

New houses are universally horrible, and eco-houses are the most horrible of the lot

Germaine Greer

The Guardian, Monday 28 July 2008

[A larger](#) | [smaller](#)

Once upon a time, when most people in rural Ireland were poor, Irish houses were lovely to look at. They were horrible to live in, which is why when EU subsidies kicked in, everyone who lived in a whitewashed grass-roofed cottage, with a dunghheap steaming before the door, knocked it down and built himself a hideous villa. Where the old cottage had been almost windowless and dark, what with the smoke of the peat-fire painting the interior brown as it curled its slow way through the thatch, the new villas had lots of glazing, doors, windows, porches and conservatories, and acres of hardstand. Because over the years he had grown sick of wading through mud and manure, the owner concreted all round the grand new house, and threw up balustrades and gate-posts in all directions.

In Italy, the peasants couldn't wait to move out of their beautiful case coloniche and into the nasty new case popolari in the suburbs of the neighbouring towns. If they were ever aware of their damp stone houses with their heavy chestnut beams and terracotta floors as beautiful, they dumped beauty for comfort and convenience, and sold their old houses to fools like me who struggled for years to stop them falling down.

At the same time, amid the sprawling medieval granges of agrarian Benelux, a new kind of ditsy villa was popping up. First of all a hole was dug, to house the bunker that would serve as foundation and garage. A two-storey house with villagey details was built on top of the bunker and the spoil from the excavation banked up around it, so that the house seemed to be pirouetting on its own little knoll. The coy way the family car was to be hidden from sight is part and parcel of the fake villagery that muddies the thinking of domestic architects all over Europe. In the worst cases it extends to fake stone, fake brick and fake tiles. Window frames and doors are no longer made of wood, but they are still styled as if they were.

Vernacular building had the advantage that it had to be done with locally available materials, which pretty much guaranteed that it would harmonise with the landscape. Windows were usually few and small, because the houses were empty most of the day, so heat was conserved in the most obvious way, by thick walls with few perforations. People who work outside don't need to enjoy the view when they are inside. As the proportion of people working on the land declined, and more people spent more and more time indoors, houses came to be built with more and bigger windows, as well as growing extra rooms. The simple cubic forms that used to nestle in the landscape gave way to buildings that stood on tiptoe and peered about them with glassy eyes - even when the new houses were built so close together that there was nothing to see, and the picture windows were most often draped and blinded to preserve privacy.

In English towns and cities, apartment living never caught on; instead of putting single-storey dwellings one on top of another, cliffs of house consisting of pairs of rooms connected by stairs were stuck on both sides to others. Gradually, as the suburbs grew outwards, the terraces decayed to mere stumps of themselves and became that endless architectural conundrum, the semi-detached house.

Houses grew uglier as the proportion of architects in the population and their share of the new-build budget grew. New houses are now universally horrible, and eco-houses are the most horrible of the lot. The builders of eco-houses accept as a given the basic shape and dropical proportions of the two-storey suburban villa, with pitched roofs, end gables, front porch, picture windows, chimneys, and so forth. This may be because local planning authorities demand that they be "in keeping", even though there is little aesthetic merit in what they are expected to be in keeping with. There is usually nothing about the eco-house to signal that it is a new kind of energy-efficient machine for living. It could open and shut mechanically, like a greenhouse, but it doesn't. It could have photosensitive windows, but it won't. The slate in the roof may be recycled, but with so many solar panels, skylights, sun tunnels and windows in it and on it, there's no good reason for its being made of slate at all.

It is already pretty clear that the developers of the dreaded eco-towns are uninterested in design and terrified of innovation, and probably for good reason. The British, like other timid mammals, are neophobic - that is, irrationally terrified of the new. Eco-housing will have to work differently without looking different. Solar heating panels are best installed en masse on flat roofs, but no one has dared to design detached dwellings with flat roofs since the failure of the Frinton Park project in Essex in the 1930s. If you are thinking eco-house, the Villa Savoye is a better model than a Devon fisherman's cottage. The new eco-houses should be proud to be different. So far, the difference is in hidden extra cost; if less energy was spent on faking sameness, the costs could be kept down. If you are building a house out of hemp and sheep's wool, it is a pointless extravagance to trick it out in stone.