

# In Peak Condition

Paul and Dervilla's family ties to this extraordinary site in Donegal go back over 45 years. Striking in its beauty and breathtakingly rugged, the area is the definition of a classic, Irish coastal location. But what could inspire such a unique and intriguing shaped building here? The answer lay right in front of their eyes.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DEREK ROBINSON.







Paul's family caravanned in the local village from 1965. Outgrowing the caravan, they searched for a site with an interesting setting and in 1969 bought the site that the new house now sits on and built a 650 ft<sup>2</sup> cottage. Over time the cottage became a bit small and needed money spent on it, so they decided it was time to build anew and take full advantage of what the site offered. The orientation of the new house, south west facing, is exactly the same as the old cottage, so the view is as it always was. And in that view lies Muckish Mountain, a thing of natural beauty that was to completely inspire the new building.

'We asked four Irish practices, north and south, who had delivered award winning homes if they were interested in our project,' says the couple. 'We selected Macgabhann Architects on the basis that they had created several very individual and challenging homes in Donegal, and given that they are from the county, they had a clear sense of the demands of planning, finding a capable contractor, and building a one-off design in a remote location. We were also very impressed with their willingness and ability to deliver unconventional yet fully functional and appropriate buildings – both homes, offices, the Regional Cultural Centre in Letterkenny, and more. The shape of the house mimics Muckish Mountain as viewed from Kilmacrennan, with its sloping sides and sloping top surface. But also, in the foreground to the house, there are further outcrops of rocky headland which again show sharp slopes.'



The house came to be known as Pig House, as Macgabhann Architects explain, ‘The name Muckish is derived from the Irish word ‘Muc’ which is ‘pig’ in English, hence ‘Pig House’. Like Liam McCormicks nearby Cresslough church, the design is also based on the form and shape of Muckish.’ Seeing the end result, it is evidently a remarkable build in terms of its incarnation through the inspiration of the natural landscape, and one would have thought a logistical challenge due to its location, not so. Gaining permission for this type of build required architects who understood the local planning requirements and process, and who had a track record of delivering local buildings that work in the very special Donegal setting. Macgabhanns did that and more.

‘We retained Macgabhanns to provide a complete service – scheme design, planning permission, detailed design, tender, supervision, stage payments, snagging etc. They advised and helped us select contractor Barney Coyle & Sons on the basis of the satisfactory experience they had had with Coyles on other projects of similar complexity, on price, and on accommodating attitude. Martin McHugh of Milford was the electrical contractor. Everyone involved was excellent and worked well with us and with each other. The main problem we encountered was the precipitous fall in the value of the pound between when we started the tender process and when bills had to be paid.’

Zinc, large panel glass and slate flooring are the three most abundant materials that you absorb when you see the house - each specified by Macgabhanns and sourced by the contractor Barney Coyle and Sons, Letterkenny. Zinc was chosen as the cladding material because it allowed the building’s roof and walls (vertical and inclined) to be clad in the same material thus accentuating the monolithic form. ‘We saw zinc used to cover another Macgabhann home, Tuath na Mara, and very much liked the dark colour and texture. Macgabhann’s suggested that the zinc on the walls could be in shingles, and having seen it used that way at the Regional Cultural Centre, we liked the extra layer of texture created.’

Interiors wise, the couple wanted everything to centre on the view, and wanted complete access to that view - hence the orientation of the house and the rooms within, the amount of glass in every room, and the fact that in the main glass walls there are large sliding glass doors inviting you outside. Macgabhann Architects explain the layout, ‘The main living, dining and kitchen areas are in an open-plan double height space, with the ceiling and side walls lined timber boards. There is a smaller TV room where the three ground floor bedrooms open onto. The master bedroom is on the first floor where the walls, floor and ceiling are lined again with matching Douglas Fir. The timber lining was selected to provide a warm respite from the harsh external environment and because of its metaphorical connection to the ships and the sea. All the services, such as WCs, boiler room, utilities are in the rear contained within double concrete block walls.’

Cooking and eating are a big part of the family time in the house, and thus they wanted the kitchen/dining/lounging areas to be part of one bigger space - but not simply one space. ‘We also wanted an adjoining space where folks can go when they want a bit of quiet - so if the kids want to escape adult company at the end of dinner they can move to the second lounge area behind the stairs and be on their own, yet not cut off. We wanted two bedrooms with en-suite bathrooms so that elderly parents can stay and feel comfortable. Other bedrooms were to be functional, simple, and have a view. We wanted a wet room at the back of the house where wet-suits could be got rid of before a warming shower.







We wanted lots of storage and we wanted a utility area that didn't intrude. And we wanted some form of central heating (unlike the old cottage). We also wanted a fire of some sort - the focal point in the old cottage was an open fire, so we wanted something that carried that connection into the new house.'

Finishes are bright and sharp but low maintenance. There is a minimal amount of furniture, merely to prevent the build up of clutter. The living area furniture itself is in quite vivid colours to provide a strong contrast with the building. The simplicity of colour scheme in the bedrooms with an emphasis on white walls and white bed linen is relieved by the colour provided by locally woven rugs by Eddie Doherty, Ardara. 'Macgabhanns worked closely with us to choose finishes as the structural build progressed. So for example the tongue and groove boarding that clads the internal surfaces of many walls. There was



some spirited debate with the architects as to whether we would have this or a variety of other finishes. Probably the only major changes were to the kitchen which was from Dukes Kitchens of Newtowncunningham. The two stand alone pods, for want of a better phrase, originally had the upper level of cupboards suspended from the ceiling. When being constructed we felt the suspension structure obscured the open-plan feel, and so changed to having the cupboards supported off the counters below. A change for the better, but not to the delight of the joiner who had put in a lot of redundant effort! The only other unique material perhaps is in the refectory style dining table and benches, built from ash. We had always enjoyed large family and friend dinners in the previous little cottage and wanted to be able to recreate that feel in the new house. So we commissioned Stephen O'Briain of Carlow to design and make what you see. It's a great 'centre' to the house.'





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With so much access to the view it is like you are sitting in it - and it is of course changing every moment. It functions well - the kitchen is great to use and easy to keep under control. The utility room allows for a whole variety of chores without impinging on the rest of the house. The whole house is warm throughout the year - in large part due to the amount of insulation in all surfaces, and in part due to solar gain. The building faces southwest towards Muckish and takes full advantage of passive solar gain heating the house. The double back wall is constructed of concrete block to act as a heat bank, which stores the heat from the daytime and releases it at night. There are no gutters and the roof water is drained via a feature gargoye at the entrance like at McCormicks’ church. This trickle of water drains into a pond and the flow reinforces ones connection with nature and the place. So although there is underfloor heating and the woodburning stove, they are not used that much.

So how did the community take to the replacement of a straight and narrow cottage with Pig House? ‘The local community are great. Our neighbours stoically put up with the disruption of building works. And, as they did with our old cottage, keep an active eye on the place when we are not around. We are very grateful. As to what people feel about it, no doubt opinion is divided. Some like the adventurousness of the design, some like the fact that whilst it is two storey and angular, because it is grey, it doesn’t dominate the landscape. The house is tucked into a small hillside behind and thus not visible from the nearest road. And from the other side of the bay it largely disappears given its colour unlike more traditional houses. The two storey glass wall creates access to a view that everyone enthuses about. Some think we are mad because we could have got a ‘proper’ house cheaper and one that would be ‘much easier to sell’. We enjoy the ribbing!’ 🏠