

## **THE FORTIFIED HOUSES OF COUNTY CORK: ORIGIN, FABRIC, FORM, FUNCTION AND SOCIAL USE OF SPACE**

**Joe Nunan**

*This analysis of the origin, fabric, form, function and social use of space of the fortified houses in county Cork examines some of the changes that took place within Irish society in the late medieval and early modern period. The rise and decline of the fortified house reflects the passing of the Irish social, political, military and religious (Catholic) order and the rise of the new English elite determined to settle in Ireland. The builder/owners of fortified houses were the elites of Irish society who needed to secure and protect their property and valuables. The fortified house met the para-military and residential need of early seventeenth-century Ireland. It was a uniquely Irish architectural form that bridged the transition from tower-house building to the emergence of the undefended Irish country manor. It can be defined as the initial architectural form that identifies Ireland's move from the medieval to the modern world.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Over the past six decades studies concerning Irish fortified houses have identified them as a transitional genre that emerged at the end of the sixteenth century and acted as an architectural bridge between the Irish medieval tower-house and the country manor house of the late seventeenth century. The fortified house drew on the earlier tradition of the tower-house and was influenced by the Tudor and emerging Jacobean architecture from England and also the Classical and Military architecture coming from Continental Europe. The social, political and military changes that took place from the 1580s-1650s, were to play a major role in the development of this unique Irish structure. These houses provided a comfortable living space for the elite of early seventeenth-century Irish society, they were fashionable yet defensible. The fortified house also represented a public display of power and wealth. They represented a long-term investment in their owner's regional future and were monuments to an aspiration for an English and Continental house style suited to local Irish conditions. On a basic level the construction of a fortified house represented the owners desire to modernise and Anglicize.

### **ORIGINS**

The introduction of Tudor architectural forms into Ireland was influenced by the influx of British settlers during the latter half of the sixteenth century, especially throughout Munster. This was a period when New English settlers were arriving in large numbers establishing new towns and villages, initially within the plantation zone, but then rapidly expanding beyond the official regions by acquiring properties through various commercial and political activities. Classical architectural designs reached Ireland in a variety of ways; the sons of the Irish nobility were educated abroad during the sixteenth and seventeenth

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centuries; Irishmen traveled to Europe to join Continental armies or religious orders and in the process were exposed to classical architectural forms.\*

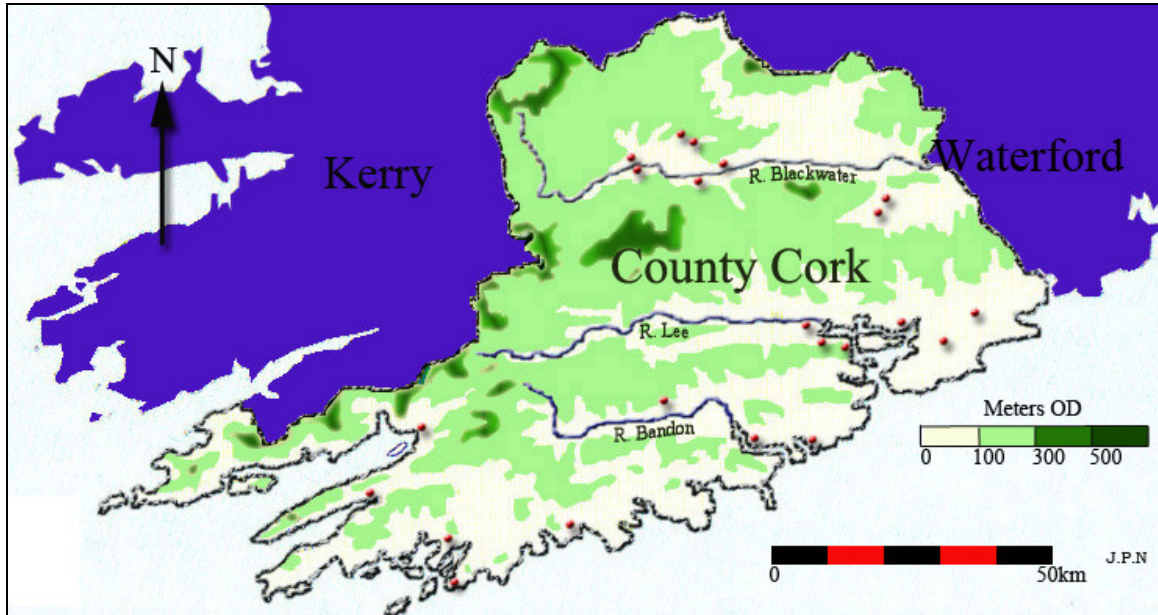
The oblong residential building, with projecting corner-towers, square, round and octagonal, was a recurrent theme in English architecture from the thirteenth to the seventeenth century. In England by the mid-sixteenth century these structures, cast in a para-military mould, had little or no defensive significance and were designed with aesthetics rather than functionality in mind. The corner-towers and bastions integrated into the design of many English houses were to become functional elements on the Irish houses. Ireland was an unstable and dangerous country by the seventeenth century; the elite of Irish society provided their own protection and the military features incorporated into the fortified house were sufficient to meet their defensive need. Many of the military elements were taken directly from the tower-house, as they had been effective deterrents against would-be attackers. The vast majority of fortified houses were located within the rural landscape and situated outside the security of the walled towns. This made them susceptible to local banditry and the occasional cattle raid, or to attack in times of rebellion. For those Irish elite living beyond the walled town, the insecure, hostile and unpredictable nature of life in rural early seventeenth-century Ireland was an incentive to provide for their own security. Features such as bartizans, machicolations, wall walks with parapets, corner towers and the provision of many gun loops, were used to secure the fortified houses. The bawn wall with towers and corner-tower was an effective defensive structure used to protect both the inhabitants and the houses. On later built houses the defences moved away from the house and out onto the bawn walls. The walls were provided with many gun loops, their towers and corner-towers were also multi-looped.

