Inspired by the Historical Vernacular: Architect-designed Houses across three Eras in Ireland

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Received	Accepted	Published
16.12.2025	21.01.2026	31.01.2026

https://doi.org/10.61275/ISVSej-2026-13-01-03

Abstract

Housing has almost always been inspired by the historical traditions and vernacular until recently, when architects have begun to imagine entirely different concepts and models. Indeed, this has also been the case in Ireland. There, the 1880s-1940s is noted for the widespread construction of labourers' cottages; the 1960s-1990s saw the appearance of the pattern-book Irish 'bungalow'; and, since about 2010, the building of houses appears to bridge the conceptual gap between the two. Undeniably, there are lessons to be learnt from these evolutions. In this context, this paper examines the design of Irish rural houses in three eras of the past. The research explores the ideas behind these waves of housing and how the vernacular has or has not informed them.

The research examines secondary sources relating to the labourer's cottage and the bungalows: in particular, the pattern books and other published models, and commentaries on both these forms. For contemporary housing, the research involves field observations, a web search for houses purportedly modelled on the vernacular, and a study of some local authority development plans and policies.

It reveals that the cottages of labourers were heralded as a housing upgrade, although, usually at the expense of the vernacular house. However, they generally reflect the scale, form, and often, the plans of the vernacular houses. Notably, there has been a recent tendency to alter and extend them, often unsympathetically. The research thus concludes that the 'bungalow' stands between the formal and the vernacular, with the simpler bungalows being at least superficially not unlike the latter, albeit with larger window openings. Architects and architectural historians tend to dismiss them, due to their pattern-book origins or, perhaps, professional snobbery. If one considers the bungalow as simply the typical rural house of the modern era, a more rounded view is attained. The housing of recent years is more heterogeneous, but with more consideration of setting and the local vernacular, and some projects break up the massing of large houses into 'vernacular-sized' units.

Keywords: Social housing, Bungalow, Pattern Books, Vernacular, Ideology, Contemporary housing, Ireland.

Introduction

Rural housing in Ireland in the latter half of the twentieth and first quarter of the twenty-first centuries has been dominated by the 'bungalow'. This term describes a single-storey detached house with a low-pitch tiled roof, with its main elevation having large 'picture' windows. It also had one or two of these often set into a gabled projection; the house standing

on a site of half to three-quarters of an acre (0.2-0.3 hectares), with a lawn to the front bounded by a concrete wall. This is a very different building form to what was constructed in pre-Independence times (i.e. before 1922), the older examples often having a wraparound timber or metal veranda.

However, there has been much debate, mainly negative, about the modern bungalow. It has usually been depicted as an aberration, a rash of modernity in what might be otherwise regarded as the 'unspoilt' Irish landscape. In fact, some have suggested that the bungalow is a new 'vernacular'. This research examines the validity of these ideas.

Less commented upon is the labourer's cottage of the 1880s to 1940s which, at least superficially, appears to be modelled on the vernacular house. Large numbers of cottages were built by the state, mainly through the local authorities, to replace what was regarded as the cramped, poorly-lit and substandard architecture of many vernacular houses. These cottages have themselves become underrated and when they have been acquired over the last two decades, they have tended to be greatly enlarged; thus, as with the vernacular house, they have become vulnerable to a popular appetite for more expansive accommodation than heretofore.

Rural houses of the past two decades have tended to be larger than the bungalows and often L-plan and two storeys high, or 'neoclassical' with three or five bays and two storeys high; they may also be set further back in a large site. There are also house forms that are more consciously contemporary, usually lacking chimneys, often, at the instigation or perceived instigation of planners. However, there are also some houses constructed that are purported to have the vernacular as their inspiration.

In fact, there are a number of schemes of thatched houses around Ireland, some built by the landed estates and dating to the early to mid-nineteenth century, and rather more built in the mid- to late twentieth century as tourist accommodation.

In this context, this paper examines the ways in which the historical vernacular has either influenced or not and how they have inspired the making of the houses in the past: particularly from the 19th to 20th centuries. Its aim is to ascertain the relevance of vernacular in the making of houses which arguably help make undeniable connections to the past as well as the establishment of sense of identity of the Irish people as a distinct community.

The objectives of it are follows.

1. To identify the significant characteristics and aspects of vernacular houses of Ireland.
2. To ascertain to what extent these various eras of rural house building draw, or do not draw, from the historical vernacular.
3. To map the trajectory of the evolution of house forms in Ireland.

The Background

Irish Vernacular Houses

The vernacular house in Ireland has been studied since the 1930s. Through them, the relationship of the main entrance of the house to the kitchen hearth has been established as the key generator of the vernacular plan form. A typical house is thus four bays long, either window/window/door/window or the reverse, single storey (often with loft accommodation over one end of the building), one room deep, having thick masonry walls of stone or mud, and a thatched, slate or stone flag roof (Fig. 1). Almost all of them have either a 'lobby-entry' or a 'direct-entry' layout. The first is characterised by the presence of a lobby between the front door and the hearth area, while the latter was shielded from the doorway by a screen or a 'jamb wall' set parallel to the front wall. The second has the hearth at the opposite end of the kitchen to the entrance.

Over the decades since about 1950s, vast numbers of vernacular houses have disappeared and most of those that remain have lost their original roofs and windows and door frames. Nevertheless, the vernacular house has recently been afforded greater consideration by the state and local authorities, who recognize their increasing rarity, as well as their potential to offer exemplars or insights for sustainable buildings for contemporary living.

