Selfbuilding is widespread in Ireland, both north and south. Every year there are more selfbuilds in Ireland (population 6 million) than in England, Scotland and Wales added together (population 58 million).

As a result of land reform at the beginning of the twentieth century, Ireland is a land of small farms and smallholdings. This pattern of land ownership, together with liberal planning policies, makes it fairly easy for people to get planning permission to build in rural areas. Selfbuild has remained as part of the culture there, as indeed it has in many other European countries. In Britain, on the other hand, early industrialisation and the mechanisation of farming lead to urbanisation and the mass production of estate housing by developers and local councils. By the middle of the last century, individual selfbuild – and what could be a more natural than building your own home? – had become almost extinct in Britain. Fortunately, there has been a revival since then, but selfbuild in Britain is still very much restricted by the lack of individual building plots.

Not so in Ireland where plots (called ‘sites’ over there) are much more plentiful. That may be about to change in Northern Ireland where a draft Planning Policy Statement, PPS14 ‘Sustainable Development in the Countryside’, states that there is to be a presumption against any development in the countryside – rather revolutionary over there, but standard practice in mainland Britain. Nonetheless, an applicant for a single dwelling may get planning permission if he or she can show a ‘need’ to live in the countryside.

In rural areas of Southern Ireland, personal factors affect a planning application, and consent for building a dwelling can be given if the applicant can satisfy one of the following:

- Has family ties in the area.
- Works locally in agriculture or an agricultural business.
- Is a long-time resident of the area.
- Is a returning emigrant.

(In England and Wales, the personal circumstances of an applicant can be considered and personal planning permission be given, but this is extremely rare.)

Actually, in those rural areas of Southern Ireland where the population is in decline, anybody who wants to build themselves a home is likely to get planning permission.

Note that it is illegal to build in Southern Ireland without planning permission, though that is not the case in the UK – rather the opposite of the national stereotype one might have imagined.

The laid-back stereotype of the Irish would appear to be supported by the fact that, despite the existence of building regulations in Southern Ireland, the local authorities don’t have any building inspectors to check what is built. This apparent anomaly is explained by the fact that you have to get your architect, or other professional, to certify that your house has been built in accordance with the approved plans. By and large, the building regulations, both north and south of the border, are fairly similar to the English and Welsh regulations.
What has prompted this article about Irish selfbuild is that I was at the Dublin selfbuild show in September. This is one of the Selfbuild Extend and Renovate Shows organised by Clive and Gillian Corry and their son Brian. Clive and Gillian built their own house in Northern Ireland in 1990. Clive is from the 7th generation of the family business, JP Corry, timber and builders’ merchants, with depots both north and south of the border. It was the experience of their build that made Clive aware of some of the difficulties facing selfbuilders. In 1995 he left the family business and put on the first selfbuild show in Ireland, in Belfast. There are now four shows a year: Belfast in the north (February), Galway in the west (May), Dublin in the east (September) and Cork in the south (November). Out of their show guide developed a quarterly magazine, Selfbuild Extend & Renovate (£3, €4.50), edited by Gillian Corry. Their latest development is the Masterclass, a day of seminars for selfbuilders. The first Masterclass was held in Dublin at the end of September and it attracted 200 people (admission €80, ie, £54, for the day). Clive thinks that building is ‘in the blood’ of the Irish. Nonetheless, novice selfbuilders are hungry for information, and the more sources of information available to them the better.

The typical selfbuild in Ireland used to be a modest rectangular bungalow, in rendered blockwork. But the newfound prosperity of Southern Ireland has led to a property boom and exciting house design. (Southern Ireland now has the second highest per capita GDP in the EU, behind Luxembourg.)

The Bed & Breakfast I stayed in over the show period was something of a revelation. Selfbuilt four years ago as a family home with a few extra rooms for B&B – a not uncommon practice, apparently, in Ireland – it was a spacious 400 square metres in floor area. The half acre plot was one of about 20 on a new development of individual houses, most of them selfbuilds. Every one of these houses had enough style to grace the cover of this magazine as a fine example of contemporary design. Why do we not see development like this in the Britain? Our commercial developers make most of their profit from converting land into plots (ie, from gaining planning permission). They could save themselves all the hassle of actually building houses and still make plenty of profit simply by selling off individual plots rather than houses – selfbuilders and society would be winners, too.

The Dublin selfbuild show

The Dublin show is held in a spacious hall on the Punchestown racecourse, some miles outside Dublin. What struck me about the show was the number of stands demonstrating alternative energy technologies: ground and air source heat pumps, solar water heating, wind turbines, wood-pellet boilers, etc. Perhaps this is not surprising as mains gas is not as widely available in Ireland as it is in Britain. The alternative energy methods there compete with oil, which is costly now and likely to become even more costly in the future. Grants are available.

Here are some of the exhibitors that caught my eye:

Homebond

Homebond are the Irish equivalent of the NHBC. They publish an excellent book, ‘House Building Manual’ (€45, about £30, for 528 pages with over 1,000 drawings and charts). This is a very useful manual for anyone involved in sitework – even in England.
**Balcas**

This company manufactures wood pellets made from sawdust and wood chips, without any additives. Pellet stoves are said to emit hardly any smoke. (The burning of wood is carbon neutral and doesn’t contribute to global warming.)

