnetic holy medals from Italy, crosses, Elvis magnets, miniature maps of holiday destinations and many others. This is not merely homage to religious people and places. There is a blend of kitsch and religion here, which is seen all over the house, for example in the coupling of Christ on the Cross, with Elvis.

The couch in the living room has been there since the family moved in, covered in a multicoloured knitted throw it looks deceptively soft but in fact is supported with a sheet of chipboard underneath (see fig.9).

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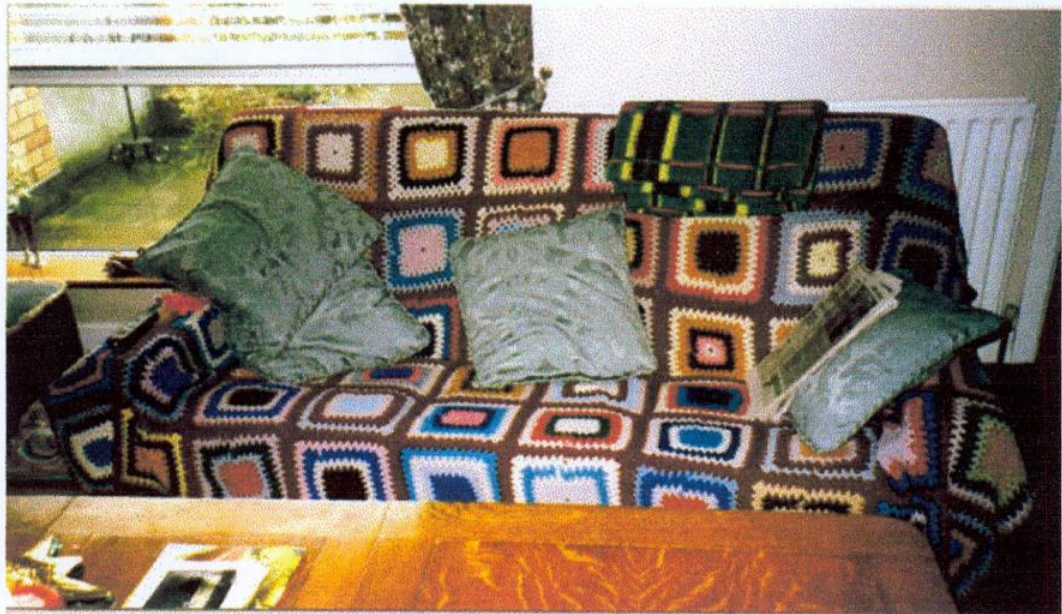


Fig.9: The much talked of couch in the living room.

This is one of the talking points of the room, as everyone who visits the house gets a shock when they sit down on it. Most of the features of the house are of this kind, they are not expensive or design classics, but they are memorable and sometimes humorous.

At the top of the stairs on the landing there is a framed picture of the Sacred Heart, on which is written the four names of the members of the family. When the family moved in, this picture was brought to the house and as part of a traditional ritual the parish priest came to the house to bless all the rooms, the picture and each member of the family (see fig.10).



Fig. 8 The main living room in the house.

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Fig.10: The Sacred Heart placed at the top of the stairs.

This is seen as protecting the family from all harm and can be seen from the end of the stairs inside the front door. Also on the landing is another holy water font, just outside the bathroom, there to bless the family as they go to bed and rise in the morning.

This type of house, with religious and political iconography taking such an important place still remains in Irish society today. There is still a reluctance to lose these icons of perceived safety and faith, even in modern homes, but some are being replaced by more universal symbols of spirituality, such as works of art and craft that create a direct link with the earth and some believe, with God. The house may be regarded as unusual in the huge amount of religious iconography, kitsch items and Kennedy memorabilia. But this is typical



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of so many houses in Ireland, unseen and disregarded by the rest of the world. The mortuary cards, the plethora of holy crosses, pictures and holy water is not the exception to the rule. While it may be becoming less common in new houses, there still remains a link to the spiritual and the holy in most houses in Ireland.

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Chapter 4: The 'Designed' Suburban House (1988).

This case study is of a house owned by furniture designer Gearoid O'Conchubhair with his wife Muireann and their three children. O'Conchubhair studied as an industrial designer at the National College of Art and Design in Dublin and National Institute of Higher Education, Limerick, (now University of Limerick) and his strong design background can be seen quite clearly in the house.

Built about ten years ago, this house is representative of a type of lifestyle and approach present in Ireland, that would not be widespread, but is becoming more common. O'Conchubhair's father was a wheelwright and helped with the design and construction of the house. It is a two storey detached house, with floor area of 2,000 sq.ft. with another 700 sq. ft. in the attic allowing for more rooms to be added at a later date. The house was built larger than necessary, on rather a small budget to allow for future additions, rather than having to add an extension when the need arose.

The house is built in brick and mortar, with an exterior finish of red brick on the ground floor and a plastered finish on the upper part of the house and the porch at the front (see fig.1).

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The house is built in brick and mortar, with an external finish of red brick on the ground floor and a plastered finish on the upper part of the house and the porch at the front (see fig. 1).



Fig.1: The exterior of the house.

The porch is a very interesting feature of the house, adding lots of space to the entrance 'hall' of the house, with long narrow windows at the front which create interest and add light without opening up this area of the house to prying eyes. There is also a roof light in this porch which lights up the space inside very effectively.

On the ground floor there is a studio, in which O'Conchubhair works, a living room, a kitchen/dining room, a small lavatory and a utility room (fig.2 plan). Upstairs there are four bedrooms, two for the three children – two boys and a girl – the master bedroom with an ensuite bathroom, a guestroom and a main bathroom.