Fig. 1: Vernacular house, Dundrum, Co. Tipperary
Source: Author

Research Methodology

This research employs a literature study as the main methodology delving into the past and assessing the designs and built forms and, finally, drawing conclusions in relation to their 'vernacularity'. It examines in particular, the secondary sources relating to the labourer's cottage and the bungalow. For the former, the most relevant is work by F.H.A. Aalen - the book '*Irish Life and Industry*,' which accompanied the Irish International Exhibition of 1906; and the contributions by Alan Gailey and Mary McCarthy. The bungalow has a much more extensive historiography. The pattern book '*Bungalow Bliss'* is central to any enquiry, as are various polemical writings for and against. Some other pattern books were also consulted.

For contemporary housing, the research is necessarily more diffuse, involving field observations, a web search for houses purported to be modelled on the vernacular, and a study of some local authority development plans and policies. An assessment is also made of the three categories–cottage, bungalow and recent 'houses–as observed' within three vernacular settlements and along two sample 10km stretches of roadside: one in Northern Ireland and one in the Republic. Exact details of the 10km stretch where the research was carried out is available for scrutiny for any legitimate use, but is not presented here for want of privacy by the occupants, as required by ethical standards.

Findings

The Labourer's Cottage

One of the most familiar house types in rural Ireland is the cottage. Those built for their tenants by the colonial landlords throughout the nineteenth century often have good-quality exposed stone walls and architectural detailing, such as 'fancy bargeboards', decorative hoods over doorways and perhaps double-light casement windows with diamond glazing. The quality of these buildings reflects the status and munificence of their benefactor.

Much more numerous, however, are the cottages built by the government through the local authorities (Rural District Councils) to accommodate landless farm labourers. These cottages are of modest scale and simple detailing. They are seldom of exposable stone, being more usually rendered, but may have brick to openings and quoins, and generally have pitched slate roofs with brick chimneys. Many have a flat-roof windbreak to the entrance or a small pitched-roof porch.

Local authority cottages were constructed in the period from c.1880 to 1945, reflecting the various Land Acts implemented by the British parliament to deal with chronic housing problems in Ireland. They were built mainly along rural roads but can be found at the edges of towns and villages. Interestingly, an image has been published in *Irish Life and Industry* to emphasize the squalor of poorer vernacular housing that the cottages were intended to replace (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2: 'What the model labourers' cottages are intended to replace'
Source: McCartney-Filgate, 1907,

Aalen (1987) notes that between 1883 and 1921, about 50,000 cottages were provided in Southern and Eastern counties, and at least 9,000 two-storey farmhouses in western counties: the latter funded by the Congested Districts Board. Cottages had to have a kitchen and enough bedrooms to provide the segregation of the sexes. The lofted and two-storey houses had about twice the floor area of the typical vernacular house of the time.

Fig. 3: Late 19th-century house funded by the Congested Districts Board, Cill Uru, Co. Kerry
Source: Author

One design is known colloquially (and possibly inaccurately) as the 'Parnell cottage', named after Anna, sister of the celebrated nationalist politician Charles Stewart Parnell (1846-91). These cottages (Fig. 4), built in the period 1890-1920, but particularly after 1906 (see below) are of three bays and single-storey with a full loft floor, a windbreak or porch to a central entrance, and an internal layout echoing that of the lobby-entry vernacular house.

They are often set at a right angle to the road, and several may be seen along a short stretch, each on its own quarter acre of ground. Aalen (1986) observes that 'thatched roofs might be sanctioned but corrugated iron was forbidden' for labourers' cottages, indicating that it was not the intention of the government to discourage vernacular materials *per se*.

Fig. 4: Labourer's cottage, built after 1905, near Fethard, Co. Tipperary
Source: Author

An architectural competition for model cottage designs was held by the Local Government Board in 1906. It created controversy because, out of the 400 entries submitted, all the prize-winners were English firms. Examples were erected at the Home Industries Section of the Irish International Exhibition held in Dublin in 1907. The winning entries were criticized for being 'rather in the style of Victorian estate cottages, indeed almost suburban' and were challenged by the nationalists who advocated more familiar and traditional forms. As Aalen, (1986) shows, the Board eventually proposed models closer to the vernacular houses. Four of the disparaged models are set out in the book, *Irish Rural Life and Industry* (McCartney-Filgate, 1907), none having an external appearance or layout recognizably inspired by the vernacular.

Francis Joseph Bigger and another critic, Robert Brown (1907), produced designs clearly inspired by the vernacular. Brown's design was based on the lobby-entry plan, with a boarded-off stairway and Bigger's designs were based on a direct-entry plan but with an unenclosed stairway. While the exterior of Brown's design is not particularly vernacular in appearance (Fig. 6), its interior certainly is, even to the extent of providing a 'spy window' in the jamb wall between the hearth and the entrance. The positions of the table (under the front window) and of the dresser (on the end wall, opposite the hearth) are typical of vernacular interiors. Brown (1907) also extols the virtues of thatch as a way of reducing costs, but it is unclear whether or not any local authority took up this suggestion. He does point out that the cost of repair makes thatch expensive over time although, interestingly, he suggests improving the lifespan of thatch by using copper sulphate solution. However, he believes that local authorities would not approve the houses of the treated thatch and suggests concrete tiles as an alternative.

