

HOME



CARRIED AWAY

We pick out trugs that are as attractive as they are useful **P13**

Tomb with a view

The Dolmen House, based on an ancient monument in the Donegal countryside, is a magical combination of prehistoric archeology and modern style, writes **Dara Flynn**



Dennis Gilbert

Rarely are architects required to merge the megalithic with the modern. To the ear, the concept sounds clumsy and ill judged. Worse still, it risks having all the makings of a modern-day tourism interpretative centre: a lifeless pastiche of a place, emotionally and physically removed from the very thing that led to its existence.

The Dolmen House is different. Like a

capstone on a standing stone, it has perfect balance, combining the prehistoric past not only with modernism but also a whiff of the future.

From most vantage points, this is a house that strongly echoes dolmens — the ancient portal tombs strewn about the Irish countryside, some of which are 5,000 years old. It is also the vision of a frankly modernist mind. You can read it as a 21st-century interpretation of the most ancient archeology the landscape has to offer, but the squinting eye might be given the imposing impression of a newly landed spaceship.

The 3,230 sq ft home, built across

three-quarters of an acre of rolling Co Donegal countryside, is on sale for €750,000 through Franklins.

The Dolmen House, naturally, is not a property that could be conceived in the cold, detached confines of an urban architectural practice. The team at MacGabhann architects, which was behind the project, donned wellies and walked the lands around this remote site before the concept of the dolmen came into view.

“Every site drives what the project will look like, so a properly designed house will never resemble another house. The specifics of its site are what generate the

Field of dreams The design of the property was influenced by its rural location

design,” says Tarla MacGabhann, who conceived and executed the Dolmen House with his brother Antoin and fellow architects Björn Patzwald and Dermot Ryan.

“Unlike in an urban setting, where you can generate your concept from a man-made local landmark, this was entirely rural and there was nothing man-made immediately nearby from which to take our cue.”

So the team turned to the local landscape, which was ripe with archeological inspiration: Gortnavern dolmen is only 2km from the site. “Gortnavern isn’t one of the more





→ well-known dolmens in the country; it's more low-key, but it's very beautiful and more than 5,000 years old. It seemed the obvious thing that would generate the design for us," MacGabhann says.

The project's earliest draft was a scale model of the dolmen. "At first we weren't sure what the model would give us. It wasn't as though the client had said, 'I want a house like a dolmen.' He had asked for a high-end rural home, with this many bedrooms and bathrooms and a certain square footage," says MacGabhann. "We also had a responsibility to the local environment. So we began sculpting and honing this dolmen to become the perfect response to the brief, as well as a response to the microclimate of the site."

The design ensured that the occupants would benefit not only from the magnificent Donegal views but also the best solar gain, and it was drawn to include private outdoor spaces.

"You bring those elements together, and these things drive the design," says MacGabhann. "There's no point having a concept unless it meets all these other criteria: views, the sun and privacy issues. There would have been little point in building a beautifully conceived house that had a kitchen the family felt they couldn't cook a dinner in. It would be ridiculous to turn around and say to that, 'But what about the concept?'"

The upper level of the building — MacGabhann's architectural response to a dolmen's capstone — was constructed using dark 12mm fibre-cement panels on a highly insulated steel-and-timber frame. "This was like a metaphor for the stone of a dolmen — this material is like a man-made, poured stone," says MacGabhann.

As a result this upper level appears to be propped up by its lower floor, and contains individual cocooned spaces: bedrooms and a large sitting room that feels enclosed and private, albeit with glazing to take in views of the undulating countryside. Underneath, the guiding principle was one of transparency, with an open-plan kitchen and large living spaces surrounded almost entirely by

Light fantastic
The living space is enclosed and private, right; Gortnavern dolmen which inspired the design, above; stairs lead to the capstone-style upper level, below

