



# Sitting on the Dock of the Bay

Her job had brought Barbara to this extraordinary part of Ireland a number of years previously where she set up home in a traditional, two bedroom cottage perched on the rugged shoreline of Donegal. But with her daughter, son in law and now granddaughter visiting regularly from London, the time came for more space and something a little different. The result; An Sciobál Dearg (Red Barn).

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DEREK ROBINSON.





‘When my daughter, her husband and my granddaughter came over to visit, it was becoming clear that the house was just too small,’ says Barbara of the previous dwelling that sat on this remarkable bay. ‘So they very kindly offered to put on an extension and I got a builder in to look at it. He said if he had this site, he would knock it down and start again! So I then asked an architect I knew and he agreed that the site was worth more than the house. My daughter and her husband agreed with the evaluation and set out to build a new house that would be comfortable for me and also as an investment for their future too.’

Macgabhann Architects were a practice that had built a solid reputation in the area. Hugely respected, Barbara went to meet with them. ‘They asked did we have any set ideas about the type of house we wanted, which we didn’t really. I said I didn’t want anything too palatial but something that fitted in with the boatyard and wasn’t too conspicuous. They knew the site well and were very happy to proceed. They came over and we met downstairs in the old house and talked about it.’

Before long, plans were drawn up and they were meeting again to iron out any issues. ‘They discussed the exterior cladding and originally they looked at seasoned wood outside. I’d seen it elsewhere but I wasn’t particularly keen on the idea. They have utilised galvanized steel on other projects and I felt it fitted in with the boatyard. They brought us samples and convinced us as a team that this colour would work and indeed they were right and it looks like a red shed from behind, hence the name, An Sciobál Dearg.’





As the architects explain, it was this context of the unique site and the task of ensuring the success of the cantilevered 'shed' that was crucial to the success of the project. 'The form and orientation of the red box on the upper level is derived from the neighbouring boat building shed, thus seeking to fit into its rural context. However the seaward and cantilevered projecting end of the red box is cut-off at an oblique angle to offer views to the bay and open sea beyond. The red corrugated metal cladding was chosen as it is a common material used traditionally on sheds in the countryside. Also its lightweight qualities suit the metaphor of a building about to be launched into the sea, or that of a temporary building or container perched on a dockside. The lower ground level is parallel to the water's edge and is constructed of round beach stones. The narrow window openings in the stone are surrounded by a metal surround, which also functions as the lintel.'

Barbara fully admits she found it all very hard to picture in her mind. Once things began to develop, she went on holiday for a few weeks and came back to settle into her temporary home just across the bay while the house took shape. On her return, bricks and mortar greeted her, the rooms of which she felt were initially smaller than expected, but this was an aspect that she and the architects felt was important; that the bedrooms were for sleeping and the living space for living, hence the living space taking the majority of the upper square footage. A concrete floor had been discussed with Barbara, which she initially had reservations about.

I thought a more sandy look finish would work better on the floor and would work with the stone outside so they had a lot of trouble doing that for me, but they did a fantastic job. The kitchen top is cement too and the floor in my room as well but they have each been polished to different levels.







‘The only floor we knew of which was similar was at the Regional Cultural Centre in Letterkenny. I noticed when I was there, there were black shoe markings on the floor which I wasn’t keen on. I thought it worked well in that space, but that it was grey and quite cold. The winter is very long here and extremely cold and grey so I didn’t think that would work. When I was in Canada and I saw in restaurants and cafés there were a lot of different styles of concrete floors and I loved them. I thought a more sandy look finish would work better on the floor and would work with the stone outside so they had a lot of trouble doing that for me, but they did a fantastic job. The kitchen top is cement too and the floor in my room as well but they have each been polished to different levels.’

The main living area is on the upper ground level, which has a west-facing terrace at the entrance. The terrace is finished in locally salvaged flagstones. This is in contrast to the corrugated metal upper level. The building is entered via a steel bridge from the roadside to the terrace. Internally the floor is finished with that wonderful sand coloured polished concrete, and this combined with the under floor heating gives the feel of walking on the warm sand of a tropical beach. The light and spaciousness that has been achieved is completely in synch with the surroundings in that it harnesses the panorama that greets you at the waters edge. Harnessing the surroundings even more are the two solar panels on the roof which heat the water.

In terms of the interior, Barbara has utilised some pieces that have been with her for many years, including the sofas which are in remarkable condition. ‘I actually bought them in 1971! I was living in Canada when I bought them. At the time, they were very expensive and I kept them for years, came back here and got them recovered again. They’ve been very reliable. Some other pieces are from my daughter’s house in London and things they had in storage. The kitchen was looked after by the builder and all the lighting by the architect. For the bathroom, we picked the style as a team. We saw the stone tiles in a magazine once and loved the effect and again it tied in with the surroundings here on the shore.’

What has been achieved here may be seen as some on paper as an unusual construction at first glance, but spending any amount of time in this incredibly beautiful part of the country and absorbing the surroundings and the rest of the activities that take place here, this building makes complete sense on every level. To the extent where now it’s difficult to imagine what other solution would have possibly worked. ‘A lot of people have been curious and have come for a peek,’ says Barbara. ‘Some don’t like the cladding which is fine, I love it. I’m not sure what others think but my guests certainly love it. There’s a lovely guy in a house across the bay on the hill and I met him at the local restaurant one day where I was having lunch with my cousin. He came over for a chat and my cousin said to him ‘isn’t Barbara’s house wonderful?’ and he said, ‘well it suits Barbara!’







The view is incredible. Some of the abandoned boats have been here for over 10 years. There are no plans to move them at all. I am used to them now and they're part of my view now. No matter what the weather, it's always gorgeous even if it's a force 10 or snow. We had the full works last Christmas with the snow and I had the family over to visit. It gets pretty wild. There are quite a few boats coming in and out at the dock for refurbs and painting at the end of the season so there's lots of activity plus the anglers are out and there's diver training. There's always something going on. Most importantly, my family have plenty of room to come and visit now, they love it here and my son in law has a boat moored and they have kayaks too so its perfect for them. They were only able to come a few times a year because of the lack of space, now they come once a month.' Those final reasons alone sum up the true success of this iconic piece of architecture. 🏠

