HOUSE IN A LONG BACK GARDEN, Navan

A DRAWING: O’DONNELL AND TUOMEY ARCHITECTS

A narrow, linear garden behind an existing restaurant on Railway Street, Navan, is the site for this new house. The house is designed in response to the clients' particular requirements. They needed to be near to but separate from their work. They had been living over the restaurant and used an existing courtyard - the hollowed out shell of a disused workshop - as an outdoor room.

The house is organised around three courtyards with external circulation between living and sleeping zones. The living space and bedroom tower are positioned on either side of the footprint of the former workshop. Storey-height retaining walls hold back the higher level neighbours' gardens on either side of the court; the living room roof is at the same level as the adjoining gardens.

The cast-in-situ cranked roof gives the living space a cave-like character. Glassed screen doors connect living and courtyard spaces, and the stone floor runs from inside to outside. Access to the three bedroom floors is across the sunken courtyard. The upper bedrooms have views across the gardens to the Navan skyline.

Concrete steps lead from the courtyard level along the side court to the existing raised garden at the rear. The house is built in concrete, and lined internally with plywood. External joinery is untreated iroko.

Area - 110m². Stage - completed 1996.
ASSESSORS' COMMENTS

McAMAARA — Theo, you and I had a little discussion earlier about whether or not you would like to walk across that open space in the middle of the night.

DOUGAN — Shelly, you and I were not discussing walking naked across that space late at night, but what the inhabitants of the house would like.

McAMAARA — The description is important in terms of establishing how the forms came about, the form of the tower and the cave, and how it is inserted into an existing courtyard or external room.

DOUGAN — That was one of the projects that stayed in my mind over lunch, and I'm still picking up themes from it, like the way the sleeping block echoes and reflects the tower in the distance. I really like the way the narrow yard is played with, like the sense of privacy and mystery and play. But I worry that the owner will eventually compromise the integrity of the design because of the dislocation of living spaces from the sleeping complex.

McAMAARA — It's sunken below the adjacent gardens, so it is very protected.

DOUGAN — I like the cave-like aspects of the living room, with the stone and all that, and given the climate of Italian there is a very attractive proposition. That to me increases the unattractiveness of putting on your boots and your coat to cross the yard to go to bed.

McAMAARA — I assume the clients have worked closely with the architect, and it is a personal decision on their part.

DOUGAN — Sometimes it is up to an architect to explain to the user what they should have. At least, that's how I understand most architects work.

McAMAARA — No, they won't put in a sink, Theo. This is a tailor-made house to a tailor-made brief.

DOYLE — The owners have a restaurant. So it might be quite good to have the living room near the restaurant, but the bedrooms are far enough away so you don't hear the late-night noises.

TANSEY — I think it is very unusual, intimate. Unexpected. I visited this when it was under construction and I was very struck by it. The construction is a very powerful simplicity, with the exposed structure and the inner space making the rooms inside.

And the section is very interesting — the sleeping block is only two storeys at the back, and only really becomes a tower when you drop down to the level of the courtyard and living spaces.

LION — I think it is very well designed and everything, but what kind of house it is, I don't know. I understand that they have a restaurant and they want to have another life, so they organise a kind of city, with different buildings around a square. I regret that very small location plan — for me, it could be the key to understanding it. I'm afraid it is a pictorial answer to the very particular situation of this family.

McAMAARA — I think it is important that this courtyard space was already there, and the house was built around it. But yes, you said that it was a pictorial answer.

LION — It is a project you can visualise it, and I think the building is more important than the project, with the square between four façades of concrete. The courtyard is a room no-a without a roof, but it is a room.

DOUGAN — What you see as a virtue, Shelly. Yes, seems as a fault.

LION — I would need to visit it because I don't really understand the situation.

DOYLE — I don't know if the people building this cared about being very practical. I think they just wanted to build a little monument, like it, I think it is an enjoyable house, and using concrete is a very unusual. They must have been very agreeable clients to accept bare concrete for their house. They must have liked the idea of having something very different. I think the concrete is amazing. Does the joint here go around the corner? It is difficult to work out the joints in the panel — I'm trying to think of the concise detailing and where the rivets are going in for the shuttering. It must have been difficult to do it. I must say, I think it is very brave. Concrete is a material that's hard to use. And the design of the timber windows and shutters is very nice too.

McAMAARA — I agree with you. For me it is one of the most memorable projects of the day.

DOYLE — But if you think back, this use of concrete would not have been unusual in the 1940s. And wasn't Robin Walker's house built in simple concrete in the 1940s? It's funny to see it turn up nowadays. But it is a memorable project — and to think somebody went through with it so strongly.

McAMAARA — What I enjoy about this project is that it is dealing with architectural elements and not with design, so to speak. It is trying to make space for its own sake.

TANSEY — The execution of the house has been very rigorous. The building hasn't lost the power it had while it was under construction. It still has a rugged, naked quality, and I think the internal/external relationship is refreshingly ambiguous.

McAMAARA — I think it is interesting that the windows on each level relate differently to the ground, the courtyard, and the town.

TANSEY — One thing that bothered me when I visited the site was the introverted quality of the house. But I see from the photos how the view from the upper level of the tower is focused on a tower beyond the town.

O'DONNELL AND TUCKEY — established in 1988

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