



The living space incorporates light and open plan designs; left, the house is nearly all glass on one side



The Origami House blends into the contours of the landscape; below, the kitchen; below right, Burnside avoids 'modern building fads'

Welcome to the fold

The Origami House uses innovative design to create an inviting family home with a village feel, writes **Siobhán Maguire**

Ireland's avant garde of rural architecture favours the blending of monolithic dark shapes with the landscape to counter the bungalow blitz. But one architect is challenging this approach to contemporary building with her own stylish take on one-off rural housing — and bucking the trend is an important part of it.

"I don't get that architecture can only be good if it's aggressive and ugly," says Jane Burnside. "A home should be nice to look at, a place that lifts your heart when you drive up to it."

The 44-year-old architect from Ballymena, Co Antrim, certainly has a non-conformist approach to rural housing design, shunning the minimalist "boxed" concept for her own modern twist. Her white sculptural designs appear carved into the contours of the landscape, creating something that flies in the face of modern building fads.

"If I see another timber-clad box, I'll scream," she says. "I look at these things and think, 'another glass slab box with a flat roof. These designs were around in the 1920s, nearly 100 years ago, and yet they are regarded as contemporary.'"

Burnside is clearly happy to put her money where her mouth is. The home she designed for her own family — the Origami House in Kells that she shares with David Page, her boyfriend, and sons, Ryan, 13, and Chris, 11 — is causing something of a fuss among the architectural establishment.

The four-bedroom house is constructed on a single level. The house and carport are a single composition of eight pavilions connected via a footbridge overlooking a dam, waterfall and burn.

The seven pavilions of the house are interwoven so that the building looks like a cluster of single-storey cottages

against the beech woodland. Five glazed gables and a facade of cut-out windows add to the feeling of space, which is further enhanced by the folded roof — the origami effect the house is named after — and expansive vaulted ceiling.

"You get this wonderful open plan and highly contemporary living space, which has several spaces flowing off it like a stream and its backwaters," says Burnside.

The Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland (RIAI) liked it so much, it gave it the Highly Commended title at its annual awards this summer. It was also shortlisted for Best House in the Royal Institute of British Architects' 2009 awards, after it was initially passed over. "We went in for the RIBA awards and were rejected by the local architectural community who first judged it," says Burnside. "That was overruled by the London community of architects who insisted that the house be shortlisted. It's bizarre."

Burnside concedes that her outspoken opinions will make her a controversial figure among colleagues. After all, the very trends she criticises tend to clean up at annual awards and are regularly held up as shining examples of visionary design.

"These are not popular views," she

admits, "but it is these very dark objects I have difficulty with. Some of these austere buildings are best photographed empty and remain empty. You wonder if they really are for people."

"The challenge for me is to build a home in the country, not to disguise your living space as an architectural building. You want a place your children and dogs and cats can occupy without looking out of place."

Nevertheless, the competitions have given Burnside and her firm of architects a welcome publicity boost. The Origami country home is Burnside's third in a series of pavilion-type houses. The first was built on a small drumlin at Annahilt in Co Down, while the second is located on a hillside in the seaside village of Whitehead, in Antrim.

"With Annahilt, the clients had been given permission for a two-storey dwelling in the middle of a farmyard, but they wanted to build on a hill," she says. "I told them that the only way to do it was to build a single storey with a beautiful design. I heard the man turn to his wife and say, 'she's going to build us a bungalow.'"

At first glance all three properties give an impression of several cottages clustered together like a tiny village. Only on closer examination you can see

that they comprise a series of interlocking pavilions.

"Looking in from the road, you would think it was just some cottages," she agrees. "In Whitehead the neighbours kept coming by and asking when each one was for sale and if any had sold. When you looked inside, however, you could see this was one big living space with the most beautiful views over the sea."

Creating this type of home for others encouraged Burnside to build her own on a site beside her old home in Kells. The project, ill-timed as it coincided with the downturn, took 11 months to complete, and cost £450,000 (€514,105) to build.

"I had a very stressful year," she says. "I was building a house and selling my other house next door, and financing both. It was a Grand Designs nightmare."

The risk paid off. The Origami house has approximately 3,000 sq ft of living accommodation and sits on four acres, including one acre of woodland and three acres of lawn and pasture land. Only a single tree was removed to construct the house.

"Our home is probably the most extreme [design] of the three because it is nearly all glass on one side and then

nearly all solid facing the road," says Burnside.

"Big monolithic windows face the old dam. From the roadside you can see the dam but the building itself doesn't look terribly big. Tall chimneys rise over the trees but it isn't until you enter that house that you realise its size and that it's nearly all glass."

Burnside is keen for her designs to reflect a lifetime of change, so that rooms can be easily adapted to suit families as they grow older or larger.

"My studio, for example, is built so that it can be easily changed into a second living room when I retire," she says. "These designs are about lifetime living, homes that will change their usage internally to reflect changes — such as your family growing up, or your teenage sons bringing home groups of friends, or a couple [retiring and] living alone."

"The hardest clients are the youngest ones because they haven't had enough life experiences. You have to remind them that while they don't have kids now, they may one day and should factor that into their house plans."

Burnside, who takes up to six projects a year, is currently working on several ambitious residential designs. One is for a Parisian lawyer who lives in



Ballymena but commutes to the French capital for work. Her design for this property is based on the same principles as the Origami house, except that it twists into a fan-shape to provide a panoramic view.

Another is an elongated pavilion of stone and white render. The house overlooks a lake and, like Burnside's home, its windows are positioned to take in the views and sunlight without compromising on privacy.

To suit the needs of the owners — a retired couple — the interiors will include a series of sliding walls. When the couple are alone they can make the place smaller and more snug; when their extended family and grandchildren visit, the walls can be pushed back to create a larger living space.

As a side project, Burnside is working with the Northern Irish government on its new planning policy on rural dwellings.

"It's a very interesting process," she says. "Some [contributors] want dwellings to be invisible and standardised but I don't think that's the way to build."

"When you're building in a landscape, what you put in should be beautiful and a contribution — but it shouldn't have to be hidden in order to be built. There's no reason why homes can't be beautiful."