### **FABRIC**

Individual house-styles and plans varied within regions, but ultimately, the fortified houses had an overall Irish architectural quality to them. This resulted from the use of local craftsmen and materials and the incorporation of architectural detail from the tower-house. The builders were mostly restricted to the materials close at hand, with the choice of construction material dictated by the raw materials available within the immediate area. Outside resources were utilized but transportation by land of heavy, bulky and large amounts of building material was generally difficult given the infrastructure of the day. Over-land carriage was slow and expensive, adding great cost to any building enterprise. Water transport was easier and less expensive and the majority of county Cork houses were situated close to or near a water source (Fig.1). No matter how well placed a building site was in relation to waterways, some land carriage was always necessary, if only to transport the building material from riverside to the site. Glass, lead and some slate or carved stone may not have been produced locally and would have been transported to the various house sites. The distribution of stone built houses correlate to reliable water transportation. According to Airs (1995) the availability of good transportation routes by water seems to have been a critical element when considering the use of quarries more than a few miles from the building project. Many of the houses reflect the geological distribution of available stone within a given region and the stone used was probably a combination of

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locally quarried, re-used and purchased stone. Brick was rarely used as a building material on Irish fortified houses as it was difficult to manufacture due to the wet climate and a reliable supply could never be guaranteed. A limited quantity was used at Mallow, Aghhadown and Ballyannan and may have come through the southern ports as ships ballast.



*Figure 1 – Fortified house distribution in County Cork. Many of the houses were located close to major rivers and coastline (Joe Nunan).*

The buildings originally had timber flooring; some floors were carried on a series of wooden beams set within wall sockets, others were carried on corbels. Looking at a floorless fortified house the missing floor levels were usually situated 50cm to 60cm over the corbels. Floors were also carried on scarcements, narrow ledges on the walls where the upper part was set back. The Cork houses had a combination of wall sockets, scarcements and corbels, with the former two being the most common. Oak was employed for the structural timberwork, possibly unseasoned for roofing and seasoned for interior features, such as floorboards, stairs and panelling. Seasoning was expensive and time consuming; it required a degree of organization and pre-planning on behalf of the builder to calculate the amount of seasoned timber required for construction. It has been estimated that a trunk of oak required a years seasoning for each inch of thickness plus an additional year for every three inches of total thickness; very few builders would have been able to plan their complete timber supply that far in advance.