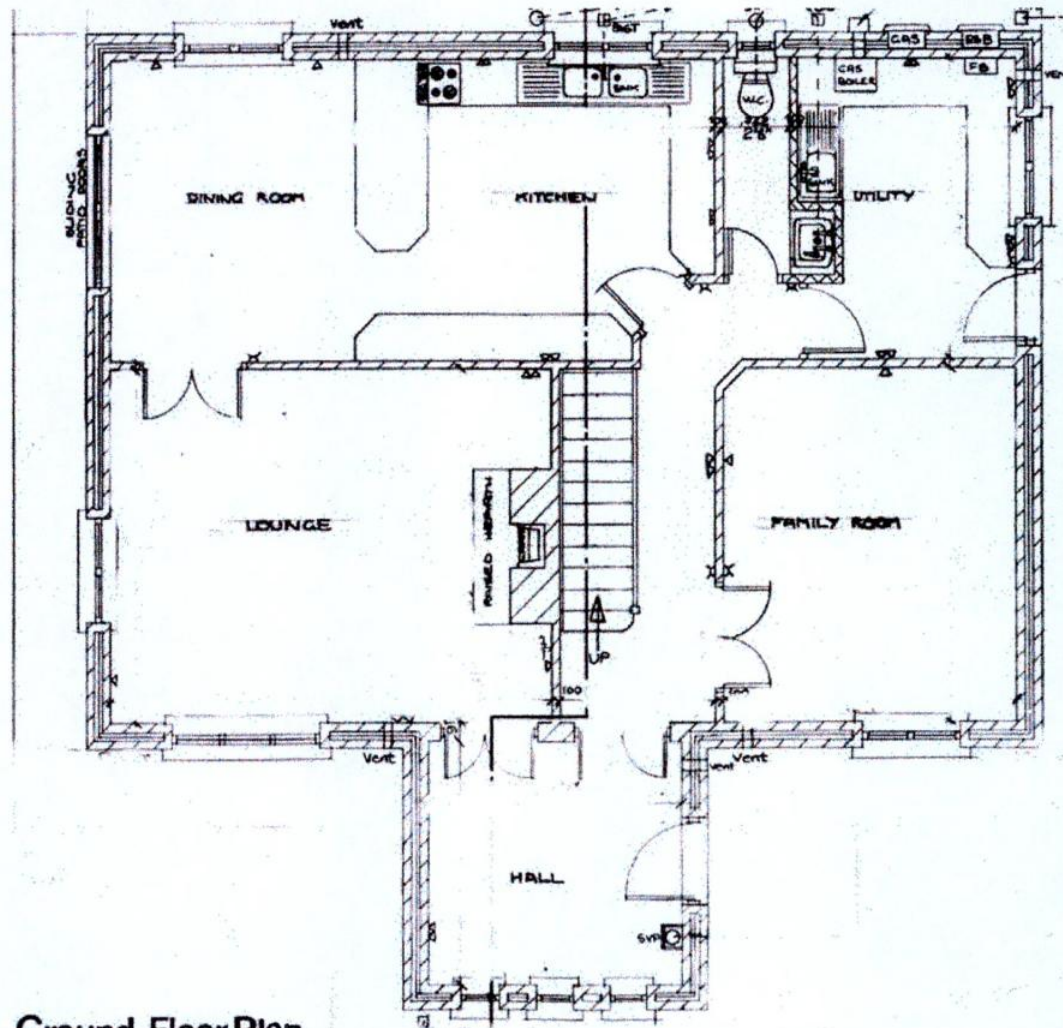
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Ground Floor Plan

Fig.2: The ground floor plan of the house, showing the large entrance hall and living area.

Although O'Conchubhair is an accomplished designer, with a lot of experience in the product design field, he had little input in the design of the house at the time of building, as he didn't have much experience in house design at the time. He had no strong ideas on what kind of house he wanted, other than the size and number of rooms, so his father made a lot of the decisions. However, when the house was built it was empty of furniture and it took a few years to take shape and become the home it is now. Even now there

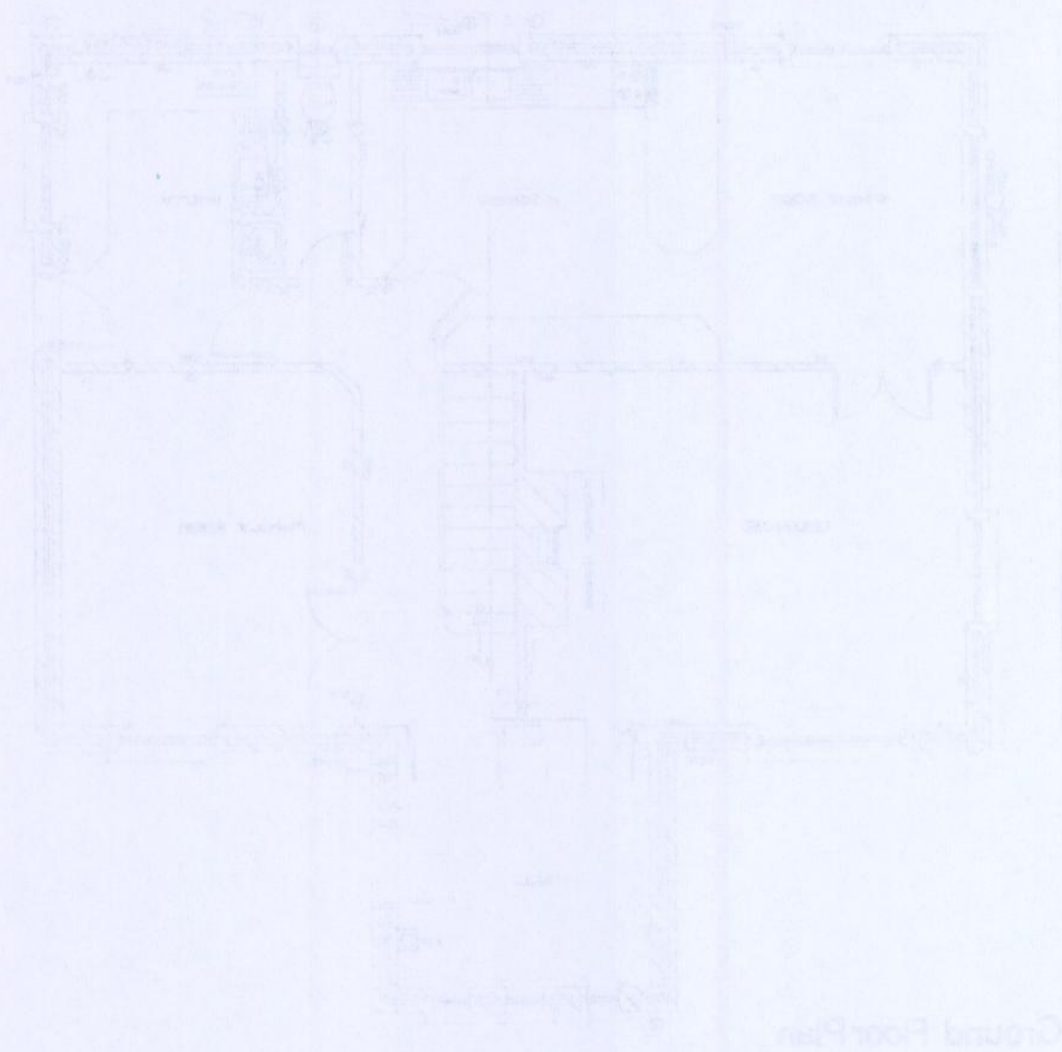


Fig. 2. The ground floor plan of the house, showing the large entrance hall and living area.

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are changes being made, with new sitting room furniture being added and the attic beginning to be used for more than just storage.

The house is clearly a family home, with an entire floor devoted to sleeping space. The ground floor is more a 'living space' than a collection of rooms, with a distinct feeling of freedom and relaxation throughout. The entrance hall leads directly in to the living room, which then opens into the dining room and kitchen. Off the kitchen is another door leading into a hall, off which is a toilet and utility room, which opens into the back garden and the workshop. There is a difference felt in this house though which is not common in many houses. The doors between rooms are rarely closed and they do not have a latch to be closed (this is because the latches were never put on to begin with and the openness of the space was something the family liked and wanted to keep). They are not solid doors, nor do they have frosted glass or leading to provide a visual barrier of sorts between rooms. The rooms are also decorated in a similar way with the use of similar materials and colours, most notably white and this tends to tie the rooms together as more of a space than a series of individual rooms, without the area being completely open plan. There is nothing to be hidden or concealed in these rooms, they are open and free and that is where the difference lies.

