

# IMITATIONS OF GRANDEUR

A bid to reproduce the glorious architecture of the Edwardian age cost a small fortune, but has resulted in Dublin's finest replicas, writes **Mark Keenan**

Hop into the seat of HG Wells's time machine, set the dial for 100 years ago and send it hurtling to Orwell Park in Dublin's Rathgar. Now step out into a newly built, confident street of modern red-bricks — a bastion on the city's outer limits for the forward-thinking, wealthy set of Dublin in the (nineteen) noughties.

Change is in the air. Queen Victoria's gone, and the modern *bon-viveur* Edward is on the throne. Now there are telephones, electricity and automobiles.

That guy there is John Syngé. He lives at No 4. Some people don't talk to him since his plays are considered subversive — they've been causing riots in the theatres in town.

And the man with the beard over there? Don't look now, but that's Abraham Stoker, another modern scribbler and new resident. Apart from suffrage, the ladies in their shiny new parlours talk about little else. His last book about some blood-sucking monster — Dracula, it's called — has them enthralled. That and the salacious rumour that he's moved here to take the country air for syphilis.

Another automobile. Nobody owns horses around here. And over there, the terminus of the fully electrical tram of the Dublin United Tramways Company — a revolution in public transport.

Behind these new homes is Dartry House, where William Martin Murphy lives. He's one of the new breed of homegrown Irish Catholic entrepreneurs who didn't exist a generation ago. He has so much money he's been adding a castellated turret to his house.

See across the river valley at Milltown? That's a relatively new leisure course dedicated to the fast-growing, middle-class sport of golf. The houses themselves are wholly modern, wired for telephones, electric bells to summon servants, perhaps even a shiny new automobile in the driveway. No need for stables here. It's the future, you know?

The architect Niall Brennan and his design team took a trip like this back to Orwell Park, 1908, in their research for building three homes in the prestigious Dublin street.

Their client, the developer Eugene Renehan — who in 2005 bought the site, along with WM Murphy's former house and 3.6 acres, all for a headline-grabbing €30m — needed to find ideas for the gap at the Orwell Park end.

Neighbours, including many of the city's captains of business, were unlikely to welcome the sort of modern home designs planners prefer. After Renehan bought the site, the property market collapsed, so apartments in particular were not looking like a good option. And in an age when replicating period designs is frowned upon, the planners weren't keen on pastiching.

In view of the Edwardian character of the road, the developer decided to replicate the style of the pre-existing affluent red-bricks.

It was still a big risk, though. The luxury central home market in Dublin was poleaxed first when the bubble burst. However, Edwardian red-bricks remain the trophy home of choice for Dublin's most affluent. They're spacious, supremely and ornately crafted and built to dimensions that suit a modern family. Unlike their Victorian predecessors, the kitchen isn't in the basement, the living quarters don't take endless flights of stairs to reach and there are no tiny, useless rooms for live-in servants. So Renehan and Brennan opted for replicas — with a difference.

Renehan says: "What convinced the planners in the end was that we had determined to do it right — in every single detail."

He isn't joking. Today Renehan has three complete, huge, detached, Edwardian red-brick replicas, each of which cost him €2.5m and two years of hard graft to construct.

Edwardians are rarely replicated in Ireland, partly because they are so expensive.

Brennan's team, driven by the project manager, Morgan O'Shea, started by surveying neighbouring houses. They photographed every architectural detail, from the chimney stacks and the ornamental ceramic plates on the facades to the external ventilation grids. There were visits to the Irish architectural archives to see the plans and get into the mindsets of the Edwardian builders, masters in the use of red-brick detail, granite trim and ironmongery.

In the Edwardian era, craftsmen were skilful and cheap. The brick-workers created intricate decorative trim, the joiners turned staircase balusters and the woodworkers fashioned magnificent sweeping mahogany handrails.

Today, as Renehan's experience shows, getting close to Edwardian quality costs a fortune. Each ornate staircase cost €75,000. Each kitchen, marrying modern convenience with Edwardiana, cost €150,000 and took two years to create.

