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Bring Back State-Run Social Housing

Lorcan Sirr

Technological University Dublin, lorcan.sirr@tudublin.ie

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Cool new villas are giving golf resorts serious design kudos, says Hugh Graham

Golf. Is there a sport more conservative than 18 holes of driving, putting and avoiding bunkers? In America, it's the favourite game of those who identify as Republicans. In Scotland, Muirfield recently made the headlines when its members voted to continue excluding women – and the Royal & Ancient Golf Club of St Andrews only changed its men-only rule in 2014.

Such staid traditions are reflected in the architecture on golf resorts: identikit townhouses in Mediterranean pastiche. Golf and avant-garde just don't go together – until now.

A new resort in Sardinia is turning heads thanks to its surreal, otherworldly buildings. Simultaneously blobby and prehistoric, the 15 villas and clubhouse at the Is Molas resort, near Cagliari, look as if they've dropped from outer space or sprouted from the ground.

"They're like a meteorite or rocks, a piece of nature," says their Italian architect, Massimiliano Fuksas. "We saw this as like a new planet, because on golf resorts, it's about free time and living a different life."

The design was also inspired by planet Earth, specifically Sardinia's *nuraghi* – megalithic stone towers that dot the island's wild places. "I try to build shapes that belong to the area, to reference something that is already there, something prehistoric. I took the light, the water, the wind. It's like a wind that carved the buildings into shape. Wind is my favourite architect."

Fuksas calls his buildings "inhabited sculpture" and visual forms of music: "I hope to be like Mozart, like Beethoven." So how will polo-shirted golfers, who have come for the 18-hole Gary Player course, react to all this wackiness? "Golf has some crazy, fantastic people," he says. "They are obsessive, the same way I am obsessed with architecture. And these people love nature."

Still, they don't like to be outdoors all the time, which is why the villas, which are available to buy from €2.15m have small windows and darker interiors on one side. "Inside, you feel protection. There is big glass on one side, smaller windows on the other. This allows you time to think for yourself. And the sustainable, natural materials [*tadelakt*, a waterproof lime plaster used in Morocco, and *cocciopesto*, fragments of earthenware used in ancient Roman architecture], make it warm in winter and cool in summer."

Is Molas isn't the only golf resort pushing the envelope. PGA Catalunya, near Girona and the Costa Brava, was conceived to showcase the work of cutting-edge architects. The second phase of its residences went on sale last week, and they're aimed at "intelligent buyers" – a third of them don't even play golf, according to the resort's corporate director, David Plana.

Seven architects have been commissioned to bring hipness to the greens, with lots of 21st-century variations on modernism. The developers aren't necessarily Le Corbusier devotees – the aesthetic blueprint was created for business reasons. "It was 2009, in the recession, and there were 800,000 villas unsold in Spain," Plana recalls. "We thought, 'Why should people buy our villas? We have to be different.' Most developers build south-facing villas with the usual red tile. Ours are unique, and our buyers are clever."

"It's low-density – we are planning 400 villas, not 5,000, and over 400 acres. None of the houses have fences. They have natural gardens and local plants. And they're all different. If you have 200 houses all the same, there's no emotion."

Could architecture achieve the impossible and make golf cool? Here's our pick of villas that are anything but par for the course.



SARDINIA, from €2.15m
Channel your avant-garde caveman with a futuristic yet prehistoric villa at the Is Molas golf resort in Sardinia. It's called "bio-architecture", which isn't as newfangled as it sounds: villas are made with natural, ancient materials – Moroccan lime plaster and earthenware fragments used in ancient Rome. The small windows also help keep things warm in winter and cool in summer. Four villas are ready now, and the remaining 11 by November; €2.15m to €4.6m. IS Molas is on the south coast, 30km from Cagliari airport. sothebysrealty.com

They've got that swing



ALGARVE, €3.79m
Inspired by vintage Americana – the art deco styles of the Roaring Twenties to the 1940s – The Keys development is looking back to go forward. On Quinta do Lago's north golf course, the six-bedroom Bel Air villa was inspired by Hollywood's golden age. You can just imagine a starlet smoking a cigarette on the streamlined deco balcony. thekeysatquinta.com



TENERIFE €1.175M
The words "cool" and Tenerife don't often appear in the same sentence, but architect Leonardo Omar's sleek and angular villas are an exception. His six villas at Las Casa del Lago, on the Abama resort, have views of the 18-hole golf course and the sea. In this three-bedroom one, the striking glassless window evokes the new trend for outdoor rooms, silly in Britain, but tempting in the Canaries. abamaluxuryresidences.com



CATALONIA, €5.9m
How refreshing to see a modernist box that's not white. But the PGA Catalunya, near Girona, is aimed at sophisticated buyers. The four-bedroom Z-Balca villa is clad in zinc, to reflect the "coal-coloured" mountains, even if it calls to mind urban locales. The edgy Barcelona architects Lagula, have had works featured at the Venice Biennale. pgacatalunya.com/real-estate



PALM SPRINGS \$3.75m
Palm Springs is famous for its groovy mid-century modern architecture. It's also nicknamed the "golf capital of the world", with an impressive 130 courses in the area. So, you could call this three-bedroom, 465 sq m bungalow a golf villa for hipsters. Surely it's only time before the young fogeys hit upon golf as the new darts. The bungalow may be new, but it has that vintage, desert feel, with its aerodynamic angles and fin-like shapes, and is designed by Brian Foster. hiltonhyland.com