The entrance hall is a very attractive feature of the house. The front door leads into a large rectangular space, which feels like a room in that it is not a claustrophobic, narrow corridor. It is a welcome to the house, allowing people to gather with ease and chat before entering or leaving. There is the space there that most Irish houses do not possess, unless the front door opens directly into a room (see fig.3).

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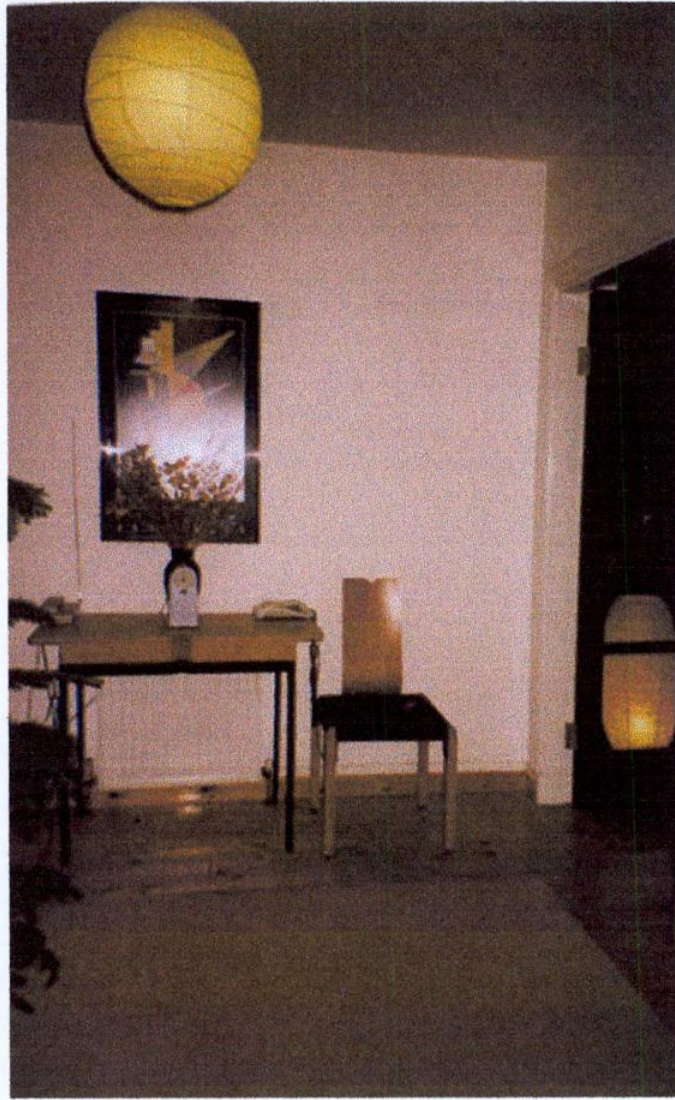


Fig.3: The spacious entrance hall.

The three windows at the front of the house are also very interesting. They almost stretch to the full height of the space, with shallow sills at the base, and simple blinds for privacy. They add interest and focus to the 'room' without being overpowering. All the floors on this level are wooden, which adds a strong sense of warmth to the already friendly and welcoming atmosphere.



Fig. 3. The interior of the house.

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The living room is quite large for a modest family house, at 18' x 13'8". The recent addition of new furniture creates a cosy enclosure around the hearth (see fig.4).



Fig.4: The living room, with leather furniture and other items designed by O'Conchubhair.

The couches that were bought, were initially too long for the room, so O'Conchubhair chopped the ends off them and made new ones, in fact the reincarnated two seaters work very well. These are dark brown leather, which in contrast with the walls and light wooden floor create a strong focus in the room, which is one of comfort and relaxation. The television in the room takes second place after the fireplace, which is a wonderful feature. It came from O'Conchubhair's grandparents' house in Roscommon, which fell to ruins, leaving just the fireplace. It was rescued and restored and sets the atmosphere in the room. It also led O'Conchubhair to try to blend his love of contemporary design with traditional, hence the prominent position of the hearth and use of a

The living room is quite large for a modest family house, at 18' x 13'3".

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traditional picture rail in the room. The fireplace itself is cast iron, and is in the style of the Georgian era. Possibly painted in its early days, it is now solid black, and the simplicity of its form adds a sense of sobriety to the room. The ornamentation is minimal, with simple floral scrolls on either side with a solid rectangular frame surrounding it. This blend of contemporary and traditional puts the visitor at ease. The use of materials and items which would be considered 'modern' work with those that are clearly of an earlier time to great effect.

Most of the furniture in the house has been designed and made by O'Conchubhair, apart from the kitchen chairs, and his love and understanding of materials and structure comes through in the use of his designs throughout the house. There are a number of prototype chairs, designed by O'Conchubhair, dotted around the house. There is no requirement for "matching" furniture, more the belief that "good things will blend and harmonise, and that each acquisition should have meaning to the family" (Harrison Beer, 1976, pp 168). The table in the middle of the room is based on a design that O'Conchubhair was commissioned to do for R.T.E. The table contains in the centre a bowl, which is from the original design and can be removed with ease to access magazines and books, which are stored there. It is made of solid beech and cream painted wooden legs, blending well with the rest of the room, in that it is a functional piece of furniture.

This room in particular and indeed the rest of the house is representative of the influences of Scandinavian design on Irish design. There is a respect for materials and user priorities that is seen at it's strongest in Scandinavian design. Throughout Scandinavian design history there has

traditional picture rail in the room. The frieze itself is cast iron, and is in the style of the Georgian era. Possibly painted in its early days, it is now solid black and the simplicity of its form adds a sense of sobriety to the room. The

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Scandinavian design. Throughout Scandinavian design history there has

existed the ideal that one cannot create something pretty in the hope that it may be useful, but that it is always possible to make a functioning 'sensible' object beautiful. Scandinavians acquire objects because it gives them personal joy rather than to impress the neighbours. This notion can be seen in much of O'Conchubhair's designs. He has a respect and knowledge of materials, (both natural and man-made) and of function that is clearly seen in his work and his home is not exempt of this. While one is always susceptible to changes in fashion and the desire to impress, the style of this house is one which has been influenced more by personal experience and the desire to be surrounded by comfort and beauty, than to impress others. The white walls, the wooden floors and the functional yet beautiful objects are testament to an ideal that has found itself at home in a country where good sense, cleverness and beauty are a way of life (see fig.5).