The Cork houses do not retain any of their original roofing material, but the surviving structures do give some indication as to the type of roofing that may have been used. At the fortified house complex of Dromanreen a partial limestone roof slate was identified lying on the basement floor, it may have been a damaged slate that was incorporated into the masonry work or it may have fallen from the house when it was de-roofed (Nunan 2005),

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(Fig. 2). It was similar to the roof tiles dating to c.1641 uncovered during excavations within the grounds of Limerick Castle (Wiggins 2000). At Ightermurragh a sandstone roof slate was identified in the basement below the main entrance door (Nunan 2005), (Fig.3) and at Baltimore numerous limestone roof tiles were uncovered during excavations in 2002. Stone houses with slate roofs were being built in Munster in the early decades of the seventeenth century; Boyle's leases in Kinalmeaky and Carbery Co. Cork included precise instructions concerning the type of houses that were to be built with stone chimneys and slated roofs (MacCarthy-Morrogh 1986). North Devon decorated ridge tiles, however, were used at Baltimore (Eamonn Cotter pers. comm.) and these can be dated to the seventeenth century, after which there was a decline in their production with an increase in the production and use of plain ridge tiles. North Devon Gravel-tempered ridge tiles were found on excavations in Cork city at Philips' Lane and Grattan Street. Some of these tiles had thumb dressing, low cockscomb cresting and incised decorations on their exterior face (Wren 2003) and were probably imported into Munster through the various port towns. Finally, lead was used for roofing and rain water systems as it was the only material capable of keeping rain water out. Lead was rust free, malleable, but expensive and it was probably used on the roof at Mallow where according to Leask (1941), quantities of molten lead and fragments of thick, small slate were found during renovations.



*Figure 2 – Roof slate from Dromaneen.  
(Photo: Joe Nunan)*



*Figure 3 – Roof slate from Ightermurragh  
(Photo: Joe Nunan)*

Naturally, many other materials also went to make up a finished house. Stone was bound together by mortar, consisting mostly of lime and sand. This was mixed with water, beaten, covered with sand and left to stand. The standing periods may have been as long as several months. Burning limestone produced lime for mortar and plaster. Other binding materials may also have been used, such as cement made of mixed wax and resin, which had been utilized in the medieval period for masonry that was exposed to dampness. Another method designed to produce mortar resistant to the influences of moisture, involved the insertion of crushed marine shells into the mix. This was not the only method used to insulate the interior from rainwater seepage and from the damp climate prevalent in Munster. On some of the house sites in East and West Cork there were remnants of very thin slate-tiles attached to sections of the exterior wall with iron nails and gravel or lime mortar. Such



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features can be found at Kill-St-Anne South, Aghadown and Monkstown. There is very little information available on interior plasterwork and any information obtained comes from what still remains on the buildings. Plaster was used in large quantities for walls and ceilings; much of the plaster was composed of lime-sand and strengthened with chopped straw, hair, woodchip or dung. The remnants of a decorative plasterwork scheme were identified at Mountlong, representing scriptural subjects and field sports (Fuller 1907). Pieces of interior wall plaster can be found at most house sites in Co. Cork and where sufficient plasterwork remains, rooms, wall partitions and halls and stairs can possibly be identified.

The large rectangular window was a distinctive and common feature of the fortified house (Fig. 4). The window surrounds were framed with cut stone; these frames contained vertical and horizontal inserts (mullion and transom) which were rebated for glass to secured paneled frames. Many of these mullion and transom windows were of a cavetto-type design. As a general rule the larger windows were those at some distance above the ground floor. At ground floor and basement level many of the openings on the outer wall were, for obvious reasons, of narrow width towards the outside and splayed inwards. Windows of this kind were commonly found on the lower levels of the buildings and on their projecting towers. The original window lintels were either large stone slabs or rectangular planks of cut oak. Many of the lintels were removed from the houses over the centuries. Some were destroyed by fire, or fell out while others were taken and re-used elsewhere. At Ightermurragh, Kilmaclenine and Kill-St-Anne South, the lintels either fell out or were taken, while according to tradition, at Mountlong, the house was burnt by its owner in 1643 (Fuller 1907), with a number of the wooden lintels surviving *in-situ*, some showing signs of burning.