Gailey (1984) sounds a note of caution, writing that the lobby-entry plan was adopted by the local authorities even for districts where such was not found in the local vernacular houses – an approach, perhaps, of 'one size fits all'.

Indeed, this case study demonstrates that it has been a common practice to both adapt vernacular house forms as well as being inspired by them. In the case of the latter, the 'inspirations' would have either reproduced the same kind of elements, technologies or patterns or invented other new versions much like the older ones.

Despite these adaptations and the values of being inspired by the vernacular however, there also exist major obstacles in doing so, particularly given the fact that the modern municipality regulations and requirements often either discourage them or outright reject them being adopted.

Nevertheless, it is heartening to note that ordinary people and enthusiasts who are mesmerized by the allure of the interiors and the affinity of the forms to the sense of identity and belonging continue to adopt them despite the difficulties.

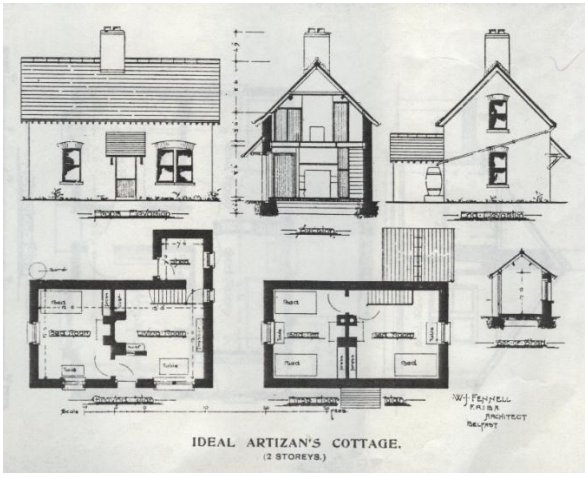

Fig. 5: 'Ideal Artizan's Cottage', designed by Robert Brown
Source: Brown, 1906

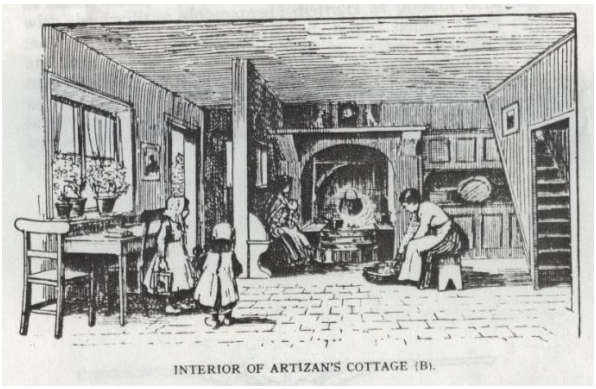

Fig. 6: Interior of the same cottage
Source: Brown 1906

In contrast to the previous patterns, a great number of cottages built in the period 1920-50 are four-bay and single storey, generally without a loft floor and having one or two chimneys; facades are generally rendered and openings unarticulated (Fig. 7). These can be found detached, semi-detached or in rows of up to a dozen; one such a row near Dublin is known as 'the twelve apostles.'

Fig. 7: Modernized cottages of the 1920-50 period, Aghagault, Co. Donegal
Source: Author

Comparison of the Labourer's Cottage with the Vernacular Houses

An assessment of the characteristics of the various labourers' cottages suggests a very close affinity with typical vernacular houses in terms of form – three or four bays long, single room deep in plan, no projections (except for a windbreak or shallow porch), pitched roof of 45º or higher, vertical windows and openings generally unarticulated. In addition, there are particular plan forms of labourer's cottage that incorporate the lobby-entry feature typical of vernacular houses in the eastern two-thirds of the island but, in this latter regard, the appearance of such houses in some areas not known for this plan form in vernacular houses might be seen as discordant. On the Great Blasket Island, Co. Kerry, the Congested Districts Board built houses with opposed doorways, a feature of much of western Ireland, but not of the island in question; the inhabitants promptly blocked up the rear doorways.

Architect-designed Thatched Houses

A number of cottages ornés were constructed in the early nineteenth century, most notably the Swiss Cottage at Cahir, Co. Tipperary, one of the most intact in either Ireland or Britain. It is an exuberant display of the 'vernacular', every window opening being very consciously different. It was built by the local landed estate to a design by the celebrated English architect, John Nash. Inside is wallpaper depicting the Bosphorus in Istanbul – a far cry, indeed, from the Irish vernacular.

Fig. 8: The Swiss Cottage (east end), Cahir, Co. Tipperary, built 1810-14
Source: National Inventory of Architectural Heritage

The main street of Adare, Co. Limerick is lined along one side with two-storey thatched houses that would not be out of place in Britain but are an alien curiosity in Ireland, much photographed by native and tourist alike (fig. 9). Like the Swiss Cottage, they too are a creation of the colonial era. Rows of one or two-storey thatched houses at Dunmore East, Co. Waterford were built for fishermen and tourists about 1840, but are rather more familiar in appearance (fig. 10).

