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If We're Playing by the Rules, it has to be a Good Game

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O'Malley has made a triumphant return to Dublin from the City of Tribes with a development at Ardilea Crescent in Clonskeagh, writes Larissa Nolan

The last time O'Malley Construction announced new homes in Dublin was 2010, when the property market was in freefall and the Galway company had decided to focus on the City of Tribes. It was getting hard to see how the firm would return to the capital, according to David Casserly, a director of O'Malley.

"There were a few dark days, but we're a conservative company," he says. "The sites we had were still buildable, although the prices had been reduced. We spent a few years concentrating only on Galway."

The company did return to Dublin, and this weekend it is launching new homes at Ardilea Crescent, in the southern suburb of Clonskeagh.

The development is in one of Dublin's most exclusive locations, next to Dundrum, and comprises 26 four- and five-bedroom houses, eight of which are being released for sale initially. Prices range from €875,000 to €1.05m.

A scheme of 48 high-spec apartments is also planned for the site; further details, including the prices, will be made available later.

O'Malley was established in 1971 and is an institution in Galway. Its second-hand houses are advertised proudly as an "O'Malley-built home", guaranteed to attract buyers. This fits in with the company's philosophy of their last build being the marketing for the next site. "We bring buyers through the most recently finished estate and show them how they were constructed and managed," says Casserly.

O'Malley says its core business is building communities – it has created more than 10,000 homes in its 45 years. The company also has an excellent reputation for finding premium land and locations for families. Ardilea Crescent, along with its previous ventures in the capital, is no exception.

The company started building in Dublin in the 1990s and has developments in Ballsbridge Wood, Sunbury Gardens in Dartry and Wyckham Point in Dundrum.

How does a business 200km from Dublin get it so right in the country's most expensive and volatile property market?

The company's team in Dublin has made it all possible, according to Casserly. They know their stuff and advise accordingly. "Galway is our back garden, but in Dublin we have brought in all the knowledge and experience," he says. "We use the same architects – McCrossan O'Rourke Manning – and we use agents Hooke and MacDonald, who are excellent. The managing director, Ken MacDonald, knows the market inside out. We also use the same contract companies. It really is a team effort. Local knowledge is key."

What is the company feeling about the new homes at Ardilea? "We're delighted with the product we have achieved," says Casserly. "We went through every room, every door, every aspect of the house to get it just right."

"Sometimes there's something you wish you'd done slightly differently, or just a bit better. But in the case of Ardilea we took it at a slow pace, and so we have nothing to apologise for. It gives an extra sense of achievement."

Casserly also has a sense of celebration about returning to the capital after a six-year break. "For the past few years we've stuck to Galway. We had to, the way things were. We were building and selling there just to keep above water."

"This is our return to Dublin. The last project we did here was a joint venture [with Dorville Homes] at Wyckham Point. It's great to be back, involved in real building, going into a greenfield site and turning it into something."



On the yellow brick road



Ardilea took far longer than most developments to get off the ground. O'Malley bought the site in about 2004 and it took about nine years to get planning permission in place.

Casserly knows his way around the company that his father, Christopher, first worked for as the housing foreman. Christopher Casserly retired in 2008.

"I loved working with him and I decided about returning to the capital after a six-year break. For the past few years we've stuck to Galway. We had to, the way things were. We were building and selling there just to keep above water."

"This is our return to Dublin. The last project we did here was a joint venture [with Dorville Homes] at Wyckham Point. It's great to be back, involved in real building, going into a greenfield site and turning it into something."

With Ardilea, the firm has gone for a contemporary look that is sensitive to its



O'Malley has a development of 26 four- and five-bed houses at Ardilea Crescent, with floor to ceiling sliding glass doors at the back, above left, to maximise natural light in the solid wood kitchens, and granite facades around the windows and doors, left

surroundings. "These are the first new family homes to become available in the area in quite a while. We want to create a quality product, but the prices had to be right for the market. We've added extra touches like underfloor heating on the ground floor and installed a high-end gas fire system into the sitting room. These are A2 rated houses and they are very efficient," says Casserly.

There are two types of yellow-brick fronted house: Type A, which measures 225 sq m, and A1, which comes in at 260 sq m. Architectural flourishes, which include double-height halls, give a sense of space and brightness.

"Light is so important. In this country, we get so little of it and you have to draw that in. At the back of the house the entire back wall is glass sliding doors and we added skylights."

The firm made sure that the kitchen, furniture and workmanship were "sharp" inside and out. "Features like granite stone on the facades around the windows and doors add a touch of elegance," says Casserly.

The bespoke solid wood kitchens, which have natural stone worktops and high-quality integrated appliances, are from Nolan Kitchens. There's a utility room with additional workspace, cabinets, a washing machine and a drier.