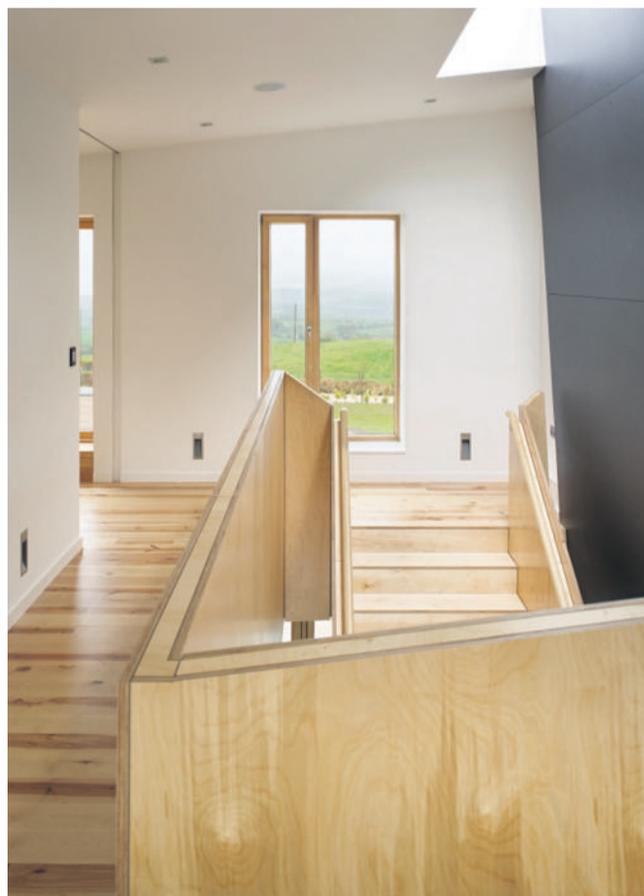
glass, made possible by the immense privacy of the site. "It means the experience of being in this building, on the top of a hill with views of the landscape, is like being outdoors, but you're warm and cosy," says MacGabhann.

Skylights are important. There is one at the top of the stairwell and another in the centre of the house that sucks daylight down towards the dining area. "This wasn't so much required to capture

As you go up the stairs, it's as though you're ascending towards the sky — this is important, this ascension towards something godlike

daylight, but it means that in two parts of the house you can look up and see sky. As you go up the stairs, in a sense it's as though you're ascending towards the sky — this is metaphorically and psychologically important, this ascension towards something godlike."

Although built two years ago, the Dolmen House is rooted in the past materially as well as conceptually. The



stone on the entrance gates bordering the site, and clad on part of the lower elevation, is local, salvaged from the owner's ancestral farmstead.

"The client is a worldly person who has travelled and has good taste. He's seen plenty of stuff outside Ireland, including some spectacular Californian homes, and was influenced by this in his taste," says MacGabhann.

MacGabhann architects has executed several rural residential builds, but is influenced heavily by international architecture, marrying avant-garde modernism with local traditions. It follows that the Dolmen House's influences are not solely prehistoric. Parallels have been drawn between aspects of the property and Pavillon Suisse, Le Corbusier's 1930 design for the Cité Internationale Universitaire in Paris. It too has a strong overhanging eave, but with a nod to open spaces and transparency at ground level. Le Corbusier used stones at the base of the pavilion that are similar in shape to those at the Dolmen House.

"Those stones bring a local note to the home here but have a big international reference. And if it's good enough for Le Corbusier, it's good enough for us," MacGabhann says.

The Dolmen House has an interior fit-out to match its imposing good looks. This is a home laden with smart technologies, such as recessed halogen



spotlights, a smart home system that controls lighting and sound, electric remote-controlled blinds, air conditioning and solar heating to complement the oil-fired system. The kitchen is a glossy, hi-tech model, with Bosch appliances and a quartz worktop,

Dennis Gilbert



Head for the hills
The views from the living area, above, and main bedroom, left, are spectacular

plus steps down to a seating area that has an open fireplace serving the adjacent sunroom. The playroom, which could serve as one of six bedrooms, is a bright dual-aspect room with pine floors and views of Lough Swilly and the surrounding countryside — including a peek at An Grianan Ailigh, a 6th-century ringfort, beyond the lough. The office is also double-aspect.

As well as containing the sleeping spaces, the upper level also has a sitting room with impressive views and doors to a decked terrace. The master bedroom is split-level, with a walk-in wardrobe and its own bathroom that includes a free-standing Victoria and Albert bath positioned for the best view of the countryside. A second large upstairs bedroom also has its own bathroom

The stones have a big international reference. If it's good for Le Corbusier, it's good enough for us

facility, while the main bathroom has a contemporary Cersanit suite. Flooring is a mixture of pine and grey slate, and the house sits on three-quarters of an acre, laid mainly in lawn with laurel hedgerow to the boundaries, a wide grey slate walkway surrounding the house, and private terrace and patio areas on the perimeter. There is a separate utility room with access to the garage, which has a glazed door to the side leading to an exterior carport.

MacGabhann stresses that the construction of the Dolmen House would not have been possible without a contractor who understood and appreciated the project. Paul Doherty of Black and Doherty, a masterbuilder and friend of the owner, was chosen.

“Only a few builders early on could recognise what a special design this was, and Paul took it under his wing and made it his project,” MacGabhann says. “That architect-client-builder relationship has to work for a project to work, and it functioned exceptionally well in this case. He handled the geometry very well.”

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