Fig. 9: Rows of thatched houses, built c.1820, Adare, Co. Limerick
Source: Google Earth 2025 (image: July 2022)

Fig. 10: Row of thatched houses, built c.1840, Dunmore East, Co. Waterford
Source: Google Earth 2025 (image: September 2022)

Neo-vernacular houses were occasionally designed by noted Irish architects. An example is one by the modernist Michael Scott near Tullamore, Co. Offaly, built in 1945. The house had concrete walls, stone-faced chimneys, generally large windows and a reed-thatched roof. Its roof structure was partly sawn rafters and partly railway sleepers, due to the shortage of materials during the 'Emergency' (the Second World War). However, the house proved to be very cold because of the overlarge ventilation gap at the eaves and the thatch was replaced with tile in 1984 (O'Reilly, 2004). More instructive was the proposal, three years before, by another architect, Frank Gibney. As standard building materials were in short supply, Gibney suggested that the government might construct houses with walls of mud and roofs of thatch for simple, rectangular single-storey houses designs, noting that mud was easily available in many localities (McCarthy, 2011:291). *The Irish Builder and Engineer* for 27/2/1943 featured Gibney's design; McCarthy notes that an 'almost identical cottage…was privately constructed in County Kilkenny in 1944' (McCarthy, 2011,292).

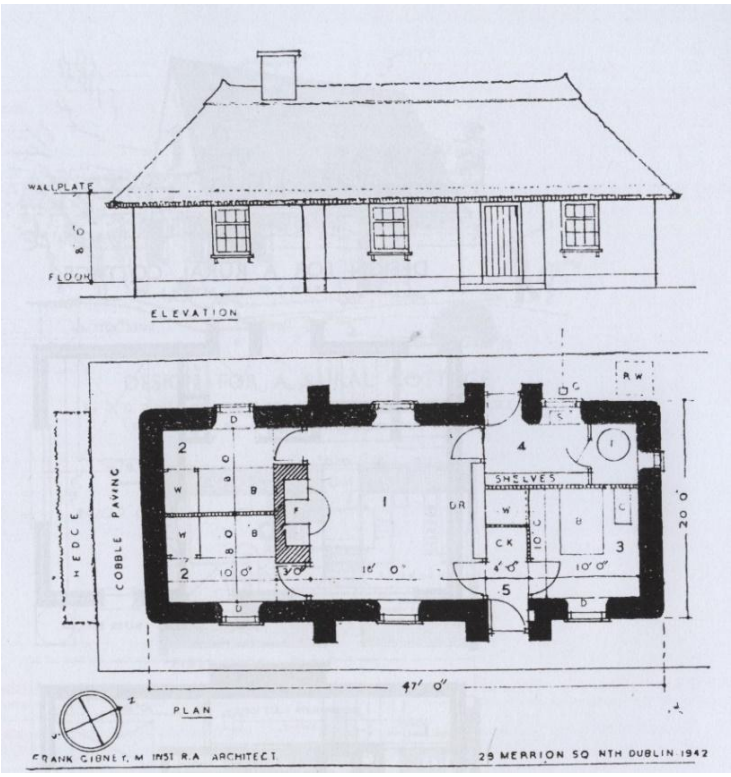

Fig. 11: Plan and elevation of Frank Gibney's proposal (1942) for a house of mud and thatch
Source: McCarthy, 2011

More recent groups of two-storey houses in County Waterford, built in an 'English' style were erected as holiday houses. Many recent rural thatched houses for long-term occupation are rather 'English' in appearance also, but holiday houses, especially those built in groups in various parts of the Republic, tend to be single storey and consciously draw on the vernacular.

Fig. 12: Thatched holiday houses (built c.1980) at Ballyvaughan, Co. Clare
Source: Google Earth, 2025 (Image: September 2024)

The Irish Bungalow

The word 'bungalow' apparently derives from Hindustani *bangla*, meaning 'of Bengal' (Collins Dictionary), later denoting local house forms with verandas adopted by British colonial settlers in India. Bungalows were adopted in many countries, including Britain and the US, often as holiday homes in seaside locations. McKeagney (2021) notes that pattern books of bungalows were available from at least 1891, eventually adopted by lower-middle and lower classes for seaside holiday homes as they became cheaper to build or buy. She also suggests that among their attractions were 'newness, design, style from elsewhere, cheapness and ease of building.' Simpler, symmetrical three-bay bungalows appeared in Ireland in the 1930s-50s period.

Fig. 13: Colonial-type bungalow, Tipperary Town, Co. Tipperary, erected c.1900
Source: National Inventory of Architectural Heritage

Fig. 14: Bungalow of c.1950, Mionlach, Co. Galway
Source: Author

The current paper briefly assesses the pattern books for bungalows in Ireland, particularly *Bungalow Bliss*, other similar publications, and polemical writings by Fitzsimons and others. A recent book (Duncan, 2022) presents a benign view, but most other commentaries have been negative. The planning design guide, *Building Sensitively in Ireland's Landscapes* sums up the design features of bungalows:

> "Many retain a simple gable and pitched roof form which is discreet within the landscape. However, window size, proportion and distribution are almost universally unsatisfactory; too wide, too large and overwhelming the elevation by presenting too much window relative to the solid areas. Most were designed with suburban locations in mind and were not subsequently adapted to a rural situation. Many come from books of plans which take no account of the actual location."
>
> Building Sensitively in Ireland's Landscapes,1988:55

This view was echoed by others:

> 'Whatever their merits or demerits [vernacular houses]…sit comfortably among their surroundings in a way that their modern counterpart, the bungalow which has spread so rapidly in Ireland during the past two decades, never will. The…appearance [of the vernacular house]…was determined by the needs of the occupier, while the other imports a higgledy-piggledy jumble of materials and styles, with cavalier disregard for the spirit of place'.
>
> (Shaffrey/Pfeiffer,2025:14).