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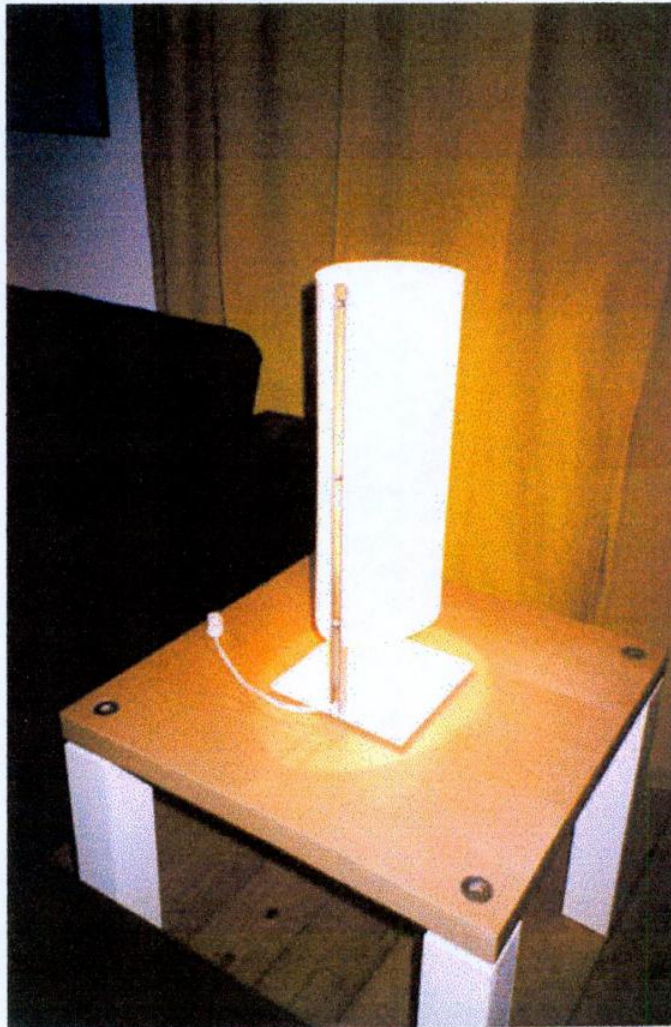


Fig.5: One of O'Conchubhair's designs, is the perfect addition to this comfortable restful room.

The kitchen is a more utilitarian room. It is predominantly white, with wooden finishes on cupboards and the table, all of which are designed by O'Conchubhair. The floor is also wooden, as in the living room. The counter, cupboards and table are finished in a white melamine, with wooden details on edges and ends. Shelves are wooden also (see fig.6).

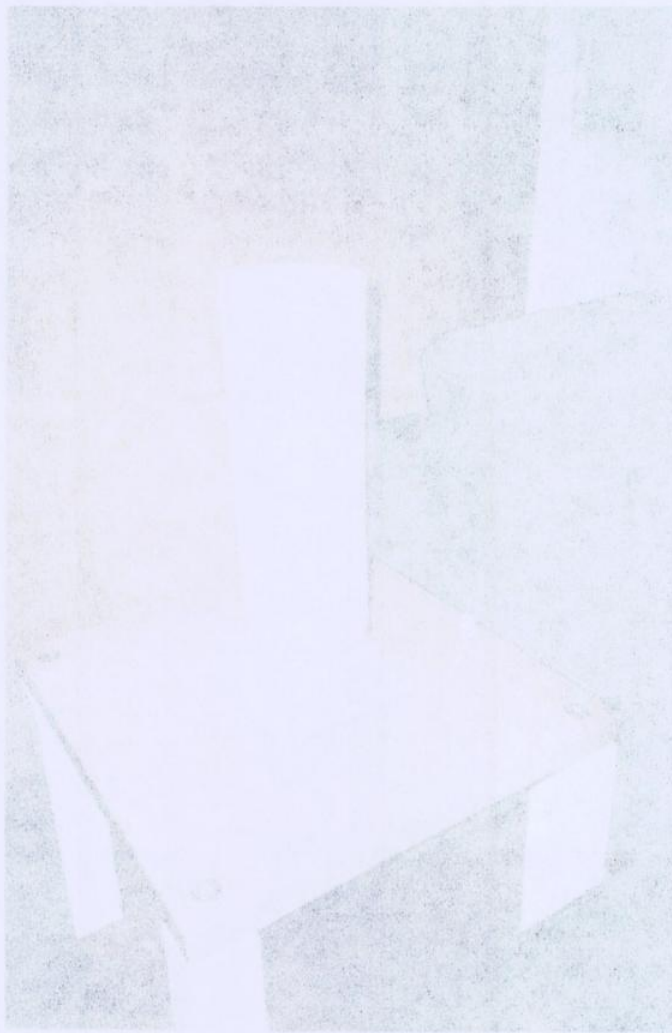


Fig. 2 One of O'Connell's designs is the paired cabinet shown in figure 2, which is made of wood.

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Fig.6: The kitchen as seen from the living room entrance.

This simple, functional appearance ties the room together as a utilitarian space, distinct from the living room. The cooking and dining area are also quite separate from each other, as the counter divides the spaces. Despite the division there is easy communication between chef and diners, allowed by the layout of the counter and cooking facilities.

This room is not intended for the kind of chat that clearly takes place in the living room. It is a functional space that is used primarily for cooking and eating. There is still a sense of warmth and comfort that follows through from



Fig. 8. The kitchen as seen from the living room entrance.

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the living room though, in the use of natural materials and simple arrangement of furniture and appliances and this would encourage one to linger. There is a natural flow of 'traffic' between the two rooms, which means that the kitchen need only be used for eating, as the living room is so close and easy to get to.

While the kitchen units are quite old and would not be seen to compete with current modern trends in kitchen furniture, they are quite appropriate for this house. They are functional, durable and light, their colour setting the atmosphere that has begun in the living room and continues here.

Despite the fairly average size of the rooms, there is a wonderful sense of space and light about them. The white walls clearly have an effect on this, but it is the simplicity and functionality of the space that strengthens this perception. There is a respect for material, function and use of space that isn't often seen in Irish houses, but is something that people in Ireland are becoming more aware of and seem to realise the importance of this approach in their own houses.

When looking at this house in an analytical manner, identifying those features that are distinctly Irish, there are some that are a strong representation of Irish values and tendencies.

- The open space in the entrance hall could be seen as representing the traditional welcome that Irish people are famous for. There is an openness in the house that clearly represents this sense of geniality and familiarity, and the entrance hall, being the initial contact with the house definitely represents this.
- The Irish tendency to gather a myriad of styles, colours and textures simply because they are seen as beautiful in their own right can be seen in the

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- The Irish tendency to gather a myriad of styles, colours and textures simply because they are seen as beautiful in their own right can be seen in the

following. The use of natural materials in the house; wooden floors and furnishings, a blend of textures from leather to wood to metal and the perceived lack of a complementary blend of furnishings through the use of a mix of O'Conchubhair's own designs and bought pieces

- The predominance of white in all the rooms on the ground floor is not usual in Irish interiors, particularly in recent years, but traditionally it would have been in widespread use. This is a modern interpretation of the use of white, and is an appropriate use of the colour as Irish weather is often so dull and dreary.
- The use of a typically Scandinavian approach in the use of light colours, natural materials and open airy spaces is something that is becoming more popular in Irish houses today and has clearly been embraced here.

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Chapter 5: The Artistic Rural House (1993).

This fifth and final case study is of a two storey detached house built in Doolin in the West of Ireland in 1993. Matt O'Connell, batik artist and Mary Gray, jewellery designer and their two daughters live in the house. They moved from Dublin about sixteen years ago. Both Matt and Mary grew up in the country and so had no qualms about moving to one of the remotest parts of Ireland, and as their work was not dependent on a specific location they moved their business to Doolin, Co.Clare. Originally they lived and worked in their cottage cum gallery, but the strains of a growing business and the need for some personal space prompted them to build the house they had been planning for years.

