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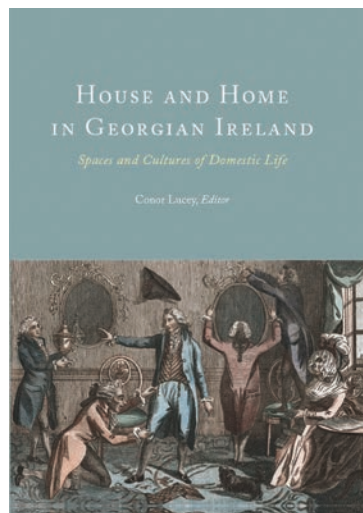
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towns / Thinking differently about embodied carbon / Art of the ordinary / House and Home in Georgian Ireland / Architecture and Micropolitics / Imaginary journeys / International Rugby Experience / Lios na nÓg / The Quay, Ramelton / Tropical Fruit Warehouse

# House and Home in Georgian Ireland: Spaces and Cultures of Domestic Life

by Conor Lucey (ed.)

Review by Graham Hickey



Available at the RIAI Bookshop

'Species of domestic spaces' titles the introduction to this compendium of essays edited by UCD Associate Professor Conor Lucey, focusing on the house and home in Georgian Ireland. It is a deft description for the expansive array of topics explored by academics and historians that unite around the use and habitation of Irish domestic interiors, from mansions and merchant houses to lodgings and rural cabins. Their aim is to broaden an appreciation 'of the diverse meanings and materialities ascribed to and associated with house and home in eighteenth-century Ireland'. Critically, the book stokes the underbelly of grand facades and archetypal scenes of poverty to reveal the quotidian living habits across the period's social spectrum.

We learn how obtaining a suitable Dublin town house could have one 'in really great distress', as expressed by William Fitzwilliam, one of the most privileged men in the country, while house-hunting in the 1750s (after a stint in Suffolk Street and soon after in 'vile' Frederick Street, he eventually settled on a newly built, four-storey over-basement mansion on Merrion Street Upper, now home to Restaurant Patrick Guilbaud). At the other end of the dial, encompassing the majority of the burgeoning population, cabin dwellers typically slept together as a family – visitors and travellers included – 'in stradogue', bundled like sardines in straw on the floor, covered with a blanket, often with the man of the household's big coat spread atop. And somewhere in the middle, we gain insights into the habits of tea drinking among the general population; as late as the Regency period, per capita consumption of the drink in Ireland was still one third that of Britain, only booming from the 1830s onwards. Even houses of the grander sort could possess a solitary teapot shared with servants, as experienced by Maria Edgeworth in 1840s Connemara.

The overlapping themes of basic human requirements, material culture, social mores, and the role of speculative development undulate through the chapters. Most striking is the 'dichotomy between how houses were designed and lives were lived', manifest in the straightjacket of the resolute two-room plan of Dublin houses, seemingly built regardless of the intended or eventual household composition. Lucey and Patricia McCarthy break down the typical disposition of accommodation, consisting of two parlours on the ground floor – the front termed the 'street parlour', the back invariably the dining room, 'vulgarly so-called' according to Mary Delany, disparaging the newly fashionable term in 1755 – two drawing rooms on the first floor, two principal bedrooms on the second floor, and servants' and/or children's bedrooms in the 'attic storey'. Delany's barb is important, as it signifies the move away from rooms used for ad hoc and flexible occupation to one of prescribed use, a theme that was firmly embedded by the late eighteenth century.

Expanding on this is Lucey's essay on 'single lives, single houses', a captivating and rare foray into the blindingly overlooked: how did a significant portion of the urban population – singletons – live? Lucey excels with intriguing new research into the expectations for young gentlemen's accommodation in town, tallying

oddball house types and plans with 'respectable' multiple occupancy. Lodgings, often rooms taken in a family home, were considered 'a convenient and extended lifestyle choice for single men', compared with squandering limited means on fitting up a house pre-marriage. In 1797, a Dublin advertisement for 'apartments' in a 'genteel private house' advised that the prospective lodger 'may breakfast with the family if agreeable to him'. In other cases, a 'servant' or 'attendance' could be provided, to be shared with the family or other lodgers by arrangement. In another case, on Gardiner Place off Mountjoy Square, three households, including the well-heeled de facto owner, comfortably shared the same house, of a type where the stairs bisected the plan, isolating the rooms from each other. These patterns of living shatter many embedded perceptions about these buildings which were clearly built for flexible occupation, where contemporary facilitators of utility, namely staff in attendance, rather than mechanical services, adapted to make them work.

What is so striking about these historic arrangements is the inherent common sense of it all, unhindered by suffocating modern building regulations that can stymie the creative adaption of these beautiful buildings for multiple occupancy by applying a pragmatic, lighter touch. Equally, it highlights the dichotomy of Dublin's north Georgian core, where a collective blind eye is turned to rampant unauthorised development and illegal subdivision of these buildings far beyond what was ever the case in the eighteenth century. Where is the middle ground in all of this?

Aisling Durkan picks up the baton in Drogheda, one of Ireland's most beautiful towns and another urban centre benighted by neglect, fuelled in its case by disastrous suburban sprawl. She delves into the legacy of fine houses that survive on Fair Street and St Laurence Street, analysing plans and typologies, including those of the remarkably rich vein of early eighteenth-century, formerly gable-fronted houses that survive mutilated and unrecognised across the town centre, a strand which desperately needs further research. Although, in a rush to academise plans through categorisation, the primal motivation of housebuilders through the ages is overlooked: namely sunlight, orientation, and views. In Drogheda's case, a key decision when setting out domestic accommodation, drawing rooms, and fireplaces was capturing the once sensational, south-facing prospect of the town across to Ballsbridge – an amenity unique to this magical town, and ripe for reawakening.

Other authors colourise the expansive role that house and home played in the long Georgian period, from a place of childbirth and the complex ritual of the 'lying-in' described by Emma O'Toole, to the social and practical implications of selecting chinaware, dinner services, and 'showy ceramic need-nots' outlined by the ever-effervescent Toby Barnard. Claudia Kinmonth's harrowing testimony of the living conditions of the wretched majority is occasionally broken by warming portrayals of communal contentment. Collectively, the writers weave a rich tapestry that helps to illuminate the shadowy corners of our urban and rural domestic history.