**Campion Concrete Products and Wright Quarry Products**

Concrete beam-and-block floors are passé in Ireland, having been overtaken by hollowcore concrete slabs. The Irish companies offer a service not available from their English counterparts – the narrow slabs are put in place by a crane mounted on the delivery lorry.

**Polarwall**

This is an English company though I came across them in Ireland. They have an ICF system (Insulating Concrete Formwork) based on extruded polystyrene – a stronger and better insulator than the expanded polystyrene often used, and more water resistant.

**Dan-Wood**

You might guess from the name that this is a Danish timber frame company, and you would be half right. It’s a Polish company that designs and builds timber frame houses. The components are prefabricated in Poland, but are based on Danish technology – and that is their explanation for their name.

For many years there have been Continental companies supplying and building bespoke kit houses in the UK – Huf Haus is a well known German example. Using German labour to build a house in the UK may or may not make financial sense, but Dan-Wood build their houses with Polish labour and that does sound financially appealing.

Although I first came across this company in Ireland, I noticed that they also had a stand at the Excel selfbuild show in London a few weeks later. They supply and build in many European countries, and they claim to build you a house in only ten weeks.

**Polishinterior**

This is another Polish company – they manufacture windows in pine, oak and PVC. They claim to offer high quality windows at ‘very low cost’. The windows have a U-value of 1.0, which is better than the offerings of most British manufacturers. I haven’t come across them at British shows, but they do supply to the UK.

**Keylite**

They manufacture roof windows, and claim a unique variation: a blind within the double glazing unit. It’s a neat idea, and even neater is that the blind is moved up and down with a magnet.

**Vacuflo**

This was a name previously unknown to me, but the company claims to be the world’s oldest manufacturer of central vacuum systems, producing its first system in 1955. (They have a dealer in Ireland but not in the UK.) That leads me into a short digression on the history of central vacuuming. At the Exeter selfbuild show, I was
talking to James Starkey and he has probably been in the business longer than anyone else in Britain. He told me that in Victorian times, blown air was used for cleaning the interiors of train carriages. The first use of suction for cleaning was in the ‘Puffing Billy’, invented in England in 1901. This was a suction apparatus powered by a petrol motor, and it was transported on a horse drawn carriage. The carriage would be parked outside a house and a vacuum hose lead into the house to clean with.

The antecedents of our present systems were developed in Edwardian times, both in the UK and in Germany. A large, electrically powered suction machine, situated usually in the basement, was connected to pipework installed around the house. To clean, a maid would plug a hose into a socket. (The Shire booklet, ‘The Edwardian Home’, shows an example of such a socket with a brass cap.)

The story goes that some Canadian soldiers, who were billeted in an Edwardian house in England during World War II, were impressed by its vacuum system. When demobbed, they took the idea back to Canada and developed a more modern version. The studwork walls of many Canadian houses made it relatively easy to fit the pipework. The idea caught on in Canada, then in the USA, and then in Europe. James Starkey’s father, Derek, pioneered the re-introduction of vacuum systems (Beam) into Britain about 20 years ago.

**Ecologics Solar Solutions**

Ecologics sell evacuated tube, solar collectors at very low prices, €375 (£250) per square metre. (Surprisingly, most of Ireland is as sunny as southern England.) The Navitron tubes are Chinese made, and Ecologics don’t pass them off as their own brand. From this lead I found Navitron in the UK. They sell solar, wind and water energy apparatus, much of it from China, at very low prices – well worth investigating, especially if you are a green DIYer.

**Innovations in whole house ventilation**

There were some interesting innovations for whole house ventilation at the show:

*Villavent’s rotary heat exchanger:*

In most whole house ventilation systems which incorporate heat recovery, the incoming, cold air is warmed by the outgoing air in a crossflow heat exchanger. Villavent have introduced an ingenious heat exchanger based on rotating metal discs – more efficient than the crossflow design.

*Nuaire’s Sunwarm system:*

The British company, Nuaire, promote Positive Input Ventilation, a very different system from the Continental system of whole house ventilation. Nuaire have now incorporated solar panels into their system. Air flows through the panels, not water – neatly avoiding the problem of water freezing in cold weather. The solar-warmed air can be used, in wintertime, to warm up the incoming, fresh air, and, in summertime, to warm up the hot water cylinder.

*Low Energy Solutions*

Low Energy Solutions have incorporated a mini heat pump into their Airexe heat exchanger, and the exhaust air is expelled at about 4°C. The heat extracted is used to
warm up the incoming air.

They also supply air source heat pumps, which they say can be installed for half the price of a geothermal heat pump system. Apparently, much of the heat extracted from air is gained from the moisture in it – from the latent heat given up when water vapour condenses. In a humid climate like that of Ireland (and much of mainland Britain), using water vapour as a source of heat seems to make a lot of sense.

FURTHER INFO:

Selfbuild Extend and Renovate
Exhibitions and quarterly magazine
www.selfbuild.ie.

Irish Association of Self Builders

Sites for Sale
www.sitesforsale.ie.
(Also local estate agents, local newspapers, etc.)

WEBSITES

www.homebond.ie.
www.campiongroup.ie
www.wright.ie.
www.polarwall.co.uk.
www.keylite.co.uk.
www.vacuflo.ie
www.centralvacuums.co.uk.
www.ecologics.ie
www.navitron.org.uk.
www.villavent.co.uk.
www.nuaire.co.uk.
www.lowenergy.ie.

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