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ROCKY ROAD

Building this Connemara home wasn't easy, but this striking renovation shows how it can be done, writes Niall Toner

Peter Legge's recently completed Connemara Residence, near Roundstone in Co Galway, was a long time in development. The architect took nearly a decade to build the coastal getaway in the popular west-coast holiday destination for his "blow-in" neighbours.

The wait is likely to have been worth it, though, both for client and designer. The modest three-bedroom house is the "marquee entry" in House and Home's Build Your Own magazine 2012, an annual guide featuring the best of the previous 12 months' self-builds completed in Ireland.

The striking project with its rugged setting has also been picking up attention globally among the online design media.

A mere decade is not much more than the blink of an eye in the life of a dwelling whose story straddles four centuries. What now looks like a contemporary interpretation of the rural vernacular architecture of the area is a reconstruction of two cottages whose origins probably lie in the 1700s.

"The cottages were occupied up until about 15 years before my clients bought them," says Legge. A retired couple, they

already had a holiday home in the area but with a growing troop of grandchildren taking that over, they wanted some quiet space for themselves. "They had acquired this piece of ground and there were the ruins of two dwellings on it," he says. "I thought why not restore and convert them rather than demolishing them? It would not have been less expensive and was more environmentally friendly."

The architect drew up detailed plans of how he was going to rebuild the two detached cottages and connect them with a contemporary glass element, designed to be almost invisible, yet weatherproof. He thought this conservative approach and his plans' sensitivity towards the built heritage of the locality would help smooth their passage through the planning system.

Alas, his grandiose scheme for the ancient stone walls hit a bureaucratic brick wall, going all the way to An Bord Pleanála, the planning board, without success. It wasn't the modern elements of the design that were the problem, but the notorious "locals-only" planning regime.

"The response was 'they are not local residents, so forget it', even though they had been living in the area for part of the year for nearly four decades," says Legge.

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It took 10 years to plan and build the house at Dolan, in Connemara, Co Galway

Sean Breithaupt / Yvette Monaghan



The Connemara house blends into its rugged coastal setting; right inset, Legge

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"Then we got one more chance. There was a slight change in legislation allowing for the restoration of ruins, although not total ruins, so we tried again."

This time, however, access to the site became an obstacle. Legge had to prove that they could build a road that did not involve the removal of too many rocks from the sensitive landscape.

Legge and his clients also had to contend with the objections of neighbours, who argued that the cottages would be a blot on the landscape. He had to produce complex artists' impressions to prove that the new dwelling would sit well in its setting in order to get the final go-ahead.

The concept behind the design was to match the stone work with the remains of the existing walls, which had deteriorated significantly, despite the cottages having been occupied until relatively recently.

"When a place is left unoccupied around that part of the country, with salt water blowing horizontally through every little gap in the stonework, it doesn't take too long for it to degenerate," Legge says.

"Then when a storm blows off a couple of slates, the next weather event will blow off a few more, and when you lose enough slates, the roof timbers will rot very quickly."

Legge believes that the roofs of the two cottages would probably have been thatched originally, but had been

replaced with natural slate by the time the homes were last occupied.

Stones from the original building, which were a mixture of granite and other metamorphic rocks, were reused. A block wall was built inside the thick stone skin, with a cavity for insulation. Where possible, local contractors and suppliers were used, although the glass element was contracted to Duggan Steel, a Dublin company that specialises in the cladding of office blocks.

"The glass exterior needed to have invisible supports by means of stainless-steel brackets," says Legge.

There were a few problems on site with the glass, with the result that there was enough material left over at the end of the project to build a greenhouse.

"One element of the roof weighs three tons. It was a complicated job, but it was worth it. There isn't a whisper of wind or water when you are in there," he says.

Inside, concrete was poured and polished over underfloor heating. The "floor" was continued out to the exterior outside the dining room, but a rougher surface was applied to compliment some large exposed granite rocks on the site. As a result, the dining room can be half inside and half out when the weather permits, courtesy of folding double-glazed doors.

The main living space is part double-height, with a gallery overhead, taking up the floor space of one of the cottages. The smaller of the two cottages

houses the master bedroom, the main bathroom and a storage room. The glass atrium provides not just a link between the two, but an area where boots and outdoor wear can be stored, as well as fuel during the winter.

The interior design was overseen by Lisa McSharry and Cornelia Hope, who are associates at Legge's practice. The pair used a contemporary take on old cottage style.

The internal doors are traditional plank-and-batten construction and are opened by old-fashioned thumb latches. The built-in wardrobes are similar. The seating around the dining table is styled on the traditional Irish straw or rope-seated sughan chair.

The budget for the build came to €548,000, which included the building of the meandering 200-metre access road, which has been made to look as if it has been there for years.

Legge offers advice about recycling materials to anybody attempting a similar restoration. Attention should be paid to any rubble found around the site, he says, especially when walls have partially fallen down. "It is worth numbering any stones that may have come from the structure and noting where they were found," he says. "Often, the gables have quoin stones that can be reused and fit very well."

In spite of the protracted and at times complicated realisation of this project, it may suggest a blueprint for the future of the many thousands of ruined dwellings dotted around the Irish rural landscape.



A contemporary take on cottage style in a bedroom



The staircase links the two cottages

Some architects suggest that the traditional cottage may be a more sustainable solution to one-off rural housing in the future, especially when there are so many lying abandoned on good sites and offering accommodation that at worst costs no less than building from scratch and in many cases a lot less.

Many contemporary builds, especially in the west of Ireland, have begun to mimic the traditional cottage, a house type that first appeared as we know it in the 17th century. Before that, round hut-style dwellings built from wattle and daub would have been the norm in rural areas.

The cottage is thought to have evolved as the more advanced building techniques used in the larger estate houses that were replacing castles began to trickle down. In coastal and rocky areas, stone became the main material used, whereas in the midlands, a sort of muddy clay was the predominant building element, with thatch being the most important roofing material.

Few clay examples survive, largely because they deteriorate much faster than stone-built cottages if left unoccupied. One example, Goggin Cottage in Kildimo, Co Limerick, is undergoing restoration by the Irish Landmark Trust. The thatched farmstead, which is built of rubble stone bound with lime and clay mortars, was taken on when it was almost beyond repair.

plaaarchitects.ie; irishlandmark.com



The use of wood in the kitchen echoes the rustic vernacular



The cottages before renovation

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