Their close friend and architect Shelley McNamara (Grafton Architects) took on the project, along with Philippe O'Sullivan also of Grafton Architects. The brief was one that the couple had been working on for quite some time. They wanted a house that would provide lots of natural light and that would have plenty of storage independent of specific rooms, for all the 'stuff' that families accumulate over time. An important aspect of the brief was that the house would not take away from the beautiful scenery around the site. They wanted a house that would fit in with surrounding architecture, and so Shelley went out and photographed vernacular houses, barns and farm buildings as inspiration for the design. The resulting house design is one which fits the brief and sets a new standard for house design in Ireland (see fig. 1).

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and photographed vernacular houses, farms and farm buildings as inspiration

for the design. The resulting house design is one which fits the brief and sets a

new standard for house design in Ireland (see fig. 1).



Fig.1: Exterior of the house in Doolin.

The house is two storeys high, one room deep with narrow slit windows to the front, which is north facing. It is built in the style of a traditional farmhouse, and without hiding away in shame it does not intrude on the local landscape. To one side of the house is a sliding garage door, similar in style to a traditional barn. On stepping inside it is clear that this is no ordinary farmhouse. The entrance hall is small and narrow, with rather industrial looking stairs up to the first floor on the left. There is one door leading off this hall which leads into a glazed double height space, full of light and bright white walls. Off this space to the right is the kitchen and dining area and to the left is the living room. No walls or doors separate the different areas of the ground floor living space, with only varying ceiling heights signifying a change of 'area'. All the

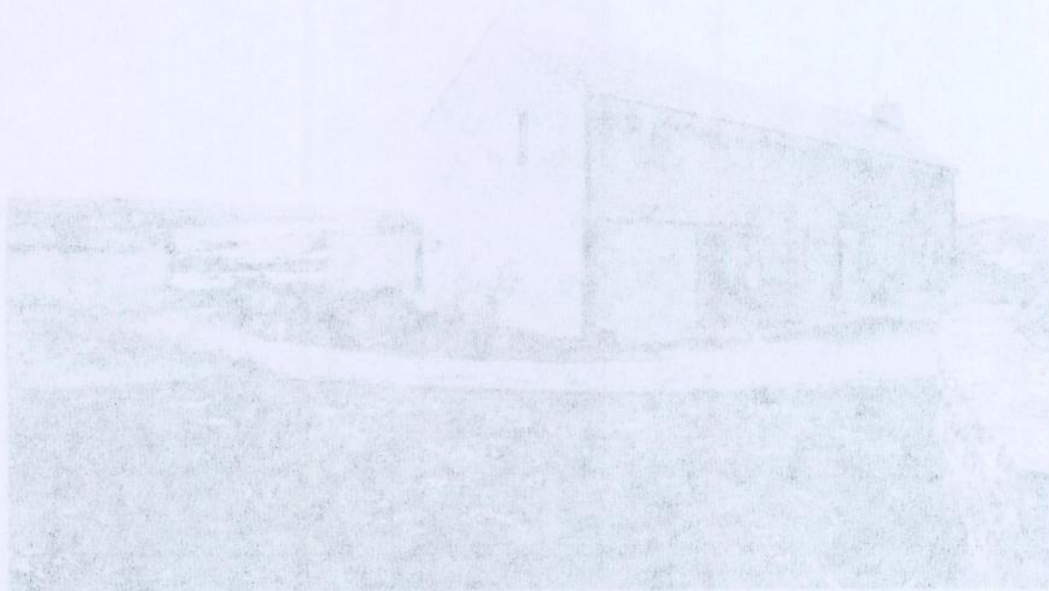


Fig. 1. Exterior of the house in Berlin.

The house is two storeys high, one room deep with narrow slit windows to the front, which is north facing. It is built in the style of a traditional farmhouse and without hiding away its theme it does not intrude on the local landscape. To one side of the house is a sliding garage door, similar in style to a traditional barn. On stepping inside it is clear that this is no ordinary farmhouse. The entrance hall is small and narrow with rather industrial looking stairs up to the first floor on the left. There is a door leading off this hall which leads into a glazed double height space, full of light and bright white walls. On this space to the right is the kitchen and dining area and to the left is the living room. No walls or doors separate the different areas of the ground floor living space with only varying ceiling heights signifying a change of area. All the

walls are painted white save for a curved section in the kitchen behind which is storage space, a shower room, and access to the garage (fig.2 plan).

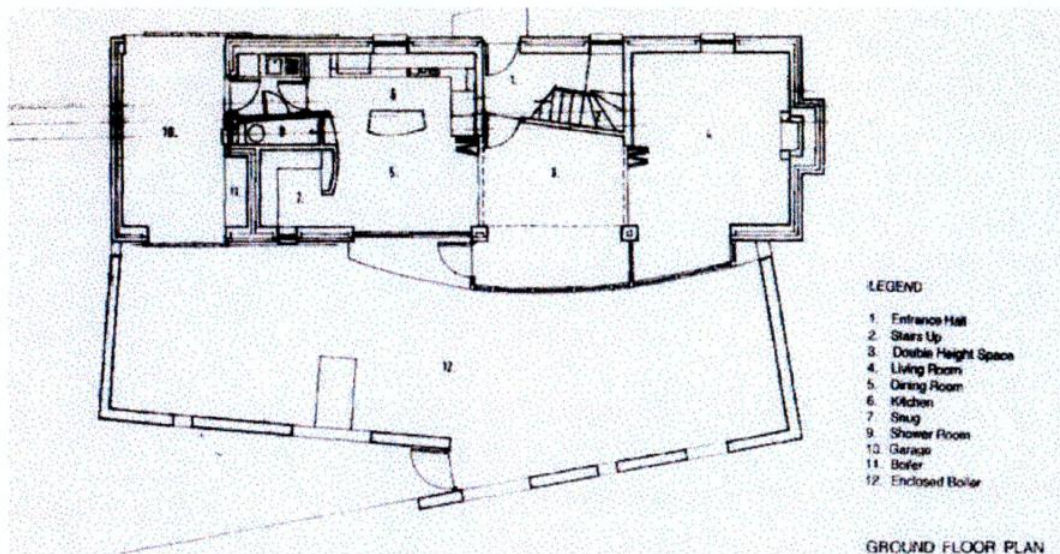


Fig.2: The ground floor plan of the house, showing the windscreen at the back of the house.

The entrance hall is small but bright, with one window allowing light into an otherwise dark corner. The stairs are metal, with an upright grey metal mesh as banister, supporting the handrail. These stairs curve sharply upwards to the first floor of 4 bedrooms and 2 bathrooms. Along the corridor of this floor is a series of low cupboards providing the storage that was stipulated in the brief. Also on this floor there is a tiny balcony looking out on the open space below, serving as communication between the 2 floors of the house and is also used as a 'theatre' stage by the children (see fig.3).

