



Home truths

Dermot Bannon speaks to Aisling Hussey about *Room to Improve*, dealing with the critics and his solution to the housing crisis

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When do you know you've made it? For

Dermot Bannon – Ireland's best-known architect – that moment came when *Room to Improve* was likened to another Irish institution.

"It has become part of our Sunday-night traditions in the same way as *Glenroe*," says Dermot. "When you hear people saying that, it really gets me. It puts a lump in my throat. Architecture and design is my life, and the fact that the nation are sitting there and enjoying it – that means so much to me."

After 10 seasons of the popular show, which sees people renovate their homes with the architect's help, Dermot is practically a national treasure. However, he is quick to downplay his role in its success.

"I can't understand it myself, it's just me doing my job," he says. "I really do think it's the clients' journeys, and I think people are really interested in that," he insists. "It makes it fresh every single time: the fact that we follow a new couple with a new set of problems and a new design – and their reactions are all very different."

The most recent season had some memorable projects – though, Enda the vegetable farmer from Rush was a standout. "I've never had a bromance like I had with Enda. He was just the best company, the most interesting character and the best worker. He was

just an inspiration to everybody," says Dermot.

TENSIONS RUN HIGH

However, tensions often run high on the show. How does Dermot cope with the criticism often levelled at him online? "I wasn't on Twitter until this year, and then I became a bit addicted. Some of the slags I got on it this year were hilarious. You have to see the funny side of it."

Despite his light-hearted attitude, watching himself back on TV poses difficulty, though his family – wife Louise and three kids – keep him down to earth. "I do that thing where you cover your face with your hands and watch through your fingers. I'm mortified watching myself half of the time," he laughs. "My family cope by ignoring it completely. I don't get any airs and graces at home. The kids barely watch the show. I was on the *Toy Show* last year and I ruined it for them."

Viewers of *Room to Improve* are familiar with Dermot's enthusiasm (as well as the odd strop, and his love of windows and the colour grey) and indeed, he is exactly the same as his on-screen persona: talking a mile a minute and passionate about his work.

"I love when people come up to me (to talk about the show). They are starting to see different things and want different things," he says. "And the fact that the country has embraced it – we'll be a better country for it if we can get a few design aesthetics going, we'll all have better homes and buildings."

HOUSING CRISIS

Design could be a solution to the current housing crisis, says Dermot, who argues that homes and new builds are not fit for purpose.

"This housing crisis is not going to get any better until we come up with a more creative solution to how we live," he says. "Our cities are still very



low-rise, low-density. We need better high-rise apartments and duplexes and green spaces.

“The problem with our cities is we have far too many houses. If we keep building three- or four-bed semis, we’re going to end up with a sea of suburbia all the way down to Portlaoise and Kinnegad, and that’s not what people want. Berlin does it well, Copenhagen does it well. A lot of European cities can live quite collectively. We don’t.

“We have great selling points in this country, but we are not providing housing in the right way for people coming over to this country or young graduates,” he adds.

FARMING ROOTS

Dermot’s parents were from rural Ireland, and as a youngster he would spend summers on his mother’s family farm in Wexford, calling it a “slower and easier way of life”, which he sees fading away.

“People are building houses on an acre five miles out from towns. It’s slowly depleting villages. We have to embrace living together a bit more. We don’t put enough weight on the benefits of it. We put the individual ahead of the community,” he says.

Can Dermot see enough being done to help solve the housing problem?

“I don’t see that. I see a lot of talk,” he says. “When I see new projects, it’s more three-bed semis out beyond the M50 in the suburbs.

“That’s not really solving our housing crisis. We’re going back to long commutes and collecting kids when they’re wrecked and there isn’t a quality of life in that.

“There have been a few documentaries on property and how we’re living and a lot of it would break your heart. It’s the youngest, oldest and most vulnerable who are suffering. There is something very wrong with that, and we owe more to people.”

IMPROVING HOMELESSNESS

To that end, Dermot is involved in the Royal **Institute of the Architects** of Ireland (RIAI) Simon Open Door campaign, which aims to raise over €100,000 in support of the Simon Communities. Architects nationwide will offer one-hour consultations to the public for a donation of €90 from 13 to 19 May.

“It’s an event I love doing – the benefits of this are huge,” he says. “In an hour you’ll get an awful lot done. There have been times where I’ve actually designed a house in an hour, or I’ve got the concept for it.

“It’s a brilliant initiative, even for somebody who wants to build their own home and needs to pick an architect in their locality.

“Some people think design is elitist or it’s for other people, and when they see it on *Room to Improve* they realise it’s for everybody.” **CL**

Visit www.simonopendoor.ie to book a one-hour consultation with an RIAI registered architect in your locality.



Dermot Bannon with Lauren (4) and Jessica Walsh (5 1/2) at the launch of the RIAI Simon Open Door campaign.