

COLLEEN DUFFLEY



cottage industry

Breathing new life into old buildings is as noble as it is daunting. **Nathalie Marquez Courtney** explores three innovative makeovers.

BALLILOGUE Ballilogue is a series of expertly designed and lovingly refurbished stone buildings, all a few steps from each other in a tranquil, rural hamlet near Inistioge, Co. Kilkenny. The properties, which include a renovated farmhouse, barn and dairy, date back to the 18th century and have been a labour of love for Irish-born, London-based architect, Mark Guard and the guesthouse's

creative director Patrick McCarthy, for almost two decades.

The buildings are a beautiful example of how modernist architecture and expert restoration can work seamlessly alongside each other. "Mark brought a contemporary, light-filled approach to it," recalls Patrick. "Our interest was in keeping things simple and plain," adds Mark, "while Patrick's interest is in finding richness and heritage – so we put the two things together and got something quite wonderful." The result is a tasteful blend of old and new that celebrates Irish rural tradition while showcasing contemporary architecture and design.

One of the more impressive modern features is a raised atrium made of galvanised

steel and glass that's part of Ballilogue House. It overlooks the pretty and private walled garden and deck, making it perfect for al fresco gatherings. "I planted wildflowers and we've brought back all the original hedging," says Patrick. The gardens at Ballilogue are an important part of the overall design story and cleverly serve as both a way to connect the individual spaces – which are hired out for private gatherings, events and small weddings – and create little pockets of privacy, making each building feel like its own oasis of calm.

And while the three buildings have their own unique personality and finish, for each there was the same central ethos driving the design and decor: preserving the integrity of what was there, being as unobtrusive as possible



with the architectural additions, and making each house a home through comforting, homely touches and great Irish craft.

Mark's love of modernist architecture comes from a desire to keep things stripped back and simple, and this passion is very much at play at Ballilogue. "Architecture should be just the container of people's activity and existence, albeit a nice container, with lots of natural light and the best proportions," he explains. "We try not to let the architecture overshadow what is going on inside or outside the property."

Within each space, mid-century modern furniture sits with quality Irish craft pieces (such as bespoke Studio Donegal blankets, woven baskets from Norbert Platz and quirky ceramics by Marcus O'Mahony and Robert Lee) while contemporary Irish art hangs from the beautiful, rough, old stone walls. "I thought it would be very interesting to have the properties be a celebration of contemporary design and art, really linking the modernist architecture with what was there," says Patrick. "We also felt this combination would work across the varied spaces, connecting the houses." The soft furnishings and accessories proved such a hit with guests that a shop was opened on-site, so that people could take their favourites home.



Ballilogue was a big undertaking for all involved, worked on in stages over the years. There are still renovations going on and more buildings dotted around the grounds, so plans are afoot to continue to work on those, infusing them with the same considered care and deep respect for the history of the area, alongside stylish finishings. "Our hope is that when people are here they can enjoy these lovely, luxurious contemporary spaces, but also connect to the tradition and that it means something to them," says Patrick.

ballilogue.com

RENOVATION ADVICE

BE BRAVE The thought of refurbishing an old stone building can be daunting, but it's important to remember that most were built to last. "People come to my design clinics and always start off saying they were told by their builder to knock it, or that an engineer told them it will never stand," says Patti O'Neill. "We're talking about buildings that have been standing for hundreds of years. There's often a lack of knowledge and understanding, but my advice is to go for it, it can always be rescued."

SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW

Many of these historic cottages are small both in ceiling height and floorplan, so modern extensions can be inevitable. Don't be afraid to lean in to the contrast between the old and new; the juxtaposition of sharp, clean lines with old, rustic stone is a beautiful one. "If you can work with the original footprint and add to it, rather than ripping something down and starting again, it brings something quite special to the finished property," says Patrick McCarthy.

INSURANCE SAVVY

If you have your heart set on a thatched roof cottage, be prepared for a little extra legwork securing insurance. "Unfortunately, although a very powerful symbol of Irish heritage, getting insurance for a thatched cottage is very difficult," explains Declan McCabe. Even if you have carried out the necessary works and have the required certifications, you will have to look to the UK to get cover, as there are no underwriters currently left in Ireland that will insure a thatched roof house.