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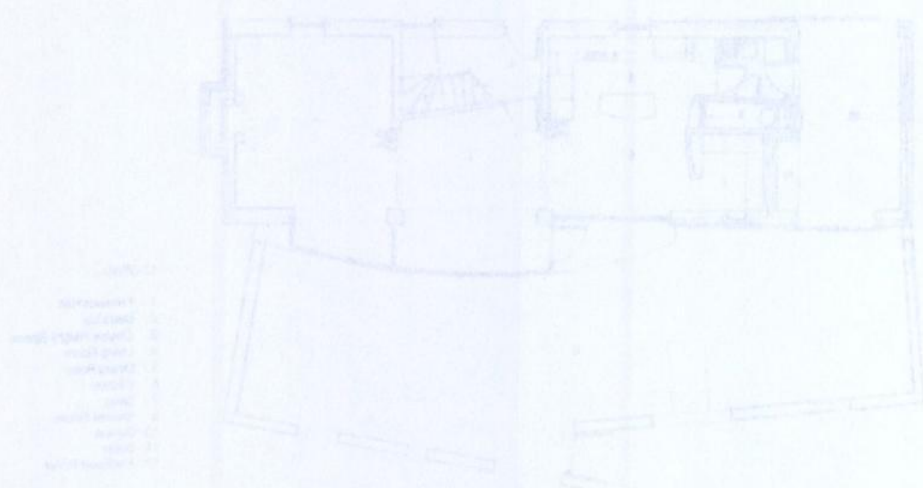


Fig. 2. The ground floor plan of the house, showing the window in the back of the house.

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Fig.3: The balcony door overlooking the open space below.

At the foot of the stairs is a painting, one of the few in the house, serving to brighten the area and create interest. Coats and shoes are stored along the wall of the recess under the stairs.

The double height space in the centre of the ground floor space is incredible in its capacity for bringing light into the house. On a wet and windy, dreary Clare day the rooms are still full of light and due to the huge expanse of glass, the beautiful scenery can be seen for miles around despite the often miserable weather (see fig.4).

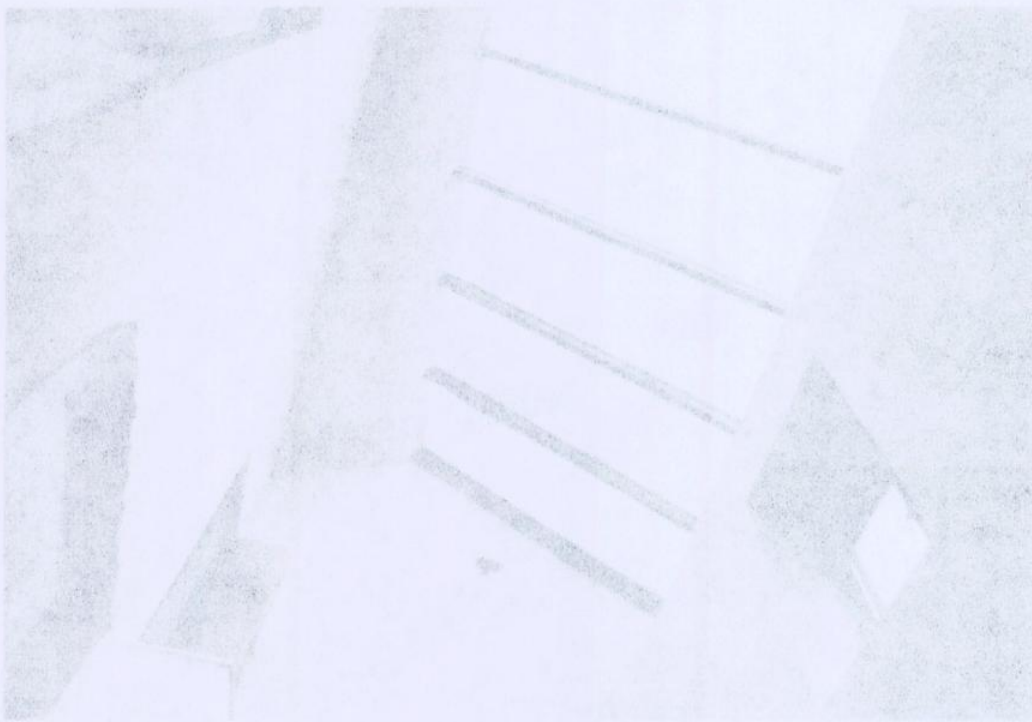


Fig. 3. The brightly lit doorway overlooking the open street.

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Fig.4: The central open space at the back of the house.

The exterior wall of this space curves outwards in a series of glass panels, extending the height of the ground floor. In this extended space there is a group of blue canvas deck chairs, surrounded by lush green houseplants. This link with the outdoors impacts on the viewer, creating the impression that the garden and the space inside are almost one. Against the wall adjoining the entrance hall is another pair of deckchairs, piled high with straw sun hats, again making the link with the outdoors, above which is a woollen tapestry filled with a rainbow of colours (see fig.5).

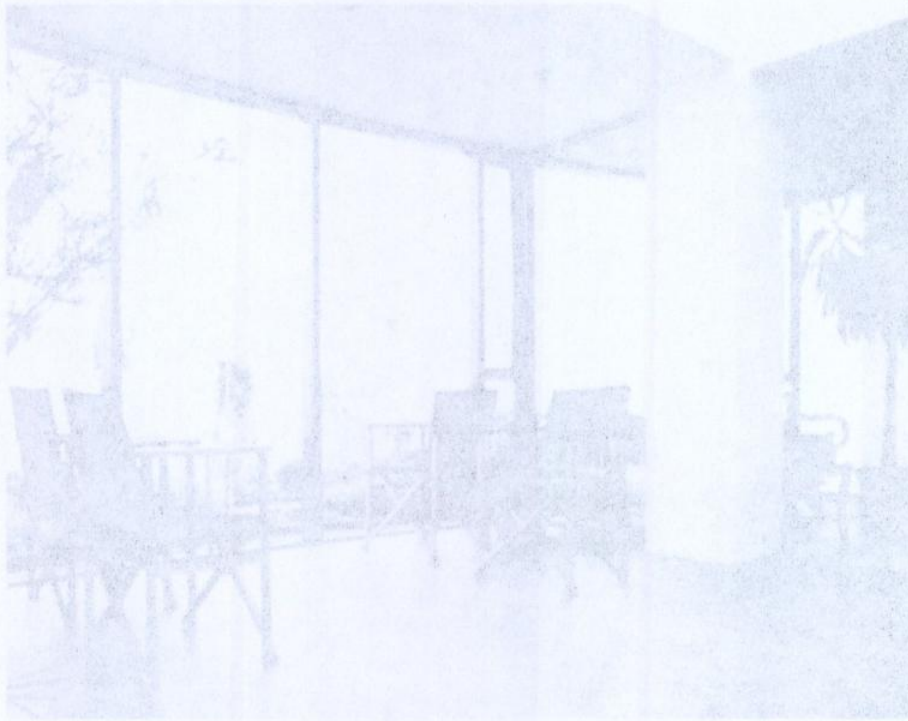


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of colours (see fig 5)



Fig.5: The deck chairs and woollen tapestry along the wall.

A particularly interesting attribute of this space is the series of narrow slit windows along the wall, rising with the slope of the stairs beyond. These windows open up the already expansive space and also link this 'room' with the narrow windows at the front of the house.

To the right of this spacious area is the kitchen, which also looks out onto the garden beyond through a set of sliding doors which in the summer would remain open throughout the day (see fig.6).