Jack Fitzsimons

The architect Jack Fitzsimons (1930-2014) was celebrated (or castigated) for his series of pattern books, *Bungalow Bliss*, which appeared between 1971 and 1998. He was informed by his own memories of living in earlier house types:

> 'For the first four years of my life I lived in a two-roomed thatched cottage rented by my father at two shillings per week. The floor area was about 300 square feet. The furniture consisted of a settle bed full of rubbish and rats, a table, iron bed and few chairs. It had a front door and two tiny windows. Built in a hole on the side of a hill, if you can imagine such a situation, it blended into the landscape, surrounded by privet hedges, whitethorn bushes and trees. I have still nostalgic memories of the cricket in the hearth and the high thatched, smoke blackened ceiling'.
>
> Fitzsimons, 1981:50

The family rented this house until 1933, when they moved into

> 'a county council cottage on a one-acre site nearby and were granted a five-acre Irish Land Commission holding. Living conditions at this house were only slightly better than the first…In late 1940 his infant sister Annie died. Fitzsimons attributed her death to the family's poverty and the coldness of their home in winter…Improving housing conditions for the rural working class would become the leading cause of his life.'
>
> Evers, 2022

Fitzsimons was a farm labourer during some of his school years, a draughtsman with the local authority and, later, the Office of Public Works. He was elected to Seanad Éireann (upper house of the Irish parliament) and was strongly active on social issues.

Bungalow Bliss

Fitzsimons' pattern books ran into twelve editions and were bestsellers. His first volume featured twenty designs – front elevation, plan and description of the building and its accommodation (fig. 15). All designs have large horizontal windows, and almost all have brick cladding or an area of stone cladding. All plans are two rooms deep, mainly four or five bays long and three incorporate garages. In short, these bungalows represent modernity; the presence of some garages emphasizes this point. It has been claimed that the verandas with 'Spanish' arches on some bungalows were inspired by holidays in that country.

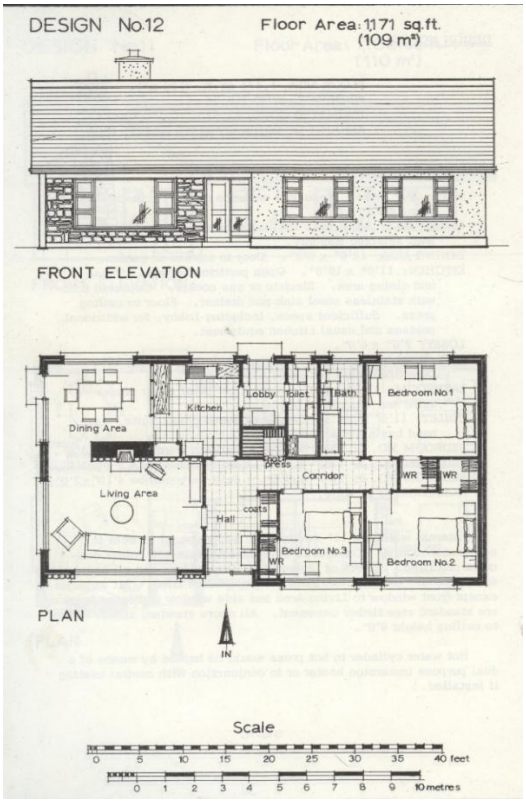

Fig. 15: Design No. 12 from first edition of Bungalow Bliss (1971)
Source: Fitzsimons 1971

By the seventh edition (1981), of the 100 designs included no less than 62 have simple elevations and two have only vertical windows, showing that Fitzsimons may have been receptive to commentary concerning his work, as well as his own evolving ideas for the presentation and siting of his creations.

The ninth edition (1989) develops this approach further. Of the 228 designs, 28 have a strong hint of the vernacular in their front elevation, particularly because of their vertical windows, their four or five-bay facades, presence of the chimneystacks on the ridge and unfussy detailing. Indeed, 58 of the designs have only vertical windows, suggesting a retreat from the large picture window of earlier editions.

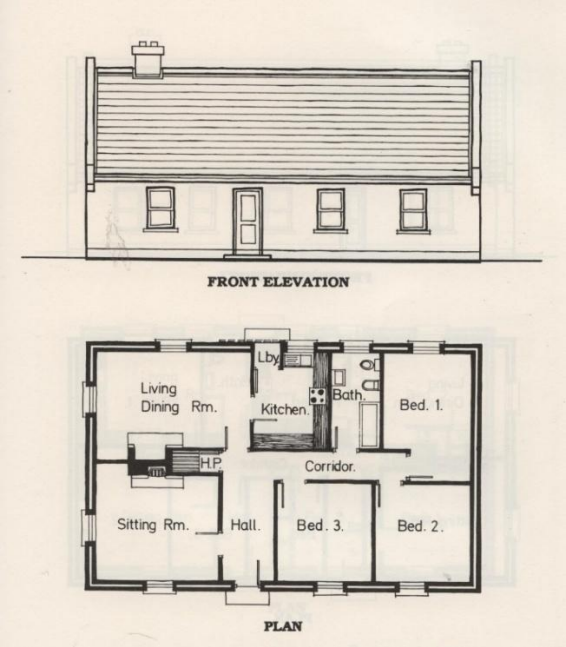

Fig. 16: Design No. 201 from ninth edition of Bungalow Bliss (1989)
Source: Fitzsimons 1989

