



We are the custodians of other people's history

For Eavaun Carmody and Emmet Sexton, moving to Killenure Castle in Tipperary meant the start of a lifelong journey to preserve and promote the history of the 400-year-old property. Along with their three children, the couple set about putting their own stamp on this most unusual of family homes

In conversation with Aisling O'Toole | Photography: Carol Dunne

There is a lot of history behind the house. The last of the O'Dwyers lived here and fortified the structure in fear of Cromwell arriving. He did and he burned them out. The castle then passed to the Cooper family, who lived here for six generations from 1746 until the 1960s. While in their hands, the house underwent major alteration and extension in the 1800s. The shell of the fortified house still stands, while the original thatched 17th century house was extended to link with the castle ruins. Every 60 or so years since then, the house has been added to, something did when we installed a modern glass box structure to the house and a tree house in the grounds.

It took seven years to find this house. During that time we looked at over 100 properties but a lot of them had difficulties with adverse possession, which meant other people had right of way on the land so we would have had no control over our own domain. This house is very unusual as there are no right-of-way issues; it's all ours.

Both my parents are from north Kerry and from spending summers there as a child, I knew that I didn't want to bring my children up in the city; it's a hard life with a lot of wear and tear on the psyche. Everything is harder, faster and more furious and I didn't want that for them. I suppose in one way I wanted to extend their childhood by removing them from the external influences city life has. Even for our mental health as adults, we wanted to move to the country. Of course, it's horses for courses and this way of life isn't for everyone – but it suits us.

When I first saw the house I found it very masculine and felt that it had lost its heartbeat. It had dirty magnolia walls, like the inside of a smoker's lung. I found it depressing. It was never meant to be a fancy home, it's a large working farmhouse, and so needed to be simple. Once we decided to buy it, we did a lot of research, worked up the costings and knew exactly what we were getting involved in.

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→ once we got started, I did have a very clear vision of what I wanted. I knew that colour was important and I knew that keeping the integrity of the structure was important. It was a challenge to enhance the building without making it look like we'd just come along and applied new money.

I drove the builders crazy, numbering and photographing everything. When they took up the original flagstones to apply foundations and geothermal heating, I made sure that they were put back down crooked so they stayed original. Likewise, when they replastered, I asked that they did it very roughly so that it would crack slightly. I even had them colour the new rendering by the front door with teabags and crayons so it matched the six-inch original rendering we had discovered.

We never wanted the house to feel grand; we wanted it to be cosy and for visitors to immediately feel comfortable throwing a leg over a chair. There's a higgledy-piggledy feel to everything that we like; the art and antiques we have collected set the mood of the house.

I have been collecting architectural salvage and antique pieced for 25 years. After originally starting out in animation back in the '80s, I ended up becoming a bronze caster and moved by default into the antique trade. I was good with my hands and so I'd buy things from house sales and salesmen and then restore them. It's resulted in an eclectic mix of bits and bobs in the house. We want people to be seduced by what's going on and have worked at creating a burst of visual energy.

Owning a house like this means my work is never done. The only way I'll be stunted is financially, which is one of the reasons we decided to open the house to the public. Houses like this can become a financial vortex and if you don't have a clear plan, it can bankrupt you in a few years. I don't want the house to be a millstone around any of my children's necks because by the time they're adults, they'll have an emotional attachment to it. You could easily become burdened by the history of this house and become a slave to it for life. So I want the house and its history in place before I run out of steam.

We had a civil duty to open the house. We are the custodians of other people's history. So many people in the community worked here through the years that the house is part of the community's identity. We had to open it. The original fortified building is older than the spuds in Ireland. We were sitting on history. 🍀

Killenure Castle

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