The cast-iron railings around the houses are handmade, as are the hardwood windows, all proper working sash windows with fully functional shutter systems.

"The problem with re-creating Edwardian architecture is that if you get even the tiniest detail wrong, it will really stand out," says Brennan. "Take the small ornate cast-iron vents. We scoured all over to find them. If we hadn't, the houses would look completely off kilter."

The theme is continued throughout. The gutterings and rain pipes are also cast-iron handmades, just like the originals on the road. The sills are hand-carved and of detailed granite. Authentic ceiling plaster detail was commissioned from The Old Mould Company, restoration stucco specialists. The intricacy of the interior joinery, the panelling and the windows meant they had to go north of the border, to Dask Ltd.

"If you look at these rooms, you'll see the proportions are exactly of that era. The ceilings are 12ft high, the skirts are high and the floorboards [pure walnut in one reception room] are thicker than usual. That's the attention to detail you need."

Handmade carpets with patterns to match the ceiling plaster detail were also commissioned.

Lamartine, of Walkinstown,



The last available house is on sale at €7.5m; left, the interior decor looks authentic



Renehan, left, and Brennan, whose project took two years to complete



The replica homes let in more light than the Orwell Park originals, as this living room shows

was commissioned to carve the fireplaces, with their floral detail, from white marble.

For architect and developer alike, building a carbon copy of a large Edwardian house was in many ways a far harder job than the original builders had. With so much to monitor, something had to go wrong somewhere, and some slip-ups are evident.

The granite quoining marking the edges of these houses is not evident in any of the neighbouring red-bricks, and is neither subtle nor authentic. The red brick is a good match, but doesn't quite get there. Using recycled clay bricks would have sent the budget off the scale and made the construction altogether impractical — profit, of course, has to be made.

While most internal door work is in brass, they're missing the trademark Edwardian fingerplates, and some lesser doors even have plastic handles. The ceiling lighting is all chandeliered and looks good, but chain-hung coloured glass was more in vogue by the early 1900s. In addition, stained-glass doors and windows, one of the most alluring aspects of Edwardian homes, might have been nice.

You can't have it every way, though, and, as always in a job like this, some improvisation was necessary. The failure to secure enough Bangor slate in time for construction meant the team had to import from Spain. The replacements have been artificially stressed but actually look more authentic than the originals, if that's possible.

Huge money has been spent on detail you won't notice straight away. The lead aprons that wrap the roof and garret windows are something period home restorers seldom consider, to dreadful effect. Here they're spot on.

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And apart from the quoining, from the outside these homes look so genuine that they've had more than one passer-by drop in to congratulate the builders on the quality of their work. O'Shea's experience as a conservation architect of long standing shows through at every level. One triumph is the staircase, which has the finest banisters and a mahogany rail that twists elegantly inwards at the base along with the proportions of the landing.

Where the developers couldn't go Edwardian, they went modern. There are bathrooms and a steam room worthy of four-star hotels. More windows than the average Edwardian is not something you notice until you realise the daylight has been turned up by perhaps 30%.

The heating is underfloor gas (and you have to wonder whether a chance was lost to go green with geothermal). Under the timber boards and swish tiles is cast concrete, eliminating the squeaking that characterises a walk through an original

Edwardian. It also eliminates the possibility of the woodworm that tends to plague them.

There is an all-hardwood timber conservatory/sun room, in which you can envisage spending warm mornings taking tea from a silver service. In the attic, so often underused in original Edwardians, live-in quarters have been built suitable for a nanny or teenagers.

Downstairs, the kitchen, with a huge Aga, is designer fare from Clive Christian (who even signs his own drawers).

Apart from the niggles, these are probably Dublin's best ever Edwardian restorations.

Despite the property downturn, two of the three were sold off plans through Lisney. The third, available with showhouse furniture, is on offer for €7.5m. For a house of 3,500 sq ft, the embassy market is a likely contender, and the developers will also consider leasing to the right client.

www.lisney.ie