

## MODERNISM IN THE IRISH LANDSCAPE



Above / Thorn Pier House

### Three Houses by Caroline Dickson, Revisited (and Re-assessed) 30 years on.

In the 1960s and early 70s, Derry-based Architect Caroline Dickson built a series of modernist houses in County Donegal. The houses provide a rare example of domestic modernist architecture in that county. What can we learn from these houses, built over 30 years ago, that is of relevance today, to the issues of one-off rural housing, and in particular the relationship of the modern rural dwelling to its landscape? The discovery that two of the three houses are completely intact and occupied by the original client/owner whilst the other lies in ruins prompts a further question- How successful has modernist design proven to be for contemporary living today? The houses are all sited along the west shores of Lough Swilly;

The first at the Thorn Pier, where the narrow river channel meets the lough; the second, in the sheltered inlet near Ramelton town, and the third, further north again, where the Lough opens out towards the sea at Rathmullan.

#### HOUSE AT THORN PIER

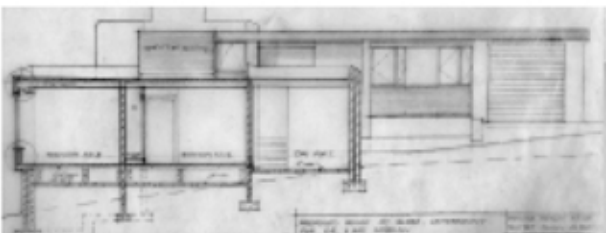
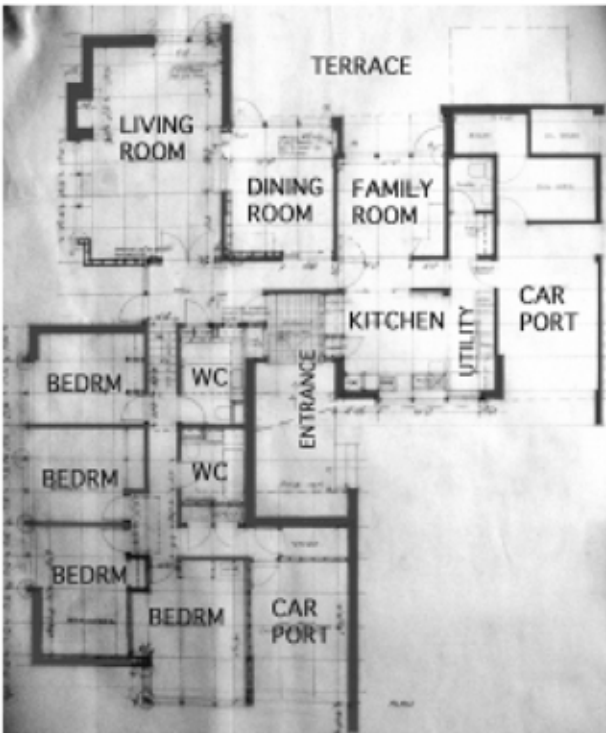
The House at the Thorn Pier (1969) is organised as a series of volumes that step up the steep site and then return on themselves to define the entrance area. The kitchen, at the uppermost level, is thus afforded a view, over the house volume, back towards the Lough, and each volume has a different orientation and relationship to the landscape. The subtle level changes separating the rooms create visual fluidity between the spaces. The massing and articulation of the volumes start to define external spaces, giving them a degree of enclosure and a scale that relates to the internal rooms. ▶



Above / Thorn Pier House



### THORN PIER HOUSE





Above / Rossreagh House

#### ► HOUSE AT ROSSREAGH, RAMELTON

The exploration of outdoor living spaces is more explicit in the House at Rossreagh, Ramelton, 1974. The height generated by the series of mono-pitched roofs gives a vertical emphasis and a dramatic scale to the outdoor room, which opens off the living room and entrance hall. A small balcony from the first-floor study looks down into this outdoor room, further integrating it with activities within the house. The external-internal ambiguity of the space is made complete by the living-room style fireplace in its south wall.

Inside, large cavity sliding doors and moving joinery open up theatrically, effectively removing the walls, to connect entrance hall, sitting room and dining room. It is easy to imagine these houses operating for large social gatherings and family parties, but as the occupants grew older, they were also adaptable to a quieter, more contained way of living (- an aspect pointed out by one of the occupants).

In both these houses, the plywood kitchens that exists today are as designed by the architect, and are in immaculate working order. And in fact the interiors throughout are entirely intact and unchanged from the original realised designs.

