

# €25K HOUSE

*Dominic Stevens* B.ArchMRIAI

## Background

The way in which we house ourselves has profoundly changed in Ireland throughout the twentieth century, this has not been widely discussed, debated or questioned, it has happened quietly, incrementally, by stealth if you like.

In the developed world nowadays, if you want to own a house then you buy it. You can buy one that has already been built or you can employ a builder to build one, whichever way you choose to do it, it is likely to be the most expensive acquisition in your lifetime.

In order to afford this you borrow money from the bank and pay it off over a very long period of time, sometimes over your whole life. It is this that has fueled our Celtic Tiger Boom, the results of which have been catastrophic.

In the vernacular tradition of rural Ireland, houses for the community were produced in another way.

The houses that were built relied on simple technology and local materials, knowledge of how to build them was held in common by the community. These houses were very basic and in no way suit contemporary lifestyles or aspirations, I propose *in this project* to show that using



some ingenuity and modern techniques, houses can still be simply self built to suit the 21st Century.

The original vernacular 'cottage' building techniques developed over our history in an evolutionary way. The houses were never designed, rather they were the objects of incremental improvements from one generation to another, modeled to suit specific local conditions using specific local materials.

This produced a rich local culture of building where for example a building on the western seaboard was quite different to

one in the midlands. In the west the walls were built using stone which lay about everywhere, in the midlands mud was used for the walls.

The roofs in the west had to be streamlined to resist high winds, in the midlands a roof overhang protected the walls from erosion. Thus a sensitive complexity arose of site specific architecture achievable by all with minimum means.

The building techniques were held in common, specialties' did exist, in most communities there were those skilled in thatching, though it was rare that this was



### Project Description

This house seeks to redefine how people can house themselves. I set out to design and make a highly insulated house for a very affordable budget that people can self build over a year during weekends and holidays.

This is achieved using simple timber-framed self building—a compact design which achieves a modest 3 bedroom house of just 60 sq.m yet with a feeling of spaciousness and generosity.

The house seeks to be modest and familiar in expression, an existing form in the Irish landscape re imagined as a low energy compact dwelling for the 21st Century. It is located so that I may walk to the local village and cycle to the train station.

There are a number of ways of describing this project, you could describe it practically, philosophically, politically or architecturally. I imagine it will mean different things to different audiences.

### A Practical Description

This is an extremely economic house to build. I found myself without a lot of money and urgently requiring somewhere to live. I had experience of self-building and many years as an architect of building homes for people who had tight budgets and high aspirations as to what a house can be. I sat down and designed for myself what was as small and simple a three bedroom house as seemed possible. I put

a full time job, mostly it was done alongside other activities and the skills exchanged on a barter basis.

New building techniques, developed during the twentieth century, produced a “one size fits all” building approach which, as it became more specialized, moved house building into the general economy where building companies, engineers and architects made their living purely by building house for payment.

Thus these houses, though in many ways of a higher standard, started to rely on the production of money by the householder and on large amounts of imported energy for their construction and upkeep. We are left with what is commonly called an “unsustainable” housing stock.

**“As simple as possible, but no simpler”** *Albert Einstein*

We have to develop a new approach to housing that learns from the evolutionary methods of tradition, and uses technology to make housing production inclusive instead of exclusive. Where traditional forms were developed by few people over a long period of time, we shall use the resource of millions of connected people on the world wide web and search for a new evolutionary speed. This is how much open source software is developed and a device called the wiki was invented to allow many people to contribute to software development in parallel. This same tool has produced *Wikipedia*, the online, peer produced encyclopedia. We shall produce a new vernacular, owned in common, developed by all.

a lot of energy into making the main living space feel as generous as possible, while making the other spaces compact and cosy.

I used my experience of modular building methods learnt from contemporary building practice, from a wonderful self-building pioneer Walter Segal, and from the rural vernacular tradition of building your house instead of going and buying it. By being extremely disciplined, and by paring everything back to the basics and accepting very basic finishes, I arrived at a point that I had a design which I was confident that I could build for €25,000. I estimated that it would take about seven weeks to build, which I reckoned to do over a period of time—weekends, evenings and holidays with the help and goodwill of friends, neighbours and family.

