



# Modern megalith

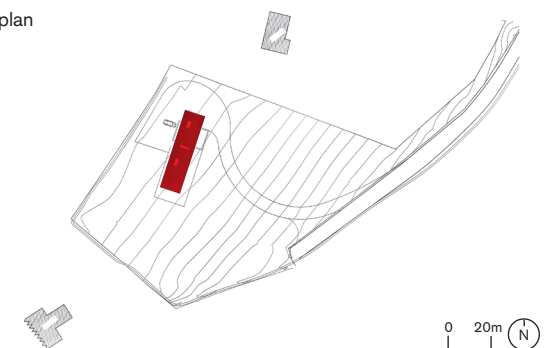
An ancient stone portal was the inspiration for MacGabhann Architects' Dolmen House in north-west Ireland, writes *Charles Rattray*. Photography by *Dennis Gilbert*

For a small country, the Republic of Ireland has produced a wonderful crop of architectural talent. The great names, such as Scott Tallon Walker, De Blacam and Meagher, and Grafton Architects have been joined over the years by architects such as McGarry Ní Éanaigh, O'Donnell + Tuomey, and more recently by a younger generation: TAKA, Clancy Moore, Ryan Kennihan ... one could go on.

Predictably, perhaps, all these practices are based in Dublin (Tom de Paor is in the neighbouring county of Wicklow) since the city and its immediate surroundings are home to half the population.

By contrast, the practice of MacGabhann Architects has its offices in the far north-west, near Letterkenny, in County Donegal. One partner is a project manager and the other read architecture in London >>

Site plan







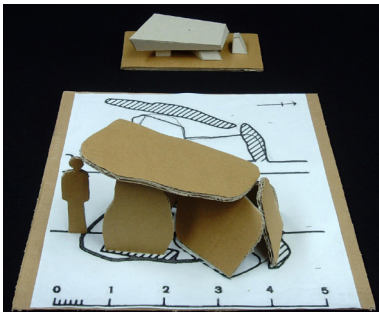
(The Bartlett) rather than Dublin, worked for Daniel Libeskind in Berlin, and now teaches at Queen's University in Belfast. The detachment from what one may describe as a 'Dublin School' in architecture is more than physical, then, and it shows. Their work is highly characterized, sometimes formally unorthodox, and often elucidates the very specific qualities of a site. The Letterkenny Council Area Office (2003), for example, is built on a continuous ramp from outside to inside and under a continuous planted roof surface; the dramatically faceted Letterkenny Regional Cultural Centre (2007) presents its foyer as a theatre to the town; a weekend house by the side of Lough Swilly encapsulates

An object-like top appears to float over a smooth stone floor

the tension between transience and rootedness. In each case a visual 'argument' is pursued with clarity and concluded with grace. The question of whether the building makes the site or the site makes the building is never far away when one visits these places, and this new house is no exception. The approach here through undulating landscape to the south gives a partial first view, over an intermediate hill, when the roof appears almost like one of the surrounding agricultural sheds. The site, with superb views over Lough Swilly, lies on the side of a hill, but on a rise between two other houses so that, in terms of habitation, it appears to occupy the highest point.

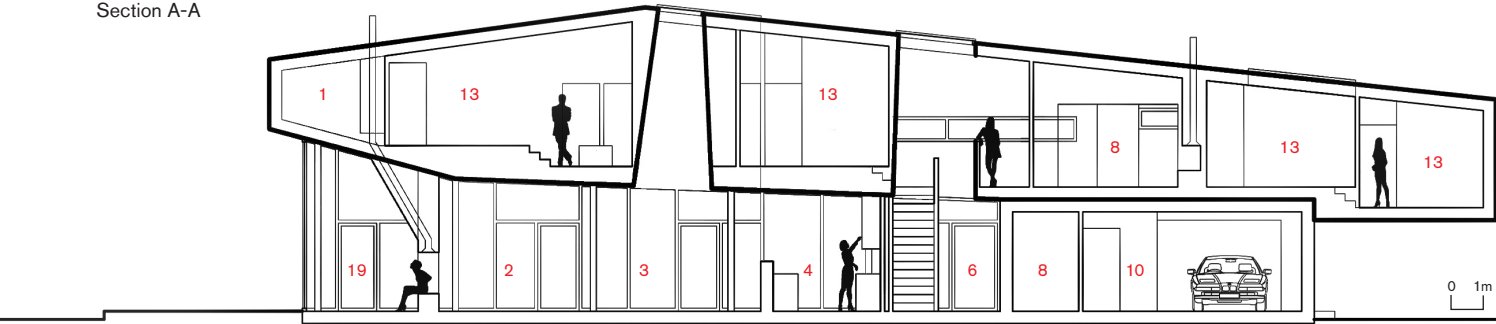
In terms of context, the existing houses are standard developer products and therefore gave few clues for the new work. In these circumstances, and typically for this architect, ideas were instead sought from other man-made structures in the landscape of

considerably greater age – a nearby dolmen, or megalithic portal tomb, where upright stones support a flattish top stone, rather like a table. The formal result here is an object-like top, clad in dark and crisp fibre cement and accommodating private, cellular rooms, propped – or appearing to float – over a smooth stone floor, gently stepped to match the ground. The top is punctured by windows, but the monolithic quality is maintained since, to the east, these are of irregular height and, to the west, are in the form of long strips that partially conceal the >>

