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# IRELAND'S INSPIRING HOMES



## APPETITE FOR CONSTRUCTION

Our guide to some of the country's greatest extensions, renovations and new-builds



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Cover photograph by Denis Gilbert

Ireland's cities and countryside are full of stunning examples of architecture, writes **Dara Flynn**

**T**o select a dozen or so houses from the annals of Irish architecture, old and new, is a challenge — and that's a very good thing. The boom and bust that did so much damage to Ireland's economy also left an indelible mark on the architectural landscape, but in many cases for the better. There are now more clever, high-functioning and beautiful contemporary homes in this country than ever before, a fact that we celebrate in the pages of Ireland's Inspiring Homes.

It's a credit to our architectural professionals that, as a nation, we have not fallen foul of any architectural homogeneity. In Ireland's Inspiring Homes, we present 13 of the most impressive domestic residences in the state and, although some of them share common traits, no two are truly alike. The variety of architecture dotting the Irish landscape, both rurally and in our urban spaces, is remarkable. It's proof that we are influenced as much by international design excellence as we are by our own vernacular heritage and by the Georgian and Victorian-era builders who came before us.

Ireland's Inspiring Homes reached out to architects, designers and homeowners the length and breadth of the country in an effort to find gold-standard homes that accurately represent the state of current architecture and the high standard of renovation apparent among our heritage homes. Many of the homes in these pages were completed in the past year or two; the oldest was built in the 18th century but recently renovated with expertise and modern-day technologies.

There's a striking suburban home that challenges our perceptions of what housing estates — and homes for wheelchair users — can look like. We showcase a home designed as a modern take on an ancient megalithic dolmen, but without so much as a whiff of interpretative centre pastiche. There are two houses whose occupants pay a pittance in energy bills, thanks to the foresight and attention to detail applied to the use of the best green technologies.

These pages are also evidence there is no such thing as an "Irish-looking" house. There's a visual variety at work in the backlanes and boirins that's proof of the merits of allowing a home's design to be informed by its site. Yet we're also a nation of wit, plenty of which is evident in our modern one-off residences, even if it is only in a peephole window or the framing of a curious view.

Some of the projects published in these pages are also reassuringly sympathetic examples of expert conversation. For a nation that was still bringing the wrecking ball to bear on fine Georgian homes as recently as the 1970s, we've come a long way. Bodies such as the Irish Georgian Society and the Irish Landmark Trust, as well as improved design education and government



Barbara Corsico, Barbara Egan

# The properties building up our nation's reputation



regulation, have forced change and transformed the way we treat our old buildings. Even in rural locations, there's a new-found respect for the humblest of heritage structures — such as cow sheds and other vernacular outbuildings — in the knowledge that our ancestors who built them intended them to last.

No showcase of architecture is complete without the show-stoppers, the work of so-called "starchitects" that manages to dazzle and surprise. There are wow-factor homes here that we're proud to know were drawn by the hand of an Irish-trained, Irish-based architect.

Ireland's Inspiring Homes is proof that, despite our patchy design past, we have learnt and our practitioners continue to evolve in the right direction. Ireland's architectural future is in capable hands.





# A very modern house with echoes of the

Charged with creating a high-end home in rural Donegal, the architects took inspiration from the dolmen and came up with megalithic-modern – 21st-century design rooted in its setting

## AT A GLANCE

■ **Location**  
Rural Co Donegal

■ **House type**  
A new 3,230 sq ft modern family home

■ **Why we chose it**  
This is a successful merging of the megalithic with the modern, without a whiff of pastiche, and a considered approach that responds perfectly to pastoral views.

**T**he dolmen, the ancient portal tombs strewn about the Irish countryside, inspired this house by MacGabhann Architects of Letterkenny. Not just any dolmen, however: the fact the local Gortnavern dolmen triggered a plan for an exciting new modernist build in rural Donegal is what makes this project honest and ultimately successful. It's a considered design rooted in its setting. However, it contains nods to the future; this is very much a 21st-century house, with all of the flexible layout and mod cons that entails.

The Dolmen House sits on three-quarters of an acre of rolling Donegal countryside. The team, comprising Tarla MacGabhann, his brother Antoin and fellow architects Björn Patzwald and Dermot Ryan, donned wellies to walk the site before pen was put to paper.

"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 design," says Tarla MacGabhann.

The client's brief never referred to a dolmen. He asked for a high-end rural home with sufficient accommodation and a great kitchen for his family. The design met these considerations, but also ensured its owners would benefit most from both views and solar gain, with outdoor spaces.

The first floor of the building was constructed using 12mm fibre-cement panels on highly insulated steel and timber, in a modern-day architectural expression of a dolmen's capstone. This upper level appears from the exterior to be propped up by the lower floor.

Inside, the layout includes individual, designated cocooned spaces: bedrooms and a large sitting room with an enclosed

private feel, but just enough glazing to frame views of the undulating countryside.

Downstairs is an open-plan kitchen and living space, with walls made almost entirely of glass. The design was generous with sky lights; there's one at the top of the main stairwell, another in the centre of the building that scoops daylight downwards to the ground-floor plan. In a fitting reference to the purpose of these ancient burial mounds – built to offer up the dead to the gods – the occupants can always see sky.

The architects and client were conscientious about their use of materials throughout the project. The entrance gates and the cladding on the lower elevation are local stone salvaged from the owner's ancestral farmstead.

The Dolmen House has an interior fit-out that belies the megalithic metaphor that defines its shape. There are smart technologies, including an automated home system that controls lighting and sound, electric remote-controlled blinds, air conditioning and solar heating to complement an oil-fired system.

The kitchen is a slick, high-tech model, with Bosch appliances and a

**A tomb with a view**  
The upper floor houses cocoon-like spaces, while the downstairs area is enclosed by walls made almost entirely from glass; pine and slate were used underfoot inside and out, above and right





Dennis Gilbert

# ancient landscape

**In a fitting reference to the purpose of these ancient burial mounds – built to offer up the dead to the gods – the occupants of this house can always see sky**

quartz worktop. There are designer bathrooms, and underfoot is a mix of pine and grey slate, as well as a wide grey slate walkway around the house. Finally, private terraces and patios are planted at certain sections of the perimeter, and there's an exterior carport.

No tricky architectural design sees the light of day without a contractor who understands its objectives. Paul Doherty of Black and Doherty, a master builder and friend of the owner, constructed the house.

"That architect-client-builder relationship functioned exceptionally well in this case. He handled the geometry very well," says MacGabhann. Geometry, a concept prehistoric Irish builders innately understood, was a watchword for the design of the megalithic-modern Dolmen House, and the key to its ultimate success.

The house isn't solely influenced by the prehistoric: parallels have been drawn with Le Corbusier's 1930 Pavillon Suisse in Paris, which has a similarly blunt overhanging eave and ground-floor transparency. "If it's good enough for Le Corbusier, it's good enough for us," says MacGabhann.

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