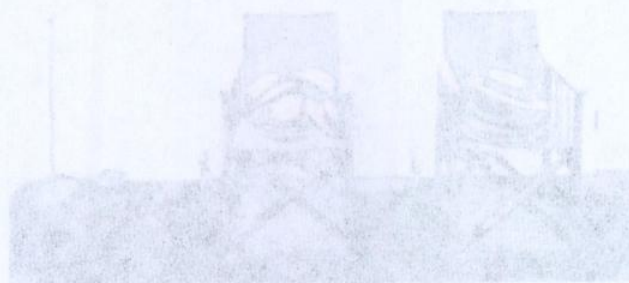


Fig 5: The back chairs and wooden lattice along the wall.

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To the right of this spacious area is the kitchen, which also looks out onto the garden beyond through a set of sliding doors which in the summer would remain open throughout the day (see fig 6).



Fig.6: The kitchen, at one end of the open space.

At the far end of the kitchen is a curved section of wall, painted a startling bluey purple, the only coloured section of wall in the house. This colour provides a focal point for the room and also hides a discreet shower room and utility space behind. The curve of the wall is reflected in the island unit, the top of which is also curved outwards towards the diners, who would be seated at the large solid wooden table by the window. The dining chairs are a design by Arne Jacobsen, and complement the natural colours and traditional line of the table. The island unit is covered in ash veneer and topped with Carlow limestone, polished to a high black shine. This unit provides a preparation area and easily accessed storage space, allowing the cook to chat with the rest of the family while in the kitchen. Along the opposite wall is a row of ash veneered cupboard units, with a



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contemporary stainless steel splash-back and extractor hood. Cooking utensils hang on meat hooks from a stainless steel bar, above the electric hob. Open, solid ash shelves line the upper space of the wall, one cleverly hiding the bar across the base of the window, which was stipulated by planning regulations. All of the appliances are concealed behind the ash units, and the impression of the kitchen space is sleek and functional, with down-lights adding to the homely, cosy atmosphere. The floor in both the kitchen and the open space in the centre is covered in stony coloured marmoleum, chosen because a real stone floor was out of the question when the house was built because of the huge expense it would incur. In fact it works rather well as it reflects the colour of the gravel in the garden outside (see fig.7).



Fig.7: The garden outside, showing the curved glass walls, allowing lots of light into the house.

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Fig 7. The garden outside showing the stony gravel which allows light into the house

On the other side of the open space is an enclosed living room, where a lower ceiling height creates a charming, cosy atmosphere for family chat and recreation (see fig.8).

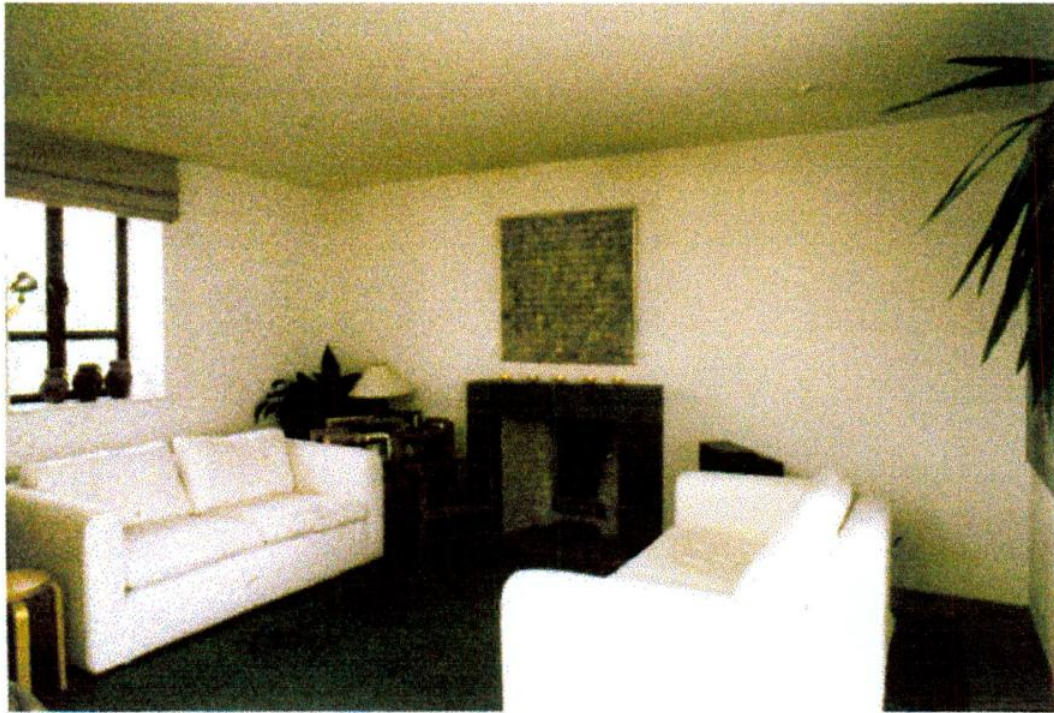


Fig.8: The cosy living room, with moss green carpet adding a sense of relaxation.

The floor here is covered in a moss green carpet, separating this space from the rest of the ground floor. Two cream linen couches provide seating in this private, secluded section of the house, with the television in one corner, obviously not the centre of attention in this busy family. The fireplace is simple and understated, with a Carlow limestone surround, this time unpolished. The recess is lined with sandstone bricks, and the fire is set right on the ground. Above the fireplace is a painting, with a thin metallic frame, which mirrors the colours in the bricks of the fire. In one corner on a low table is a collection of family photographs, tidy and unobtrusive. Books and clutter are stored in a tall pine cupboard against the wall opposite the fireplace.

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(caption, see fig 8)

