

## MOVE

# Singular visions in light and space

A quartet of unique homes is in the line-up for this year's RIAI Public Choice award, writes *Barbara Egan*

**T**he domestic architecture of any era embodies the way we live at that time. It reflects our everyday life and our ideas about what is important in the home and in the world.

In the developments of the Dublin suburbs, in the 1930s to the 1950s, homes typically faced the road, but with the rarely used "good" room to the front. The radical response of the open-plan home from the 1960s onwards gained traction gradually, allowing cookery while chatting and watching the children doing their homework. Then there was the introduction of the playroom, basically a separate space to store ever-growing collections of toys, a by-product of a wealthier society.

It will be interesting to see the changes wrought in residential architecture by the present pandemic, which may create substantial change in the way we live and work. In recent years, though, architects in Ireland have followed similar themes where light and shadow, flexible spaces, environmental responsibility and embedding homes in the landscape are common.

Last week, the Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland (RIAI) launched its poll for the Public Choice Award. Part of the annual RIAI Architecture Awards, it gives people a chance to vote for their favourite building, place or public space. Of the 33 projects on this year's shortlist, four are one-off houses.

In each project, architects responded with their interpretation of the translation of everyday life into the built form.

## Blackrock House, Co Louth

This house sits at the end of a residential road in Blackrock, Co Louth, and was designed for a couple. "The design was driven by orientation; the path of the sun and the views of sea and grasslands," says architect Declan Scullion. "I envisaged it as embedded in the meadow, incorporated into the experience of being beside the sea."

The house is a series of interlinking structures with open spaces and courtyards, which Scullion has based on the vernacular farmyard architecture of the area. The house does not face the road, as many of its neighbours do.

The central kitchen and living areas are open, with different areas of activity delineated by changes in level. "There is a natural human pleasure in being together, but the open-plan box concept probably needs a more intelligently considered solution," says Scullion. Above the kitchen area is a guest/family bedroom block on the first floor.

He describes the materials used as "elemental". Brick and herringbone oak flooring create what he sees as a "woven" texture. "The design is the opposite of elitism; it incorporates many traditional

elements of vernacular architecture. It has been made to answer the needs and lifestyle of the client," says Scullion.

## A House, Coach House and Garden, Dublin

When Culligan Architects was designing a three-bedroom home on the site of a coach house, it was determined to let the original building inform the design and look of the project.

"It was a protected structure, but was close to dereliction and needed restoration. Other projects on the road have added extensions to the coach house to provide the floor area for a family home, but we decided to leave it as a stand-alone historic structure, and restore with minimal intervention so that it could be used as a studio space," says Damien Culligan.

Through the coach house there is an entrance courtyard into the three-bedroom home. "We wanted to create as many garden spaces as possible, to bring views of planting and nature into the house, but also to introduce light," says Culligan. Light is the driving force behind the design, he adds.

The house has been created in three interlinking volumes, with roof and floor levels, along with openings, at varying heights. This allows daylight to flow in.

Clerestory glazing in the main living area is broken up by the introduction of timber fins, the purpose of which is to create drama with shadows, and to bring a sense of enclosure. The changes in levels are also used to delineate different areas and usages. "Part of the house is sunk into the landscape, which creates privacy, as it becomes invisible from the road," says Culligan. "I also liked the idea of the house 'nestling' within the site."

## Pavilion House, Dublin

Four 1930s bungalows with red-tile roofs stood overlooking the sea in south Dublin, as architect Robert Bourke wrestled with the conundrum of transforming the end house into a spacious, modern home for a downsizing couple. "The home was a traditional 1930s build, completely inward looking with small rooms and windows," he says.

"It is a corner site and quite large, but that wasn't being utilised. To create the home my clients wanted with what was there wasn't making sense, so we decided to demolish and start over."

The two-bedroom, 252 sq m house is in two parts – the main house and the guest "pavilion" – the massing of which creates four separate zones on the site. There is the gravelled arrival area, an "orchard" garden with fruit trees surrounding the pavilion, a smaller grass area defined by a change in level viewed from the kitchen, and a larger area facing the sea at the rear of the site. The site itself slopes steadily downwards towards the sea.

"From the outside, the house looks modest, but inside it is opened up to roof level to create a spacious feeling," says Bourke. In both the main house and the guest pavilion, a mezzanine area has been added as part of a double-height space, and the main house's living room mezzanine has a large dormer, which allows light to wash down through the house.

Materials on the exterior are in keeping with the remaining bungalows, pebbledash and red-tile roofs. Inside, both chimney stacks are board-marked concrete, and are structural elements, supporting the roof. Ceilings run up to roof level and are Douglas fir timber with birch ply.

"We are moving towards a more



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**Contenders:** Blackrock House, in Co Louth, top; A House, Coach House and Garden, Dublin, left; In, On and Over the Earth, above



Pavilion House in Dublin, designed in two parts by architect Robert Bourke

modest, sustainable approach in building, a reduction to simple elements where structure is expressed rather than covered or clad, a more permanent long-lasting form of building, which requires minimal change or maintenance," says Bourke. "It feels to me a more honest expression of the built form."

## In, On and Over the Earth, Galway

The starting point for the design of this home was the amazing landscape of the Connemara coastline. "I wanted the house to live within the landscape," says Peter Carroll, of A2 Architects.

The site sits between two hills, contoured gently down towards the sea, from where the full force of the Atlantic winds can come screaming over the site. The clients have a deep interest in horticulture and growing food and plants, so carefully considered shelter was necessary outside as well as in.

The basic structure of the three-bedroom house is a 42-metre concrete beam, which spans onto two wings, built at 90 degrees to the main structure, enclosing a sheltered garden behind. "The beam echoes the earth below and the sky above, and beds the house within the landscape," says Carroll.

The central part of the house is a kitchen/dining/living area, with a more secluded living area linked to the main space. The wings contain the smaller, enclosed spaces of a house – bedrooms in one block, utilities, such as the laundry and garage, in the other. There is also a library and a television room. The roof is reached via an external staircase.

"I incorporated a fluidity in the house, in that it has no front or back door. The house can be entered and exited via many routes, and you are free to wander and experience as you will," says Carroll.

Robust, locally sourced materials were used to withstand the Atlantic's furies: rendered blockwork, fair-faced concrete, and anodised joinery. All doors and windows open outwards to create positive pressure on joints in strong winds. The most striking material elements are the huge, butterflyed sheets of Connemara marble on the fireplace walls.

Online voting for the RIAI Public Choice Award is open and voting closes at midnight on Friday; [riai.ie](http://riai.ie)

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