

Holding the Circle

'We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves. Our vision is continually active, continually moving, continually holding things in a circle around itself, constituting what is present to us as we are'.

John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, Penguin, 1972







John Berger's observation could easily describe MacGabhann Architects' approach to designing and the genesis of their designs in contextual analysis. Every project is informed fully by its context. They continually build upon an awareness of the site and its surrounding landscape, topography, and other defining elements. The sense of a 'continually active vision'... 'holding things in a circle', as described by Berger could not have a stronger articulation than at Slieve Gullion House in south Armagh. The house is on the site of an old cottage, which is the ancestral homestead belonging to the client. 'The brief for the project was to design a modern dwelling incorporating the latest in environmental design which would benefit from the views to the south, from the passive solar gain, and most importantly would integrate and sit comfortably with the existing cottage'.

The house makes reference to a number of elements including the nearby Killeavy Castle, a nineteenth century building that began life as ➤







➤ a modest farmhouse but was transformed into a small granite castle in the Gothic style. The castle is located at the foot of Slieve Gullion which itself is the primary inspiration for the form of the house. Slieve Gullion is a renowned geological phenomenon, consisting of an extinct volcano with surrounding crater lake and it is the site of the highest burial cairn in Ireland. The elevated site offers views of nine counties. The architects took direct inspiration from this internationally important and unique site; [that, they explain,] 'was formed by a volcano eruption from Slieve Gullion where the overflowing lava formed a large dyke, or earth ring, surrounding the mountain. Millions of years later during the ice age, flowing ice glaciers removed large parts of the surrounding ring. The parts that remained from this ring are now the satellite of hills, which constitute the Ring of Gullion, with the much higher and larger Slieve Gullion mountain at the centre'.

Equally as important, therefore, as Slieve Gullion is the Ring of Gullion, the satellite of surrounding hills. These natural referents were mapped by the architects and 'the drawing was superimposed onto the site with Slieve Gullion

positioned on the location of the old ancestral cottage. The mapped surrounding hills then formed an enclosure around the cottage, which became the basis for the enclosing walls of the new dwelling'. The configuration is unique and innovative and the form is akin to an object modelled in folded paper, such is its complexity. As is customary for the architects, development models were employed to visualise and progress this concept for the plan in three-dimensional form. The new dwelling was intended to be as unobtrusive as possible and thus has 'a gently sloping roof ascending away from the road towards the views and Slieve Gullion beyond'.

Although sizeable with its double height south-facing façade, it is also surprisingly delicate; origami-like, sensitively folded in a staggered accordion arrangement. It offers a visual feast for the eye – a kind of architectural alter ego for the mountains' forms it has been designed to reflect. There is a symmetry and balance between the manmade and the natural and the interrelationship between both.

The house itself is somewhat of a chameleon; from the front it is impressive, robust and

stands proud. Yet from the roadside it is discrete and somewhat hidden on its site allowing the older existing cottage to have primacy. In terms of its relationship with the cottage, it is designed to 'metaphorically embrace it, thus accentuating its importance as the centre and entrance to the ensemble'. The design in its entirety is akin to a gradually unfolding narrative that begins with quietude and reflection. Indeed one would almost drive past without acknowledging the presence of the building if it were not for the grass roof – a recognisable MacGabhann signature, most notably employed on the renowned award-winning Public Services Centre in Letterkenny. 'The ascending green and planted roof merges with the landscape, and the building forms a foreground to the distant views, creating a new type of ground line instead of a new skyline, thus embedding the project into the ancient landscape'. It is an ingenious design device and lends the building a timeless quality of belonging. In terms of materials, 'the walls facing the landscape are finished in timber, evoking the ancient and former Irish forests, while the cottage and road-side walls are finished in a dry dash with granite pebbles ➤



» from local Mourne Granite, to match the old cottage’.

Internally the spaces are ideally proportioned and light-filled. Downstairs the kitchen, living/dining area, reception space and stairwell, all benefit from the double-height south-facing vertical windows. The high gloss lime green kitchen is a quirky modern reflection of the dramatic surrounding landscape that infiltrates the house throughout. The external folded structure of the design sees its internal echo in a series of multivalent spaces – open plan areas and bedrooms are planned asymmetrically and interior interest is created through a range of windows, predominantly long and vertical. There are also smaller feature windows that frame selected landscape vignettes. The

majority of the interior is painted white and is defined by simplicity. In the bedrooms feature walls are highlighted with colourful wallpaper and the client has a diverse art collection that has been distributed throughout the house to great effect.

Overall Slieve Gullion House is a truly impressive and original design. It marks a strong achievement for the architects to achieve this level of innovation on such a constrained site. I have not previously seen a house like this. Once witnessed it stays in the mind’s eye for long afterwards. ■

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THE PROJECT

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