SURPRISE, SURPRISE

Working with older properties is a process of discovery, as you get to know the cottage's quirks and limitations. While there can be some nasty shocks, there are often wonderful surprises as well. "At Ballilogue, we discovered that all the original windows had their shutters and they were just painted in," recalls Mark Guard. "We didn't know they were there and they could be reopened and reused."



PHILIP LAUTERBACH

O'NEILL ARCHITECTURE Having admired it from afar for years, when award-winning architect Patti O'Neill finally got her hands on this ramshackle 250-year-old cottage in Ballycommon, Co Tipperary – one of the only remaining thatched cottages around – she got straight to work, moving in after just six months when only one room was completed.

Over the years, several renovation attempts had added layers of cement to the walls and floors, suffocating the old stone and lime mortar construction. Patti painstakingly removed at least 60 tons of cement in an effort to bring the property back to its original state. "It was unfortunate, but since the 1920s and 1930s, that's how people were renovating old cottages," explains Patti. "But they were doing more damage than good."

Older houses need to breathe and move, but cement completely prevents this, leading to a humid, dank and dark environment that slowly but surely destroys the structure of the building. This led Patti to explore how new, modern techniques and old building methods could dovetail; there is underfloor heating connected to solar panels, which in turn are connected to the stove, which is all helped by having a dry, breathable construction. The result is a warm, rustic and cosy space. "I've studied architecture for years, but I think that my latest, biggest teachers have been the old buildings," she says. "The principles stay the same: always natural, always breathable, and 100 per cent recyclable."

The cottage is simply and tastefully furnished, with some clever design touches that mean you're always presented with

opportunities to admire and enjoy the original structure. In the kitchen, Patti opted for a modern, free-standing stainless steel kitchen so as not to detract from the beautiful old stone walls. "I found it worked well as a contrast, the metal and sharp edge versus the stone," she says. "And it was very cost effective – you don't always have to throw money at kitchens to get a good effect."

And while these older buildings might require more TLC, the results are always more interesting and worthwhile. "The advantage with something old is, even if you add something new to it, you immediately have an atmosphere and a feel-good factor," says Patti. "That is much harder to achieve in a new property."

oneillarchitecture.com



BUNDORAN Built around 1820, Teachín Tuí + is a thatched cottage in Bundoran, Co Donegal, with a modern extension that has been thoughtfully designed as a welcoming holiday home. Up until the 1990s, the cottage was a small shop known locally as O'Brien's. The new owners had enjoyed holidaying in the adjoining house over the years, so when the dilapidated cottage came up for sale, they spotted a unique opportunity to both restore the cottage and create a series of new spaces that could comfortably accommodate their children and grandchildren.

"The little cottage lay derelict for years and was in desperate need of repair, care and attention," recalls Declan McCabe, of Donegal's McCabe Architects, adding that the cottage is the only thatched example of

its type that still exists in Bundoran. "The project included many trips to salvage yards, antique shops and old ruins that were beyond repair to source materials, be inspired, learn and get a deeper appreciation of how these little buildings were inhabited."

The result is Teachín Tuí +, which simply translates as "thatched cottage", the "+" cleverly referencing the new extension. The original cottage was completely restored right up to the thatched roof, which now boasts a new, locally cultivated rye thatch. It acts as a neat, self-contained retreat and is linked to a new one-and-a-half storey contemporary extension overlooking the golf course, where larger groups can gather. "The majority of buildings along the street turn their back to the seaside, but we saw an opportunity to frame the sea views with a

new extension," explains Declan.

The modern extension is split-level to follow the sloping nature of the site, which also means it's ingeniously hidden from view from the main street. The first-floor bedrooms of the extension float above the lightweight glass walls at the lower level, to accentuate the relationship between the new extension and the original cottage. "A basic decision in the redevelopment process was that old and new would read as separate elements," explains Declan. To achieve this, a transparent glass link was created. "This link became the new entry and circulation hub between both cottage and extension, with the stone walls meeting contemporary, minimal detailing."

mccabearchitects.ie