



THE WATER MARGIN

Breathtaking views of Rosslare Harbour come with this striking contemporary retreat — but building it was far from plain sailing, writes **Caroline Allen**



Cillbríoch's design had to encompass an old church wall and take into account the graveyard below it and the holy well beside it

Cillbríoch, a contemporary waterside sanctuary set on the Burrow peninsula in Co Wexford, was built for an enviable purpose. Its owner wanted something to look forward to at weekends, holidays and, ultimately, in retirement. When you see the 1,700 sq ft home in its bird-sanctuary setting, you have to ask: what is he waiting for? Perched on the water's edge, it commands such

knockout views of Rosslare Harbour that you think surely even the most feverish workaholic would contemplate downing tools ahead of schedule. The owner, who wants to remain anonymous, lives in Dublin but is a native of Rosslare and bought the site — which included a derelict 860 sq ft cottage — in 2004, without planning approval.

It was a small plot and there were other unusual challenges. On one side there was a holy well called

St Brioc's and on the other a flood plain. Sterrin O'Shea, of Sterrin O'Shea Architects, got the call in early 2005 to design a replacement house that would fit the plot and be acceptable to the Wexford County Council planners.

"The original cottage was partly constructed from an old church and is officially a national monument," says the owner. "So we had to design the building around part of its old wall, which could

not be demolished. This gave Sterrin a real design challenge, but she coped very well."

As the plot is also on an old church graveyard, the planners required archeologists to be involved in the building work.

The planning process went smoothly and took about nine months. However, once approval had been granted, the economic downturn stalled

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Continued from page 9 progress and the project was put on hold until 2011.

The brief was simple enough: the owner wanted a three-bedroom, sustainable and contemporary dwelling that capitalised on the westerly aspect of the site and the view of the harbour. Achieving it was trickier. When work eventually began, the contractor ran into financial difficulty and the tough decision to appoint a new one had to be made. Time was of the essence to ensure that the house was built before the planning approval expired.

Despite the scepticism of the architects, the owner appointed a new contractor that he knew, confident that he could trust the firm. “We usually work with contractors whose work we are familiar with or who have built similar types of projects, says O’Shea. “Our designs are very detail specific and the choice of contractor is always critical.”

The breach was filled, but it didn’t mean that the build was straightforward. The tight time frame created pressure and the seasons were also against the team because of the delays. “Construction started in October, so building over the winter months slowed down drying-out times and caused other problems,” O’Shea says.

The “stick-build” timber-frame shell was built on site, rather than in a factory, as they often are. A raft foundation was employed to “float” over the historic site and support the structure. At a pre-planning meeting, Wexford county council had asked that the new home “echo the traditional building form of the cottage”, which prompted a change from an ultra-contemporary look to a pitched-roof form, flanked by two single-storey extensions.

The main entrance is at the eastern end of the plot, in a low timber-and-zinc-clad extension. It leads through a low space into a double-height living/dining area, with the kitchen, utility room and cloakrooms behind it, in the low areas under the attic study.

For O’Shea, the best design involved making the old church wall a prominent feature of the new project. “Early site research revealed that the cottage had been built on the site of a church and burial ground, dating back to the 17th century,” she says. “The L-shaped stone wall which was part of that original church was retained as a feature in the living area. We were not allowed to build on top of it.”

O’Shea and her project architect, Diarmuid Brophy, designed an opaque glass screen over the church wall, protecting the building from the elements. The screen can be backlit, highlighting the historical significance of the wall to passers-by.

The main living spaces look west, flooding the interior with natural light.

Sliding glass doors from the living area make the most of the harbour views; above, the kitchen is tucked under the attic room



Doors from the living area open out onto raised decking

Super-sized sliding doors allow access to elevated timber decking, which connects the main house and its two extensions. The deck runs parallel to the shore, soaking up views right across Wexford harbour.

Although open to the living and dining spaces, the kitchen, which is tucked under the attic room, feels separate. The breakfast bar/island is positioned under a Velux roof light and the bathrooms and utility areas were put on the opposite side, with restricted windows along the roadside wall. The kitchen features pared-back, sprayed and lacquered cabinetry. There is also a quartz splashback, counter tops and island sides.

The master bedroom, which is accommodated in one of the timber-and-zinc-clad blocks to the south, has an en-suite bathroom and walk-in wardrobes concealed behind the bed-head. The block to the north contains two smaller bedrooms, an en-suite bathroom and another bathroom. Bespoke louvre screens filter natural daylight and were designed to give privacy between the bedrooms and the deck.

Devised as a low-energy house, Cillbríoch’s rooms all have a dual aspect and face south or west to maximise solar gain, allowing it to make the most of natural light and free heat. Hemp

insulation was used generously and the recommended regulations were exceeded to ensure a toasty living space.

As well as a wood-burning stove in the living room, there are radiators in all the rooms. “We explored the possibility of installing underfloor heating but

because this house is used as a weekend and holiday home, we decided it wasn’t the most practical solution,” O’Shea says.

The timber-frame structure was also sealed with membranes and tape to make it air tight, while plumbing was

done for the solar panels. Zinc was the material of choice for the pitched roof and fascias to the flat-roofed buildings as it is 100% recyclable.

The finishes for the interior were selected with simplicity and practicality in mind. Iroko was used in the hardwood windows, sliding doors, timber cladding and decking. “It weathers light grey which will, in time, match the zinc cladding on the fascia over it,” says O’Shea.

An off-white cement-compound floor was used throughout because of its suitability for wet rooms as well as living areas. The bedrooms were carpeted for warmth. The plentiful amount of built-in wardrobes and the large storage wall in the utility area under the stairs meant there was no need for much furniture.

Birch-veneered plywood clads the stairs, adding warmth and tactility when offset against the white floor. Walls were painted off white, apart from the bathrooms where a blend of

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brilliant white paint and light grey square tiles work well with the wall-hung sanitary ware and the clean concrete floor.

Building and completing the project has cost €370,000.

The owner has been deliberately slow in choosing furniture: “I wanted to get the feel of the house before committing

to a decor and furnishings. Most of the furniture at the moment has come from Ikea. This fits the design of the house and has been convenient to buy and have delivered.”

The extensive glazing and the view out over the reeds make the small but spectacular site seem bigger than it is, and the existing trees were retained.

The completed house makes the perfect retreat for the owner. “The ever-changing view is the key feature of all the main rooms in the house. It gets the afternoon and evening sun and sunset is spectacular,” he says.

“The harbour is a bird sanctuary and there is always feeding activity going on outside, especially as the tide goes out. The water is relatively shallow and the sea level is ever-changing so there is always something to look at.

“Having an ancient church wall in your living room adds character and integrity to the development, I think.”

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O’Shea, the architect behind Cillbríoch, is pleased with how she was able to make the 17th-century church wall a feature in the house

VICKI COUCHMAN