#### HOUSE AT RATHMULLAN WOODS

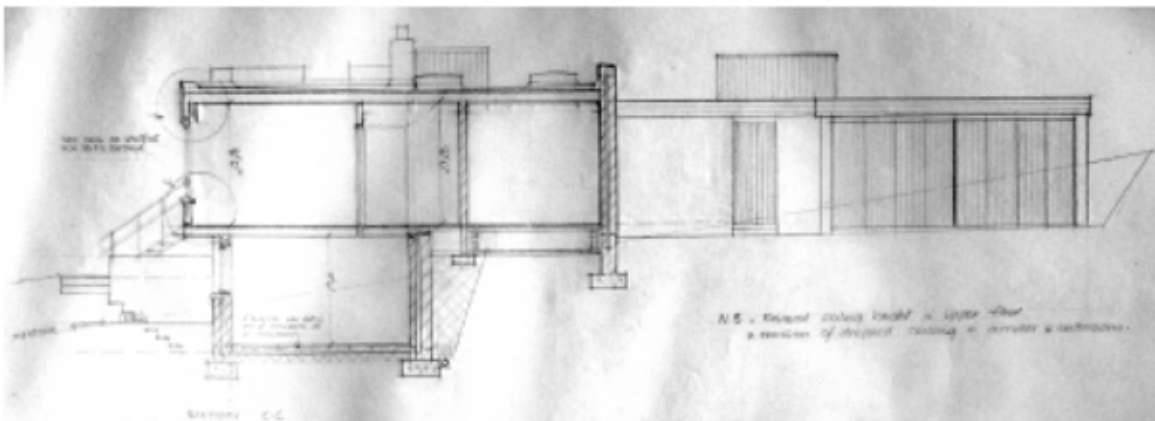
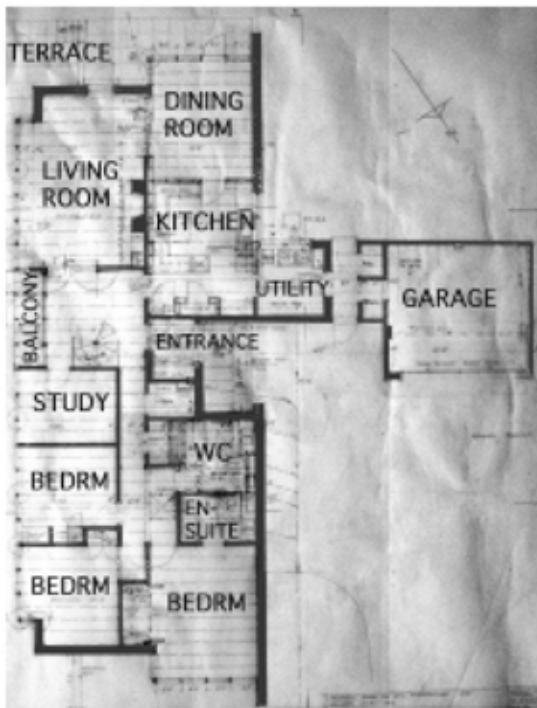
In tragic contrast, The House at Rathmullan Woods has been in a state of dereliction for a number of years. However, the principle architectural move is still legible- the cantilever of the living spaces towards the sea view. Projecting the higher level of the rear of the site out into the landscape brings the sea into sudden and dramatic visual proximity. This subtle manipulation of the ground plane also serves to conceal from view the lower private bedroom, creating a kind of ha-ha. The architect drew massing diagrams for the planting in the garden and even now in its derelict and overgrown state (perhaps especially now) the house appears integrated and sensitively scaled on the site.

The relationship of these houses to their landscape is of particular interest - in this, one can detect the influence of Liam McCormick with whom Dickson had worked. Dickson had also spent time working in Greece, where her interest in spaces for outdoor living developed. In the three houses, indoor and outdoor spaces function as fields of equal significance and the gardens are conceived as a middle ground to interweave the house and site. The interweaving of interior space, external spaces, garden, site, landscape within the modernist idiom is reminiscent of the approach taken by Walter and Ise Gropius in the design of their own house in Lincoln, Massachusetts, 1938: ►

# ROSSREAGH HOUSE



RATHMULLAN WOODS HOUSE





Above / Rathmullan Woods House

► Landscape theorist, Eric Kramer has described their approach: "The house was conceived as an organic part of the landscape. The house (mass?) does not cease at its thermal boundary but dissolves subtly into the space around it. The garden does not end at the exterior walls of the house, but clings to the architectural elements and penetrates its spaces (screened porch, roof terrace, planes of glass)... In the same way the garden does not end abruptly with a set of bounding walls; rather it weaves itself into the fabric of its surroundings with zones of diminishing control and cultivation expanding from the house outward into the landscape."\* These "zones of diminishing control" result in buildings that integrate with the landscape visually as well as experientially. Perhaps this is the first lesson we can learn from these houses.

But how successful are these Modernist structures for contemporary living today? Two of the three houses were occupied by the original clients at the time of visiting, and were completely intact and unchanged more than 30 years on. This successful occupant experience is the result I think of the carefully considered site-specific design that amplifies the qualities of the landscape they occupy, combined with spatial flexibility in the plan, which meant the house could adapt to the changing living patterns of the occupants over the years.

These were brave buildings in their context and time. And they were honest too, in their examination of how we live, and in the fluid and experiential way in which internal and external space is handled. Indeed, contemporary residential Architecture in the Irish countryside seems more tentative by comparison. These houses are examples of how Architecture can be integrated into its context through the medium of landscape rather than through formal vernacular reference. The derelict condition of the House at Rathmullan Woods draws attention to the plight of many of these modernist works. It will be a great loss if the best buildings from this time in Ireland are not recognised as valuable artefacts of more recent Architectural heritage, at a time when they are at their most vulnerable. ●

### Deirdre McMenamin

(Since writing this text, the house at Rathmullan Woods, along with its garden, has been demolished).

Based on research and visits by Dougal Sheridan and Deirdre McMenamin and on discussions with Caroline Dickson.  
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Thanks to: Thecla Morgan, Angela Hayes-Costello (RIP), Liam McCaul, Caroline Dickson.

\*"The Walter Gropius House" A collaboration of Modernism and the Vernacular", Eric F. Kramer, *Journal of Architectural Education*, 2004 pp.39-47