In the end I had the house complete over a period of two years, I was on site for a total of about fifty days during that period, and kept within my budget. I have lived in it for a period of two years now, through all the seasons and it has proved a very easy and pleasant house to live in. I was to fit a wood burning stove which I hadn't done as winter set in but due to the high insulation levels, the 1.5 Kilowatt electric heater that I had installed as a backup heated the entire house. I could not pretend that it is easy to build your own house, it is a hard slog and a lot of



pressure—for two years it felt like I was either working, building or feeling guilty about not building! However it is really empowering to achieve something like this in your life, and you are left with a house without enormous debts.

#### A Political Description

We have been duped. At the height of the Celtic Tiger Boom €300,000 was the average house price. In total it could be calculated that about one third of this went into the government coffers in the form of taxes, levies and development charges, another large chunk went into the pockets of developers.

By artificially escalating the price of houses through media hype and manipulation the government and their developer cronies seem to have transferred

the national debt to being a private debt, and the developers are sitting in luxury laughing at us. Others (David McWilliams for example) can describe this more eloquently and technically than me; as an architect I was sickened to be part of a profession that played along and profited in a major way, studiously uncritical about what was going on. By building this house I am examining alternative traditions to what has become the accepted model. The model that we have become used to, now places the house as a way of driving the economy—we build houses as a method of making money, not in order to house people well.

The vernacular tradition produces houses in another fashion. Here people build their own house, not with help from the bank, rather with the help of

their neighbours, so the by-product of house production is an interdependent community instead of lifelong debt to the bank.

Walter Segal further developed this model for use in social housing in London during the 1970's, proving that it could be used to make comfortable contemporary houses. He made small council estates consisting of about six to ten houses which were built by the people who were to live in them, all helping each other out, they are still lived in thirty years later and cherished by these people. My project aims to remind people of these alternatives and seeks to show that people can put the power in society back with them, with their communities.

It is wrong to rely on a banking system and a government that consistently place profit before people, money before wellbeing.

Sharing this information on a website is a way of paying back a social debt that I owe to all the brilliant people who helped me build this project, it seems a much more fruitful exchange than debt repayments.

### A Philosophical Description

The notion of the Commons in a society is important to me. It is primarily understood by people in the form of common land, where a whole community shared grazing rights. Through enclosure, space for common land has been eroded overtime and it is no longer part of our

agricultural system. Other aspects of commons have been eroded too, knowledge held in common is not valued anymore in a society of experts. We fetishise individual genius and place competition as the societal driving force.

The vernacular tradition shared commonly the knowledge of how to build a house. Thus the design of houses developed over time became the hand of many, incrementally improving. Developing over centuries, houses were therefore part of an evolutionary model, not a consumer article produced by a genius. Folk music shares this model and if we look to the past our homes, entertainment and food—the most important things in life, were not part a consumer culture. These were things we shared and we held in common. The purpose of making the website was to place the knowledge of how to build a house once more in ‘the commons’. I hope that people can use it as a resource to help them build, and to use the blog as a place to add their experiences so that a new vernacular tradition can take root again.

### Facts and Figures

*Budget:* €25,000 includes all material costs and the costs of a plumber and electrician. All labour was by friends, neighbours and family, This promotes a sense of community, a feeling of group achievement. This



budget did not include hooking up to services which all came to a total of about €10,000 or the cost of a site. Obviously many people in Leitrim have access to a site on the family farm.

*Time:* I began in July 2009 and had the house weather tight by the end of October. Due to other pressures I did little over the Winter and in Spring and Summer got the inside finished. I moved in in September 2010. It was hard work and I got lots of invaluable help, but it feels tremendous to be living in a house that I achieved like this, and I don't owe the bank a fortune.

*Sharing:* To pay back some of the social debt I have made the plans and building instructions available for free on an interactive website so that this knowledge may, as was the case in the vernacular tradition, be held in common in the community develop as an evolutionary tool.

*For further information look at [www.irishvernacular.com](http://www.irishvernacular.com)*