Characteristics of the Irish 'bungalow'

- Deep (two-room) plan
- Generally, picture windows, but over time vertical windows may be present instead
- Low-pitched roof, usually tiled
- One in two have projecting gabled bay(s) to the façade
- One in two have a simple facade
- Dormer windows on a small number
- Chimneys often in the roof slope rather than the ridge
- Some have stone cladding to part of the façade

Fig. 17: Typical bungalow of c.1980, Ring Commons, Co. Dublin
Source: Author

Fitzsimons and the Vernacular

Fitzsimons did not have an antipathy towards vernacular houses *per se*, rather just those houses he regarded as providing unhealthy accommodation. Indeed, he published a book on the thatched houses of his native county, *Thatched Houses in County Meath* (1990). The seventh edition of *Bungalow Bliss* (1981) recommends taking heed of vernacular buildings and their characteristics in regard to unfussy detailing (pp. 19-21) and he presents detailed and incisive discussion in such sections as 'Buildings in their setting' (pp. 23-6), 'A case for clustered rural housing' (pp. 34-53), 'Traditional patterns of Irish rural settlement' (pp. 34-36), 'Irish vernacular' (pp. 45) and 'Thatched roofs' (pp. 408-422).

Other Pattern Books

The Department of Local Government published a book of twenty designs the year after *Bungalow Bliss* first appeared (Roinn Rialtais Áitiúil, 1972). None of the plans presented are based on vernacular forms. Seventeen of the front elevations feature square windows, including at least one large picture window, and roof types are offered in 30º, 22º and flat-roof forms. None is culturally or site specific and, indeed, it could be stated that they constitute a greater departure from their antecedents than do the *Bungalow Bliss* designs. It is noteworthy that none of Fitzsimons' designs features a flat roof, acknowledging that such roofs make little sense in a wet climate.

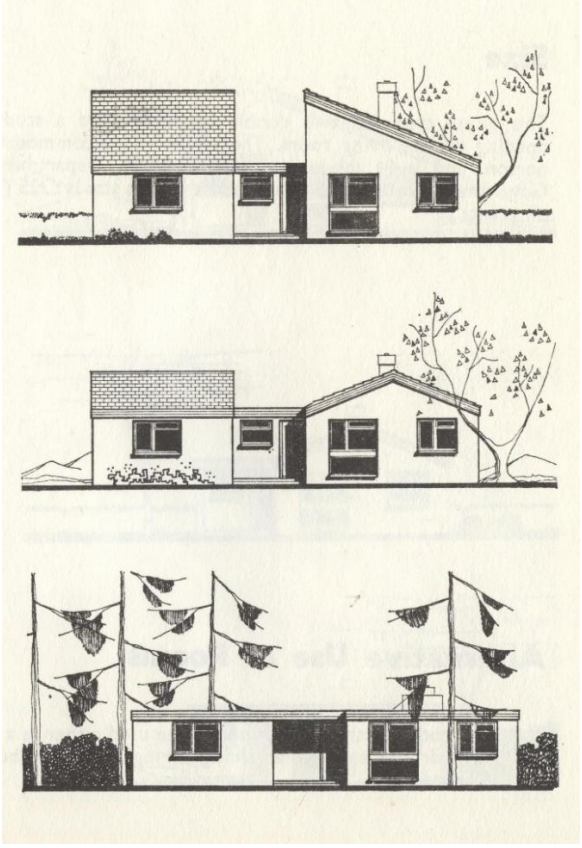

Fig. 18: House Type Y'C
Source: Roinn Rialtais Áitiúil 1972, p. 20

In 1980, Roadstone, a firm specializing in the production of concrete products and other building materials produced its own pattern book, the *Roadstone Book of House Designs*. The designs are extremely varied, several are generally similar to Fitzsimons' forms, but at least two appear to recall aspects of the vernacular (fig. 19).