*Figure 4 – The large rectangular window was a distinctive feature of the fortified house (Photo: Joe Nunan).*

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### FORM

The majority of the Co. Cork houses were of two or three storeys, with attic and towers, usually above a basement. String-courses sometimes marked the stages of the building, identifying the internal floor level on the external face. While the central-plan of the fortified house was rectangular, there were many variations on that design, including U-shaped, L-shaped, X-, Y-, Z- and cruciform plans. Mountlong, Ballyvireen and Kilmaclenine have identifiable X-, Y- and cruciform plans (Fig. 5). The Z-plan was most prevalent in Ulster, a probable influence from the second phase of the 'Scottish tower-house' tradition. Ballyannan is the only surviving fortified house in Co. Cork with an original Z-plan layout. The six fortified house in West Cork were all varied in plan. In North Cork there was no predominant plan type, while this situation was similar in East and South Cork. The house plans in West Cork were the most varied, followed by East Cork and finally North Cork. Overall, the X-shape was most prevalent and the T-, U- and Z-plans were least common. Why a particular shape was chosen is difficult to ascertain. Was it an architectural fashion, a display of power, of wealth, an embrace of the new, a break with the past or a security issue? In reality it was probably a combination of all of these.

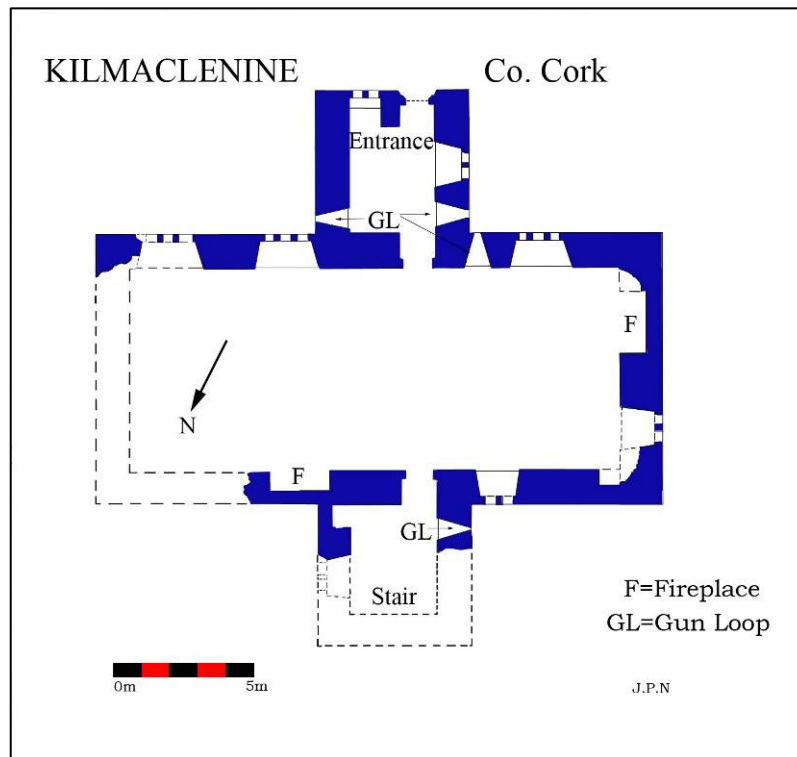


Figure 5 – Cruciform plan of Kilmaclenine fortified house in North Cork (Modified from Nunan 2005).

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### **DEFENCE**

The houses were clearly constructed with defence in mind. They were generally provided with pistol and musket loops. The loops for firearms are found at doorways, in the projecting bays under windows and on corner towers. Many houses had defences at higher elevations, taking the form of roof parapets, machicolations and bartizans, with the projecting features specifically placed to command views of exposed angles and entrances. Above the longer walls at Paal East, a series of corbels provided seating for a continuous machicolation defensive platform. In county Cork stone built machicolations and bartizans are frequent and are found on 50% of the fortified house sites. Battlement parapets with their crenellations and merlons rarely survive as they were slight in construction and easily destroyed. Some that do remain can be found at Mountlong, Monkstown, Castlelands and Ardclloyne. Behind the parapet was the allure or wall walk and these were drained by outwardly sloping slabs which delivered through rectangular outlets along the base of the parapet. They were also furnished with projecting dripstones. The surviving machicolations were borne by lintels or arches resting on corbels. A very common form of corbel was the long, narrow, inverted pyramid that was either straight sided or slightly incurved.

Pistol and musket loops were found on the walls, towers, machicolations and bartizans of the houses. The gun loop holes assume various forms. Commonly a hole-base was circular or semi-circular for the mouth of the piece, while the upper section remained a vertical slot for sighting, the admission of light and the escape of smoke. Frequently, the circular, semi-circular and vertical slot were to be found as individual stand-alone features on a wall face, tower or beneath a window opening. The gun loops on a number of Cork house sites were incorporated into their window features, embedded directly under a window or within either side of a window bay (for e.g. Dromaneen). Internally the openings were set within square or rectangular splayed embrasures and were commonly situated on the ground and first floor level, however, some are found higher up.

