

A new generation of Irish architecture

A house on Inis Óirr in Co Galway has just been showcased at the BAU fair in Munich

GEMMA TIPTON

For many, the idea of an Irish vernacular architecture conjures images of John Hindesque stone cottages, preferably thatched, and with a picturesque donkey or two outside.

More recently the landscape has become peppered with dormer bungalows that seem somehow more suburban than rural. Completed in 2013, Brigid Keane's Inis Óirr house, which has just been showcased at the BAU building and architecture fair in Munich, is an excellent example of what a new generation of architecture might look like.

The two-storey, three-bedroom house is at home in the wild and dramatic landscape of its west of Ireland setting, but it also features innovations in its structure and design.

Architect Patti O'Neill of Co Tipperary firm O'Neill Architecture initially came to the project because the site owners, Brigid and Kevin Keane, needed someone to shepherd the

project through the planning process.

The first site visit was in 2009, and the couple wanted a holiday home that would ultimately be somewhere to which to retire. Shortly after permission was granted, however, Kevin was diagnosed with a terminal illness; he died later in 2010.

Building on an island

Brigid decided to carry on with the project, and the team started on site late in 2012. Building on an island means everything has to be transported by ferry, a process that turned out to be much easier than O'Neill had anticipated.

Even the unpredictable weather wasn't a problem – something the architect credits to her choice of material: Poroton monolithic clay blocks.

These were introduced into Germany as an ecological building material, but now account for more than 40 per cent of building in that country. "It's now a mainstream product,"



■ Brigid Keane's house on Inis Óirr, designed by architect Patti O'Neill.
PHOTOGRAPH: PHILIP LAUTERBACH

says O'Neill, who knew about the material from her training in Germany.

Irish climate

And while it is an imported product, she also argues it is uniquely suited to the Irish climate, in that it absorbs moisture without becoming damp, giving the house a BER of A3. "If you think about it, the potato was an import too," she adds.

She also notes that despite the expense of importing, the clay blocks are cost-neutral, because building is four to five times faster than with conventional blocks.

The house is built over two stories, sheltered by a retaining wall, and with a sun-trap balcony-cum-terrace, and views across the sea to the Cliffs of Moher. It is cosy and yet also

has a sense of drama, without dominating its site.

"It's really a lot of common sense, good design, fitting into the landscape, using good materials," says O'Neill. "That's what good architecture is. Its message is so subtle it's almost

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For Keane, “the house is a dream come true. It's a sanctuary, a place to recharge in an idyllic island, with lots of memories.” Good architecture indeed.