MURCIA, €770,000
La Manga may be a quintessentially 1980s golf resort, once beloved of Denis Thatcher and Bjorn Borg. But the Spanish stalwart, 90 minutes south of Alicante, is upping its game: for a change from its mock hacienda architecture, it hired Italian-Uruguayan architect Carlos Gilardi to sprinkle his futuristic white villas around the resort's three 18-hole golf courses. He once said "there are shapes that can only be designed once", and this four-bedroom villa is certainly a singular example. Its indented facade has a striped effect, another playful variation on the white box formula. lamangaclub.com



CATALONIA, €1.1m
This low-slung three-bedroom villa calls to mind west coast modernism: it could overlook the Pacific, rather than the 15th hole of the Spanish PGA Catalunya. But the inspiration for its architects, Joseph Camps and Olga Felip, goes back even further: they studied Mies van der Rohe's 1929 Barcelona Pavilion, and were also influenced by Roman villas. Those wooden shutters lend texture and pattern to the minimalist facade. pgacatalunya.com



ANDALUCIA, €5.9m
La Zagaleta, the gated golf community above Marbella, has a flashy, oligarch vibe: Vladimir Putin owns here. But this four-bedroom villa, designed by London architects Roach and Partners, is more interesting than most white cubes: it juts out here and there, up and down. All the layers and protruberances prevent monotony, as does the dramatic lighting. aylesford.com

Bring back state-run social housing

Two weeks ago I was in what remains of O'Devaney Gardens, the social housing complex off Dublin's North Circular Road, filming a programme with RTE.

O'Devaney Gardens, behind Dublin's Arbour Hill Prison, was built in the early 1950s, and named after a Bishop O'Devaney, a friend of 16th-century resistance leader Hugh O'Neill. O'Devaney was hanged in 1612 in the Arbour Hill area for treason. In recognition of his greatness, three centuries later 13 blocks of flats were named after him.

The flats at O'Devaney went downhill for a few reasons. First, traditional employment, especially in such places as Dublin Port, declined and many men found themselves out of work and with limited income.

Second, the flats, although well designed in terms of scale and aesthetics, were too small for the size of the households of that time. Finally, the 1960s and 1970s saw a push in town planning

towards suburbanisation rather than inner-city development.

While researching for the RTE programme, I was reminded that it wasn't too long ago that governments of all hues were in favour of state provision of social housing. They were also happy, as it had a knock-on effect of stimulating employment. So, how did we get from where we were years ago to the mess now?

Social housing was originally administered mostly by Protestant charities. By 1916, Irish local government was providing twice as many homes as its British counterparts, with 82% of it in rural areas. This anti-urban bias continued until the 1930s, when city slums were tackled.

The 1950s were the "golden age" of social housing across Europe, and saw our greatest

output at nearly 53,000 homes during the decade.

From then, until the 1980s, access to housing was seen by the state as a form of welfare. Social housing was regarded as a stepping-stone to full home-ownership (through tenant-purchase schemes), and to becoming a better citizen.

Right-to-buy schemes took off first in rural areas and did not reach urban locations until the 1970s. By 1980, two-thirds of all council housing stock had been sold to tenants at big discounts.

Home-ownership bred "social conservatism" and so was fully supported by the Catholic church. Tenant purchase was seen as a form of betterment, rather than as an instrument of neo-liberal ideology, which was the UK's subsequent rationale for it.

According to Michelle Norris and Tony Fahey, of University College Dublin's School of Social Policy, Social Work and Social Justice, the 1980s was a turning point. High unemployment, an



Flats at O'Devaney Gardens were too small for the families who lived there

economy going nowhere fast and rampant government spending meant that a new economic order was needed: the now familiar, low-tax, low-spend model.

Funding for housing was cut, meaning supply dwindled, while private housing rose. Fewer people received social housing and, instead of going to low-paid workers, as had been the case, it went to long-term welfare-dependent households.

By the 1990s, social housing was associated with poverty, and as there were more poor people,

tenant purchase also collapsed. By this time, the purchase price was calculated on the basis of market value, which didn't help.

The response to reduced supply and rising demand was typical of the solution across Europe: supplement people to find homes in the private sector, turning private housing into social housing. From 1994 to 2005, the number of claimants more than doubled, and they claimed for longer.

We still have this system and it isn't working. The prevailing

ideology has shifted from welfarism to neo-liberalism, which – possibly conveniently – ties the hands of politicians in getting the state seriously involved in housing once more.

The system is expensive – there are more than 60,000 recipients of rent supplement, for example – the waiting list grows longer, there are problems with the quality of accommodation, poverty traps are created, and rents rise as demand increases.

It takes a long time to recover from this.

Significant state intervention is necessary. Relying on housing associations to fill the gap is unrealistic. So, too, is relying on Part V social housing, where developers have to set aside 20% of houses for social housing, or the private rental sector.

The state can provide decent accommodation cheaper than the private sector – at a cost of €180,000, rather than €330,000, for a three-bedroom semi – and in turn it will reap significant short- and long-term benefits.

In the past 15 years, ideology has been a bigger barrier to the delivery of social housing than the economy. It's time to get over it.

LORCAN SIRR ON THE HOME FRONT