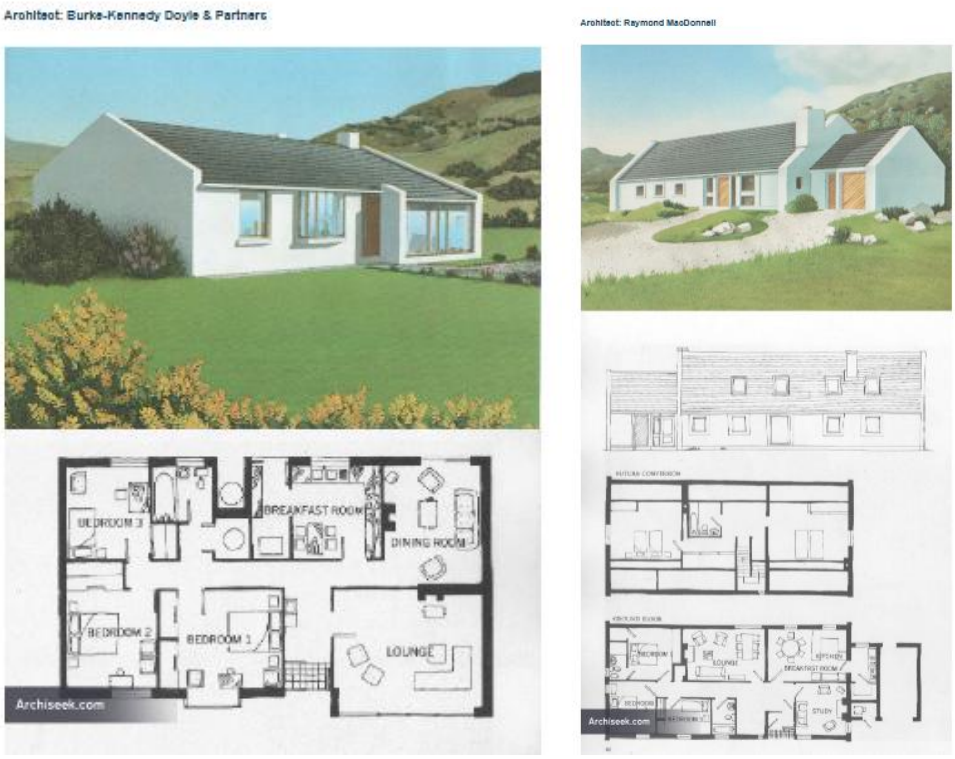

Fig. 19: House designs Nos. 5 (by Burke Kennedy Doyle) and No. 9 (by Raymond McDonnell)
Source: Roadstone Book of House Designs 1980

Controversy

Journalist Frank McDonald wrote a series of articles in the *Irish Times* newspaper in 1987 under the heading 'Bungalow Blitz', criticizing the phenomenon of the 'one-off' bungalow in the Irish countryside and using pejorative language to describe the buildings and their settings (Duncan, 2022). His real target, perhaps, should have been the lax planning regulation that has enabled often long lines of new houses along rural and main roads, essentially the suburbanization of many parts of the Irish countryside. Fintan O'Toole described *Bungalow Bliss* as:

> 'the great leveller of Irish rural society, a bible of social mobility…The new bungalows were the perfect compromise between consumerist individualism and the desire to stay put in your own place, between the new values and the old'.
>
> Evers, 2022

In 2021, the national broadcaster, RTÉ, aired a series of programmes entitled 'My Bungalow Bliss' in which bungalows were upgraded for energy conservation, showing a new regard for what has been a rather maligned architectural form.

Comparison of the Bungalow with the Vernacular House

The characteristics of the bungalow suggest relatively little affinity with vernacular architecture. While some examples are similar in length and have a simplicity of façade, the two-room depth of the plan is a key departure from the vernacular form. The presence of 'picture' windows is another significant difference, especially evident in the pattern books up until about 1980. Roofs are typically lower in pitch and covered in tiles and about one-in-nine designs have forward-facing gables and/or porticos. None of the plans acknowledge vernacular house layouts.

Recent Houses

The architectural school in University College Dublin produced the earliest widely used house design guide in 1988. They suggested that designers use simple single-storey forms where such are prevalent, avoiding squat bulky forms, and using clean roof shapes of 30º-50º; also, when extending houses, to do so at the rear or side (Building Sensitively, 1988, p. 59).

Many local authorities have published their own design guides for rural houses as part of their county development plans, generally produced for them by architectural firms. These increasingly reference local vernacular as a model for appropriate design, detailing and climate awareness. The Cork guide describes the vernacular as 'simple, honest and has inadvertently almost effortlessly integrated into the landscape; an unconscious technique that should be mastered in contemporary rural design practice' (Cork Rural Design Guide, 2010, p. 59). It asks if the proposed new house addresses the following qualities:

> 'simple…related to rural building forms…incorporates distinctive characteristics of its location…attractive proportions…good solid-void relationship in its windows and doors…in scale relative to its site, surrounding buildings; massing…to articulate different elements…to reduce its bulk where necessary'
>
> (ibid, p. 73)

Some private firms also offer advice on design. On the website of one such firm the question 'How can I incorporate traditional Irish architectural features into a modern rural house design?' is answered with 'By blending stone walls, thatched roofs and cottage-style designs with modern materials and amenities, you can create a home that is both timeless and functional' (Total Planning & Design Solutions, 2025).

A firm that has designed new houses with the vernacular in mind is BGA Architects of Newtownards, Co. Down. Two projects are of particular interest. 'Modern Farmstead' is essentially a large house broken up into different volumes, including an interpretation of the classic iron haybarn that first appeared in Ireland in the 1860s. The firm's intention is:

> 'to achieve a vernacular clustered design...to respond to how local farmsteads traditionally 'grew up'. The main rendered 'farm' house in the middle is flanked by two stone buildings, the barn-like structure and an 'outhouse' respecting traditional forms…Traditional materials and modern details elevate these traditional shapes to produce a sympathetic yet contemporary approach to the overall design.
>
> http://www.bga-ni.com/projects/

Fig. 20: 'Modern Farmstead', Gilnahirk, Co. Antrim (c.2015)
Source: BGA Architects (http://www.bga-ni.com/projects/)

Fig. 21: 'Scrabo Clachan', Co. Down (2016)
Source: BGA Architects (http://www.bga-ni.com/projects/)

The conscious effort to emulate the vernacular farmyard feels a little contrived, pulling forms 'off the shelf' and appears more intended to reduce the overall impact of an overlarge dwelling in the countryside. A second project, 'Scrabo Clachan' sees the creation of a 'courtyard arrangement 'or clachan'…a restrained collection of pitched roof buildings, each…in a contrasting material to articulate the design intention of reflecting a contemporary clachan (http://www.bga-ni.com/projects/). However, conflating the terms 'cluster', 'clachan' and 'courtyard' might not present a particularly sound understanding of the nature of the vernacular. Nevertheless, these projects indicate an interest in the vernacular, as well as an acknowledgement that there are aspects of vernacular design and layout that appeal and are appropriate to rural landscapes.