Fortified houses were usually situated within a courtyard or bawn wall. The bawn wall formed an outer defensive line and was mainly provided with a gatehouse, flankers and loops for firearms. The existence of the bawn is difficult to demonstrate since their walls were less robust than the houses themselves and easily removed. The remains of a large trapezoidal enclosure with corner-towers and semi-circular projections at mid point still survive at Dromaneen. At Ballinterry and Mossgrove partial bawn walls and towers survive, while at Baltimore only parts of the wall survive. It can be inferred that a bawn existed at Paal East, Castlelands and Lissgriffin, where some of the walls on these houses lack defensive features, indicating those sides lay within a bawn wall. Furthermore, the standing gable at Lisgriffin incorporates three large projecting stones, positioned between the ground and first floor levels, suggesting a bawn wall was keyed into the house at that location.

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### SOCIAL USE OF SPACE

The internal arrangement of many of the Co. Cork houses can seldom be fully recovered. There are reasons why this is the case. Many of the houses were damaged, destroyed and abandoned and there has been little, if any, continuity of occupation. Timber and plaster were the principal materials used to frame and partition the interior of these buildings, with little of either material surviving. Where there were floors some corbels, sockets and scarcements remain, their positions revealing each floor level. Overall, 46% of houses had identifiable basements situated in corner-towers or within sections of the main block. When the basements were located within the main block they did not cover the entire floor space. They were commonly situated at a gable-end, extending the full width of the block and covering approximately one-third of the blocks length. There were exceptions however and at Castlelands the basement was located centrally within the main block. There are two surviving examples of basements situated within corner-towers and both are found at house sites in West Cork (Aghadown and Ballyvireen). One surviving basement with a separate external entrance survives at Ightermurragh, all others may have been accessed from within the buildings.

Initially, the kitchen was situated within the main block, but as ancillary buildings were added some kitchens and bake houses were moved into these building. This happened at Ballyannan, Ballyvireen, Castlelands and possibly at Dromaneen. The kitchens are identified by the presence of large fireplaces and bread ovens and were located in the basement or on the ground floor. Besides the basement, the ground floor was generally the least comfortable area of the house, acting as a functional space provided with kitchens, storage and defence. The ground floor contained more gun loops than those found on each individual floor above, as well as having fewer and smaller windows. It was also an area provided with less light and poor ventilation.

The main dining, living and sleeping areas were situated on the floors above the basement and ground floor level. The upper floors; first, second, occasionally a third and always an attic, contained numerous fireplaces and many large rectangular windows. The fireplaces were always situated close to a window on the floors above ground level. Elaborate or carved fireplaces signified an important room, perhaps a solar, a chief private apartment, or a dining hall. Identifying individual rooms can be difficult, however, when sufficient wall plaster remains, combined with door, window and fireplace locations, an interpretation of space can be inferred. Within the main block, floor levels were sometimes partitioned into at least two main rooms. At Ightermurragh the shadow of a timber partition frame can be located on the wall plaster. At Dromaneen and Castlelands, a stone wall remains *in-situ*, defining the limits of their basements and partitioning the ground and first floor level of the main block into two separate areas. At Mountlong a division was unlikely in view of the small size of the main block and the continuous shadow of some decorative plasterwork on all remaining walls at first floor level. Little visible evidence survives for timber partitions on the other surveyed sites, but a division of the main floors into two chambers may be inferred from fireplace positions at Kilmaclenine. Overall, the sub-division of the living space and the use of decorative plasterwork reflect an increased desire for privacy and comfort.



