



**The sea inside: the house McLaughlin designed at Dirk Cove near Clonakilty in Co Cork, left, is in close proximity to the water; above, a window in flats he designed in Silvertown, East London**

# Trapping the light fantastic

Niall McLaughlin's fascination with light and space are vital components in his beautiful designs, says SHANE O'TOOLE

**S**peaking to a packed hall of rapt architects in his home town of Dublin two years ago, Niall McLaughlin surprisingly classified the small-scale designs with which he had made his international reputation as "trial pieces".

The phrase perfectly captured the experimental ethos of the former young British architect of the year (he has used a wide range of materials, from gold to Daz washing powder, in his building projects) but it bore no relation to the perfectly tilted notions of beauty that seemed to imbue every project that emerged from his studio.

They include a tiny chapel and cloister in the Carmelite priory in Kensington, west London, that has been called one of Britain's modern wonders; a photographer's hide on a pond in Northamptonshire shaped like a mechanical alien water bug; and a jolly seaside bandstand that took three years to design and resembles a rippled megaphone or an abstract sea gull, with two wings hovering over performers and projecting sound towards the audience.

"My first decade in practice was an apprenticeship," said McLaughlin, "a way of finding a voice." He spoke of having enjoyed a second education after setting up office in London, teaching at Oxford and the Bartlett, University College London.

As a student in University College Dublin he had "absorbed the canon of architecture as a pure discipline, a pure art", whereas at the Bartlett they "prefer the pursuit of innovation through ignorance", he said. "They allow that architecture can fuse with other arts." McLaughlin's unique architectural voice owes something to both cities.

The influence of his Dublin training, with its devotion to precedent and reference, is evident in a house near Clonakilty, Co Cork — his first free-standing building in Ireland. Dirk Cove is a small harbour that faces southeast across Dirk Bay, sheltered by Dundeady headland. There was a boat slip on the wedge-shaped site and some old stone buildings that were once a coastguard's station.

McLaughlin had worked for the new owners before, converting their home in Hampstead, northwest London. They had found the site on the internet and invited him to see it. There was a problem, however. "We were straining to get afternoon light," he says. "We went in August and it was natural to want to sit in the last shred of sunlight. The coastguards had wanted to be under the hillside, out of the weather, but we wanted the best of both worlds."

Light has long been a preoccupation of McLaughlin's. In a series of projects he calls *Angels* — previously located in dense, light-starved urban locations — he has

explored ways of sculpting surfaces so they can pass light from one to another. "Angels began with the Carmelite monastery and ended with Dirk Cove," he says. "It is the sixth or seventh generation of the same type. The cross-section of the house is the same as the sacristy in London."

The idea for lighting the sacristy began with a visit to a church designed by Jorn Utzon in 1976 at Bagsvaerd, near Copenhagen. "The ideal never exists," says McLaughlin. "I like the way, when you finish a project, you realise there was another way of doing it. There was another version — the one you really wanted to make."

The solid coastguard structures were refurbished to provide three bedrooms. An airy, timber-frame extension containing the living spaces was placed on the far side of the promontory, set against a thicket of mature trees and pushed out towards the sea. From the hilltop above, the extension connects metaphorically with the site's geological grain — the long fingers or shards of rock stretching out into the sea beneath the cliffs.

The planes at the extremities of the extension are tilted and skewed, as if straining to catch the last rays of the setting sun. McLaughlin insists it was not done for effect. When you sit in the house at this time of year, the low sun seems to track along the hill during the afternoon, staying above the ridge line and illuminating the interior.

Once inside you are pulled left, towards the light and the sea, into the living space. A long glassy link between the parts of the house forms an edge to a kind of sheltered cloister garden open to the water. Although

you cannot see this yet, beyond the chimney the view opens to the horizon. McLaughlin had just returned from visiting Erik Bryggman's 1940 Resurrection chapel in Turku, Finland, when he set about designing this transcendent sequence of spaces.

"Shane de Blacam and Robin Walker, my teachers, had a reverence for the inner spirit of materials," says McLaughlin. "I would tend to be more promiscuous in the way I think about them." He demonstrates the point in his recent block of 12 flats in London's Docklands for the Peabody Trust: "You can make connections between materials and history and ideas," he says.

Silvertown in east London, where this development is located, was a swamp in 1850 but by 1900 it was one of the largest industrial complexes in the world. It was the place where the riches of the empire were unloaded and processed into consumer goods — the new mass luxuries of dye, sugar and matches.

"As soon as blue dyes could be made from coal tar, for example, colour went from posh to gaudy," he says. "The same thing was happening to sweeteners. In this chemical city, iridescent beautiful things could be made cheaply."

McLaughlin regularly collaborates with the artist Martin Richman, a former stage and lighting designer for Jimi Hendrix, the Velvet Underground and Pink Floyd. Their approach to low-cost housing in Silvertown was to accept the economic logic of simple forms made from speedy timber-frame construction. Wanting to connect with the area's "cheap, chemical history," they devel-

oped a system that uses ribbons of radiant light film to create a "chemical flare" that shimmers across the building's facade.

Radiant light film, which has an iridescent appearance — like a peacock's feathers or petrol on water — had never previously been used in building. McLaughlin and Richman encased the material in modified double-glazing units, manufactured by Architectural Aluminium in Dublin.

The spirit that animates McLaughlin's invention seems more Dutch — and therefore more modern — than British or Irish. "Its limitation is that the effect is only skin deep," he says. He wants something deeper.

Houseboat, McLaughlin's recent winning design for a home of the future is, he says: "One of a number of projects that explore an intuition about a certain sort of architecture, without necessarily yet having the means to make it." A waterborne structure in which nothing is hidden away, it looks like a cross between a Heath Robinson contraption and one of Paul Klee's twittering machines.

A descendent of Archigram design collective's influential 1960s ideas, Houseboat is conceived as a metabolism: a body with a self-correcting ecosystem that is half nature and half microchip.

McLaughlin says projects like this "provide a store of ideas or possible worlds you can use". It will be interesting to watch him pick off pieces from the matrix and test them for real over the next few years. □

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