Notwithstanding the various guides, large, two-storey houses, sometimes pejoratively termed 'McMansions', have proliferated in rural and peri-urban Ireland over the last two decades, initially in response to the bank loans that were so easily available during the 'Celtic Tiger' economic boom. However, construction of such houses has continued despite the economic collapse of 2008. Tim Robinson, quoted by Duffy (2015) mused that they were 'twice as big and twice as numerous as those McDonald had deplored'.

Fig. 22: Recent houses, near Ballygawley, Co. Tyrone
Source: Google Earth (Image: August 2025)

Fig. 23: Recent houses. Left: Valentia Island, Co. Kerry; right: Inis Oírr, Co. Galway
Source: Author

The author assessed the post-vernacular housing of three vernacular settlements and of two stretches of roadside (about 10 km long each) in order to gauge the relative proportions of bungalows, labourers' cottages and large recent houses, and their general characteristics. The total sample of houses in the five sample areas amounts to 158, comprising Aughagault (17), Cill Uru (11), Kiltullagh (21), Tyrone roadside (47) and Tipperary roadside (62). The numbers of each type are bungalow (95), cottage (26) and recent large houses (37).

Cill Uru has five three-bay two-storey houses designed by the Congested Districts Board (CDB); such houses are very characteristic of many western counties and date to the period 1875-1925. There are a further three bungalows, one of them dating to about 1950. Four single-storey houses have been built recently, all with pitched roofs typical of the district, but no large or two-storey recent houses. This may be due to the fact that the hamlet is designated as an architectural conservation area. The presence of just three bungalows suggests a degree of inertia during the period 1960-2000.

At Aughagault, likewise, there are no large new houses in the area of the hamlet, but there are such houses 200-300m beyond; there are two single-storey recent houses. The numbers of cottages and bungalows are similar, at seven and eight, respectively.

Kiltullagh is rather different, being subject to the urbanizing effect of Galway City, six kilometres away. Here, bungalows (eleven) are rivalled by large recent houses (ten). Curiously, there are no cottages. The phenomenon of large L-plan and symmetrical two-storey houses is a marked feature of the region, visible along very many rural roads and lanes.

The two sample stretches of rural road examined are near Fethard, Co. Tipperary in the Republic of Ireland and the second near Ballygawley, Co. Tyrone in Northern Ireland. The presence of relatively few older houses in the latter sample may be due to a government policy in Northern Ireland of replacing 'unfit' housing; this may also have affected the labourer's cottage. The proliferation of post-vernacular houses in the two samples is similar, at one per 160m for Tyrone and one per 200m for Tipperary.

The proportion of large recent houses in the Tyrone sample (15) is higher than in Tipperary (10). In general, new houses in the North are also noticeably larger; this has been noted by the author for Northern Ireland in general, but a more widespread analysis/sampling might lead to a different conclusion. Bungalows are fewer in Tyrone (31) than Tipperary (43) and cottages even more so, at one for Tyrone and nine for Tipperary.

The large recent houses appear to owe little, if anything, to the vernacular and could be considered a greater departure from traditional forms than the bungalow. However, such houses do tend to have parallels in Ireland's formal architecture. Half are five bays and two storeys with a central doorway, usually set into a full-height gabled porch; a quarter have two storeys and an L-plan; and another quarter are single-storey, but more elaborate than the typical bungalow. Many of the buildings have some stone facing.

Conclusions

Table 1 presents an assessment of the broad characteristics of bungalows, cottages and recent large houses in relation to the vernacular. It can be seen, for example, that most labourers' cottages have a generally similar form to the vernacular house, that some bungalows do likewise, but that few recent large houses do. It is clear that the labourer's cottage owes a great deal to the vernacular, that the bungalow owes rather less and that recent large houses owe very little.

Table 1: Key vernacular characteristics assessed for cottage, bungalow and recent large house
Source: Author

	Cottage	Bungalow	Recent large houses
Form	Most	Some	Few
Scale of facade	All	Many	Some
Plan depth	Most	None	None
Simple elevation	Most	Many	Some
Roof of ≥45º	Most	None	Some
Plan/layout	Some	None	None

This examination of the built environment suggests that further research could be fruitful for understanding, among other matters, the relevance (or otherwise) of the vernacular house as a model for contemporary living and the degree to which design recommendations have been taken on board by architects, planners and others. It would appear to be the case that, except for relatively niche areas of construction, such as eco-building, the lessons that can be drawn from the vernacular are not being much heeded. Rather, it seems to be the case that those building new structures in the Irish countryside (and this includes farm buildings) are 'thinking big and formal' rather than 'small and vernacular'. It seems that the dream of Bungalow Bliss continues, albeit in a magnified form.

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