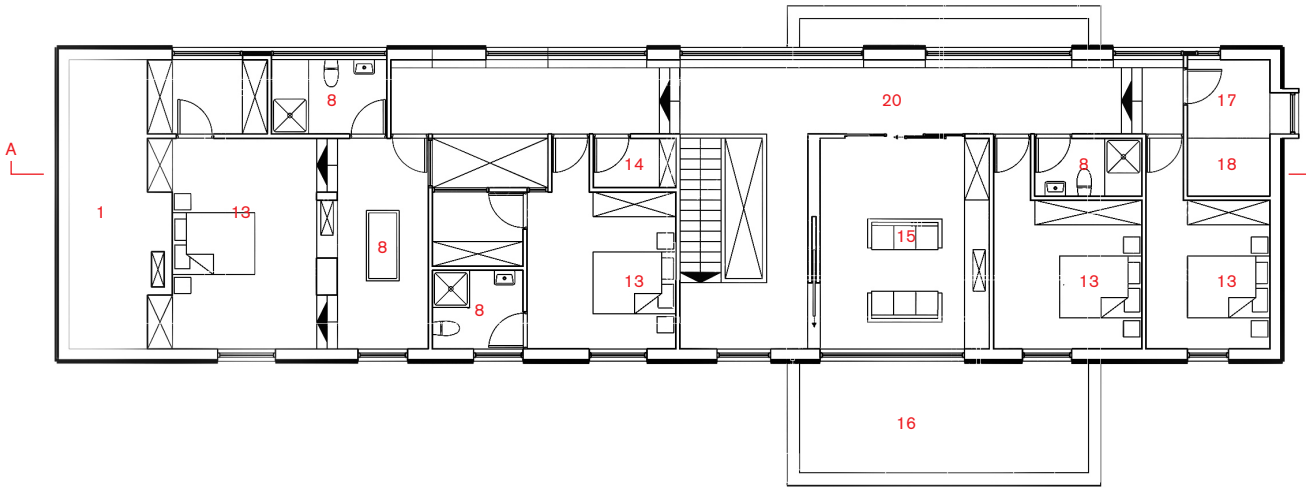


- 1. Store
- 2. Living
- 3. Dining
- 4. Kitchen
- 5. Patio
- 6. Entry hall
- 7. Cloaks
- 8. Bathroom/WC
- 9. Utility
- 10. Garage
- 11. Playroom
- 12. Office
- 13. Bedroom
- 14. Airing cupboard
- 15. Sitting room
- 16. Terrace
- 17. Gym
- 18. Steam room
- 19. Sun room
- 20. Library corridor

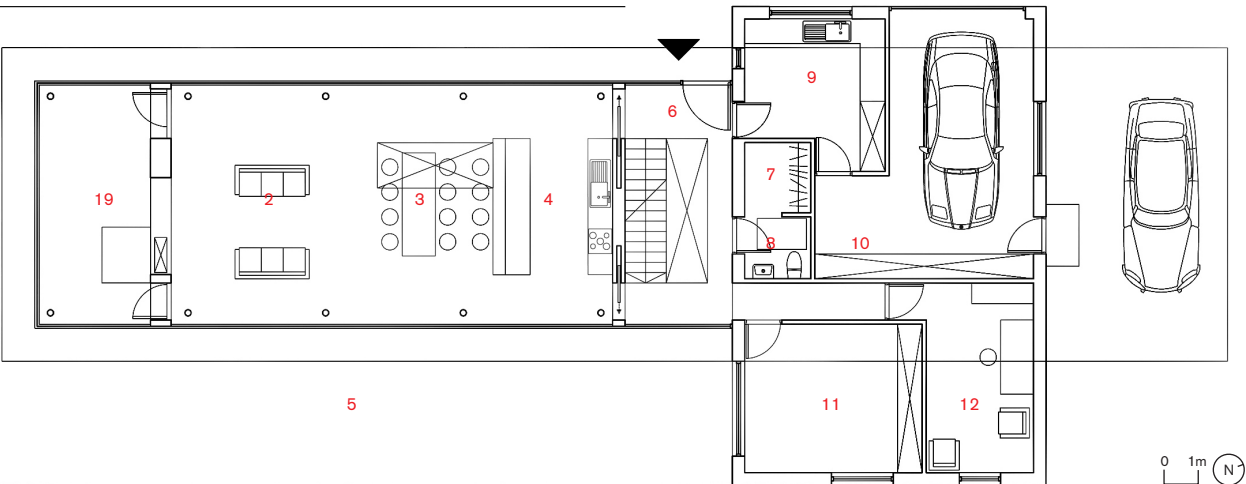
Section A-A



First floor plan



Ground floor plan



Previous pages

The approach to the house, via a winding road, from the east  
**Top** View from west, with opaque volume perched above fully glazed living, dining and kitchen areas  
**Left** Architect's conceptual model



levels within. Read together with the propped volume, the stone-clad garage to the north side of the ground floor gives a little hint of Le Corbusier's Pavillon Suisse. Here the overhang forms a carport.