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In some of the houses the stairs were positioned within the main block, others were fixed inside a central projection, while more held the staircase within one of the corner-towers. At Ballyvireen the south tower contained the stairwell and it was identified externally by the considerable amount of varied and staggered window lights on the south gable wall. Internally, wall plaster preserved the outline of what appeared to have been a newel stairs. At Ballyannan the stairwell was located in a rectangular projection west of the main block and the surviving wall plaster outlines a staircase of scale-and-platt construction. At Ighertmurragh the north-central projection contained a newel staircase identified by the shadow on the remaining wall plaster. Externally, window lights were situated on all three walls of the tower and were stepped. At Castlelands the initial staircase was spiral and keyed into the northwest corner-tower. The stairs at Paal East was located in the northeast corner-tower and was identified externally by the stepped windows rising from east to south. The internal wall plaster did not survive but the wall sockets remain and the stairs was a probable newel-type construction with a landing at each corner. At Dromaneen there were some plaster remains on the south wall of the main block over the basement. A stairs was located here and a number of sockets, rising up from the ground to the second floor level, were identified. All of the stairways were constructed of timber, and none are known to have survived in Co. Cork.

A surviving example of a seventeenth century staircase, once the main centerpiece of Eyrecourt house, Co. Galway, had three landings and two flights ascending to a common landing where they joined to form one flight to the upper floor. It was a massive staircase carved in leaves, antics and with many masks hidden among the woodwork. This staircase is now stored in the Detroit Institute of Arts (Loeber 1973). It may well be that some of the fortified houses had similar decorative carved staircases, acting as centerpieces and complimenting the carved door and fireplace surrounds.

### **CONCLUSION**

The groundwork to present studies on fortified house was comprehensively mapped by H.G. Leask (1941) in *Irish Castles and Castellated Houses*. Leask identified the most architecturally significant buildings in Munster, including Burntcourt, Co. Tipperary, Mallow Castle (Castlelands), Kanturk Castle (Paal East), Monkstown and Coppingers' Court (Ballyvireen) in Co. Cork. In his work he collated a lot of primary evidence, making the subsequent study of such buildings possible. The fortified houses built in Co. Cork had a unique Irish architectural quality and a distinct southern English look and feel; the result of contacts built up between both regions, politically through plantation-immigration and economically, through trade with the port and fishing towns of Waterford, Cork, Kinsale, Youghal and Baltimore. The social changes that took place in Tudor England were reflected in architectural form by the elites in that society and it was the latter who spearheaded the Munster plantations. They were noblemen who viewed Munster as another region within a larger England and it was through these individuals that the initial architectural influence of the many gabled, oblong country manors with circular, square, rectangular and hexagonal corner-towers was introduced into Co. Cork.

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Fortified house layout was, in some respect, a product of late sixteenth and early seventeenth-century Anglicization, but there was also much and varied contact between the Irish elite and continental Europe. The beauty and elegance of classical continental architectural forms was not lost on the Irish nobility who had frequent contact with mainland Europe. The fortified houses did not leave behind their association with the tower-house and incorporated the defensive features of these into their design. Overall, they were symmetrical in plan, with many large windows and were ventilated and heated with many fireplaces.

The fortified houses of Co. Cork were principally clustered within two main areas; along the Blackwater river valley and the Co. Cork coastline. Further analysis shows that they were divided into sub-regions; the estuary into Cork harbour and Kinsale port, within the cattle grazing pasture lands of North and East Cork and on the fishing coast of West Cork. All were built close to natural hardwood forests, within limestone or sandstone areas and on the major transportation routes that accessed the principle port towns.

The shape, size and plan of the houses were in harmony with a seventeenth century desire for uniformity, domestic comfort and luxury. Some of the houses had similar design plans, while others had decorative elements that were identifiable on one or more sites. Some staircase types were identified from the remaining wall plaster within corner and projecting-towers. The more prestigious rooms were identified by the wrought-stone and carved fire and door surrounds and by large window lights. These high status rooms were usually located on the first or second floor. The kitchens were located by their very large fireplaces and bread ovens, mostly on the ground floors and usually situated next to the entrance to and from the stairwell, allowing quick and easy access to the dining and private room above. The Dining Hall was usually located at the level above the kitchen. The storage and defensive areas were identified by their smaller window lights, gun loops, lack of fireplaces and their proximity to the basement and rooftops.

Overall, the construction of a fortified house was a large-scale undertaking. Specialised craftsmen and manual labour was required. Building materials and general supplies had to be purchased and transported to the sites. Within this dynamic work environment there must have been active exchanges of ideas between all involved. The study, survey and analysis of the origins, fabric and function of the Irish fortified house provides valuable insights into a time, people and society that have long since passed. Nevertheless, research into the Irish fortified house needs to be continued and further developed in order to build on the current level of knowledge.

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