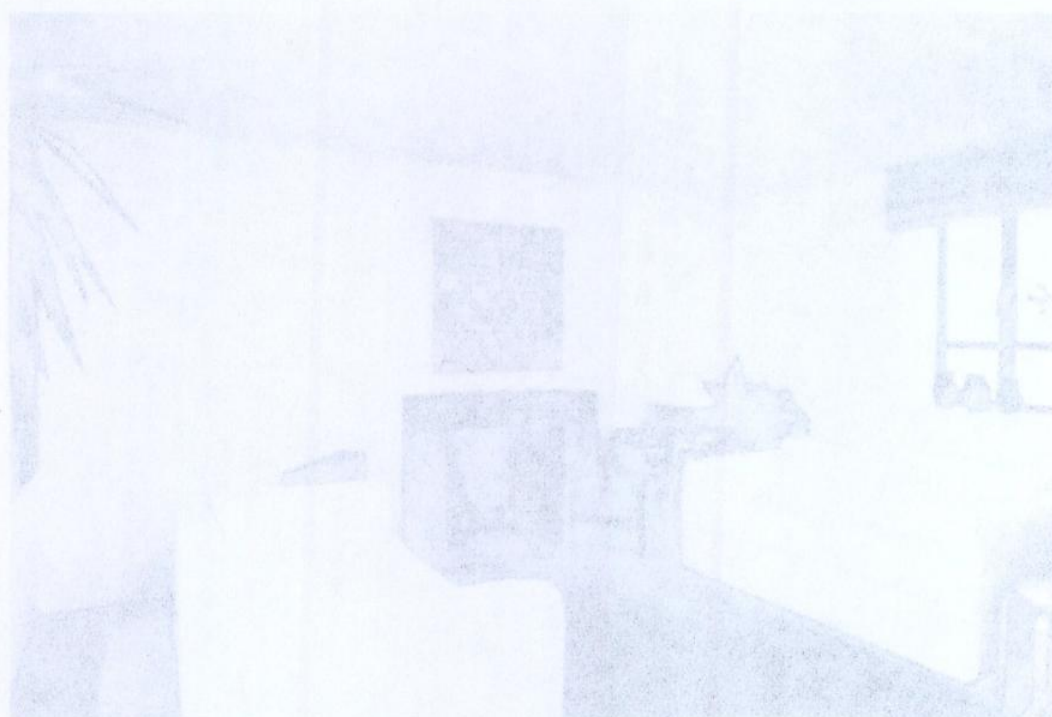


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This room is a more private space than the rest of the ground floor. The difference in ceiling height achieves this without completely dividing the rooms. There is one window on the north wall of the room, allowing a small amount of light in, which is quite appropriate as the room, is not intended to be used in the same way as the other spaces. It is intended to be a cosy enclosed room and the low ceiling height and one small window achieves this.

At the back of the house is a white windscreen, built as an extension to the house. The wall is in two sections, one coming from each of the gable ends of the house, overlapping slightly at the centre (see fig.9).



Fig.9: The windscreen at the back of the house.

At intervals along the wall there are 'windows' of different sizes, looking out to the view beyond. This is almost like an outside room, sheltering the garden from the weather, and adds a cheap extra space to the ground floor. The gravel of

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Fig 9. The window at the back of the house

At intervals along the wall there are windows of different sizes, looking out to the view beyond. This is almost like an outside room, sheltering the garden from the weather, and adds a great extra space to the ground floor. The gravel of

this garden almost matches the colour of the marmoleum inside and when the doors are open on fair days, the spaces seem to merge together as one open airy room. From inside the house looking out, the view changes with each 'window' and with each season, almost like a framed picture. On special occasions figures of clay are propped in the window, rather a humorous surprise for the visitor (see fig.10).



Fig.10: Figures sitting in the window, a light and humorous addition.

This house, unlike the other case studies in this thesis, was built specifically for the owners with a clear idea of what, exactly they wanted. The

this garden almost matches the colour of the marbledum inside and when the doors are open on fair days, the spaces seem to merge together as one open airy room. From inside the house looking out, the view changes with each window, and with each season, almost like a framed picture. On special occasions figures of clay are propped in the window, rather a humorous surprise for the visitor (see fig. 10).



Fig. 10 Figures sitting in the window, a light and humorous addition.

This house, unlike the other case studies in this thesis, was built specifically for the owners with a clear idea of what, exactly they wanted. The

couple worked closely with an architect and built a house that fulfilled their needs. This house in the remote west coast of Ireland is one that blends with the environment without sacrificing any of the needs of the family. The interior of the house although quite minimal does not jar with the traditional exterior. The space inside allows freedom and ultimate relaxation.

The strongest feature of the house is the open double height space in the centre of the ground floor. The light and space created by this is astonishing, and it divides the living spaces effectively without the use of walls and doors. The freedom of movement and ease of communication within this space is unrivalled by any of the other case studies in this thesis. In none of them is there this strong link with the outdoors and this obvious love of light and space. The clever use of a traditional style of building twinned with an open airy modern interior creates a house that is easy to live with, at the same time acceptable and agreeable to the eye of the passer by.

There are facets about this house that are recognisable as distinctly Irish.

- First of all the traditional style of the building itself is based on Irish barns and vernacular houses. The narrow windows on the first floor and inside the house in the open void are reminiscent of round towers and old barns in Ireland, a link with the past that is typical of Irish people. The walls of the interior are rendered in a traditional manner, which is appropriate to the style of building.
- The materials used in the furniture in the house are on the whole native to Ireland. The Irish limestone fireplace and island unit, ash kitchen units and

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- The materials used in the furniture in the house are on the whole native to Ireland. The Irish limestone fireplace and island unit, and kitchen units and

marmoleum floor are representative of a return to an appreciation of Irish materials and this house has been fitted extensively with these.

- While the Irish love of colour and ornament is well known and accepted, this house does not partake to such an extent in this approach. The need for colour and ornament in many Irish houses is based on the fact that they do not allow the same level of natural light in to the spaces within. By opening up the space in this house and allowing the natural light in, the need for colour is not so great.
- The clear love of the outdoors apparent in the building of the open space at the back of the house is typical of Irish people, but perhaps not of the houses they live in. The space at the back of the house is a true reflection of the love of the outdoors, but allows the family in this case to appreciate the view without subjecting themselves to the often harsh conditions outside. With examples like this it is obvious that the tendency to block out the exterior because it is not always so friendly is changing. Houses are becoming more honest, and representative of the type of people that live in them.

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Conclusions:

The case studies that have been discussed in this thesis are representative of a number of different approaches and lifestyles in Ireland. It is difficult to tie down a specific style or approach to interior design, as there are so many kinds of houses and so many different influences. What has become apparent is that there are very few houses that have been approached in the same way or decorated or furnished in the same way. However there are some things that, while may not manifest themselves in the same way, are represented in some way in most of the houses.

- The link with nature and the outdoors is seen in three of the houses, through the use of materials, and the introduction of a more spacious light interior.
- The respect for and preservation of older styles and approaches is also represented in some of the houses examined.
- The link with the spiritual and religious and political tradition is also apparent in two of the houses, and to some extent in all five of the examples shown. This is not only through the use of religious and political imagery, but also in the relationship with nature and the outdoors, which for some represents life and spirituality.
- The more modern trend towards a minimal interior can be seen in two of the more recently built houses. This is due to a number of factors. There is a growing appreciation and use of natural materials in the domestic interior. This is mainly due to the fact that Irish people are increasingly open and interested in using materials that are native to this country and provide an atmosphere of restfulness and harmony. Also the influences of foreign

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trends cannot be discounted. Irish people are moving away from using decoration and ornament to brighten up their lives, rather they are more inclined to introduce more natural light into their houses, hence eliminating the 'need' for overdone colours and details.

- By looking at the range of houses in this thesis, it is clear that there has been a slow movement towards a more informal and relaxed approach to living. In the first three houses, there is an entrance hall which leads into 'reception' rooms, which are either unused or used for a purpose apart from their intended one. There is a back and front door, which are intended to be used by different people and for different occasions. In the later case studies, the entrance hall leads into a family area, without any attempt made to hide the day to day routine of living.

The choice to discuss houses that are perhaps not famous in any way is based on the huge number of houses that are, that have already been written about. While the houses chosen are not well known, they are still interesting. They may not be special in any particular way, but they are representative of a category of houses that until now has been ignored. There is little about these houses that could be said to be worthy of note as the 'Great Houses of Ireland', but this is the reason for including them in this thesis. They are owned by ordinary people in city and countryside and are a true representation of many of the houses in this country.

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