

How's Your Mother for Blocks?

During the boom years, television programmes charted the stories of private individuals engaged on impossibly elaborate schemes for their own houses – schemes which often had no budgetary constraints, nor any thought as to the ecological consequences of their design.

Now the climate is very different – even among the rich, there is no appetite for such ostentatious excess, while ordinary people now find themselves living in houses which are no longer worth the money spent on them, and unable to borrow the money to develop even the most modest proposals.

So what has happened to all of the design ambition, the challenge of finding an architecture to express your personal vision and your place in the world, or merely the simple dream of living in your own custom-made space? Do we now have to radically overhaul our assumptions about what the word “house” means, about what we expect from a “house”?

Even if we feel we're not in the market for an architect to help us find answers, architects themselves must surely be asking the same questions. Where do we begin to find out how to build our dream house in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland? What is an affordable house? What is a sustainable house? Is it just about technology, or is it about *how* we live?

Over the next six episodes we are going to look at six houses in six separate Irish contexts –including urban infill, the suburbs and the countryside. Most building projects involve a three-way set-up between clients, architect and builder, but, in Ireland, people would be surprised to know that only 2% of residential construction involves architects. Yet, rather than designers or engineers or builders, it is *architects* who need to address themselves to the question of how we should live. In fact, *that* is the true meaning of “ecology”.

So architects need to repossess terms like “ecological” or “green” in relation to architecture – they cannot be, as most people understand it, limited to the technical concerns of a building's energy footprint. Architecture is based on space, light, form and movement – we need to produce buildings which are designed on these principles, but which address the issue of sustainability in a more fundamental way. And if we really want to save money, we have to do much more than simply reproduce the traditional house, with a solar panel or a windmill on the roof.

We will be looking for the answers from these projects – in the light of changed economic realities, the clients will have to reconsider their requirements, the architects will have to define what they mean by sustainable design, and the builders will have to find new ways of making homes affordable. In the end, the role of government, as represented by the local planner, is crucial in setting out national house-building policy – can planners start to imagine a new built environment, both urban and rural? We will be asking them to respond.

Over the course of six programmes we will be looking at private houses under construction involving Irish architects - in some cases, their own houses - including Tom de Paor's houses in Wicklow and

Mayo, Dominic Stevens' houses in Leitrim, houses in Meath, Kerry and Dublin by Simon Walker, houses by Gráinne Hassett, Peter Cody, Ken Meehan, A2 Architects and Alan Mee, among other projects to be confirmed. We will be talking to their owners and builders, as well as examining the work of these Irish architects in dealing with the issues of cost, sustainability and the environment.

By interspersing these featured houses with visits abroad, and interviews with architects and clients outside the country, the programme will attempt to draw parallels between Ireland and current European practice, from countries which have similar climatic conditions. Among those relevant projects which could be considered are work in Mulhouse by Lacaton and Vassal, Waterwijk Ypenburg housing in The Hague by MVRDV, houses by Atelier Bow Wow in Tokyo, Borneo Sporenburg by West 8 in Amsterdam, house in Norfolk by Lynch Architects, house by Bruno Vanbesien in Brussels, work by Vandkunsten in Ballerup, Denmark.