



Wild Clare cottage is Home of the Year

Judges stunned by Swiss take on a traditional Irish cottage



Home of the year: winning blend of old and the new in Co Clare



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Thu, Apr 27, 2017, 20:55



In the seven episodes of RTÉ's *Home of The Year*, judges Declan O'Donnell, Hugh Wallace and Deirdre Whelan say they travelled more than 3,000km miles up and down the country in search of perfection.

And they found it, hidden from view, along a little boren in the wilds of west Clare, about half a mile from the salty seaboard of the Wild Atlantic Way.

We get driven to all parts of the country in the back of a car, explains O'Donnell. "We are told absolutely nothing in advance so when the car stopped on the side of the road in a small village in Co Clare to see an unpainted cottage we were all underwhelmed."



But the minute they crossed the threshold they were stopped in their tracks. "We couldn't speak. There was just silence. The height of the space, its scale and simplicity combined with the light you couldn't help but be impressed."

Swiss design

When the judges made their decision they didn't know that the house had been architect-designed, by an outsider.

Geneva-based Swiss architect Jean Claude Girard, a friend of the owners Louise McGuane and Dominic McCarthy, had never been to Ireland when they invited him to come look at the site in the village of Coolaclare.

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Louise McGuane and Dominic McCarthy: took their Swiss architect round the region to see traditional buildings

He met McGuane, who lived and travelled across Asia, while working with Irish Distillers and Pernod Ricard. And she is now the throes of setting up a Irish whiskey brand, JJ Corry, in this corner of Co Clare. Named after a local bonder she's still waiting to find out how the environment affects the whiskey she has maturing on site.

Girard flew into Shannon and got to observe many of Ireland's traditional buildings on his way to Co. Clare. It had always been his plan to use traditional building methods and materials but in a contemporary way but it was the countryside in Ireland that he found to be truly special.

Colour and light

“It is so very green and that strong colour green combined with the sky and its ever-changing light is really quite amazing and unique. I wanted to capture that countryside in the large picture windows and floor-to-ceiling glass.”

The couple took him around the region so they could take a closer look at traditional buildings and having seen the role the hearth played in cottages he decided to make the entrance hall, where the fire would have been traditionally, a focal point.

He also decided to make the new part of the house look the same as the old part, but gave it a totally different sense of volume, with the use of well-positioned large windows and double-height ceilings to frame the views.

There is a lot of talk about architecture and design in the countryside and much of it sounds fluffy but a simple idea executed well to a very high standard showed exceptional skill and restraint, says O'Donnell.

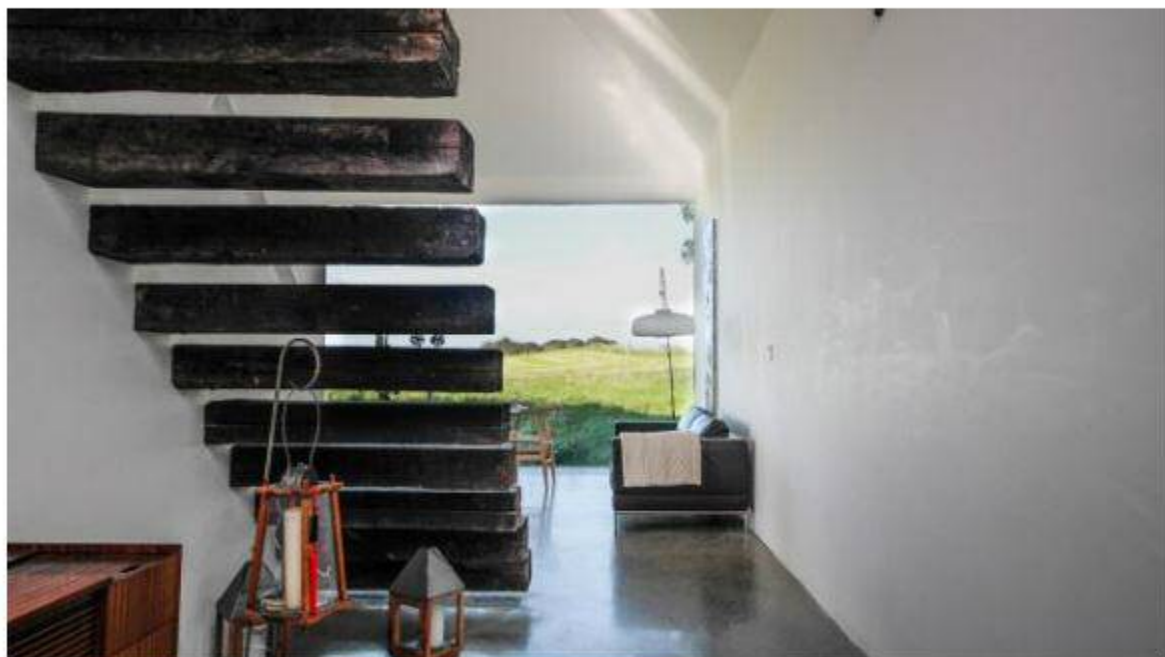




“The first thing you see when you walk into this house is the countryside and that is very special.”

Architecture and design are human science and are all about evoking emotions rather than fancy finishes, he says adding: “The impact here is in the physical feeling you get when you walk into this home.”

Design statements: stairs and sink



Stairs: Inspired by a gallery in Hong Kong, the cantilevered steps are suspended from the wall and the treads feature railway sleepers, a cost-effective material that cost her €19 per sleeper, with each sleeper giving her five or six steps. The stairs has no outside handrail but has one secreted into the wall side.



Sink: In the upstairs bathroom set under the eaves the handbasin floats above a reclaimed wood surround installed by local joiner Eugene Woods. McGuane believes it to be cedar. “It was the dance floor in the parish hall in Curraclare and was put down in the 1940s. My dad then sanded each single piece by hand.”