While the plans are simple, the section is figured. Within the top, a long library corridor links all the rooms (and has the strip windows). The floor is birch ply, a material that then seems to gather itself into a stair which reaches down to touch the ground while being held away from the walls in a roof-lit void. Whereas >>

The connection between inside and out is relaxed and informal

**Right** Living, kitchen and dining areas with contiguous patio, looking south  
**Below** Ground floor living room below the crank in the soffit of the overhead volume  
**Opposite** First floor stair landing between sitting room and bedroom





there is an intimacy about the upstairs (and the end bedroom is especially cosy, as the floor rises and the ceiling height reduces in line with the outside form), downstairs is a place for parties, public and open. In between, at the top of the stairs is a private sitting room with a balcony over the garage.

On section, the ‘chimney’ above the dining table is lined in the same fibre cement as the exterior cladding and the wall to the south side of the stair. The connection between inside and out here is relaxed and informal: to have reinforced the notion of a solid top by lining the ground-floor ceiling with the same material as the outside might have been conceptually consistent, but less domestic. Black anodised aluminium windows (which are low maintenance in the rather wet and

Opposite View  
from east

For more on  
this project

The AJ on iPad  
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windy climate) are screened downstairs by concealed blinds mounted horizontally. Galvanised edges to openings give a precise built quality.

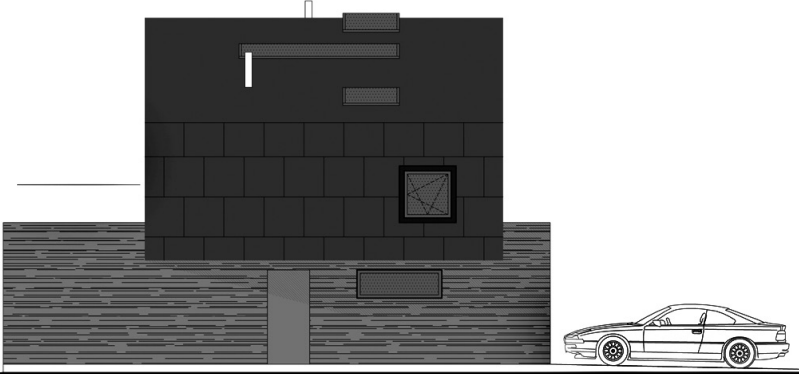
Too much has been made of *Bungalow Bliss*, a famous Irish house pattern book widely held responsible for the curiously heterotopic nature of much of Ireland’s rural housing. On the other hand, if every house were to be made like this, the country would be a very strange place. This is a special building. Its contexts are not only physical or related to a constructional reality, but include an engagement with domesticity, a comment on home, and a continuation of the distinguished tradition of the Modern house. ■

*Charles Rattray is an architect and teaches at the University of Dundee. He is author of Geurst & Schulze (2013)*

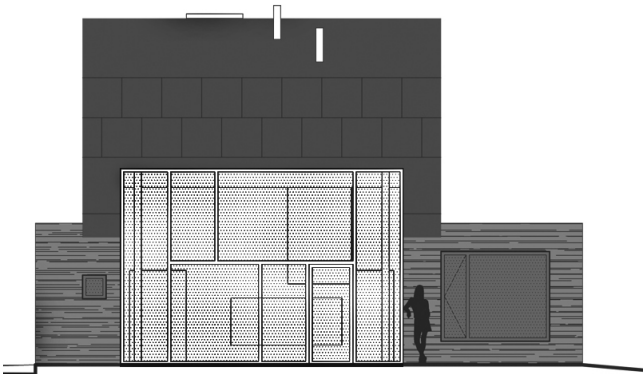
Project data

START ON SITE July 2011  
COMPLETION August 2013  
GROSS INTERNAL FLOOR AREA 352m²  
PROCUREMENT Traditional  
CONSTRUCTION COST Undisclosed  
CONSTRUCTION COST PER m² Undisclosed  
CLIENT Private  
ARCHITECT MacGabhann Architects  
STRUCTURAL ENGINEER Michael Carr  
MAIN CONTRACTOR Paul Doherty (Black & Doherty)  
ANNUAL CO₂ EMISSIONS Not confirmed

North elevation



South elevation



East elevation

