

They don't make 'em like this any more

Niall Toner visits a one-off project in Co Cork — one of the final homes made at Griffner Coillte's factory at Mullingar

When John Morehead took on the job of designing David Pearson's home in Rochestown, Co Cork, he probably didn't realise that housebuilders would not be building them like that any more — not in Ireland, anyway.

Pearson's bench-built house was one of the last to come off the Griffner Coillte assembly line at the Austrian-Irish company's factory in Mullingar, Co Westmeath, before production of timber-framed prefabricated buildings ceased there in 2007.

More's the pity. The circa 1,820-sq-ft house could easily grace publicity material for the manufacturing facility if it were still in business. Pearson's eye-catching two-storey new-build has already come to the attention of the architectural press, featuring in this year's Build Your Own House and Home annual magazine, which has just hit the shelves.

And it doesn't just look good — it comes with an A3 energy rating, making it much cheaper to heat than comparable living spaces. The owner says he has barely had to turn on the heating since moving in, even in the recent weather and despite the fact that the house is on a relatively exposed site.

Situated about 15 minutes' drive from Cork city centre, the house is built on land adjoining that of the Capuchin Franciscan College. Pearson hired Morehead, of Cork-based firm Wain Morehead Architects, which has worked on industrial and public sector projects in Ireland, as well as in Russia and France, in addition to residential one-offs.

Morehead has long held an interest in sustainable architecture and energy-efficient building, and is enthusiastic about prefabricated buildings. In his own Cork home, he built a prefab first-floor extension a number of years ago.

"It was amazing seeing it go on," he says. "It just sat right down on the ring beams like a shoebox. And because of the way the timber frame was built, it actually dried out the concrete structure underneath. It was like putting a poultice on the building."

In fact, Morehead's firm has now branched out into the business of doing diagnostics for existing buildings to improve their energy efficiency.

Since designing Pearson's house, Morehead has completed another one-off Cork project that he hopes will achieve either an A2 or A1 energy-efficiency rating. It's another Griffner-built



A view of the patio and garden



Everywhere, the interior features smooth lines, wood and light

"HE WAS IMPRESSED WITH THE IDEA OF LIVING IN A BUILDING THAT DID NOT HAVE 'AN OUNCE OF CONCRETE' ABOVE GROUND LEVEL."

house, but this time it has been shipped over to Ireland from GriffnerHaus's factory in Austria.

"We were down at the site yesterday," says Morehead, "and we were standing in shirtsleeves while it was minus three outside. The house produces 800 litres of water at 60 degrees from its combination of geothermal and solar energy sources."

Pearson's brief was simple enough. He is a keen gardener and wanted a living space that connected well to the outside and that had what he called a "free flow" inside. He wanted a mix of hard and soft landscaping, including water features. He also wanted a modern home based on sustainable principles, having lived in a period home before.

"I wanted a house that was both comfortable and easy to run and that could incorporate as many sustainable features as possible within my budget," he says. "I didn't want any part of the

house to be closed off and I wanted to maximise the sense of space. I had come from a very large property, so I didn't want a very big house either."

The budget was €500,000. For that, Pearson wanted three bedrooms and an open-plan living area to create an impression of space without having a house that was too big. His main living room is open to the dining room but separated from the kitchen by a dividing wall. This is overlooked by a gallery, which serves as both a library and a home office area.

The site had a stone wall boundary and a slight incline. Pearson built another wall on the northern boundary of the site using local stone, to minimise the visual impact of such a modern-looking building and prevent it from overlooking the adjoining property. An existing stand of mature trees was retained to enhance the home's feeling of privacy.



The gallery and living area



The exterior; below, the dining area



Morehead had already designed a Griffner Coillte bench-built house for a previous client and Pearson knew someone who lived in a timber-framed house in France. He was impressed with the idea of living in a building that did not have "an ounce of concrete" above ground level.

The house's exterior good looks have been achieved by using a simple single-pitch roof design and an equally simple mix of timber cladding and neutral render. The roof is zinc-clad.

There are windows well above eye-level on the north side of the house to help light the kitchen and utility areas. There are also small windows to the east to capture the morning sun. The south-facing facade, however, is a different story. Most of this side of the building has been glazed to maximise the property's solar-energy efficiency.

High-level sections of the windows can be opened to help provide cooling ventilation in the summer.

After it was designed, Pearson's house was cut out and constructed on benches in the Mullingar factory and transported to the site on flatbed trucks. There, it was erected on a concrete slab that had already been laid by the main contractor.

Almost all of the home's interior finishes were made in the factory, with just the kitchen and the bathrooms designed and fitted separately.

Inside, clean lines are the order of the day. The kitchen is all muted grey, stainless steel and white marble and the bathrooms have a modern green and white motif.

Where old heating technology meets new, the garden has a large panel of solar tubes, which also acts as a shelter for drying logs for burning on the open fire. An open fireplace — not something

that would usually be endorsed by modern champions of energy efficiency — was Pearson's one nostalgic concession to traditionalism.

The fireplace is in the main living room. It has a storage nook beside it for logs and the chimney can be closed when it is not in use, to prevent heat loss. The property's underfloor heating is powered by gas, but Morehead says it could easily be converted to a renewable source of energy, such as geothermal.

By the time Pearson and his family moved into their new home, the garden had been planted. Morehead says he always tries to take a front-loading approach to the design of his projects.

"When you are building a house you have to do the ground works anyway, so you may as well go the whole way. I believe that the landscaping is very much part of the design of a house, too."

While Griffner Coillte is no longer manufacturing in Ireland, the firm has retained its sales department here. Fabrication now takes place in Austria.

Despite the need to import from mainland Europe, Morehead says the costs of prefabricated structures have not increased significantly. "In many ways it is better, because you used to have to use local engineering for the plumbing and wiring and so forth. Now the whole thing is designed and pre-engineered in the factory."

The downside of this, of course, is that once you've decided on the design, there is no going back. "It does mean you have to think ahead," says Morehead. "If you want a sound system, or whatever, you must plan it in advance."

Wain Morehead Architects, 021 230 7250, www.wma.ie; Build Your Own House and Home, €9.95