The fireplace is by Stone Facings, with a Portuguese limestone finish and a sealed gas fire. The tiling, by Spanish producer Fanal, is also used throughout the downstairs hallway, kitchen and dining areas.

Individuality was important. "Traditionally in Dublin, you build a showhouse and that's it. You buy a replica. But we wanted to allow people to make changes. You can change the kitchen or wardrobes, tiling, fireplaces, things like that."

The top floor space has been fitted out to be used as an extra room, whether that is as an office, a den or a playroom. The homes also provide generous storage areas including under the stairs, the linen cupboard and the off-the-office room. The attic is part-floored to add further storage.

Outdoors, all homes have either a paved or decked patio area leading to a levelled and seeded back garden and sheds with a light and power point provided. They have room for two car parking spaces.

Casserly says these are upmarket family homes appealing to both those trading up and downsizers looking for quality.

Location was an important consideration for the firm when they bought the site. Ardilea Crescent is tucked away off the Heidelberg estate in Clonskeagh, set on professionally landscaped grounds with mature planting. It's close to schools and the M50; there's the Dundrum Shopping Centre nearby and the Luas.

Showhouses go on view today, from 11.30am to 1pm.

ardileacrescent.ie

If we're playing by the rules, it has to be a good game

In the 2015 book *Rule Breakers*, author Niamh Hourigan postulates that Ireland's success and downfall was due to personal relationships being much more important than rules. She says that a "weak rules and strong relationships" tension permeates Irish life, and not only at the top.

This seems to have led to Ireland having a reputation of being friendly and open, and an easy place in which to do business. It has also created a place where corruption has been far too easy and widespread as a result of the power and influence of relationships.

Rules are also seen as inherently unfair and to benefit the elite (which isn't quite true), so to break the rules is to get one over on the system. Spain, Italy and Portugal also operated with such a relationship-based system, and it's no coincidence that they have experienced similar problems to ours (it may well be a "Catholic thing"). The Netherlands, Denmark, Belgium and Germany, on the other hand, place much more emphasis on following the rules.

The importance of relationships in Irish life is why somebody like Tom Parlon is head of the Construction Industry Federation (CIF). Parlon is a former politician and farmer and spent several years as head of the Irish Farmers' Association, a powerful lobby group. So why is a farmer the head of the CIF?

The answer is that Parlon has a lot of governmental experience – and connections – as a former minister, but also because he has

a reputation as a friendly and affable person. This is critical in being able to forge positive relationships on behalf of your organisation. Given the power of the CIF, it seems to have worked. Good for him.

As austerity progresses, however, things are changing, with rules becoming far more important, making life uncomfortable in Ireland. This is somewhat ironic as Hourigan explains: austerity has been more

traumatic and painful than it might have been if the rules had been stronger and the intimacy more restrained.

We now have a whole slew of European Union directives on various issues from cutting turf (that didn't go down well) to public procurement, making it difficult to exclude outsiders from public contracts. Then we had the troika coming to Ireland to direct economic and fiscal policy. They laid down a set of rules to be followed if money was to flow from them to us (that didn't go down well either).

More recently, we have had the Central Bank imposing lending restrictions on banks for mortgages. Whereas previously an applicant's relationship with their bank, and indeed the bank manager, was of some importance in being able to borrow and how much could be borrowed, nowadays the relationship is virtually irrelevant. (Do such relationships matter, when banks are rapidly getting rid of all human interaction anyway?)

The rules are now the rules, and, boy, are we having trouble



Citizens of Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands are more open to rules

accepting this new normal. In sallies on behalf of the CIF, Parlon frequents the airwaves citing human interest "anecdotes" of knowing a schoolteacher, married to a garda, who between them can't afford a house, and so he says we need to ease up on the rules. The Central Bank doesn't seem willing to budge as it also

knows that a 20% deposit has always been the norm in most European countries with stable housing systems, as has not buying a property until one's late thirties or forties.

A rules-based system doesn't augur well for those used to using the power of the relationship to gain influence or votes. Lobbyists

and particularly politicians in our clientelist system are going to be very sensitive to this change, as each new rule chips away at politicians' potential voter-gathering power.

Assistance with obtaining planning permissions – especially when rule-bending was required – was a classic way for politicians to ingratiate themselves with voters.

This transition from a relationship-based to a rules-based system will be painful for many, and not just the elite: everyone from house-hunters to people who have septic tanks are feeling the change in the air with the start of a new intractable rules system, especially when opposition to the rules is effectively impossible.

In general, I have few issues with a rules-based system, but if we're going to have rules, then the rules have to be good ones. So far, it's been hit and miss (credit limits, generally good; apartment size standards, developer-led and amateurish), and we need far more hits than misses if the system is to have credibility.

LORCAN SIRR
ON THE
HOME FRONT

