



**A revamp has transformed the  
1990s house in Ballybrack, Dublin**



# THE GREAT ESTATE

Suburban homes are being given a dramatic new lease of life, as **Niall Toner** discovers in the first of a three-part series on contemporary design. Pictures: Alice Clancy

**T**he rattle and hum of lawn mowers, the chatter of 2.4 children, and the humdrum identical facades of three-bedroom semis. These form part of the stereotypical image of the suburban housing estate.

The maligned "cookie cutter" architecture of the late 20th century is known for its rows of pebbledash, red bricks, grey render and concrete roof tiles. It's the last place where you would expect to find hot contemporary building design.

Well, not any more. A few young architects have been turning their attention to book-planned estates to see

how they might reinterpret the classic "Mr Average" houses of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. They are tackling the challenge of wrestling new life out of what their profession might call the "prosaic typography" of suburbia.

Robert Bourke, a Dublin architect, recently completed the remodelling of a typical estate house: a 10-year-old, three-bedroom property at Ballybrack in the southern suburbs of the capital.

The house had been built in the late 1990s as part of a small development. It faced the wrong way and was gloomy inside, which added to the paltry sense of space felt by its owners, Alan and

Fiona Sheil. The house had been finished in a depressing pebbledash-type render with red brick at ground-floor level. Bourke says the Sheils found it expensive to heat and it had odd-sized rooms with virtually no storage space. The notion of moving to another house was not on the cards because the family were happy with the local schools and amenities.

"The sunniest side of the house was an almost completely blank wall," says Bourke. "The interior was so dark the family had to switch on the lights in some rooms during the day."

"Our immediate decision was to open

up the wall to allow sunlight deep into the heart of the house. We achieved this by relocating the staircase and downstairs toilet away from the wall, and by creating a glazed hallway along the length of the building, reorientating the house towards the south."

Bourke added three small extensions to address the confined space. The original builders had given little thought to the layout of rooms and the quality of the spaces.

"The back garden was already quite small, and the only available space was to the front and side of the house, so we

**Continued on page 10**



The now-bright interior of the Ballybrack home was so dark that lights had to be turned on during the day



Continued from page 9

built one to the front, one to the side and a small one to the rear to replace a cramped dining area," he says.

"The two-storey extension to the front contains a new guest bedroom, which is used by Fiona's parents when they visit from her native Scotland. The room above this is a multipurpose studio, which she uses to pursue her interest in pattern-cutting and dressmaking.

"It's testament to the planners here that they approved such a bold front extension. But we were dealing with them from very early on, and they had a good idea of what we wanted to do."

Bourke created three outdoor spaces between the new brick extensions that were tailored, he says, to respond to each location on the site and to take advantage of the sunlight at different times of day. "You can have morning coffee on the front patio, read a book in the more private courtyard in the afternoon, and eat dinner on the west-facing rear patio in the evening," he says.

"Our approach was to harness as much sunlight as possible, while creating spaces ranging from generous and expansive to private and intimate."

Cian Deegan, of Taka architects in Dublin, was approached to build from scratch on a corner site in a late-1970s estate in Firhouse, Dublin 24. He was keen to embrace the traditional aesthetic of the surrounding houses, rather than simply place a glass and steel box on the site.

"When building anything, it is important how you view the context. And the context in a 1970s suburban estate is as strong as any," says Deegan.

"We wanted to come up with a specific version of a suburban house, so we opted for the rough, unpainted pebbledash render and roof tiles. What makes it look strikingly different is the absence of overhanging eaves and protruding windowsills." The home,

called 4 House, was built in the side garden of a corner house. Deegan says the design "reacts to this condition by locating the entrance on what would typically be the side elevation".

The house is shaped like a trapezoid — a design feature that came from a planning restriction stating that it had to be set back from adjacent drainage. It has a look approaching austere outside, but the interior walls of the ground floor spaces are lined with birch-plywood-fitted furniture, giving it a warm, almost rural, atmosphere.

Deegan says the design was influenced by a few older buildings in the neighbourhood, as well as by the surrounding properties.

"Knocklyon Castle is just up the road, and the finish is sort of inspired by it. Alice Casey, my partner in the practice, and I wanted the feel of it being 'erratic in the landscape' but not sticking out like a sore thumb," he says.

To achieve the typical suburban requirement of four rooms upstairs, the landing is in the centre of the plan. It is a mirrored space leading to four individually roofed spaces that are "calm and white, compared with the communal areas of the house". In contrast to its 1970s suburban neighbours, 4 House was built with energy efficiency in mind. It has solar panelling on the roof, high-grade insulation and a rainwater collection system.

"It is not a huge house, just over 970 sq ft, but the owner has been getting ridiculously small bills to heat the place — as little as €30 for two-month period."

Deegan says it is easy to understand why architects do not like suburban estates. "They tended to be drawn up by engineers with no attention paid to orientation. But it is interesting to try to work with what is good about them.

"Many get better with age, now that the trees and the open spaces have matured, and a lot of them have much



The Bourke property was cramped and had odd-shaped rooms

THE OWNER HAS BEEN GETTING RIDICULOUSLY SMALL BILLS TO HEAT THE PLACE — €30 FOR TWO MONTHS



The gloomy interior of the Ballybrack home has disappeared

older trees, that were left there often for no reason but provide spaces where parents congregate while children play."

Deegan's house incorporates original design features of the estate, such as the low timber fences surrounding the front gardens. It even has a driveway, albeit one of "grasscrete" — a grid of concrete through which grass grows.

Back at Ballybrack, Bourke says the building came in at a cost of about €1,500 a square metre.

"It wasn't a particularly cheap build, but it worked out at a third of the value of the house as it was beforehand, so they got excellent value," says Bourke. "This project demonstrates that a poorly designed house can be transformed into a unique and beautiful home."

Both projects featured in this month's Open House Dublin, where the public were invited to view houses and buildings not normally open to them. Deegan

says there was a great reaction from visitors who compared his property with other houses on the estate and saw what could be done with a bog-standard estate home.

"One of the positive sides of the current economic climate is that clients can get a lot more for their budget than, say, five years ago," says Bourke. "This opens up a wider range of options in terms of choice of materials and the ambition of the design itself.

"Suppliers and fabricators are more willing to spend time on developing a design with the architect, even on smaller projects, and in doing quality work. This is one of the parts of a project that we enjoy most."

[rba.ie](http://rba.ie), [taka.ie](http://taka.ie)

Next week: outwards and upwards, the new trends in "extension chic"



The Deegan home has an almost rural atmosphere and, above, was built in a side garden